Understanding Diversity to Better Address Barriers to Learning

... it has been suggested that teachers unconsciously favor those students perceived to be most like themselves in race, class, and values; culturally relevant teaching means consciously working to develop commonalities with all the students.

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Part of this consciousness means that school staff must not favor students similar to themselves in making social contacts and enhancing learning and must not negatively hover over students who may differ from them, especially with respect to disciplinary measures

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Those who work in schools are a diverse group. So are the students and families who attend. Examples of diversity concerns identified in research include: age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, migration and refugee status and experiences, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, language, socioeconomic status, education, group identity, position in the social hierarchy, communication modality, level of acculturation/assimilation, developmental stages, stages of ethnic development, level of acculturation/assimilation, individual preferences, popular culture, family and lifestyle, workplace culture, and more.

Clearly, the topic of human diversity is complex and yet fundamental to any discussion of schooling. In particular, questions arise about such matters as how to establish a good match between instruction and learning, how much diversity should be a curricular focus, and how to balance teaching about commonalities and differences (and relatedly how much diversity should be promoted and celebrated). Discussions of diversity and cultural competence strive to provide a foundation for accounting for relevant differences.

At the core of all this are issues related to the society's interest in accommodating and promoting diversity. Biases, segregation, and disparities remain widespread. Thus, policy, politics, social philosophy, and practice converge in ways that make efforts to enhance equity of opportunity and social justice and celebrate diversity in classrooms controversial.

We have explored these matters in various resources that can be freely accessed on the Center's website (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/). Our concern here is with providing additional information and resources, with special emphasis on enhancing understanding of the school's role in addressing barriers to learning and promoting healthy development.

Toward Better Understanding

All schools must consider significant individual and group differences. While many of the factors cited above have been and continue to be the focus of research, there is still a great deal to learn about differences and their impact.

With respect to learning and teaching, researchers have emphasized mismatches between teachers and students and among students from different backgrounds as causing problems (see Exhibit 1). Given the number of factors at play, it clearly is not feasible to prevent all mismatches. The aim of good classroom instruction is to facilitate students' learning of the designated curriculum by creating as good a match as is feasible. To meet this aim, schools must provide a range of interventions that (1) address barriers to learning and teaching and (2) engage students in the instructional process.

Exhibit 1

**A Few Examples of How Researchers Discuss
the Impact of Differences**

Ed Fergus (2009) has summarized and expanded on the competing theories regarding the relative influence of social class background and racial-group membership on the school experiences, academic performance, behavior, and motivation of ethnic minority students. He states:

"The general purpose of these competing theories has been to explain why ethnic minority students fail or succeed in schools. Many of these theories consider factors inside the school and the child's family, culture, racial/ethnic group affiliation, and responses to school. These theories are commonly situated into three categories of thought: cultural deprivation, cultural difference/discontinuity, and cultural ecology. Each theory juxtaposes dimensions of race as a significant variable, but each has omitted the meaning of race/ethnicity as internally and externally constructed, particularly among Latino groups."

Fergus' research emphasizes the need to study (1) how students define their own racial/ethnic identification and how they perceive others defining them; (2) how they discuss the opportunities available for the social group with which they identified and the social group with which they believe others have placed them; and (3) how the students' academic orientation (which reflects their educational and occupational aspirations, participation in co-curricular activities, and accommodation to schooling norms) relates to their experiences of racial and ethnic identification and their perceptions of opportunity.

Instructional mismatches have been found related to differences in

- *individualist and collectivist cultural backgrounds*. For example, Boykin, Albury, Tyler, Hurley, Bailey, & Miller (2005) found "African American students were significantly more accepting of communal and vervistic high-achieving peers than European American students. European American students endorsed individualistic and competitive high achievers significantly more than African American students."

- *"rules" for communicating with adults.* For instance, researchers regularly stress that different cultures have different expectations about eye contact, physical touch, and gestures (Irvine & York, 1995). However, generalizations about such matters are tempered by level of acculturation, gender, age, position and status in society and groups, and individual preferences (Banks & Banks, 1995). Another generality suggested by research is that over 90 percent of a message may be communicated through facial expressions, voice tone, body posture and gestures and that when verbal and nonverbal messages don't match up, more attention is paid to the nonverbal message.

- *perceptions of self and others.* An example here is the work on independent view vs. interdependent views of self. Those with an independent self-view are seen as maintaining themselves as separate, self-contained individuals; those with an interdependent view are seen as adjusting themselves to fit in and maintain interdependence with others. With respect to thriving in a multicultural world, it has been suggested that interdependence is "a useful strategy for surviving when there are too few resources to go around" and that "college educated teachers and professors tend to use independent selves" while "students hailing from working-class background … tend to use interdependent selves" (Markus & Conner, 2013). There is also a growing set of findings on stereotype threat; that is, the tendency for students to underperform because of increased anxiety resulting from concerns about confirming a stereotype associated with them (Aronson, 2004; Steele, 2010).

- *family income.* There are many ways that financial conditions result in an instructional mismatch. See, for example, research focusing on how financial concerns can capture attention and trigger cognitions that interfere with task concentration and decision making (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013).

- *values.* Markus & Conner (2013) stress that, in contrast to higher status students, those with lower status tend to make decisions that are more ethical, negotiate more honestly, and compete more fairly in class and on the playground. Such students also seem to literally take insults to "heart" (e.g., a working class sample of students registered greater changes in blood pressure than did middle-class students).

- *teaching.* A variety of problems have been reported with respect to teacher gender, race, and cultural biases (Skelton, Francis, & Smulyan, 2006). For example, some female teachers produce an instructional mismatch for boys by designing instruction that emphasizes interdependence (Markus & Conner, 2013). Data also indicate that African American and Latino students have been disproportionately referred to the office and receive a harsher punishment compared to white students (Skiba et al., 2011). And teachers have been found to make negative attributions based on biases related to gender and some underrepresented minorities (e.g., perceiving the students as unmotivated, uncooperative, unintelligent). Gay (2000) summarizes her review of the teaching research by stating "Students of color, especially those who are poor and live in urban areas, get less total instructional attention; are called on less frequently; are encouraged to continue to develop intellectual thinking less often; are criticized more and praised less; receive fewer direct responses to their questions and comments; and are reprimanded more often and disciplined more severely. Frequently, the praise given is terse, ritualistic, procedural, and social rather than elaborate, substantive, and academic."

In general, as applied to schools, the literature on enhancing school staff understanding of diversity focuses on learning about such matters as

- the multiple forms of human diversity (including within-group diversity) and how such factors affect student and school interveners' attitudes, values, expectations, belief systems, world views, actions, and physical and mental health

- how diversity can negatively affect student-intervener contacts, relationships, and interactions (e.g., concerns about stereotypes, racism, sexism, gender bias, ethnocentrism, ageism, etc.; awareness of similarities and differences; power differentials that result in oppression, marginalization, victimization, blaming the victim)

- appreciating relevant strengths/assets; viewing psychosocial problems, disabilities, and school interventions in terms of reciprocal determinism and from the perspective of diverse groups

- prevalent biases in schools

- how diversity concerns can be accounted for appropriately in schools

- the role played by demographics and equity, cultural beliefs, religion, and ethnocentrism in public education and related political and societal considerations

Diversity and Personalized Instruction

From the perspective of establishing an effective instructional match, diversity is a major concern. The old adage: *Meet learners where they are* is meant to capture the commonsense view about establishing an effective instructional match that accounts for individual differences. Unfortunately, this adage often is interpreted only as a call for *matching* a student's current *capabilities* (e.g., knowledge and skills). The irony, of course, is that most school staff know that motivational factors (e.g., attitudes) play a key role in instructional outcomes.

We all know that good abilities are more likely to emerge when students are motivated. The point for emphasis is that good classroom practices involve matching *motivation* (especially *intrinsic* motivation), and this often involves overcoming *avoidance* motivation. (One of the most frequent laments about students is: "They could do it, if only they *wanted* to!")

Schools strive to design instruction that is a good fit for each student. However, the reality of individual differences and class size means that they can only *approximate* meeting students where they are.

For some time, efforts to improve instructional fit in classrooms have revolved around the concepts of individualized or personalized instruction. The two concepts overlap in their emphasis on developmental differences. That is, most *individualized* approaches stress individual differences in developmental capability. *Personalization,* however, is defined as the process of accounting for individual differences in *both capability* and *motivation*.

Moreover, personalization needs to be understood as a psychological construct. From a motivational perspective, the *learner's perception* is a critical factor in defining whether the environment is a good fit. Given this, it is important to ensure learning opportunities are *perceived by learners* as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic assessment concern in accounting for diversity and personalizing instruction is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities.

Diversity Requires a System of Student and Learning Supports

Of course, striving to personalize teaching and learning is essential but not sufficient. The greater the diversity in a classroom, the greater the likelihood that accommodations and special assistance in the form of student and learning supports will be needed in responding to learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Student and learning supports are designed to address factors that interfere with establishing an effective instructional match. Such supports are key to addressing barriers to learning and performing that are related to a student's background and/or current circumstances.

Every school has some student and learning supports. Given a highly diverse student body, a school must develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of such supports. This not only requires providing personalized instruction, accommodations, and special assistance in regular classrooms, it also requires supports that facilitate transitions, increase home and school connections, respond to and, where feasible, prevent school and personal crisis and traumatic events, increase community involvement, and facilitate student and family access to effective services and specialized assistance as needed (see Adelman & Taylor, 2015).

> In an interview on PBS, Chris Emdin, a professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, criticizes the "white hero teacher" concept as archaic – an approach that sets up teachers to fail and that further marginalizes poor and minority children. In his 2016 book entitled *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood … and the Rest of Y'all Too*, he draws parallels between current urban educational models and Native American schools of the past that measured success by how well students adapted to forced assimilation. His call is for an approach that prepares teachers to value the unique realities of minority children, incorporating their culture into classroom instruction. He stresses the stakes are too high to continue with the status quo.

A Note About Common Core State Standards and Diversity

Most states are adopting or adapting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As they do so, two major concerns arise related to diversity. As we stress above, one concern is the need for personalization and learning supports to improve teaching and learning. The need for learning supports is underscored by the Council of the Great City Schools' report stressing the reality "that regardless of how effectively school district leaders develop and implement high-quality curricula aligned with the new standards, some students will need additional support and interventions to be successful" (Gamm, Elliott, Halbert, et al., 2012).

The second major concern is how to ensure that the curriculum content provides an appropriate balance in teaching about diversity and its implications for the society. Some critics have cautioned that "attending to the diversity of students' backgrounds is difficult when a 'common' set of 'core' standards neither recognizes nor reflects the multiple ways of being, knowing, and thinking that children bring to classrooms. In other words, by privileging one way of being literate and making sense of texts, the common core limits what counts for students who bring different ways of acting, interacting, and displaying what they know" (Compton-Lilly & Stewart, 2013).

Concluding Comments

As is the case for so many other countries, the United States continues to grow in diversity. Our history is one of both embracing diversity and fighting against it. Embracing diversity on school campuses requires creating and supporting values that encourage students and staff of all backgrounds to value each other, interact with mutual respect and support, and develop authentic relationships. This calls for transforming school policies and practices and doing away with any that work against equity of opportunity for all. Such changes constitute the hidden curriculum that can enhance social-emotional development and prepare students to live in an increasingly diverse world.

Major changes are underway throughout the world. These changes bring both challenges and opportunities. Schools have a fundamental role to play in meeting these challenges and teaching about the opportunities.

To meet the challenges, schools must provide instruction that fits the diverse knowledge, skills, and attitudes youngsters bring into the school setting. When there is a good match between what families and society expect and what schools do, concerns and conflict are minimized. The somewhat daunting task ahead is to make this the situation at all schools.

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Also see the Center Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Cultural Competence and related Issues*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/culturecomp.htm