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The Impact of Demographics in Education

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Professor Susan Carson

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Introduction

Individuals are constantly shaped by the environment and the variables from which they surround themselves. The same can be true for students. Each student's life is composed and stimulated by different features whether it is a low income family, family traditions, their parent's education, community involvement, or race. Teachers need to understand that every student has been influenced by these demographic characteristics in order to be effective. This paper will discuss what demographics are affecting education and how better knowledge of these demographics can be utilized to benefit the student. Throughout this report a focus on Chugiak High School and its surrounding neighborhood in the Anchorage School District in Alaska will be taken. This area was chosen because I have been interested in moving to Alaska for teaching. Interpreting the different demographic statistics and understanding their impacts in the past will aid in the understanding of what one can expect when taking a new job at an unfamiliar school.

Family Income and Socioeconomic Status

One large impact on a student is the family's income or socioeconomic status. Previous research has found that the socioeconomic status of the student is an important predictor of achievement, and that the percentage of students on the free and reduced lunch program can serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status (Okpala, 2002). Without adequate nutrition at home students could have a harder time focusing in class. A teacher may be more receptive to low income and inadequate nutrition by looking closely at which students are on the free and reduced lunch program. Demographic research done at a low wealth school district in North Carolina on students who were on the free or reduced lunch program found a positive correlation between the numbers of students in the program and reading achievement scores (Okpala, 2002). A lower

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family income left students struggling to achieve in class. Factors that a school is able to control, such as educational level and teaching experience of the staff, have little to do with student performance; but socioeconomic factors present in schools seem to significantly influence a student's ability to succeed (Okpala, 2002). If a student is in a low income family they may need more attention than others in order to reach success. According to Harold Hogkinson, a renowned demographer, if you know the household income and the parents' level of education in America, then you can predict 45% of the national assessment scores without knowing anything about race, meaning socioeconomic status is twice as predictive as race (Hodgkinson and Goldberg, 2000).

The population in the area code surrounding Chugiak High School is 9,211. The median household income in 2011 was \$90,909; unemployment is 2% while the percentage of individuals below the poverty line is 3.5% ("Community Facts 99567," 2011). This is a higher income than the average number of families in the Anchorage School District who earn \$76,496 per household ("Income in the Past 12 Months," 2012). The amount of students that were on the free and reduced lunch program this past year was 1,096 or 16% of student body ("School Nutrition Programs," 2014). This information would be useful for walking into a teaching job at Chugiak High School. Knowing the percentage and which students are on the free and reduced lunch program may provide further insight to understanding what environment they are coming from. All families with students younger than 18 who have had an income in the last year that is below the poverty line constitute 2.6% of the Chugiak High School area code ("Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months of Families," 2012). This again provides further knowledge into the social class and home life of students that are coming into the classroom. This percentage comprises the students that might be seen in a class. If they are living in a home that is below the poverty line

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they may not have access to the tools they need to succeed in the classroom. Their family may not have enough money to purchase school supplies or a computer to do homework with. However, the cost of living in Anchorage is higher than in most places and the poverty line is below 10% which is a good sign. This does not mean that a teacher at Chugiak should forget the 16% of students who are on the free and reduced lunch program. Noticing and finding this type of information is pertinent to not letting any students slip through the cracks.

Culture

A student's culture and family ties will impact the way they will learn. Americans constantly live in the future and often this is how we motivate students; however, many immigrants have a better connection with the past and this may be a better motivator for some (Hodgkinson, 2001). In certain cultures a teacher is seen as an authority figure. To show respect students will then look at the floor. To promote individuality most teachers would prefer to be looked in the eye or for students to disagree with them, but this is often a major sin in many cultures (Hodgkinson, 2001). Asian, Hispanic, and Native American students will seldom take individual pride in their achievements, but rather pin their accomplishments on other people such as family members (Hodgkinson, 2001). A teacher should look into the culture of his/her students in order to better understand them. Culture may explain why a student acts or speaks a certain way. With this in mind a teacher must understand that if they are in a diverse classroom they are taking part of various cultures. Professor Chasity Bailey-Fakhoury who specializes in African American culture for girls in a school setting at Grand Valley State University explains:

When a teacher is not familiar with the different backgrounds and is not familiar with how they [students] have been socialized racially you may question their behavior. There is a conflict and the teacher has misinterpreted the behavior, and ultimately it affects the way the student feels connected to the classroom and to the teacher. If you don't have that cultural competence piece and if it's not in your purview to take those things into consideration...then we are judging these students and we aren't taking into

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consideration multiple world views and other perspectives (Bailey-Fakhoury, personal communication, February 18, 2014).

For a long time our society has pushed that we are a cultural melting pot and our educational system has further supported that; but now teachers engage in more socialization for their students than ever before (Elkind, 2001). It is important to demonstrate that in the classroom cultural diversity is recognized. Students are not just one part of the melting pot. They are individual and different. It is important that teachers demonstrate that differences do not make an individual better or worse: “Individuals can be right or wrong, good or evil, kind or cruel-but races, cultures, religions, and ethnic groups are not” (Elkind, 2001). Culturally understanding the actions of students allows the teacher to form a deeper connection. Through this deeper connection a sense of security and community will develop between students and the teacher within the classroom.

Technology has altered some of these cultural aspects. While technology has allowed education to access much more and to challenge students it has also clashed with some cultures. Technology allows students to research more and to keep in constant contact with teachers through e-mail, but it has also been misused for sociological or physiological purposes which can compromise its educational value (Elkind, 2001). No longer are students limited to spending hours searching for a textbook in the library, but at what cost? Technology seems to have severed relationships among space, time, and activities within what were once tight knit families (Elkind, 2001). Interfering with how students interact at home through the implementation of technology has caused a clash between culture preservation and technology. In the most northern portions of Alaska, Inupiat students are now forced to straddle two worlds (Subramony, 2009). The Eskimo culture is threatened here due to the input of technology. One community leader in Barrow Alaska described how a distance between elders and students has developed from

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exposure to computers and technology in an article done by Subramony (2009). Technology has pushed students to choose between sticking to their native culture or modernizing themselves into the latest Western influence. Schools have become an environment where the students' identity hasn't necessarily been recognized, supported and honored (Subramony, 2009). They abandon their cultural way of thinking and incorporate the technology-based accepted life style of what they believe a student should be. Education often tries to treat everyone the same, but this is not what should be done. When cultural students, like the Inupiat Eskimos, come home to family cultures and traditions, it creates rifts between what their family tells them to do and what the school tells them to do. Instead of causing this divide between culture and technology at school, we should find ways to implement them and support individual cultures. Even though it has been a cause of cultural division, internet usage has been linked to positive outcomes as well. Students who use the internet more have been found to score higher on standardized tests in reading as well as earn higher GPA's (Jackson et. al., 2006). There are clear advantages to using technology but there are also drawbacks. Recognizing this issue may help a teacher to utilize technology in a positive light and not let it take over the classroom.

Family

Families come in various different forms: 7.3% of the household population in the area surrounding Chugiak High School with students under the age of 18 are composed of single parents and 27.4% are a part of a dual parent family ("Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics," 2010). Single mother's that have fallen below the low income poverty line in 2012 constitute 17.9% of the 99567 area code population while married couple families below the poverty line was only at .9% ("Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months of Families," 2012).

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Single parents struggle more to keep a solid income for their students. Teachers must be receptive to this as it may influence the way a student learns. They bring their family life into the classroom walls each day they walk in and it is the teacher's job to knowingly understand this and to then act on it.

It has been found that one- half of American students will spend at least part of their lives in a family with a single-parent (Krein, 1986). The concern about single-parent families is that they do not have all of the resources that a dual parent family possesses, such as time and money (Krein, 1986). If a student is not receiving as much attention from their own family at home that could answer questions about his/her behavior in the classroom. In a long term study done by Sun and Li (2011) evidence was found that family structure type matters to a student's educational progress, and when students came from a disrupted family a negative academic effect was caused by a lack of family resources. If the parent does not have time to sit and go through homework that the teacher assigns, then it is the teacher's responsibility to become that second parent and to put in the time and effort to make sure the student achieves. In a long term study done by Krein (1986), educational completion was found to be about a half a year less for men who lived in single-parent families. Students who spent even a short period of time within a single parent family completed fewer years of school on average than students who were raised in unbroken families (Krein, 1986). It is up to teachers to bridge the disrupted gap and fill the lack of resources available to a student at home. Students that grow up in a single-parent home typically result in a lower academic level of achievement (Sun and Li, 2011). These studies demonstrate the need for teachers to understand the students' family background. All students should be able to achieve and if the family cannot get them there then the teacher must.

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The parents' level of education has an influence on the achievement of students in the classroom. It has been found that students achieve higher scores in reading when their parents have a post-high school education (Okpala, 2002). The level of help that students are receiving once they leave school is significant. Stevenson and Baker (1987) have shown that educated mothers who invest time and are involved with the school have students with higher academic achievement. If the student is from a home where his/her parents never completed high school this could leave the student without help. Knowledge of this could dictate the way homework is constructed. The teacher should also be accessible to a student who might not get help at home.

A final family demographic influence is the existence of the transient family. There are two military bases in Anchorage. There is an air force called Elmendorf Air Force and then an Army post called Fort Richardson Army Post. The presence of these bases indicates that there are military families present in Anchorage. This type of family is a very transient one, or one in which there is a lot of moving involved. Transience in the school setting is important. Teachers should find out which students are new to an area because they might need some help getting settled, and transiency often brings out the worst in people at any age (Hodgkinson, 2001). Not only does the constant moving cause issues for a student, but it also brings out other stresses. Students that have family members who are deployed need support at school. In the last decade, since 2011, there have been more than 800,000 parents of school age students deployed by the U.S. military (Rossen and Carter, 2011). When parents are away, this can cause a lot of different strains on the student. Students that have deployed parents experience high anxiety, more behavioral problems, lower academic performance, a higher risk of maltreatment and neglect from caregivers, and an increase in dropout rates (Rossen and Carter, 2011). All of this is brought into the classroom. A teacher that is employed in a school near a military base must

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understand that students may exhibit this behavior. Some recommendations that Rossen and Carter (2011) have for teachers who have students with parents in the military is: to talk about it openly, maintain frequent communication with the at-home caregiver, provide appropriate class placement, use the experiences of military students and accommodate to attendance issues. This different family characteristic alters the ways in which a student will interact and achieve in class. The teacher must be aware of the surrounding family structure and understand how this influences them.

Community

Community involvement supplements a student's upbringing. Whatever the community is involved with or whatever is going on outside of the student's home, one can assume he/she will become involved with it too. The spiritual influence in the community can leave an impression on the students living in the area.

Spirituality is often a cornerstone in the community. When one understands people's spirituality this often provides insight on how to work with them or reach them in a classroom ("W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Community Partnership Toolkit," n.d.). Whether they have spirituality or not influences students in a large way. For some students their spirituality is through organized religion. Religion has developed into a form of social integration that reinforces certain values for a student, and this has been shown to help students set education goals for themselves (Regnerus, 2000). Churches or places of worship provide a means of support and integrate social youth activities and a sense of community. If students have somewhere to belong they have more to look forward to and can lean on their peers to reach goals in settings such as the classroom. A study done by Regnerus (2000) demonstrates that

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when metropolitan sophomore students actively participated in church activities, they scored higher on math and reading achievement tests. Regnerus further points out that the students who participated in church activities demonstrate family and community strength, socialization, a level of self-control, and motivation. If one is teaching in an area that has religious options for students to get involved with, this could be a benefit. However, there is not a lot of work done on spirituality and its influence. When we think of spirituality we often think of organized religion. There are many students with families that don't partake in this type of spirituality and this is a whole other aspect that one needs to keep in mind. The amount of churches (organized religion) located in the area code surrounding Chugiak High School is 13 ("Chugiak Churches," 2006). Anchorage Municipality has also made number 1 on the list of top 101 counties with most Orthodox Denominations adherents ("Anchorage Municipality, Alaska," n.d.).

Sometimes the community does not always provide a positive influence. The crime rate for Anchorage Alaska is very high. In Anchorage violent crime is above the national average; in 2011 there were 2,388 occurrences ("Crime Statistics for Anchorage, AK," 2014). In the area code surrounding Chugiak High School there are 16 registered sex offenders since April 8, 2014, and the ratio of sex offenders to residents is 457 to 1 which is lower than the state average ("99567 Zip Code Detailed Profile," 2014). Chugiak does have a lower crime rate than Anchorage. However, if a child does not feel safe in the neighborhood they live in it leaves little room to worry about academic performance. The hours that follow when a child arrives home from school, and when their parents are still at work, is a dangerous time for low income students living in high crime neighborhoods (Lord and Mahoney, 2007). When no one is home with them, students are then subjected to the influences of the community. Gang violence, violent victimization of students, and juvenile crime all reach their highest levels during this

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window of time (Lord and Mahoney, 2007). Students in the area can get caught up in this violence and this can be reflected in academic performance. Neighborhood crime has been found to be associated with increased aggression and decreased academic performance for students who have to provide moderate to high self-care after school (Lord and Mahoney, 2007). It is the teacher's duty to know what kind of neighborhood the students are coming from. If it is a high violent area where students come home to no parental care then they are put in a position where violence will most undoubtedly interact with them. A teacher could provide after school study hours to delay when the student needs to go home, or perhaps encourage students to get involved in after school programs. The only way that a teacher will know these things about the community is if he/she is involved in it.

Race and Ethnicity

Whites are, and will continue to become, the minority in many areas of the U.S. An estimated 65% of the population growth in America within the next two decades will be from "minority" groups (Hodgkinson, 2001). As the world continues to change, the amount of diversity increases. There are more ways in which we can travel and interact, resulting in a larger mixture of ethnicities and races. The blurring of racial lines today suggests a declining importance of race, but racial desegregation has not led to economic equality for students (Hodgkinson, 2001). Even though the nation has become less segregated the poverty rate still influences students as stated previously. Teachers must focus less on what race a student is and more on what socioeconomic status and other demographic factors influence the student. This, however, does not mean that teachers should be "color blind" to their students:

...how can you be color blind? How can you not see a person's color? How can you not see these differences? It does not mean that you are a racist but you have got to

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see it [race]. If you're not seeing it, what message does that send to the student? You are negating them. What does that say to people of color? When you say you don't see color, then you are saying that you don't see them, and that everybody is the same and that's just not true. That's a disservice to them. You are totally negating history, you are totally negating systems of inequality that have prevailed in this country and you are missing how to remedy a whole host of things if you are going to have this color blind pronouncement. That is a fallacy, and in trying to be color blind you end up being discriminatory and you end up being racist, and so there is no such thing as being color blind (Bailey-Fakhoury, personal communication, February 18, 2014).

Just as cultural differences are recognized so should race. Diversity in the classroom is pertinent for student development. It has been found that supporting and facilitating diversity in the classroom culturally and racially have positive effects; students learn a great deal from diverse peers when interaction is facilitated (Hurtado, 2001). If the school is one in which there is a large amount of diversity this can open up an opportunity for students to encounter diverse perspectives in the curriculum. Diversity continues to evolve making race less of a focus as opposed to socioeconomic status, community influence, education of parents, and cultural influences on the students.

The total population in Anchorage Alaska is 291,826; Caucasians make up 66% of the population, African Americans make up 5.6%, Asians make up 8.1%, and Native American/Alaskan Native make up 7.9% ("Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics," 2010). At the Anchorage School District during 2012-2013 school year the race profile is as follows: 6.3% African American, 8.6% Native Alaskan, 10.75% Asian, 4.72% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 45.17% Caucasian, and 10.88% Hispanic ("Profile of Performance and School Report Card to the Public," 2013). There is a higher percentage of Asians present in the Anchorage school district than the state percentage. There are also more African Americans than the state percentage and there is a smaller percentage of Caucasians. This data clearly shows that the Anchorage School District is very diverse. A teacher must be

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aware of this so that they can input diversity into their curriculum and provide a smoothed out way for diverse interaction to occur.

Chugiak High School Specifics

Having knowledge about the school's performance provides the teacher with insight about the student's academic level. Chugiak High School's testing proficiency scores for grades 9-10 in the 2012-2013 school year are as follows: 39.5% reading, 78.6% writing, 45.5% mathematics, 41.1% science ("Profile of Performance and School Report Card to the Public," 2013). These percentages could be higher but the percent below proficiency is lower than 15% for all subjects. For students in 2013 grade levels 10-12: 92% were proficient in reading, 85.1% were proficient in writing and 86.2% were proficient in mathematics, and the overall growth for school progress was 98.65% ("Profile of Performance and School Report Card to the Public," 2013). As socioeconomic status was stated in a previous section as an important demographic feature it is an important facet to look at now. Chugiak's economically disadvantaged students did not meet attendance rate targets, graduation rate targets, or reading targets this past year ("Profile of Performance and School Report Card to the Public," 2013). This provides further evidence that more attention needs to be given to those who are from low income families. The dropout rate at Chugiak was 2.7% in 2013 and the number of dropouts in grades 7-12 was 31 people ("Profile of Performance and School Report Card to the Public," 2013). This is a lower dropout rate, but a teacher needs to know the statistics about his/her school so that they know what factors they are up against and what needs to be overcome.

Conclusion

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Demographics influence a student's everyday life. A student's socioeconomic status, family structure, parent level of education, culture, technology usage, transience, race, spirituality, and crime rate near the home all impact them on a daily basis. These are the factors that are imprinted on the student and characterize them in their own way. They develop the student outside of the classroom, and it is a teacher's responsibility to understand this so that they may teach in a way that a student can learn at their highest potential and thus develop further within the classroom. More focus on demographics is needed before taking up a teaching job. Throughout this paper attention has been directed at Chugiak High School in the Anchorage Alaska School District. Looking into details about the school has led to a more complete picture of what students are like. Preliminary research is necessary for teachers to further comprehend their students and reach them on a different level.

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