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RESEARCH IN FOCUS:

Equity in Instruction

INTRODUCTION

Students should be afforded the same opportunities to succeed, regardless of perceived inequalities, but despite actions taken in the classroom and at the federal level, those differences continue to influence the academic achievement and attainment of students to this day. To mitigate this phenomenon, educational researchers have undertaken the task of identifying the best practices to create an equitable classroom.

Underrepresented students continue to earn lower grades (ACT, Inc., 2013; NCES, 2015e; Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010) and rates of academic attainment (NCES, 2015b) than their White peers while, nationwide, larger numbers of minority-race students are placed into special education programs and only a small number into gifted programs (Artiles et al., 2010; Aud et al., 2010; NCES, 2011, 2015c) demonstrating a lack of understanding and awareness of the individual needs of these students. In order to improve this situation, it is important to first understand the need for equitable practices and then to be aware of the options educational researchers offer educators to help create equity in the classroom.

WHY EQUITY AND NOT EQUALITY

Equity is the principle of ensuring that all students are afforded the opportunity to succeed academically, regardless of background, home life, or personal experience (Hemmer, 2010; Jordan, 2010). The concept encourages educators to practice awareness of their students' situations and intelligences without letting personal assumptions get in the way of creating a challenging, individualized course of study for each student. To achieve instructional equity and close the achievement gap, schools must have high expectations for all of their students and provide each student with the support and relevant instruction to meet those expectations (Groenke, 2010, Tomlinson & Javius, 2012).

Equity, however, is not the same as equality. When focusing on equality in the classroom, information is presented in the same way to every student, without taking into account individual differences that influence interpretation and comprehension of the material.

Equity takes into consideration that not all students learn at the same pace, nor do they have the same knowledge, experiences, or access to outside assistance and, therefore, should not all be subjected to the same education style, which is typically geared toward the White middle-class student (Delpit, 2013; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

> *Equity does not focus on equal access to the same educational material, necessarily, but rather, providing equal opportunity to succeed through differentiated, individualized support*

Espinoza, 2007

RACIAL NEED FOR EQUITY

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2015b), Latinos and American Indians/Alaskan Natives are least likely to graduate high school, a feat only 59.3% of Latinos and 78.9% of American Indians/Alaskan Natives achieved in 2006. These numbers are slowly improving (NCES, 2015b), but Latinos still graduate in far lower numbers than other races.

The grades of minority-race students also show this gap. In a 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study observing 4th- and 8th-grade reading and math scores, Black and Latino students scored lower (on average) in every category than their White and Asian/Pacific Islanders counterparts, and the gap in scores were wider with older students (Aud et al., 2010).

This disparity appears again in average SAT scores, where as of 2013, only White and Asian/Pacific Islanders students regularly average over 500 in every subject (NCES, 2015e), as well as in average ACT scores where "none of the Benchmarks were met by 50% or more of African American, American Indian, or [Latino] students." (ACT, Inc., 2013, p. 5).

Test scores are closely related to which children are selected for which alternative education programs. A National Center for Educational Statistics 2006 census (2011, 2015c) showed the combined total percentage of minority students enrolled in gifted and talented programs across the country did not even equal half of the White student enrollment in the same classes.

Latino students only comprised about 13% of the total gifted and talented enrollment, despite making up over 20% of the total student population at the time; and Black students only made up nine percent of the gifted and talented enrollment but represented about 17% of total student enrollment (NCES, 2011, 2015c). Conversely, White students, who represent about 56% of the student population, make up 68% of the gifted and talented program; and Asian/Pacific Islanders, though only representing nearly five percent of K-12 enrollment, comprise nine percent of the gifted and talented program (NCES, 2011, 2015c). American Indian/Alaskan Native was the only minority group proportionally represented, comprising approximately one percent of both the student population and the 2006 gifted enrollment (NCES, 2011, 2015c) nationwide.

These trends are inversely echoed in classes for students with special needs, where minority Black and Latino students are identified in higher percentages than their White or Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts (Aud et al., 2010), though they are still unlikely to have their learning disabilities correctly identified and get the help they actually need (Artiles, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015).

LOW-INCOME NEED FOR EQUITY

In 2006, poverty affected over 12% of the American population, growing to over 13% in 2012 (NCES, 2015a). When school-aged children alone are accounted for, the number skyrockets to 21.3%; and the NCES (2015a) reports that, as of 2012, nearly half of the children (47.2%) who come from single-parent households live at or below the poverty line.

Without the ability to meet their basic needs, children of low-socioeconomic status (SES) families may demonstrate behavioral issues in the classroom and struggle academically (Jensen, 2009).

"Standardized intelligence tests show a correlation between poverty and lower cognitive achievement, and low-SES kids often earn below-average scores in reading, math, and science and demonstrate poor writing skills" (Jensen, 2009). For example, "in 2011, fourth-graders who were eligible for free lunch scored 29 points lower on average [on their reading assessments] than those not eligible. Students eligible for reduced-price lunch scored 17 points lower than those not eligible" (NCES, 2012, p. 18).

Furthermore, as *New Literacies* make technologically driven, multi-model communication techniques an increasingly more important aspect of education, the income-determined

achievement gap widens. A 2013 census of Internet use among U.S. residents shows it "tend[s] to be highest among the young, Whites or Asians, the affluent, and the highly educated" (File & Ryan, 2014, p. 2).

According to the census, 62.4% of low-income households owned computers, and 48.4% of those used the Internet at home (File & Ryan, 2014, p.4). Add to that the inclination of low-SES schools to focus on teaching toward standardized tests that do not yet include new literacies in their purview (Leu et al., 2011), and low-SES students are being left at an even greater disadvantage in the modern world.

FOSTERING EQUITY IN THE CLASSROOM

According a 2012 census, 81.9% of educators are White, whereas nearly half of students are not (NCES, 2015c, 2015d). This, however, is not a fatal flaw. It is an issue that, though prevalent, can be mitigated through active teaching styles that emphasize conscious examination of traditionally held knowledge while demonstrating deep care for student success and individual expression (Delpit, 2013; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2005).

An engaged pedagogy

To respect students as individuals, both bell hooks (1994) and Lisa Delpit (2013) suggest using an engaged pedagogy, forgoing the rote memorization of traditional teaching and instead offering holistic, meaningful knowledge that values student interpretation and expression. In engaged pedagogy, the teacher steps down from acting as the gatekeeper of knowledge and instead acts as a guide to the student's discovery and creation of knowledge. By doing this, teachers step toward their students and away from the resulting biases the traditional power structure of teaching creates, allowing both teacher and student to critically examine social power structures as they present themselves in both the classroom and society (hooks, 1994).

Culturally-relevant pedagogy

Similar to engaged pedagogy, *culturally relevant* or *responsive pedagogy (CRP)* also seeks to educate in a meaningful way while critically examining traditional structures of power, but CRP places more emphasis on nurturing cultural competence and a critical social consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed CRP as the underlying theme of successful educators, arguing that the common pedagogical traits of these teachers are that they "help their students to be academically successful, culturally competent, and sociopolitically critical" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 470) and that each educator showed the same three broad characteristics that center on:

- the conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers,
- the manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers,
- the conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers.
(Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 478)

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATORS

CONCEPTION OF SELF AND OTHERS

- believe all students were capable of academic success
- see pedagogy as art
- see self as member of community
- explore alternative ways to gain access
- see teaching as giving back to the community
- believe in "teaching as mining"

MANNER IN WHICH SOCIAL RELATIONS ARE STRUCTURED

- maintain fluid student-teacher relationships
- demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students
- develop a community of learners
- encourage learning collaboratively, being responsible for another
- establish reciprocal and equitable relationships with students

CONCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

- view knowledge as shared, recycled, and constructed, rather than static
- consider knowledge critically
- be passionate about knowledge and learning
- *scaffold*, or build bridges, to facilitate learning
- incorporate multiple forms of assessment and excellence

(Ladson-Billings, 1995)

Similarly, Sonia Nieto's research (2005) showed that "for these teachers, issues of social justice and their own continuing professional development were paramount" (Nieto, 2005, p. 33). More specifically, she claimed that "the courage to question mainstream knowledge; a combination of solidarity with and love for students; and a passion for social justice" (Nieto, 2005, p. 34) were the three common qualities of successful teachers of diverse classrooms.

In both Ladson-Billings's and Nieto's research, the main traits of a successful teacher consisted of the emphasis these educators placed on their care for their students as well as their adaptability and pride as educators, their active teaching styles, and their desire to question tradition while advocating social competency (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2005).

Equity Literacy

Paul C. Gorski's (2013) *10 Principles of Equity Literacy for Educators of Students in Poverty* are dedicated to encouraging critical examination of the opportunities low-SES students have available. Gorski warns against attempting to identify and understand low-SES students as one culture, claiming that attempting to understand a single culture of poverty will not promote understanding and could, instead, only solidify stereotypes due to neglect of the wide racial and cultural diversity of this group (Gorski, 2013). Gorski identifies educators who are literate in equity as those who understand that inequities in achievement reflect mostly a lack of opportunity, rather than character flaws, and who strive toward ensuring a "more equitable distribution of that opportunity, whether in a single classroom, in a single school building, or in the larger society" (Gorski, 2013, p. 25).

CONCLUSION

Great strides have been made in closing the achievement gap in the past few decades, but though the gap has narrowed, it has not gone away. Equitable teaching strategies seem to be the best way to close what's left of the gap by increasing awareness of the differences culture and socioeconomics create in access and learning and by actively questioning and challenging traditional structures of power, held knowledge, and personal bias. Only by continuing to be sensitive to equity in opportunity and education can educators hope to continue the progress of the past 40 years; and with an ever-increasing population of minority, low-SES, and otherwise disenfranchised students, this progress is not only imperative, it is long overdue.

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