

Final Reflection and Integration Paper

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Throughout the course of this semester, as a class, we have covered many issues related to American education. From Colonial to present day America, many things have changed in education, while at the same time many things remain the same. The American education system has always privileged some and marginalized others, especially students.

In Colonial America there were two major groups of people, those who supported formalized education and those who did not (Rury, 2002). Those who were against formal education were often those that earned a living by a trade. They had on the job training and had little use for formal education. Others, who were not interested in formalized education for all, disliked the idea of having to pay taxes for education if they had no children in school or if their children did not need formal education. They questioned why they should have to pay for other people's children to be educated. They did not see any personal gains from the education that others would receive (Rury, 2002).

Those who were interested in providing education for all believed that society, as a whole, would benefit from educated individuals. They wanted to support religious values, which were typically taught at home. Many believed in order to have a civil society, individuals needed to be able to read, to be able to learn scriptures (Rury, 2002).

Individuals that were privileged in education and proved to benefit the most from this approach were those with the Puritan religious beliefs. Individuals that held other

beliefs were forced to abandon their beliefs in order to fit in. If they did not comply, they were outcasts or seen as “uncivil” (Rury, 2002).

Immigrants were often believed to be “intellectually inferior, that they came from racially-which was to say genetically poorer- stock” (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen. 1985. p. 244). Natives, as well as immigrants, were marginalized, deprived, or separated in formal education by being forced to integrate religious beliefs other than their own to receive an education.

In modern times American students lack basic skills and are disadvantaged when compared to other nations. American students are often not reading on grade level, they have difficulty with high-order thinking skills, and perform poorly in mathematics. American students score poorly on standardized tests, which makes me question how students will compete with the world market. Often times after completion of high school students are in “need of further education and retraining” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983. p. 5).

In order to help to fill many voids that our students face, longer school days and school years have been mandated. More rigorous teaching standards and certification requirements are required for teachers. There is also an increased focus on teaching state-standards and more cross-curricular lessons as a result of No Child Left Behind (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In order for students to do well it is best to have them relate information to things they are familiar with. “The child is simply the immature being who is to be matured: he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his narrow experience which is to be widened” (Dewey, 1902. p. 238). When children are exposed to things that they are

familiar with they can relate and connect prior experiences to make the information more meaningful. This proves to be positive and productive in their education process.

However, when students are introduced to information that they are unfamiliar with it can harm them.

In my experiences I have encountered many standardized tests. Often standardized tests include questions that seem unfamiliar to students from certain cultural or socioeconomic groups. Students in my school have been asked questions regarding auditoriums on standardized tests. Many of my students are not familiar with an auditorium because at our school we only have a cafeteria. Another example includes students being asked to differentiate between a pen that is used for writing and a pen that is a house for a pig. Many of my students have never been outside of the city let alone seen a pigpen. It is difficult for them to connect what they are familiar with to things that they have not been exposed to. Students that have had more life experiences are able to connect educational experiences to their prior knowledge more readily than students that have been exposed to fewer experiences.

Another drawback of standardized testing is that teachers have become more concerned with mastering “the form and not the content” (Labaree, 1997. p. 68). Teachers have been marginalized by not being able to focus on the bigger picture where education is concerned. They have been forced to read scripted lessons and limit self-created materials for classroom use. Teachers are forced to “teach to the test”. This is harmful to students because they are not taught methods or allowed to experience other topics, due to the lack of available time that would be spent away from testing skills and information.

On a national scale students are often marginalized based on ability. In schools, when students are placed in specific groups, based on ability, many times they begin to believe that they are capable of what is expected of them in relation to the level of the group they are working in. For example, if a child is aware of advanced placement, they will do their best to achieve the goals for this group. They are confident that they have the ability to do what is expected of them. Students that are placed in a less advanced group and are aware of this placement will achieve their expected outcome as well. In situations such as grouping for differentiated instruction, teachers need to remain aware of the many types of intelligences in order to offer lessons that meet the child's needs. Support should be given to all children in order to help them reach their highest potential. Students should be held to high expectations at all times (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983).

Students are privileged or marginalized based on where they attend schools as well. Some families are able to send their children to private schools. When children attend private schools they have a greater advantage when it comes to colleges that they can attend. Usually colleges prefer children that have attended private schools to children that have attended public schools. Perhaps this is because many believe that private schools have better academic programs. Therefore, students will be better prepared for a successful college experience.

In some schools students are given less-challenging curriculum (Anyon, 1981). This watered-down curriculum requires less thought and interaction. Often times teachers that have weakened the class work believe that students are unwilling or unable to excel in more advanced assignments and tasks. These children are marginalized because they

are not given the opportunity to achieve more academically. Students are not pushed to work harder, nor are they given the actual opportunity for more challenging work.

Students that are offered a more difficult curriculum are privileged; they are provided with more information and resources, which eventually leads to more knowledge, better education, and more opportunities.

Another situation in which students are privileged or marginalized is with regards to supplies and resources available to the students. Having inadequate buildings that are falling apart marginalizes some children. Many schools have broken windows, filthy classrooms, and peeling paint (Kozol, 1991). In addition to the condition of schools, many classrooms contain out-dated textbooks, little or no reproducible products, workbooks, and manipulatives. Many classrooms have little to no technology, including very important computer use that prepares students for success (Kozol, 1991).

Often, classrooms are cramped and uncomfortable, leaving students to feel uncomfortable in their environment. If schools are improperly cared for and lack basic classroom supplies, it is passed off as a lack of funding from property taxes (Kozol, 1991). When schools are in conditions such as this, the children see it as a reflection of themselves. They feel inferior and why wouldn't they?

In the book *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Patillo Beals, there were many examples where children were privileged and marginalized. Nine black students were in the process of integrating Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. The black students endured many horrific experiences, from being spat on, kicked, chased, threatening phone calls, almost being killed and a number of other terrible things. The black students were forced to be more focused and concerned with their lives and

safety than learning. They were treated poorly based solely on their race. The white students in the school were privileged to have a safe environment in which to learn. The white students did not have to fear being attacked or killed while attending class, nor did they receive death threats while at home. Many teachers and school officials turned a blind eye to life-threatening events that involved the black students on account of the white students behaviors (Beals, 2007).

Teachers have a very important job that includes many roles. “They are routinely called to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983. p. 1). Many urban schools are faced with difficulty retaining teachers due to an extremely stressful environment and lack of available resources. Teachers are often young and inexperienced. Suburban schools’ teachers tend to have more experience, resources, and support. Often the students that need the best teachers and resources are not supplied with them (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In schools, many teacher and school culture issues arise. “ ‘Teacher cultures’ often exist even in a single school and that teachers may often face conflicting pressures by colleagues to influence them” (Zeichner& Gore, 1990. p. 23). Teacher and school cultures have a direct effect on students regarding their self-esteem, progress and achievement. Many times teachers cannot help but to become involved in school and teacher cultures. Teachers may do their very best to remain uninvolved in such things, yet at times it is more difficult. Teachers may ignore or simply agree with opinions or beliefs in order to prevent problems from arising.

Some teachers have lower expectations of children from low-income families. One study that took place in a low-income, a middle-class, and an upper class school “suggested... that there are class conflicts in educational knowledge and distribution (Anyon, 1981. p.38). Students’ as well as teachers’ expectations of themselves increased as the income levels of the student’s families increased (Anyon. 1981). As educators, one needs to remember, “what you say and do in the classroom, what you teach and how you teach it, and what you don’t say and don’t teach will have a significant effect” (Lake. 1990. p. 20).

Complications of marginalizing and privileging of students is a very complex and serious dilemma in American schooling. Even when individuals are trying to focus on issues of inequity, many issues are difficult to address on a large-scale basis. In the school where I teach, many children are from families that fall below the poverty line for family income. The neighborhoods in which they live are extremely dangerous and unsafe. Many times there are serious family issues present in the home.

Each child in our school is offered a free breakfast, as well as a free lunch. Many children are sent home with food for the weekends. By offering meals to our students we are doing our best to prepare them for learning. Students are not preoccupied with hunger that prevents them from lacking focus on improving their education. In addition to addressing issues of hunger, students are provided with a safe environment in which to learn. School fills their physiological needs by supplying them with these basic needs and wants (Heilman, 2010).

As educators we try our very best to offer opportunities in which our children will prosper. We are unable to fix every problem, yet we do our very best to meet our students' needs. I believe that with effort and desire my students can achieve anything.

I feel that this course taught me many things. The most important being the impact, we as educators, have on our children. I feel that I offer my students the best opportunities that I can. I find myself searching for ways in which I can become a better teacher. I question more often whether or not the information that I present is helping or harming my students. I have become more aware of the importance of a safe and comfortable environment for children during instructional time. I also find myself more aware of celebrating differences in our school. By using different cultures and beliefs in stories, assignments, and other learning opportunities students are made aware of the positive aspects that come from being different.

I continue to expose myself to new ideas and opportunities. By completing my Master's program I am not only able to learn from my class work, but fellow students as well. Therefore I will be able to become more aware of new techniques and ideas that will help me to offer an even better education for my students.

I look forward to learning in the years to come. I hope that as a society we will continue to work on ways to offer equal and fair education to all students, regardless of socioeconomic class, race, gender, and sexuality. With knowledge and appreciation of differences I hope that in time all differences will be appreciated and all students will receive an equal education. As a nation we have come a long way, yet as a society we still have many more issues to address.

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