From Chaos to Confidence: Maximizing Opportunities for Academic Success for All Learners

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While FCAT test scores as a whole have improved, scores for students of color are still lagging behind. In the Central Florida area, the only “F” school for the year 2002 scoring cycle was the only predominantly black high school in the county. Further, more than 43,000 third-graders in the state failed the FCAT reading test in 2002. Of that number, nearly 33,000 students statewide were retained. This paper seeks to explore challenges that all educational professionals, students and their families may face in our nation’s schools, particularly in the state of Florida, as high stakes testing becomes a reality. Issues related to language and culture, underpreparation of preservice teachers in schools/colleges of education will also be explored. Finally, culturally responsive strategies that the educational professional might use in working with students from diverse cultures are identified.

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The news was daunting and painful. The school district’s only predominantly black high school received a second grade of “F” in the last four years, thus qualifying its students to request transfers to a “higher performing school.” Community outrage and dismay- how could this happen -quickly spread as parents, friends, and concerned
citizens questioned answers and sought to have their questions answered. One state senator even called for a statewide protest that would bring attention to this issue.

Sarah (not her real name) is a 28-year old single mother of five. Her children are 11, 10, 8, 7, and 3 years old. The 11-year old child is repeating fourth grade. The 7-year old is being tested for possible exceptional student education (ESE) placement because of extreme acting out behaviors in the classroom (his teacher reports). The 3-year old is in Head Start. The other two youngsters are not on grade level in reading or math but have not repeated any grades as of this writing.

Her major concern is that none of her children are functioning at grade level. The first grader is not able to read at all, she reports. Sarah has become very much involved in her children’s academic progress. She has taken the entire family to the library and they have obtained library cards; she has also enrolled four of them in an after school reading tutoring program at the local community center.

Above the fold

Stories like the one described are being played out throughout the state of Florida, as school districts prepared for the onslaught of parental and public reactions to the release of the latest results of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Newspapers and other media throughout the state led with headlines sharing school districts’ grades. Many of the underperforming schools in the state were located in the urban area of our counties.

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than 43,000 third-graders in the state failed the FCAT reading test in 2002. Of that number, nearly 33,000 students statewide were retained. In Central Florida alone, this number translates to 5,500, including 2,265 in Orange County. Many of these students are students of color and reside within the urban cohorts of our school district. Moreover, less than half of black fourth-graders and just over half of Hispanic fourth-graders in the state of Florida are reading at grade level. Still, the 41 percent of black fourth-graders who read at grade level this year is up from 23 percent in 1998. For Hispanic students, the numbers have gone from 38 percent to 51 percent. In addressing the area of achievement, Dr. Monica Hayes, Director of Equity and Access of the State of Florida noted that the achievement gap is not due to FCAT (2003). Further, Dr. Hayes adds that 42% of the students receiving a graduation credential other than the standard diploma in 2001-2002 were African American and that 36% of the students that were not promoted statewide in the year 2001-2002 were African American.

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Perspectives on diversity

It is clear that we continue to live, work, and teach in a world that is in constant change. In some classrooms, teachers are educating classes of students whose nationalities, ethnicity, race, gender, social, and economic classification may shift on a
weekly basis (Lue, 2001). Further, it is generally agreed that in years to come,
educational professionals will be teaching groups of learners who are quite different from
any others whom they have taught in the past (American Speech-Language-Hearing
Association, 2001). Moreover, many of these youngsters will come from more diverse
cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, they will exhibit a wide range of
language, learning, and behavioral characteristics that may present challenges to
educators. Some may be at risk of academic failure and placed in special education
settings because of their limited English proficiency, their behavioral characteristics, and
their socioeconomic status (Dryfoos, 1990; Beale, 2001; Payne, 2001; Lamorey, 2002).
The challenge for educational professionals is to provide an empowering school culture.
Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm (2000) described such a culture as one that promotes gender,
racial, and social-class equity; it creates an atmosphere for looking at biases and
prejudices, identifying strategies to eliminate them, and substituting opportunities to
enhance the positive self-esteem of students.

Students of color are among those who deserve an empowering school
environment that provides opportunities for understanding their traditional cultural and
linguistic characteristics and deals with frequent biases and prejudices that they face. The
challenge is further exacerbated by the fact that institutions of higher education may be
underpreparing teacher education students-both at the preservice and graduate level-to
work effectively with these children (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Thomas, FitzHugh-Walker,
& Jefferies, 2000). As further indicated by Nieto (2000), most preservice educators are
female, white, and English-speaking. Often they are products of predominantly white
colleges of teacher education.
What We Know

Census figures

According to the 2000 United States census, one in six Floridians was born in another country, far more than the national average of one in ten.

Language and culture

Language affects families, communities, and schools (Lue, Green, & Smalley, 2001). This is especially true when individuals attempt to forge relationships with each other and collaborate, but do not communicate in the same languages. For example, in the largest Central Florida County, there are at least 147 languages spoken, from Spanish and German to Urdu and Serbo-Croatian. Many classroom teachers face the ever-increasing challenge of teaching students to read English even before they can read in their own language. The challenge of learning a new language is significant. Basic language proficiency often takes years to achieve. There are typically never enough English-as-a-Second-Language classes to meet demands, and aspiring candidates often wait months or years to move up on waiting lists. While serving as a volunteer to encourage individuals to register to vote in a recent county, volunteers were met constantly with the reply, “I have no vote/I no citizen.” When asked how long they’d been in the country, they stated “ten years, 12 years, I no speak English good. I wait for classes.” Lack of basic reading and writing skills in a person's native language (or speaking a language with no written form) hinders the ability to learn a new language.
Strategies that work

Any of the situations that have been presented, in and of themselves, are challenging. The question therefore remains, what can we do to assist learners in our care to realize their maximum potential? We offer a few strategies:

- Begin with the basic premise that all children can learn, and for the most part, enter into the school doors with a willingness to learn. What happens then, between the hours that the student is in a teacher’s care-is largely dependent upon the teacher.

- Whatever the setting, establish some rules of engagement. What is the expected behavior? Remember, children need both predictability and opportunities for socialization.

- Create a “culture of achievement.” Dorothy Height, President Emeriti, National Council of Negro Women, puts it this way, “While it is true that you may lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink; one, however, can create a thirst” (Height, 2002).

- We must all work to create a learning environment that fosters the use of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Teachers should display their excitement for teaching communication skills to promote students’ growth of positive attitudes toward learning. Modeling the communication behavior expected of students is essential;

- The classroom environment should be structured in such a way that students feel at ease in participating in various instructional arrangements (e.g., large and small groups);
Identifying current issues and concerns of students and their families is essential in the teaching-learning process. Effective and proactive teachers become familiar with what is meaningful in the lives of their students and the lives of their students’ families. Information of this type will assist teachers in identifying and developing suitable, practical examples for use in the classroom.

Educators should use storytelling skills to facilitate communication skills. For example, in some cultures, the passing down of family traditions, values, and beliefs through storytelling is a very rich tradition. Accordingly, these students are inclined to remember a concept or a construct when given a story to make the connection. Details including who, what, when, where, how, and why should be given. After the story, teachers should check the students’ comprehension by having them suggest alternative options to produce the same results (Lue, 2001);

Understand the influence of culture and language on learning and academic achievement. It is important for us to understand the family’s cultural belief system, and how one’s belief system affects how we, as educators, provide services for the student. We can certainly build upon those beliefs by involving families throughout the educational process (Hernandez, 2001);

Encourage parents to regulate their child’s television time and to avoid using TV as a baby-sitter. It has been reported that nearly 98 percent of American homes own or have access to a television set. Youngsters just 9 months of age already watch TV as much as 90 minutes a day. By age 4, children average four hours a day watching TV. Whenever possible, sit and watch programs together with your child, and talk about what you are viewing.
- The teacher must model support and respect of individual differences. “I have two mommies, I have two daddies” are topics that are coming up more often in children’s conversations;

- Be willing to reflect upon personal biases. We all have them. In one of my graduate classes at the university, students are required to complete a series of personal awareness reflections. This activity was shared with me by another colleague and is one of the most important assignments that I’ve ever required students to do. They (the students) often share in confidence that they had written things on papers that were not shared with anyone else outside of their peer or family circle. It afforded them an opportunity to face some issues head on;

- “He, who tells the story, creates the culture.” Children need to see themselves in books. They need to know that the people who write them understand who they are and their needs. It is important that students be authors who share their common heritage and their common experiences;

- Effective study skill habits must be taught. Some children are not effective learners because they don’t know how to study and prepare for studying. We can borrow from the special education literature, where clearly defined strategies have been developed for assisting students in a variety of learning tasks (Scanlon, 2002; Deshler, et al, 2001);

Just as some of the current models for multicultural education implemented in the schools do not necessarily support the history, identity, and development of some students, strategies must include those that address issues other than racial and ethnic issues.
Instill the love of reading in the hearts and minds of young readers by modeling it. Encourage parents to set aside a time at home where the whole family just reads. Be realistic in your expectations-start small, and then expand;

We must all become observers of language, and work to suspend negative attitudes about nonstandard dialects, foreign accents, non-native speakers in general;

Tap the existing positive community role models. There are exemplary models all around-the teacher must simply find them. Each of the different sectors within communities has the potential to promote positive development among adolescents. This potential is maximized when all the parts work together toward this goal, using a community-wide approach. This also increases communication and agreement (Smalley & Lue, 2000);

Don’t be afraid of technology! Embrace it. Don’t fear it. Many libraries provide free basic Internet services. Get to know the local library in the area. Use it as a field trip experience for family or for students. It will be up to the teacher to bridge the Digital Divide. In the October 2000 report issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Falling through the Net: Toward digital inclusion, researchers measured the extent of digital inclusion. They looked at households and individuals that had a computer and an Internet connection, as well as data on high-speed access to the Internet, and access to the Internet and computers by people with disabilities. The report concluded (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000):
(a) While Blacks and Hispanics have made impressive gains in Internet access, they still lag behind other groups; and that, (b) People with a disability are only half as likely to have access to the Internet as those without a disability. For students who have not had the experience or the access to technology in the home, the classroom presents an excellent opportunity for them to develop and enhance their technological skills. When teachers devise creative ways to teach students, using technology as a tool, this can make a great difference in the way students learn (The White House, 2000). Creative uses of technology in the classroom can foster students’ self-esteem, expand the collaborative efforts of students, teachers, and external resources, and promote increased learning and interest (Smalley & Moch, 1999). Finally, ask, “What difference does the difference make?” (Green & McClelland). Each of us can bring something different to the table, an opportunity to provide multiple perspectives to the same event.

Discussion

The issues that we face today in our classrooms transcend racial and ethnic boundaries; they are far more complex. Children must be taught to be resilient. Empower them to believe that they can be successful—and no matter the challenges that they may face; they must possess an “insistent passion for excellence.” The challenge, reports Hernandez (2001) is for “teachers to take what they know and use it to create learning environments in which all students can succeed. Teachers need to determine what they are already doing well, identify what they can do better, and chart an effective course for improving instruction (p.297).
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**Article Citation**