

Preparing Teachers for Education in a Diverse World

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Abstract: This paper offers a commentary on the value of educational leadership relating to cultural diversity. Principles of leadership, relationship, and ethics, create a well-rounded foundation for effective teaching. Beyond covering fundamental importance of embracing diversity, this essay explores relational philosophies for application in the classroom.

Key words: diversity in education, leadership, ethics, effective teaching, integrity, educational philosophy

1. A Diverse Classroom

Today's teachers must not only be well prepared to impart a quality education, but must also be sensitive to meeting the needs of their students regardless of their race, color, creed, or national origin. It is important for teachers to understand, believe, and practice the ideas of teacher efficacy, intentionality, educational psychology, and pedagogy. An effective teacher should take into account the intellectual, social and cultural characteristics of each student being taught. A teacher in a diverse world is enthusiastic about their responsibility to teach all students in the most effective way, remaining cognizant of the fact that each child is different and has varied learning styles. Whatever the learning style: visual, kinesthetic, auditory, etc., teachers who practice intentionality and believe in teacher efficacy, will plan the outcomes they want to achieve and embrace strategies to produce the desired result.

Because of different styles and beliefs, there are many facets of diversity in our world today. Each facet is worthy of our respect and understanding. In order to be successful teachers we need to step back and look inside ourselves. We must take note of prejudices that we may have toward people because of their disparities. In our classroom, do we call on one gender more often than another? Do we treat students with disabilities with the attention they deserve? Do we make assumptions about students based on the racial, ethnic, or cultural group they appear to belong? Answering these questions truthfully is the first step toward becoming an effective teacher in a diverse world.

Once teachers understand the differences in students' styles, beliefs, and abilities, they must create curriculum that is responsive to the needs of each student. By incorporating examples of multicultural materials, visual aids, and topics that encourage students to explore different racial and cultural perspectives, teachers show sensitivity to the cultural value of each student, creating stronger relational connections. "Educators must understand that the cultural backgrounds and experiences of their students must be respected and reflected in all

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aspects of the education process” (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, Dupuis, 2005). It is not enough to only understand diversity of students, an effective teacher must prevent harassment and racism in the classroom. Inappropriate or offensive remarks must be dealt with quickly and decisively. Since all students are diverse; racist, sexist or other abusive comments are bound to occur. Teachers need to create an environment which radiates warmth and friendliness. Diversity is all around us; it includes all of us since we all have different beliefs, styles, and abilities. This is especially evident with children coming from a foreign land. They are greatly impacted by their move to the new culture, causing potential confusion about their cultural identity. It is important to help these students merge into the mainstream without jeopardizing the quality of education to all students. Empowering these students to share their cultural identity offers other students a global perspective, it also helps embed the individual’s home culture into daily school life.

2. Some Salient Features of an Effective Teacher

An effective teacher believes in the power of education. Education is the element that constructs a civilized society. “The purpose of education is not only to make the people smart but also to make the people good” (Socrates). An effective teacher is: loyal, honest, considerate, self-disciplined, and open-minded. He or she treats others with respect, uses self-control, and builds a good reputation as a teacher. These qualities are important for a teacher or any leader because it is necessary to have a clear and challenging vision. If authority figures are corrupt, the people they serve will place little or no faith in the ability of the institution to do the job it is charged with. Ultimately, an effective teacher adheres to a code of ethics and upholds the values of the institution they serve.

The effective teacher understands diversity and works to instill these qualities in their students. In order to be a role model and have credibility with their students, effective teachers must “practice what they preach”. An unknown author points out his belief in seeing examples as opposed to hearing examples:

“I would rather see a sermon than hear one any day
I would rather have you walk with me than point the way
The eye is a more ready pupil than ever was the ear
Good advice is often confusing, but example is always clear”

An effective teacher also believes in relationships. Establishing a good relationship requires mutual respect. In addition to the 3R’s (Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic), the effective teacher must be cognizant of the fourth R (Relationship). Relationships are based on “Respect, Responsibility, and Restraint”. These are just as important as academic fundamentals; respect for other, responsibility to commitments, and restraint in criticisms.

An effective teacher connects with people. The world is shrinking so rapidly that our personal and professional success depends on developing and establishing strong relationships with others. It is important for teachers to learn and understand their students. You cannot connect with someone you do not know. A personal relationship will be established between the teacher and the student when the teacher takes a genuine interest in the pupil. Once this relationship is established we can utilize our potential to understand how to assure the success of students. Connecting with others is absolutely indispensable. As Gandhi said “we have no choice but to establish a relationship with everyone indiscriminately.”

The increasing diversity in today’s classroom demands that teachers have the highest preparation possible to impart a quality education to all students. Although what may work for one teacher will differ from another, every teacher needs a firm foundation in educational strategies, instructional practices, and an awareness of the

classroom environment. Teachers will also need a strong spiritual/moral foundation to chart a classroom course that consistently guides them and their students beyond prejudices and unearned privileges, toward a spirit of cooperation and the ability to excel at the highest academic levels.

3. Leadership and Ethics

3.1 Vision

Before its construction in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge was considered unbuildable. The bridge would need to cover over a mile expanse of ocean within a rugged canyon where 60 mile per hour winds were blowing. Connecting Marin County with San Francisco, California, the bridge is a majestic symbol of strength and beauty. The project required an incredible amount of vision and more than four years to build. Its two great suspension cables contain enough strands of steel wire to encircle the equator three times, 80,000 miles. Concrete poured within its piers and anchors would have created a five-foot-wide sidewalk from the east coast to the west coast. The color of the bridge, International Orange, was intentionally chosen because of how well it blended with the natural surroundings.

Similarly, educational leaders must have a clear vision and a defined direction. Vision helps identify a destination, individually and organizationally. Following the bridge analogy, one must carefully develop a strategic vision considering the overarching mission, landscape (challenges and threats), as well as untapped resources (community partnerships, student passions/talents, family collaborations). An equally valuable aspect of leadership is complementing one's vision with unwavering values. Values are the principles, standards, or qualities considered worthwhile and desirable. Every healthy environment requires a solid foundation of values both in policy and example. As the bridge was painted for the beauty of its surroundings, educational leaders paint an environment of diversity through daily demonstration of principals, thereby developing a culture of values through their active example.

3.2 Integrity and Charisma

Good leaders demonstrate these qualities with an aura of charisma, helping transmit positive values throughout the entire organization. Charisma is the power or ability to win the devotion of large numbers of people. Genuinely honest charisma must also involve a commitment to integrity, a firm adherence to a code of ethics or to a standard of values. Personal integrity is a commitment to the values of the institution you serve. The higher the degree of individual integrity of the people in an institution, the better chance the people it serves will have faith in the institution. Individual and institutional integrity are closely connected. If people in charge of institutions are corrupt, the people they serve will place little faith in their ability to effectively reach academic and organizational goals. Integrity is not something that can be considered optional or circumstantial; it must be valued and diligently protected against corruption. Corruption is the opposite of integrity. Integrity must be constantly watched, guarded, and protected from corruption. Good leaders not only speak of integrity, they live it!

Once the vision and construction of the Golden Gate Bridge was completed, it could not be neglected. This famous landmark is an iconic symbol; it is watched and painted on a regular basis. If not for this vigilance, the bridge would fall prey to three elements. First, ocean water's salinity can rot the steel. Second, seasonal weather patterns of fog, sunshine, and rain can weaken and disfigure its beauty. Lastly, the velocity of winds constantly pounding the structure requires the design to allow for a 27-foot sway and structural resistance of up to 100 mile per hour.

Similar to guarding from the natural elements, leaders must remain steadfast in maintaining personal and professional integrity. This is especially true when promoting a positive climate for cultural diversity. Integrity is the goal that strengthens our faith in people, groups, and institutions. On the other hand, duplicity also exists. It is characterized by hypocrisy, racism, and xenophobia. Like the natural elements challenging the bridges integrity, there are also imperfections in our humanity. The great philosopher Mahatma Gandhi (1924) validated this element of human nature:

“I believe in the absolute oneness of God and, therefore, also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous.” (1924)

Ultimately, this oneness with humanity is what we refer to as relationship, a true cultural embrace. As teachers, the key to sustaining integrity is to remain pleasant, positive, and productive in interactions. This requires a philosophy of building up pupils and peers through relational responsibility. Analogous to Isaac Newton’s laws of motion, every relational action will have some impact, either positive or negative. Therefore, it is crucial to utilize restraint by finding a diplomatic approach to correction. Consider the impact of a firm rebuke versus a heartfelt and patient explanation. Pain involved in poorly executed correctional discipline can have a lasting negative impact, while any accompanied instructions simply fade from memory. As the Golden Gate Bridge requires its 27-foot sway of flexibility, teachers need to build relational flexibility through trust. Recognizing even the most minute of achievements will help increase student confidence. Utilizing this strategy will lead to growth of self-esteem, creating increased academic performance.

3.3 Types of Educational Leaders

Quality educational leaders can be summarized in three primary categories; visionary, instructional, and community. Visionary leadership demonstrates energy, commitment, and unwavering conviction that all children will learn at high levels. This type of leadership defies the status quo attitude, encouraging academic excellence, and setting growth goals for a diverse pool of students. Secondly, instructional leadership focuses on strengthening teaching and learning with every activity in the classroom. It is making pedagogy an active aspect of daily lessons, being intentional with every student interaction. Lastly, community leadership has multifaceted benefits, including cultural outreach and can help find additional outside support for student’s personal and academic development. Community leadership manifests awareness of the school’s role in society and maintains close relations with parents and others.



Figure 1 Major Standards of a Good Leader

4. Foundation and Example

Before entering the education profession teachers must understand why they want to teach and what their methods and goals will be as well as how to create an environment conducive to success. Many teachers have uplifting stories of seeing the “light” turn on in a child, or when a student finally embraces the learning process. These stories are often why individuals choose teaching and inspire them to find more teaching strategies that lead to success. To inspire students, effective teachers must remain a role model. Students must know that the learning process never stops. As an example of lifelong learning, teachers will need to go beyond academia, embarking on personal journeys in which they can analyze their own attitudes and actions in all areas of their lives. Teachers must then demonstrate examples of learning every day in the classroom.

5. Self-Discovery: Prejudice and Privilege

To understand diversity, it is important to understand your own prejudices and assumptions regarding race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities and abilities. Diversity can be defined as “differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic area”. It is nearly impossible to escape having some negative attitudes and feelings in many of the areas listed above. In a competitively structured society we are often pitted against one another for jobs and increasingly scarce resources. Because of the competition some rationalize their losses through prejudices and assumptions regarding race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities and abilities.

Jonathan Kozol has written extensively on the inequalities within the educational system in the U.S. In his book, *Savage Inequalities*, he interviews James Carter, a principal in P.S. 79 in New York City, who states:

“Will these children ever get what white kids in the suburbs take for granted? I don’t think so. If you ask me why I’d have to speak of race and social class. I don’t think the powers that be in New York City understand, or want to understand, that if you do not give these children a sufficient education to lead healthy and productive lives, we will be their victims later on” (Kozol, 1992).

James Carter seems to understand that all students need an equitable education. If we do not give a certain social-economic groups the education they deserve, they can hold the society back and increase the negative diversity within society. The environment we live in directly affects who we are as human beings, and how we interact with each other. These relationships get played out in our schools, classrooms and communities. If, as James Carter believes, the education system is not fair and equitable teachers must change the system by being a role model showing fairness. Teachers must create an environment where students can be empowered to rise above obstacles. Then the teachers can engage students in lessons and activities that seek to change inequalities wherever they find them.

Peggy McIntosh, a professor of Women’s Studies at Wellesley college, details specific unearned privileges regarding skin color, or whiteness, in an article she wrote entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”. Peggy started out investigating the privileges men have over women and how men are “conditioned into oblivion about its existence” (McIntosh, 1990). In this article she felt that being white allowed her unearned privileges or advantages that she had not acknowledged. Peggy recounts an experience of examining her white privilege leading her to see many other privileges that exist such as age, ethnicity, physical ability, nationality, religion, and sexual orientation. “My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make”

(McIntosh, 1990). Teachers must admit prejudice and unearned privileges exist so we can begin to address them with solutions and create a level playing field with our students and communities.

Differences among students are to be expected and should be treated with respect and understanding. Teachers need to set the example in promoting respect for differences, which include learning modalities, physical, mental, and emotional abilities and behavioral differences. When prejudices arise at school, it is important for teachers to shine a light on them, to provide a safe and structured forum for students to express their thoughts and feelings. Paulo Freire, one of the great educators of the 20th century, promoted education as a necessary ingredient to liberation. Wherever oppression, inequalities and prejudice exist, they are sustained by fear and ignorance. In order to replace existing injustices, you need to educate. A teacher's strong and kind internal compass can guide students past prejudices, and toward the compassion, tenacity, and continual self-examination necessary to succeed in school, family, and community environments.

6. Cultural Immersion

Teachers should be a safe harbor for new students entering the classroom and incorporate these students' experiences and background into the lesson plans. The more teachers know about their students the better equipped they are to design lesson plans that are inclusive and motivating for all students. Teachers can also make an effort to expose themselves to social and cultural events of their students and community. They can eat and drink, attend churches, mosques, synagogues, and community events. This can help in understanding the challenges, strengths and weaknesses within that community. The more time spent within a culture the better chance there is of identifying with the cultures of the community. In the classroom students will reap the rewards of a teacher who ventures down the road less traveled, sharing these culturally rich experiences to help elaborate lesson plans prepared with humor, compassion, empathy, and the strength of diversity.

7. Conclusion

In summary, admitting cultural biases exist is a critical step to becoming an effective teacher in a diverse world. Acknowledging differences in students' styles, beliefs, and abilities allows one to develop curriculum that is responsive to individual student needs. Consequently, strength is derived from this diversity of background, cultural perspective, and pedagogy. Educators that embrace inclusion create a climate that encourages respect and friendliness in the classroom. Teachers must set the tone, encouraging discussions and activities with a global outlook. This atmosphere is sustained through educational leadership displayed through charisma and integrity. Ultimately, innovation and creativity with a focus on cultural partnership will help foster stronger relationships; not only between students in the classroom, but with their families, ethnic communities, and beyond.

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