Who's Qualified to Teach in a Diverse School?

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Diversity can mean many things to different people - different backgrounds, different colored skin, different languages, or different talents held by teachers and/or students. How can one begin to understand where someone comes from, their personal journeys and perspectives? What a huge task educators have to try to understand and apply this concept while immersed in the world of lessons, high-stake tests, and classroom management! How do new teachers, “non-seasoned” teachers, fit in and succeed in the highly “diversified” schools that are often starting grounds for them? Some of the safer and more desirable school districts only want experienced teachers—not “newbies.” We have to survive and learn—fast. We do the most we can do with what we are given. Some choose to stay, and some do not.

My story begins with a baby step. I was ready to jump right in and start that full-time teaching job, but with very few job opportunities right now in Michigan, I had to lower my sights a bit. A friend gave me an “in” at a charter school, which led to an elementary paraprofessional position. Despite it being less than a full-time teaching position, I was quite excited. After all, it was a job in a school working with students. Basically that’s what I wanted anyway. The principal told me that she only hires from within for teaching positions, so if one happened to open up, I would have a better chance at getting in. I worked, waited, and learned. I learned things that I didn’t necessarily want to learn. I used to think that any job in any school would suffice, because in this market you can’t be picky—not true anymore for me.

The students were Black, White, Hispanic, mostly poor, spoke English and Spanish, and had come from supportive and unsupportive backgrounds. Ninety-four percent of the students at the school qualified for free or reduced price lunch. I was told 80% of the families were on public assistance. It was not the type of school I was used to being in or growing up in. I found the students’ stories touching, heartbreaking, some funny, and some perplexing. Unexpectedly, I left each day a little more aware of how other people lived, but it wasn’t necessarily a good thing. I found myself shaking my head, judging too much and assuming too much. When similar situations happen over and over with multiple students, patterns started to form in my mind. I didn’t want to start thinking that this is how ALL of these families lived or behaved. It was scary for me to think that way. I think I was more open-minded before this experience.

Many of the students I worked with were wonderful, interesting, inspiring, and smart. They were also very needy, low-performing academically, socially inept, angry, and emotionally troubled. I did start to realize that teaching in that school might not be my cup of tea. I was exposed to the responsibilities that the teachers had, the unrealistic expectations, and all the extras that were put on the teachers. I really questioned whether or not I could handle this type of environment—the charter school and the diverse backgrounds.

My life at the school changed one evening when my principal called my house to inquire...
inequity in education is examined in Harris’ (2007) article, High-Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage, and the Logic of NCLB. It is a well-known fact that one of the major flaws of our educational system is inequity. Harris takes a closer look at some of the causes of inequity. Not surprisingly, one of the major factors that determine achievement is a student’s social and economic status.

Among the implications cited by Harris of lower socio-economic status are that students often do not receive proper nutrition and are sick more frequently, therefore missing more school, and are thus less prepared to learn than other students. Additionally, many (not all) parents living in poverty have less healthy emotional and physical relationships with their children due to the economic pressures of their daily lives. This stress can raise a student’s affective filter and make it extremely difficult to learn in a school environment.

Harris (2007) also cites the recent Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey which tests students’ academic ability early in their kindergarten year. The results found that African American kindergartners were one half of a standard deviation below white kindergartners. This gap is almost the same differential of the gap that is seen in the later school years. This would indicate that the schools are not entirely responsible for the achievement gap since these children are tested before they begin their school careers. The role of social and economic status appears to be critical in academic achievement.

The author also does not discount the role of poverty, high-minority school. (Harris, p. 367) socio-economically disadvantaged students continue to languish in a system that is set up to fail. Among the implications cited by Harris of high-minority school, and does not account for student disadvantage. Harris suggests that as an alternative to this learning level approach, accountability systems should focus on learning gains, or year-to-year levels of students’ scores. Such an accountability system expects schools to overcome student disadvantages that existed before they entered school.

While there is significant evidence that student disadvantage is a prime indicator of achievement, there are reports that discount this fact. Harris (2007) cites the Educational Trust and Heritage Foundation and their reports of “high-flying” schools. However, there is inherent mis-calculation in these reports as they misidentify schools that are “high-flying.” They attempt to give examples of schools that are high poverty and also high achieving. Where these reports are flawed is in their reporting of schools as “high-flying” where students have not achieved basic reading or mathematics skills. In fact, a low-poverty, low-minority school is 89 times more likely to be in a state’s top third than a high-poverty, high-minority school. (Harris, p. 367)

Of course, any accountability system will invoke some negative response. Unfortunately, our current system does not account for student disadvantage which is clearly and inarguably a significant aspect in determining student achievement. Government policy needs to do more for our disadvantaged students, not only by its expectations and measures of achievement, but also at the basic needs level. The debate over inequity in education will continue while our socio-economically disadvantaged students continue to languish in a system that is set up to forget about them.

Reference