

Equity and openness in education



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Equity and openness in education are concepts many teachers strive to achieve in their own classrooms. The thought of an equitable education is one that many would assume is embedded into the foundation of the school system. This assertion believes that an education will “level the playing field” for students that come from a variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. However, many schools sort students based on economic, or racial status or the ability level of the student. This sorting process is highly influential in the student’s lives after education. Thus, higher achieving students will have access to higher education and well-paying jobs, and lower achieving students will not have this same access. I firmly believe that education should open doors in their future for any student regardless of race, class, culture or disability. Therefore, it is the academic and ethical duty of the teachers to provide an open and fair education for all students to truly make the school system equitable for all by shifting their perceptions on what constitutes “normalcy”, encouraging meaningful and open dialogues with their diverse students, and genuinely addressing and reflecting upon their own inherent biases about groups of people or certain cultures.

I believe that for a teacher to have an open, equitable and diverse classroom, they must shift their perspective on normalcy. In the most common terms, normalcy constitutes any set of behaviors align with the common behaviors in society. Therefore, in terms of society’s standards, normal characteristics consist of being educated (at the college level), being heterosexual, being able-bodied and a follower of the dominant religion (Christianity). Thus, those that fall outside of these boundaries are

considered “ abnormal”. The concept of normalcy in education has a very negative effect especially on those in special education programs. When students, teachers, or administrators, create labels for the students with disabilities and consider them outside the “ normal” category, they become separated and considered as an “ other” in comparison to the rest of the student body, leading to an “ us versus them” mentality. In addition, this mindset of normalcy, when it comes to special education, gives student without disabilities an opportunity to look down upon their peers with disabilities because the students with disabilities seem abnormal. As Linares (2016) states, “ a binary of “ Us” and “ Them” socially constructed on the perceptions... of nay social identity...may cause alienation and perpetuation of group...discrimination, prejudice and injustice” (p. 131). Though society may not be a truly accepting and open place, I believe that the school must be. Schools that lack opportunities for inclusion are reinforcing the normal versus abnormal mindset in their students without disabilities and are perpetuating the unaccepting and judgmental culture that unfortunately those with disabilities find themselves experiencing more times than not.

In my opinion, education is supposed to give students a foundation to become productive members of society. Therefore, reinforcing ideas of diversity and openness is essential, from even the lowest grade levels. I think that on the surface, we can perceive our society as very diverse. We are constantly meeting and interacting with people of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. However, I think that diversity should go beyond the surface level of just interacting with someone of a different culture. For society to truly be diverse, I think that a level of understanding is

needed of other cultures, ethnicities and groups of people. Schools can say that they have a diverse population of students, however I believe that if the students do not know anything about the culture of their peers, then they are not as diverse as they think. MacDonald and Bernardo (2005) have reconceptualized diversity as “ a dynamic, an on-going and active pursuit of an ever-expanding about how difference is perceived and valued” (p. 2). I take that to mean that there is an inherent difference between a teacher saying “ I have a diverse group of students” (a surface level observation about their students), and that teacher truly understanding the diverse nature of their students and can recognize (and value) the unique gifts and thoughts that each student can bring. In addition, a multitude of factors create a person’s identity. These factors may be visible (like race) or invisible. I think that diversity also encompasses the invisible parts of a person’s identity. An article in *The Dartmouth* expands upon this concept. The author, Bach, states “...we cannot and should not limit our concept of diversity to just these factors [race and gender]. We must not lose sight of where diversity truly manifests: in the brain and the heart, more so than in the skin alone” (2016, p. 1). I find that this quote truly speaks to the essence of what diversity is. It is the result of people learning, understanding, and positively interacting with the cultures, mindsets, etc. of those that are different than their own.

My recent insights to diversity, equity and openness in education have also caused me to reflect on past teaching situations with diverse students. When reflecting on these past situations, I believe that I was lacking in my ability to teach diverse students. The students that I have taught have been diverse.

However, I recognized their diversity as a surface level observation and did not try to create open dialogues with the students to discover how their diverse backgrounds impacted their interest and participation in music. As an inexperienced teacher, I found myself teaching them music that I thought would be good for them to know, rather than understanding first why they wanted to participate in music, their personal connections to music, and what aspects of music-making they enjoyed. I believe that my student's cultural diversity effected how they responded to their orchestra class. Each student had a personal connection with music based on their background which prompted them the participate in the orchestra program. I think that while teaching these students, I failed to see the connections between their culture and their love for music. I made the mistake of not acknowledging their individuality from their diversity and using that in our music class. In looking back at that time, it is difficult to acknowledge my shortcomings as a teacher, especially as a young teacher. However, I can take my heightened awareness back into the school system and make meaningful connections with my future students through music.

There are several ways to try and promote equity in education, however, I believe that the most important way is for teachers to honestly address any biases they may hold against any groups of people. Anyone would have a difficult time looking inward and critically at themselves to find in biases they may have. As teachers, we would like to think that we do not let biases control how we treat our students, therefore we do not take the time to assess how we view those different from us. However, it is these types of attitudes that make it difficult for teachers to truly produce an equitable

education for their students. Coming out of my undergraduate program, I would not have considered myself to be biased in any way. However, various events have caused me to seriously evaluate how I perceive my students. One such event occurred while I was student teaching. A young girl in the orchestra played the violin and had a physical disability. Sometimes it would take a little longer for her to do techniques or passages from the music. But, she always mastered any problem and maintain a level of musicianship that was equal (if not better) than her peers without disabilities. From this experience, I recognized that I had a bias toward abled-bodied people. I realized that I had a preconceived notion on what I considered was the “right” or “normal” ability level for string playing. Anything less than “normal” would produce poor string playing. Much of this stems from the environment I experienced growing up. All my peers in orchestra were abled-bodied, very accomplished string players, and so I transferred those experiences on what I believed was a normal ability for a string player when I was teaching. These reflections brought the realization that because of how each one of us are raised, and the society we live in, there are always small, but inherent biases that we carry. We many not realize them at first, but when we are truly reflecting on our thoughts and perceptions about our students, we find that there are more biases than we would like to admit. I think that through meaningful conversations with those we have biases against, and a deep level of understanding about them will help me, and other teachers address their biases, so they are able to truly produce an equitable education for their students.

Many of the readings thus far have impacted my thoughts about teaching in a diverse classroom. The readings have brought new insights about diversity and teaching in diverse situations that I was not completely familiar with before. The first article I found very impactful was Koepke's *Back Home in Indiana*. Much of Koepke's article dealt with understanding the culture behind each of her students and using it in their education. In going back and visiting her former students, Koepke realized how mismatched her student's education was with their culture. I think that as teachers we like to think that we know what is best for our students and what will make them successful. For many teachers, myself included, the first step to success is a college degree and (as teachers) we want to prepare our students for that future. However, many students are currently being raised in a culture where higher education is not necessary or needed and as teachers we must acknowledge that diversity in future plans for each student. For example, in Lisa's situation, her cultural background was centered around family and child-rearing. Therefore, many of her academic classes were helpful in preparing her for her intended future. Koepke states "As a teacher I never asked my students what they needed to know. I decided for them" (p. 27). This statement resonates with me a lot because in reflecting upon my own teaching experiences, I found that I often chose what was best for my students. Thus, not really catering or helping the "Lisas", "Gregs" and "Pennys" in my class. This reading helped me to understand that to teach in a diverse classroom, you must know and understand your student's cultural background because this directly impacts how they view and received education. In schools, I think that diversity can be extended to a student's intended future, not all students will end up at a four-year college, and to <https://assignbuster.com/equity-and-openness-in-education/>

truly be able to teach in diverse settings teachers must be able to find ways to connect the curriculum in a meaningful way to the students and make it directly impactful to whatever future they decide to have.

The second article that I found to be impactful was Blanchett, Klinger, and Harry's *The Intersection of Race, Culture and Disability: Implications for Urban Education*. This article brought new insights to the intersections of race, culture and disability particularly in urban areas. I have always experienced education in a suburban setting. I went to school in the suburbs and student taught in suburban schools, therefore I never considered diversity in relation to a school's urban, suburban or rural setting. Reading this article brought a new level of understanding about what students in these situations experience daily. Much of this article brought the issues many African-American students must deal with daily to prominence. For example, many African-American students are put in double jeopardy situations. In these instances, students are feeling the effects of educational inequities due to living in high poverty areas with schools that are underfunded, and educational inequities that stem from being labeled as having disability. From reading this article, I gathered that many African-American students face these inequities in society and in school because, those outside of the community are being clustered into a certain group (whether that be class distinction or ability levels) and projecting their assumptions about that group onto the students. Therefore, many African-American (or any minority) students in urban schools do not receive the equitable education that other students receive. I think that for teachers in urban areas, teaching with openness and equity would entail becoming “

familiar with and acknowledge within-group ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social class differences” (Blanchett et al., 2010, p. 404). Thus, not making assumptions about a group of people because they share a cultural or ethnic background, but by understanding that each of them is a unique person and should be treated accordingly.

From this reflection, the readings and my experiences thus far in this class, I would love to see a multitude of changes that help to encourage more diversity, openness, and equity in all areas of education. To me the most important change I would like to see is a shift in what is considered “normal” in society, and I think that this change begins in the classroom. I think that having less designations to what is considered normal would help in creating a truly diverse and understanding society, because instead of separating and almost ignoring from someone who is “abnormal” more people would be willing to have meaningful interactions and conversations with people that are different from them. Ideally, this would generate a deeper level of understanding among people, which I believe would help to truly foster a sense of diversity. For me this would involve, not being hesitant about encouraging someone to join orchestra who may not be the “typical” string student. I think, for me (and other music teachers), shifting standards of normalcy also effects the music we choose for our classes. Instead of choosing the standard, classical, Western European repertoire, I need to me more open to choosing and teaching music that are representative of different cultures, different genres and more. I believe that the change in music that students experience, can facilitate worthwhile

dialogues with their peers who are different from them and encourage more openness among them.

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