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One World Is Enough

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Academic Leadership Journal

Lines are drawn upon the world, before we get our flags unfurled.

Whichever one we pick, it's just a self-deluding trick.

One world is enough for all of us.

—One World (Not Three) by The Police, 1981

When Sting wrote and sang these lyrics more than twenty years ago, he was trying to illustrate the absurdity of dividing our planet into arbitrary designations (e.g., “Third World country”) based on conditions such as location, status, and culture. Today, educators continue to make similar, broad assumptions about populations based on, among other things, cultural background, language, and religion. These assumptions often inappropriately affect educational policy-making decisions at the national, state, and local levels. Educators today must continually deal with issues such as racism, language barriers, political influences, and cultural inclusion. This must be done in schools whose populations are becoming more diverse while its curriculum, driven by legislation such as No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), becomes more standardized.

In the midst of national school reform, educators must learn to adapt quickly to the constant increase of varied cultures and special needs within the classroom, as well as changes within both administrative personnel and classroom settings. Unfortunately, schools in general, and high schools in particular, are resistant to change involving an increasingly diverse student body (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Seldom addressed is the most prevalent problem, in my opinion: there cannot be one solution to cure all ills, even though policy-makers continually try to create one. This paper will attempt to address the current problems in multicultural education, followed by some possible solutions, all the while keeping in mind that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for these issues. As with financial and curricular issues, schools’ policies regarding cultural education should be controlled locally, not by the state legislature or the federal government.

Multiculturalism and Inclusion

People of the United States should take pride in the fact that our nation is one of only a few countries that attempts to academically educate all children. Many nations use mandated aptitude testing at certain ages. Then, using the results of those tests to determine ability levels, school systems in these nations assign students to an academic, technical, or vocational track of learning with varying degrees of success (Schenzler & Horowitz, 1999). No such wide-scale tracking exists in our country. Our educational system, correctly or incorrectly, strives to educate all students equally with high academic standards assessed with a standardized evaluation tool. However, a national curriculum cannot take into account local variants such as the cultural and racial characteristics of the student population. Regarding inclusion, minority communities can have a great deal of influence in local decision making (Zine, 2001). The key is giving the local population more voice in the educational policies affecting students in their communities. The question should not be “Should we adopt a policy of multiculturalism or one of inclusion?” but, instead “When should we use a multicultural approach and when should we use an inclusive approach?” One does not necessarily have to adopt one policy at the exclusion of the other.

It should be noted that inclusion is a term normally used in the field of special education to indicate that a special education student is included in activities in a normal classroom. For this discussion, we will use term to describe foreign-born students or students with limited English proficiency that are taught exclusively in a standard, English-speaking classroom with no regard to their cultural background.

Schools, at local levels, should not view diversity as something to overcome or something to be “dealt with.” Differences, whether in social class, gender, age, ability, race, or interests, should be looked to as opportunities for learning (Barth, 1990). However, class conversation about foreign students’ home cultures rarely occur in class (Cushman, 2003). During professional growth activities, teachers should be instructed in methods in which cultural dialogue is encouraged in the classroom.

Educational practitioners and curriculum designers are now recognizing the value in considering cultural and local relevance that personally benefits the learner (Hampton & Licona, 2001). Also, there are steps that can be taken to eliminate negative effects of externally mandated projects (Malia & Korsching, 1996). The results of these studies are encouraging signs that educational practitioners and researchers are beginning to see the value of a personalized approach to education in regard to culture.

When a teacher wants to design a lesson with a foreign-born student’s cultural background in mind, there are many factors to consider. These might include language facility, gender, personality, previous acculturation experiences, schooling experiences, the attitudes and behaviors of the student’s parents, living arrangements, age at migration, as well as the current contact that the student has with our society outside of the school day. Teachers must avoid a “schoolcentric” attitude in which they maintain an exclusively school-focused perspective in which the community exerts very little influence (Carlson & Korth, 1994).

So while theorists argue the rhetoric of multiculturalism vs. inclusion, one must understand that the ultimate arbiter of cultural education is the individual classroom teacher that seeks to understand, nurture, and educate each particular student according to his or her specific background and needs.

Education and the Issue of Race

Fifty years after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision declaring segregation in our nation’s public schools illegal, a racial inequity continues to be present in our schools. Humans tend to be homophilous, that is, they tend to gravitate towards people like themselves in terms of gender, race, age, language, religion, sexual preference, etc. This is evident in school lunchrooms across the country as students group themselves together along such lines. Therefore, it would stand to reason that students would prefer to be taught from an adult that is similar to them in terms of race and cultural background. However, this is not currently possible due to the ethnic makeup of the teacher population. According to the Texas Education Agency, the percentage of minority (non-white) students in the state’s public schools during the 2002-03 school year was 60.2%. However, the minority teacher population during that same school year was only 28.3%. These numbers clearly illustrate the racial gap between students and teachers. An example: a lesson on Kwanzaa (a traditional African-American holiday), directed at a class of African-American students, would be less authentic and less effective if delivered by a non-African-American teacher. Unfortunately, as indicated by the statistics above, there are not enough minority teachers to teach the growing, ethnically-diverse population in our state’s

schools. Regardless of homophilous tendencies, however, parents should idealistically desire teachers based on the quality of their instruction, not their ethnic background.

Some studies indicate that standardized aptitude or achievement tests may be racially or culturally biased (Gleaves, 1994; Fleming, 2000). This would suggest that a test made for a widely generalized population (e.g., all American public school students in fourth grade) would contain some biases in regard to culture or race. This supports the idea that school control, including assessment, should return to the local school districts that have a greater knowledge of their student population's backgrounds.

Racist attitudes will continue in our state as long as test scores are disaggregated by ethnicity. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test, like the test that preceded it (the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), reports its test results broken-down by ethnic group and socioeconomic status. While this may help educators target remedial instruction at low-performing populations, it could be viewed as discriminatory. There may also be gaps in test results between male and female students, but this inequity cannot be assessed as the Texas Education Agency has decided, possibly arbitrarily, that gender is not a factor and data should not be disaggregated upon that basis. How can this segregational approach to test score disaggregation continue to be supported in a nation that claims in its own constitution that "all men are created equal"? If adopted at the state level, a view in which students are assessed, judged, and rated only by their ability level could greatly impact the way minorities are viewed in the state's public schools.

Language

Although not viewed by many as a critical issue in today's schools, the paradigm regarding languages in Texas public schools needs to be addressed. English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are commonplace in Texas schools, but also commonplace is the misconception that these classes are simply to help teach English to students whose first language is Spanish. Daily, schools in this state provide ESL instruction to students from many linguistic backgrounds, representing languages from around the world. The following gives an example of the diverse cultures and languages in local schools: the website for the Fort Bend Independent School District states that "students in FBISD schools represent countries from around the world, and as many as 82 different languages and dialects are spoken by students and their families." One can only imagine the resources needed to teach such a diverse student population. Would a program designed to fit the population in Fort Bend ISD be successful in a hypothetical nearby district where Spanish is the only language spoken other than English?

In June, 1998, the voters of California voted to adopt Proposition 227, which led to the end of a system in which students that primarily spoke Spanish were taught only in their native tongue. This proposition "requires all public school instruction be conducted in English." However, it makes the following accommodation for non-English speakers: schools will provide "initial short-term placement, not normally exceeding one year, in intensive sheltered English immersion programs for children not fluent in English." Similar legislation, Proposition 203, was passed in Arizona in November, 2000. Hispanic leaders are usually the leaders in such movements. While supporters of the propositions point to an increase in standardized tests scores among bilingual students in California (Porter, 1999), long-term effects of this large scale sociolinguistic experiment are currently unknown. One thing is almost certain; however, if the above experiment is successful, states from around the country will quickly look to similar programs as the latest educational "magic bullet."

Conversely, teachers and parents must avoid cultural immersion programs that insist that only English is spoken when outside of school. Instead of becoming acculturated in American culture, students may end up simply immersing themselves in their own native culture as it is available in America (Steed, 1996). Educators must avoid the generalization that cultural differences are the same as linguistic differences.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, there is no one, empirical solution to the inequities that follow students along racial, social, linguistic, economic, and cultural lines. I would submit that the solution is to return as much power to the local schools as possible so that they, in turn, could make the best possible policies concerning their own particular student body population. Widespread educational reforms seem to promote the “de-skilling” of local educators and equip them with “teacher-proof” policies and curriculum (Apple, 1990). As long as the United States continues to use a “top-down” bureaucracy in its educational system, an educational program designed around the strengths of a community, targeted toward the weaknesses of the same community, is impossible.

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