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Influences

In the increasingly competitive international economy, a good education is the best—and perhaps only—insurance. This is especially true for students who are poor, English language learners, or members of minority groups. “Get a good education,” we say. “It is the best chance you have.”

—Carmen G. Arroyo

No one deserves an inferior education and certainly no teacher wants to provide a watered down version of the curriculum. Carmen Arroyo (2008) says that although states say a good education is important in helping children to become successful adults, they often do not provide equitable resources or equal access to a quality education. “Despite national imagery full of high flying concepts like ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘level playing field,’ English-learner, low-income, and minority students do not get the extra school supports they need to catch up to their more advantaged peers; they all too frequently receive less than do other students” (Arroyo, p. 1). In many cases, education has failed to provide teachers with the background knowledge to appropriately teach

2 What Every Teacher Should Know About Diverse Learners

children from cultural backgrounds outside the traditional northern European model of today's classroom. The National Task Force on Minority High Achievement says that, with the exception of Asian Americans, minority students—even those who are not poor—tend to score lower on achievement tests than whites who are poor.

We do not have much control over the environment from which our students come, nor do we have much control over some of the adversity they must overcome to be successful. What we do have control over is seven to eight hours of their lives five days a week. During that time, we can give them the hope, the dreams, and the tools to make their lives meaningful. We can give them the kind of quality education that will be necessary to be successful in this century, and we can guide them to develop resiliency toward their issues associated with poverty.

Diversity refers to differences. Today's learners are different in many ways, such as race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, learning modalities, cognitive development, social development, and the rate in which they take in information and retrieve it.

Each student in the classroom is unique in some way. A successful teacher recognizes that diversity may affect learning and thus works toward a classroom in which diversity is celebrated and revered. In such a classroom there is a conscious effort to help students recognize and respect differences; there is a sense of community. In this book, we will look at how diversity affects what we do in the classroom and what we can do to make sure that there is an equal opportunity for a high quality education.

A FEW DEFINITIONS TO CONSIDER

When researching students today, it is important that, as educators, we have a common language with which to refer to the facts. To help us look at the issues involved in diverse populations, I offer two definitions to provide common ground in our discussion.

1. Ethnic Identity

The Regional Education Lab (Brown University, 2007) reports that “one of the most basic types of identity is ethnic identity, which entails an awareness of one’s membership in a social group that has a common culture. The common culture may be marked by a shared language, history, geography, and (frequently) physical characteristics” (p. 4).

2. Cultural Identity

The Regional Education Lab (2007) identifies cultural identity as people from multiple ethnic backgrounds who may identify as belonging to the same culture. For example, in the Caribbean and South America, several ethnic groups may share broader, common Latin cultures. Social groups existing within one nation may share a common language and a broad cultural identity but have distinct ethnic identities associated with a different language and history. Ethnic groups in the United States are an example of this.

The chart below is one way to examine your own cultural identity. Language identifies us—not just through our words but also in our use of body language with the language and the way in which we use emphasis or inflection. Thus the language with which you grew up will continue to influence you regardless of the language you speak as an adult. The beliefs,

Figure 1.1 Your Cultural Identity

<i>Your birthplace</i>	<i>Your first language</i>	<i>Your caretakers</i>	<i>Your friends</i>	<i>Your beliefs</i>

attitudes, and expectations of your caregivers and your peer groups have a tremendous impact on your own ideals and expectations. Through what kind of glasses do you view the world? That is your cultural identity.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

To understand students today, it is important to look at the recent past and some of the major influences in the world that have affected schools.

Brown versus Board of Education

Lisa Cozzens (1998), writing for *Watson.org*, describes the scene that led to this important legislation:

In Topeka, Kansas, a black third-grader named Linda Brown had to walk one mile through a railroad switchyard to get to her black elementary school, even though a white elementary school was only several blocks away. Linda's father, Oliver Brown, tried to enroll her in the white elementary school but the principal refused. Brown went to McKinley Burnett, the head of Topeka's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and asked for help. The NAACP was eager to assist the Browns as it had long wanted to challenge segregation in public schools. With Brown's complaint, it had the right plaintiff at the right time.

The U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas heard Brown's case from June 25–26, 1951. The argument presented in the case was that segregated schools, even when they provided the same education—by the very fact that they were separate—sent a message that black children were inferior to white children. That constituted unequal schools. In other words schools were not just about bricks and mortar but also about the messages that they sent to children socially.

The argument made by the Board of Education was that segregated schools simply prepared students for the way of life of the differing races in which they would be a part in real life. The court found in favor of the Board of Education, but they wrote: "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. . . . A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn" (Cozzens, 1998).

The ruling was challenged and made its way to the Supreme Court along with several other cases along the same lines.

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren read the decision of the unanimous Court:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. (Cozzens, 1998)

It is interesting to note that while we have moved a long way from the days of separate is equal, we have come full circle back to a way of life in the urban cities, older suburbs, and densely populated areas of the mountains, bayous, and woodlands that resembles the segregation of the 1950s. Wang and Kovach (1996) write that with increased urban sprawl, those who could afford the suburbs have moved out of the inner cities with its high crime rate, poor air quality, and decaying brick. This has left the inner cities to those who cannot leave for economic or other reasons. Inner-city students are often sent to older buildings wired well before the time of high technology. These schools often provide resources inferior to those of the

new, more modern schools going up every year in the suburbs and the smaller communities outside the city. Wang and Kovach call this “residential segregation” and that with the movement of resources, jobs, and people from central city to the suburbs a hostile environment has been created for children, families, and institutions embedded in the cities, including schools.

Indeed, after more than 50 years of desegregation issues, we are still battling whether all students have equal access to a quality education. Carmen Arroyo (2008), director of research for Education Trust, states “Many states still fail to give equal funding to the school districts serving the students who face the greatest challenges.” In its report on the 2004–2005 school year, Education Trust (2007) reported that schools in high poverty areas were more likely to have

1. Teachers who were either not certified educators or who were not certified in the subject that they taught
2. Teachers with less experience
3. Teachers who made, on average, \$1000 less than teachers in other schools
4. A high turnover rate

A study by Bartelt (1994) looked at the relationship between micro social forces and educational accomplishment in the macro ecology of 53 major cities across the country. The study concludes with inner schools that serve populations of poverty will remain there because they are trapped due to their economic status. Inner-city schools are increasingly remnant-population schools and communities trapped by the irrelevant economic links to diminished labor markets. Because those left in the inner city are primarily minority groups, we seem to be back to the issue of equity underpinning *Brown versus Board of Education*; not just equity of buildings and resources, but of educational opportunities and outcomes as well. Williams (1996) says that urban students’ achievement reflects historical, social, and economic events: the dynamics of the relocation of industry

from cities to suburbs, the transition to a postindustrial service economy, the history of racial segregation, and a new wave of large scale immigration.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES NOW?

Students today are different, not just in the colors they dye their hair, their music, or even the things they pierce; they are different in the way that they learn and process information. Today's students live in a multimedia world that is not limited by boundaries of the United States. They are more aware, more outspoken, and more demanding than past generations, and it takes a teacher with motivation and high energy to meet the challenges they produce.

The 2000 decade has already proven to be a time of great change in this country. We have become vulnerable for the first time to enemies outside our borders, we have become embroiled in war and the economy has proven fickle. For the first time in quite a while, the middle class has suffered major changes in their financial situations with the reversal in the stock market of the telecommunications industry and the loss of jobs by professionals. The chasm between the haves and the have-nots seems to have grown enormously. Middle-class families have lost their homes and those still in their homes find themselves trying to make ends meet in a struggling economy. According to a report from Project We (Greenberg, 2007), one in four students will become diabetic and one in two will get cancer in their lifetimes. These are scary statistics for this generation. Children from poverty, who are often exposed to lead poisoning, poor nutrition, and uneven health care, may be more at risk.

As Zhoa (2009) states in his book on globalization, "Education is supposed to prepare future citizens—that is, to equip them with the necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives to live a prosperous and happy life as well as to perform responsibilities required of them as citizens of a society" (p. 13). He goes on to say that one of the ways we predict success in life is to look at a person's success in school.

As we look at the students who come to us from poverty, it is fitting to look at what constitutes poverty today. It is not just a matter of money. Payne (2001) says that poverty is the extent to which an individual does without resources. She further defines resources as financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, and relationships. For example, *financial* resources involve the ability to buy the goods and services needed to survive and more. *Support systems* mean having people who serve as backups when we are not able to purchase goods and services for ourselves. *Relationships* refer to appropriate adult behaviors that model for students what constitutes appropriate behavior.

To what extent can we, as educators, help students to obtain resources in these areas? I am convinced that the more we can do that, the greater the possibility that we can solve inner-city educational problems.

According to Education Trust (2007), among the biggest changes in school demographics over the last decade is the increase in the number of English language learners (ELL). By 2004, the ELL student population had grown to approximately 11% of all public school students nationwide. In most states with the large percentages of ELL students, the districts with the highest concentration of these students received fewer resources, such as money, than districts with lower percentages. In Nevada and Texas, those funding gaps exceeded \$1000 per student per year.

The U.S. Bureau of Statistics projects that by 2024 the majority of students in public schools will be Hispanic with African American students second and northern European students third. By 2042, the United States adult population will mirror these ethnic identities.

It is interesting to note here that one of the original arguments for equal access to education was that education should prepare students socially and through experience to live in the real world within their ethnic and cultural groups. On June 25–26, 1951, as the U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas heard Brown's case, the NAACP made the argument that segregated schools send a message that the minority (in this case black)

population is inferior to the dominant population. Their expert witness, Dr. Hugh W. Speer, testified:

If the colored children are denied the experience in school of associating with white children, who represent 90% of our national society in which these colored children must live, then the colored child's curriculum is being greatly curtailed. The Topeka curriculum or any school curriculum cannot be equal under segregation. (Cozzens, 1998)

How much more complicated this becomes as we understand that we must provide a quality education for these students who are quickly becoming the majority in America. They will be our teachers, our doctors, our professionals, and our caregivers of the immediate future. We must provide a quality education because (1) it is morally right and (2) the future of our country depends on it. We must start early; if we are going to close gaps in achievement, we must look at early childhood programs. In a study from Rand, Lynn Karoly (2007), a Rand economist who heads the California Preschool Study project, states that the project is intended to examine the role improved early childhood education may play in closing the gap by better preparing children to succeed in school. This same study found in 2007 that three of five third graders did not achieve proficiency in English-language arts, while two of five students in the same grade did not achieve proficiency in mathematics. The report states, "Those averages mask substantial differences between groups of students based on their demographic and family background characteristics. Among children in kindergarten through third grade, students who are English language learners and students whose parents did not graduate from high school are the groups most likely to fall short of proficiency standards and lack recommended school readiness skills." In addition, the study found that almost 70% of these students did not meet second grade level proficiency standards in English language arts and 85% did not meet the standards for third grade. The targeted groups that did not

meet proficiency were made up largely from Hispanic, African American, and economically disadvantaged subgroups.

In the 2007 STAR test results, according to California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, it was pointed out that even when poverty is not a factor, the performance of black and Latino students is behind those of white children (Mangaliman, 2007). California's STAR test results show that African Americans and Latinos who are not poor perform at lower levels in math than white students who are poor. O'Connell notes that "these are not just economic gaps, they are racial achievement gaps." In other words, simply trying to explain away the differences in test scores between Hispanics and whites or African Americans and whites as the fault of poverty no longer holds true. Past methods of remediation did not account for the ways that so many of our schools are structured primarily to teach white students.

Changes in Identifying Students With Learning Disabilities

Schools all over the country are building models for identifying students with learning disabilities through response to intervention. For the first time, both regular education teachers and special education teachers are jointly responsible for identifying and implementing research-based practices to determine the level of response needed by children who are struggling. No longer do we wait until a child has failed to administer instructional changes and to track their responses. Intervention is at the first sign of difficulty.

Since the passage of Education of all Handicapped Act of 1975, Public Law 94-142, much has changed in the way that we view learning and difficulties encountered with learning. We have more research from which to draw and we have documented which practices work (best practices) and their effect on student learning. We have changed our philosophy from most children can learn to all children must learn and learn at a quality level.

Response to intervention became a formal part of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) partially because of the concern that, while schools were decreasing in numbers, special education was growing exponentially, especially for students of color and from poverty. According to Hosp (2009), "The basic premise of disproportionate representation is that, all other things being similar, students from different groups should be identified for special education services in similar proportions. For example, if 6% of the Caucasian students in a given district are identified for special education, we would expect about 6% of the African-American students, 6% of the Latino/a students and 6% of any other group identified" (p. 1). The same can be said if a group is underrepresented as well. This measure is not only used when examining data on ethnicity but on other measures as well such as language proficiency, gender, culture, and so on. The tenets of IDEA 2004 provide emphasis on effective instruction that is tied to state standards and delivered by a highly qualified teacher. It also emphasizes progress monitoring to inform instruction and early intervention rather than waiting for a child to fail before providing services.

Some of the assumptions on which the new legislation is built include

- All students will be taught by highly qualified teachers.
- All students will be taught from a curriculum built on standards.
- All students will be taught by teachers who know and correctly implement best practices in the classroom.
- All students will be taught by teachers who know and correctly use modifications for culture and poverty.

If these practices are not in place, the best response to intervention (RTI) model in the world would not be expected to get results any different from the models already in place. If we are going to truly identify students who need special education services, we must take into account the modifications needed in terms of how we assess and how we modify.