Diversity and Public Education

Introduction

One of the implicit promises made to families who choose, or depend on, tax-payer funded public education is an efficacious, relevant, and valuable educational experience. As American demographics change, however, making good on this mission has become increasingly challenging. A rapid and undeniable shift in the composition of the public school classroom has educators and the traditional systematic delivery of information and dissemination of knowledge under intense pressure and scrutiny because of federal mandates and constraints and declining performance measures. These trends necessitate an increasing emphasis on ways to improve the achievement of traditionally underserved and marginalized students (Enyedy & Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Studies show that students from diverse background are more likely than the cultural majority to live in poverty.   Children living in poverty tend to be disproportionately children of color and are concentrated in neighborhoods and districts designated to attend low-performing schools staffed by poorly prepared teachers. They are likely to leave school without a diploma or the necessary skills need to earn a living in a rapidly changing economy (Murnane, 2007).

N.C. Diversity

Diverse student populations are students who are distinguished from mainstream society by their primary language, ethnicity, and social class. According to the NC Department of Public Education, NC ranks among the states with the most rapidly changing racial demographics (See table 1). According to the Digest of Educational Statistics, this growth in population also mirrors the dropout rate (See table 2). Further, Department of Education statistics show that being a racial minority also means being at a higher risk for living in poverty. The NC dropout statistics are aligned with the national dropout rates for Caucasian and Black students, but the Hispanic dropout rate falls significantly below the national rate, which is 17%. Research indicates that

being a member of a racial minority and living below the poverty level increases the chances of attending a low-performing school. In fact, statistics indicate that 48% of Blacks, 49% of Hispanics, and 36% of Native Americans attend schools with the highest measure of poverty (referring to 75% of a school's students on free and reduced lunch) nationally. Research indicates that being part of these minority groups coupled with being enrolled in high poverty, low performing school plays a significant role in the quality of students' educational experience and leads to a student's classification of being "at risk" (Durden, 2008).

According to census data, 66% of children living in poverty are racial minorities. Since it is likely that children living in poverty also attend high poverty, low performing schools, a significant achievement gap between diverse populations and White students is manifested. Studies cite the most common factors that affect these racial achievement gaps as: (a) socioeconomic and family conditions, (b) student and youth behaviors, and (c) schooling conditions and practices (Lee, 2002). Educational reforms must incorporate strategies that target raising the achievement levels of NC's diverse populations, which includes a re-examination of policies, pedagogical practices, and assessment. Due to federal mandates incorporated in the "No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, however, meaningful targeted reform is a challenging prospect.

No Child Left Behind

Although its effects and actions are no compatible with its intentions, the NCLB policy was intended to be a transformative educational reform that closed the educational achievements gap and ensured that all students from all ethnic, cultural, racial, and economic abilities receive the same education quality (Gay, 2007). In reality, the constraints imposed by this legislation is marginalizing, rather than assisting, students of color, English Language Learners, and residents of urban and rural communities. Many, if not most, teachers and educational professionals find the standardized testing measures encumbering to innovative, individualized

and imaginative approaches need to reach diverse student populations. The content and the administration of the tests are problematic as indicators of quality education for diverse students. Research and experience indicate that students express knowledge and comprehension in different ways, for different reasons, at different rates, these differences are further complicated by "ethnic, racial and cultural experiences, identities and socialization" (Gay, 2007).

Research indicates that achievement on high stakes tests not only provides little motivation for diverse students, but may actually cultivate failure (Darling-Hammond, 2006):

-The lowest performing schools are required to make the greatest adequate yearly
  progress but the fact that they are the most under-funded and serve the neediest
  students is ignored

-Some states are lowering their performance standards to keep more of their schools
  from being designated "failing"

-Tests used as graduation requirements are increasing dropout rates

-More and more students who perform poorly on standardized tests are being placed in
  special education so that scores will not be counted in the school's achievement profile

It is reasonable to assume that students who are enrolled in public, high poverty, low-performing schools lack the "social language skills and cultural capital to successfully negotiate school learning grounded in 'middle-classness' and Standard Academic English" (Gay, 2007). Any attempts at comprehensive educational reform that engages diverse and "at risk" students in meaningful learning must navigate the narrow restrictions and considerations implemented by the federal NCLB mandate.

Student Engagement

Studies in school reform are beginning to reveal an emerging consensus regarding the factors that contribute to academic success. These factors include a meaningful pedagogy and engaging curriculum, professional learning communities among faculty and staff members,

personalized learning environments, and cooperation between education professionals and parents (Klem & Connell, 2004). Attempts to incorporate these aspects of learning have been shown to increase the levels of student engagement in education (Klem & Connell, 2004; Newmann, 1989; Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, &Perry, 2006).

Research has strongly suggested that engagement improves performance and validates positive expectations regarding academic abilities (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998). Behaviors such as on task behaviors, study behaviors, class attendance, and participation in class discussions are behavioral indices of engagement, while cognitive indices of engagement include task mastery, assignment strategy employment, attention, and a preference for challenging tasks (Caraway et al., 2003).

Research reveals that engagement is a good predictor of long-term academic achievement in school and that regardless of socioeconomic status, student engagement is a reliable predictor of student achievement and behavior (Klem & Connell, 2004). Students demonstrating a high degree of engagement earn higher grades in the classroom and on standardized tests. Conversely, low levels of student engagement are manifested in a variety of adverse behaviors, including class disruption, low attendance, poor grades, and dropping out (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Being engaged in the classroom is the foundation for several variables that influence academic success. Students who are engaged in learning are willing to expend more effort on tasks (Tollefson, 2000). High levels of engagement lead students to feel that they are a conspicuous part of school and that education is an important aspect of their lives (Finn &Voelkl, 1993). Students, therefore, derive intrinsic and external rewards from academic achievement. High levels of engagement may explain why even high-risk students succeed academically. Students who are disaffected in their own education or who withdraw from participating in school will not have access to the curriculum and are unlikely to attain any meaningful levels of learning (Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The most practical and effectual approach to enhancing the engagement, and achievement, of diverse student populations is culturally relevant pedagogy. This educational reform philosophy is a "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes," (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy considers the premise that learning may differ across cultures, and educators can improve student achievement and enhance their educational experience by acquiring and applying knowledge of their cultural background and translating this knowledge into classroom practice. Personalized teacher-student relationships and meaningful academic engagement are ways in which schools can promote meaningful learning and mediate against dropping out, particularly among Latino students, who struggle to graduate even 50% of the students who enter public schools.

Because "culture" is an important survival strategy that is passed down from one generation to another through enculturalization and socialization and shapes behavior, it is critical to recognize this component when addressing the needs of diverse students. Although most educators acknowledge Vygotsky's assertion that learning is socially impacted, most educational practices are predicated on norms and behaviors that are based on mainstream assumptions. When cultural incompatibility occurs, students may become disengaged, frustrated, hostile, alienated, or experience diminished self-esteem (Irvine, 2010). To effectively engage multicultural students in learning, therefore, immersing them in their culture by espousing culturally relevant teaching practices and connecting their cultural reality with their education experience is the best place to begin.

Learning becomes more relevant when instructional material and practices are pertinent to students' own cultural experiences. What students think is important or relevant is largely influenced by their social and cultural environment, as are their frames of reference, learning tools, and learning styles (Durden, 2008). Culturally relevant pedagogy involves connecting

learning and classroom experiences to home discourses and experiences. This approach

utilizes students' social experiences as a segue to enable the acquisition of new knowledge by

employing culturally responsive instructional and communicative scaffolding.

   Many versions of culturally relevant reform models have been employed and researched. As

many as 29 of these approaches were studied in a 2003 meta-analysis. Although each

incarnation was tailored to the specific needs of a particular district's demographic and resulted

in various levels of success, there was a consistent core philosophy, or guidelines that each of

the reform models employed:

   -The implementation of culturally responsive teaching, such as teaching in a native

      language, cooperative groups, and offering stimuli that appeals to diverse learning

      styles.

   - Pedagogy that is rigorous and challenging and reflects the idea that all students can

      Succeed.

   -The pedagogy bridges home-school discourses and experiences.

   -The curriculum allows for multiple perspectives and allows for the contributions of

      diverse student populations and affirms multiple perspectives.

What is integral to the success of a culturally relevant philosophy is more than a pedestrian

effort at "inclusion," as is commonly practiced (Durden, 2008).

Culturally Relevant Reform Models

   One of the most widely studied culturally relevant pedagogical approaches is "Success for

All" (SFA). SFA is a Department of Education sponsored model implemented by school districts

nationally with large African-American and Hispanic student populations (Durden, 2008).

Studies indicate that SFA demonstrated student progress in the areas of reading for culturally

diverse students and had a positive impact on English Language Learners (ELLs). Though

mixed results occurred nationally because of the flexibility of each district to employ a local

version of the model, there was positive recognition of SFA's inclusion of a bilingual component

to enhance literacy for linguistically diverse students (Durden, 2008).

Direct Instruction (DI) is another widely used curriculum model that is designed to enhance

the performance of diverse populations. DI focuses on accelerating student performance using

"systematic, interactive, and explicit" instruction, and is primarily instituted in high-poverty, low-

performing schools with large African-American student populations (Durden, 2008).   DI

operates on two guiding principles: a) all students are capable learners when taught with proper

techniques, and (b) all teachers can be effective when provided with research-based materials

and strategies. A study conducted by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (2005)

concluded that the DI approach was rigorous and demonstrated overall positive results in

reading and math for the "at risk" African-American students it targets.

While researchers for the CSR Quality Center assert that SFA and DI demonstrate the most

effectiveness and are the most generalizable of 29 models, there are other models that contrast

to the scripted curriculums of SFA and DI.   Other comprehensive school reform models such as

Accelerated Plus, Coalition of Essential Schools, Conet, and Onward to Excellence provide

teachers' instructional and management strategies (CSRQC 2005). Another difference among

the reform models is the content focus. For example, models such as Break through Literacy,

Comprehensive Early Literacy Learning, Literacy Collaborative, and National Writing Project

target literacy development. Models like Different Ways of Knowing, Core Knowledge, Comer

Development Model, and Modern Red School House provide schools and communities with

strategies that support the holistic development of the child such as social, emotional,

psychological, physical, and cognitive development (Durden, 2008).

Conclusion

Because learning is culturally mediated, implementing culturally relevant practices as an

educational frame of reference can improve performance. Connecting learning to home

experiences and discourse allows teachers to use culture to reach students who have been

traditionally marginalized by public education practices and standardized assessments. With

the exception of some Asian groups, children of color and low SES lag significantly behind their

peers in academic performance and are disproportionately assigned to the lowest academic

tracks and special education. Any meaningful reform measures should include the goal of

developing these marginalized groups academically by incorporating a sociopolitical

consciousness and examining current educational paradigms and legislative mandates that

address students as culturally homogenized rather than ethnically, culturally, and socially

diverse.

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(Table 1)   NC Students Population by Race 1989-2010

School Year	INDIAN No.	INDIAN %	ASIAN No.	ASIAN %	HISPANIC No.	HISPANIC %	BLACK No.	BLACK %	WHITE No.	WHITE %	Total
1989-90	17,240	1.6	8,938	0.8	7,100	0.7	327,420	30.4	717,463	66.5	1,078,161
1990-91	17,225	1.6	9,711	0.9	8,530	0.8	327,658	30.3	719,448	66.4	1,082,572
1991-92	17,100	1.6	10,395	1	10,031	0.8	329,802	30.2	725,149	66.4	1,092,477
1992-93	17,233	1.6	11,519	1	12,124	1.1	334,765	30.2	731,204	66.1	1,106,845
1993-94	17,522	1.6	12,641	1.1	14,507	1.3	340,566	30.3	738,332	65.7	1,123,568
1994-95	17,554	1.5	14,098	1.2	17,699	1.6	348,461	30.4	748,862	65.3	1,146,674
1995-96	17,698	1.5	15,696	1.3	22,299	1.9	358,129	30.6	759,128	64.7	1,172,950
1996-97	18,092	1.5	17,520	1.4	27,300	2.3	368,478	30.7	769,065	64.1	1,200,455
1997-98	18,375	1.5	19,550	1.6	32,902	2.7	376,740	30.8	774,602	63.4	1,222,169
1998-99	18,543	1.5	20,932	1.7	38,319	3.1	383,287	31	776,527	62.7	1,237,608
1999-00	18,762	1.5	22,597	1.8	46,164	3.7	388,778	31	777,400	62	1,253,701
2000-01	18,651	1.5	23,576	1.9	56,232	4.4	393,712	31	776,251	61.2	1,268,422
2001-02	18,872	1.5	24,782	1.9	67,677	5.3	400,492	31.1	775,108	60.2	1,286,931
2002-	19,081	1.5	25,574	2	77,485	5.9	407,550	31.2	774,635	59.4	1,304,325

2002-03	19,081	1.5	25,574	2	77,485	5.9	407,550	31.2	774,635	59.4	1,304,325
2003-04	19,416	1.5	26,593	2	88,355	6.6	416,264	31.4	775,079	58.5	1,325,707
2004-05	19,806	1.5	26,593	2	101,380	7.5	422,993	31.3	775,383	57.5	1,346,155
2005-06	19,927	1.4	29,095	2.1	116,021	8.4	432,587	31.4	780,676	56.6	1,378,306
2006-07	20,143	1.4	31,077	2.2	130,690	9.3	439,725	31.3	784,059	55.8	1,405,694
2007-08	20,279	1.4	33,023	2.3	143,911	10.1	444,164	31.2	781,037	54.9	1,422,414
2008-09	20,378	1.4	35,140	2.5	152,605	10.7	444,870	31.2	774,967	54.3	1,427,960
2009-10	20,056	1.4	36,490	2.6	157,027	11.1	440,385	31.1	764,204	53.9	1,418,162

Source: NC Dept. of Public Instruction

(Table 2)   Dropout Rates by Ethnicity 2008-2009

Location	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native Am.
United States	**4.1**	**2.8**	**6.7**	**6.0**	**2.4**	**7.3**
North Carolina	5.2	4.4	6.2	7.6	2.0	7.7