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Restructuring Teacher Education: The Mis-Education of Demography in the Public School System

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The educational gap in student achievement is steadily broadening among the various disaggregated groups throughout our nation's public schools. School administrators, teachers, politicians, and other stakeholders are scampering about trying to find a solution to this ever-growing problem. Unfortunately, they are looking for the answer in all the wrong places. In fact, the answer to this crisis in America's public school system lies in a series of questions. School administrators and teachers need only to address the following in order to effectively provide students with a quality education: What do race and ethnicity have to do with students' ability to read and write? How does gender factor into students' academic potential? How can an interest in the same-sex prevent a student from learning? What is the educational relevance of labeling students as economically disadvantaged? With the advancement in technology and a plethora of available resources, how is it possible to allow language barriers to stifle student achievement? Does such categorization cast these students into the proverbial corner of low achievers before they have a chance to prove otherwise? Instead of allowing pre-assessments and diagnostic exams to inform them of students' academic strengths and weaknesses, principals and teachers have allowed these biases to cripple the learning process in America's public school system. In essence, one can succinctly summarize the aforementioned questions into one *answer*: Is it diversity that adversely impacts student achievement or the discriminatory beliefs of school administrators and teachers that serve as monumental stumbling blocks to the right of every American student to be afforded a quality, public education that is culturally, mentally, emotionally, socially, and physically inclusive?

The Beginning of Bias in the Public School System

One needs only to take a step back into time and analyze this great country's turbulent affairs. As far back as the 1400's, individuals have had difficulty in respecting the diversity of other people and cultures. Being different has most often been received as negative and/or a threat to the norm. Integration of the public school system not only opened the doors to minorities, but it also opened Pandora's box of discriminatory practices and beliefs that labeled individuals as inferior based solely on characteristics and life's experiences as opposed to their intellectual abilities. As the timeline of life progressed, the more diverse the public school system became. Teachers transitioned from teaching students to teaching "kinds of" students. And, principals shifted from leading schools to leading "kinds of" schools. Both principals and teachers have allowed labeling students to blind them to the true purpose of America's public school system, which was established to afford every American a solid academic foundation so that he can successfully experience "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" as he so deems them to be.

Bias Personified in the Public School System

When little John Mark, Mary Beth, Abdul, Miguel, and Loretia walk through the school entrance for the first time, who do principals and teachers see? The expected response is "students". However, the writer submits that these stakeholders do not see human beings; they see walking and talking demography. They see Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Socioeconomic Statuses, Sexual Orientation, and

Language. Although, there is no sequential order in discriminatory practices, the writer purports that the first thing teachers and principals see is the race of students. Then, they began to factor in ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientation, and language. More often than not, principals and teachers stigmatize students with multiple labels. Once students have been labeled, principals and teachers allow their preconceived ideology about these kinds of students to infiltrate their minds and, thus, dictate to them what the students' academic potentials are.

When principals and teachers see race and ethnicity, they operate under the fallacy that minority students, specifically African American students, are intellectually inferior to their white counterparts. In schools that exercise this prejudice, African American students are the majority of the student population; they have more inexperienced teachers; and they have higher rates of transient students than in other schools that have a smaller population of African American students (Viadero, 2006). Thus, principals and teachers conclude that: most minority students come from single-parent, one-income homes that are often sub-standard; their families receive some form of government assistance; they live in crime-infested neighborhoods and are sometimes violators of the law themselves; most are teen-age parents; and many have or will drop out of school altogether. With these factors in mind, teachers and principals reason that little to no value is placed on education in minority homes. They expect minority students to come to school ill-prepared and lacking the many foundational skills that the majority population has.

However, this does not mean that minority students do not have the intellectual ability to be successful in school. The error that principals and teachers make is that they wrongfully use minorities' race and cultural experiences to justify the educators' failure to meet the academic needs of minority students. What educators and other stakeholders have to be consciously cognizant of is that, although, these stumbling blocks of life might make learning more challenging for minority students, they do not, by any means, strip them of their intellect and potential to succeed in the public educational system.

When principals and teachers see gender, the writer finds that they generally accredit female students as the higher achiever compared to their male counterparts because females tend to be more studious, attentive, and participatory in class. In classes that require more tactile and kinesthetic abilities, males are attributed to having the advantage because "by nature" males tend to be more analytical, mobile, and hands-on. Therefore, female students are not expected to be successful in classes like geometry or industrial technology; and male students are not expected to perform well in English and literature classes. However, a recent study conducted at Northwestern University dispels the math gender bias by finding that in approximately 12 countries studied, male and female students scored about the same on math assessments (Rycik, 2008). To find other examples to invalidate the gender bias in the public school system, one needs to only look in America's rich history to find example after example of success stories where males and females have ventured into fields of study that have been classified as a profession for the opposite sex. This is why key educators, principals and teachers, must not limit students based on their gender; they should use the demographic information about students to personalize the instruction for the students' individual needs. This consideration will provide the minority student a firm academic foundation to build upon.

Unfortunately, the racial, ethnic, and gender bias does not end here. When the plight of the African American male is pondered, one can see that they are singled out for more appellations than any other group of people. According to society, as well as school administrators and teachers, the black male

is more prone to end up as a dropout, a criminal, and/or a resident in the penal system as opposed to any other ethnic group of males. Pierce (as cited in Baggerly & Parker, 2005), purports that such “psychic assault of subtle racism against African American boys erodes their self-confidence and has a negative cumulative psychological impact across their developmental life span” (Payne & Utsey, as cited in Baggerly & Parker, 2005). As a result, the future of the African American male has been predetermined by society before he even has a fair chance of achieving the American Dream. This is evidenced by the use of third grade test scores to determine how many correctional facilities will be needed by the time these third graders reach their teens. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon principals and teachers to provide the necessary skills, strategies, accommodations, time, effort, and other resources to afford this group of students a solid, educational foundation. Once more, principals and teachers need only to look into the nation’s history to see many success stories of African American males who overcame the trials, tribulations, stumbling blocks, and prejudice to achieve their American Dream.

Another demographic that principals and teachers discriminatively target is sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality. Once a topic that was only discussed behind closed doors, homosexuality can no longer be ignored or whispered about since the public school system is now inundated with students who boldly express their affections for individuals of the same-sex. The problem is that society, specifically principals and teachers, is not as liberal in their thoughts. They allow their bias on the subject to interfere with the rights of these students. These school personnel often ignore the harassment and ill-treatment that homosexual students endure by their heterosexual peers. Adams, Cox, and Dunstan (2004) report that homosexuals suffer greatly at the hands of their tormentors; because of bullying, these students experience loss of self-esteem, withdrawal, truancy, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, and fear. Out of desperation and hopelessness, at least 40% of homosexual students have attempted suicide (Adams et al., 2004). To add insult to injury, the most debilitating insult that homosexual students experience in the public school system is being labeled academically deficient because of their sexual preference. Principals and teachers blindly overlook the torment that these students are subjected to and rationalize that their poor academic performance is due to their choice in a “significant other”. Again this is another example of how professional educators can wrongfully implement their beliefs system into a public entity and punish others who do not practice said beliefs.

Students’ social class is also a focal point for maltreatment by principals and teachers. Since approximately 20% of American youth live in poverty (Neuman, 2009), educators deduce that most inner-city youth and public school students come from low-income, minority homes. This means that these students are often deprived of basic life essentials, like food, running water, clothing, shelter, electricity, and the like. Principals and teachers, in essence, conclude that minority parents do not teach their children the value of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Thus, minority students come to school without any foundational skills. Instead of recognizing the disadvantages of these students and planning accordingly, principals and teachers use the disadvantageous plight of minority students to explain the students’ poor academic performance.

When principals and teachers target the language demographic, they are not just singling out English as Second Language (ESL) students; they also target American students who have not mastered Standard English. Both sets of these students struggle with instruction as well as formal assessments because they are not culturally sensitive. When analyzing the maltreatment of ESL students in the

public school system, the writer finds that a matter of effort, time, and resources can aptly diminish the areas of deficiency for these students. If ESL students cannot read or write in English, it is asinine to expect them to be successful in any academic endeavors until principals and teachers ensure that a special program of study is designed just for them. The problem arises when principals and teachers fail to meet these students' needs. This is in part mainly because of the shortage of bilingual teachers in America's public school system. However, this problem does not exempt educators from affording ESL students a quality education. This is the time when educators should employ their creativity and use the available resources to meet ESL students' needs.

The case of American students, mainly minority, who have not mastered Standard English, is not as different as the ESL students. Technically, these students have created their own language within their respective cultures. To the average principal and teacher, this nonstandard, street language is just as foreign as Spanish, French, Swahili, and the like. However, one distinction between the plight of these students and ESL students is that their language ineptitude is associated with violence and crime. A study conducted by Snow and Powell (2008) reveals that approximately half of the youth offenders were identified as language impaired. In other words, these juvenile offenders could not demonstrate proficient use of Standard English in neither written nor oral form. Snow and Powell (2008) attribute the inability to communicate effectively as a causative factor of their juvenile offenses. Therefore, it was concluded that if minority students cannot read and write on grade level, they will not be able to effectively communicate as well. School administrators and teachers can take the same approach to assist these students. Their goal should be to impart knowledge to students by every available means necessary.

Teaching Students in Spite of Their Demographics

Throughout this discourse, the writer has attempted to broaden the knowledge base of the question that drives this study: What are some beliefs concerning race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, and social class that prevent administrators and teachers from developing an understanding and a greater capacity to address dilemmas and problems in the classrooms and schools? Although there is not one pat answer, it can be summarily stated that the solution begins with the public schools system's most valuable stakeholders: principals and teachers. Public school students' success does not lie in their race, ethnicity, gender, social class, language, or sexual orientation, but in the persons leading the school buildings and the classrooms (Klein, 2009). The achievement gap is not continuously widening because of the academic deficiencies of America's students. It is broadening because of the twisted perceptions of a bias people who have been entrusted with this country's most precious commodity: the minds of our youth. Until principals and teachers began to see students instead of labels, statistics will forever show that more white students will outperform black students in reading and math by an achievement gap of 28% and 29%, respectively ("Paige Seeks," 2002).

Ironically, derelict of duty is not attributed to the bias beliefs of principals and teachers. Their breach of contractual duties arises when they allow their prejudice beliefs to dictate to them that minority students are not worth a quality education and thereby, act upon this belief by not affording minority students instructional practices that will enable them to be successful in their academic endeavors. Rycik (2008) contends that students achieve more when their teachers have high expectations for them. Sadly, in the case of minority students, the bar of expectation has been set very low because educators have allowed life's experiences and circumstances to determine minority students' educational worth.

A student's ability to read and write should not be based on his family's income. A student's inability to communicate using Standard English should not be used as an indicator of his ability to master the objectives in the common language.

Instead of using their knowledge of minority students' culture and other personal information to mislabel and mis-educate students, teachers and principals should use this knowledge to drive the vision and overall instructional plan to meet the individualized needs of every student, regardless of his/her race, creed, nationality, social status, and the like. As a point of consideration, if principals and teachers remove their blinders of discrimination, they would see that the "single best determinant of a school's likely output is a single input, which is the characteristics of the entering children" (Neuman, 2009). This means that if teachers and principals have this prior knowledge about the hardships and challenges these students face before they enter school, then these educators can begin to implement interventions, provide professional development for teachers, provide counseling for the students, provide training and other resources to promote parental involvement, and the like. In essence, the opportunities for principals and teachers to develop an understanding and a greater capacity to address dilemmas and problems in the classrooms and schools are endless. They can begin this corrective cycle by accepting that they are teaching students and not labels, descriptors, adjectives, misnomers, and the like.

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