Working with a Diverse Student Population: The Mission is Not to Save, but to Reflectively Teach*

James Kirylo

Abstract

When teachers view their mission as one to "save" children, the possibility then exists that they might not "save" them all. In fact, it is not uncommon that a teacher utters the words, "I can't save them all." The mission, however, of the teacher is not to "save." Rather, the mission of a teacher is to reflectively teach and to continuously seek ways to facilitate meaningful learning. In that light, this article examines the notion of what it means to reflectively teach, particularly as it relates to working with a diverse student population relative to different attention spans and capabilities of staying on task.

Teaching well requires improvisation within constraints. Constraints there will always be, but in the end, teaching is a custom job. Elliot Eisner, 2006, p. 44

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) defines diversity in the following: In education, discussions about diversity involve recognizing a variety of student needs including those of ethnicity, language, socioeconomic class, disabilities, and gender. School reforms attempt to address these issues to help all students succeed. Schools also respond to societal diversity by attempting to promote understanding and acceptance of cultural and other differences.

My focus for this article is specifically on the last phrase of the definition, "and other differences." To that end, diversity implies that all students are different from one another relative to such aspects as their attention span, capability to stay on task, and how they get along with one another.

As it has been defined and as obvious as it may seem, the question then is never whether a teacher will have a diverse student population; but rather, how does the insightful educator constructively teach in a developmentally appropriate way to meet the varying needs of that same diverse student population? Answering the question is not so straightforward. In fact, all of us may think we are accepting of diversity as a broad cultural concept; however based on my stated focus, the following scenario may challenge some of us to refine our disposition and action.

A second grade teacher, whom I will call Mary, thought of how she enjoyed working with her 23 students. She reflected on how they seemed interested and engaged in the various learning activities and was impressed with how they stayed on task. Of course, there were some children who were more challenging than others, one in particular, a boy named Michael. Mary noticed that Michael had a short attention span, had difficulty completing a task, and was quite disruptive. In fact, Mary was quite frustrated with Michael. She, however, continued in her efforts, trying a variety of teaching and behavior management strategies, which led to little

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significant change. One day, after a few months of little or no progress, Mary came to the exasperation point and, thinking aloud, she muttered, "You know Mary, you can't save them all."

The Task is Not to Save

If there is one phrase that I hear well-meaning educators use that leaves me perplexed, it is the statement "You can't save them all." While I think I understand a job coping mechanism aspect of it relative to various dilemmas that a teacher faces daily, I often wonder, however, if the phrase is a euphemism for abdicating responsibility. Before I explain my reasons, I would like to say that I am extremely empathetic with teachers and the challenges they confront on a daily basis. As a former elementary school teacher who taught for 18 years in diverse settings spanning three different states, I have seen my share of difficult and sometimes seemingly near-impossible situations. I understand Mary's frustration only too well. On the other hand, her final response, a reaction I have heard from others in my own experiences as an elementary teacher, and an attitude I still hear in discussions with university colleagues, I have never understood.

First, when one begins to embrace the concept "I can't save them all," one is opening the proverbial crack in the door toward resignation, which easily can translate into, at best, only peripherally working with the challenging child with very low expectations in mind; and, at worst, giving up on the child with no expectations at all. Second, the task of the teacher is not to "save" a child. Rather, the fundamental task of the teacher is three-fold: a) to engage in an instructional practice that is developmentally appropriate in order to make connections with a child so that meaningful learning can take place; b) to deeply understand that diversity includes working with challenging children who, for whatever reason, have difficulty staying on task, possess a short attention span, and are disruptive ; and, c) to thoughtfully reflect on one's practice. I believe the depth of the latter determines the degree of insightfulness and innovation of the former. Although Mary seems to be moving toward reflection on her practice as indicated by her attempt to incorporate a few different strategies in her work with Michael, she does not go far enough. A "we can't save them all" disposition only adds to the intensity of the conflict simply because the point of view offers no direction, no movement toward solutions. Of course, it would be nice if there were a magic answer, an immediate solution, or a strategic behavior management formula that was guaranteed. But there is not, and rarely is for a teacher. Imagine, if you will, Mary verbalizing to Michael's parent, "I can't save your child." Sounds hopeless with a touch of self-importance, doesn't it?

Reflection and Action

The dialectical interweaving of reflection and engagement in a developmentally appropriate practice must be one that has its foundation in hope and compassion. Concisely, hope is a necessary psychological component for all of us, and compassion is the awareness of another's difficulty while continuously seeking out possible solutions and alternatives. In other words, the notion of "can't" does not enter into the lexicon. What enters the mind and action of the teacher are concepts such as "persistence," "belief," "will," and "connection." Stated another way, children are natural learners, requiring teachers who not only genuinely believe in them, but also are continuously seeking ways to engage them in meaningful learning. Findley (2005) puts it this way, "Children have an innate desire to understand their world and to accomplish their goals. They can attend for hours to something they understand to be worthwhile and achievable" (p. 653).

Clearly, the disposition suggested here is ongoing, complex, and not easy. Grounded in hope and compassion, the interweaving of a developmentally appropriate practice and reflection can be characterized as reflective practice, which implies the following: First, that we are aware of our strengths and are consistent in building upon them, and also suggests that we are conscious of our weaknesses and limitations, moving toward ongoing improvement. In short, self-improvement is the "mark of a professional" (Henderson and Hawthorne, 2000, p. 67). Second, whether it is related to behavior management or an instructional approach, reflective practice advocates that we possess an understanding of how we go about meeting the individual needs of students. That is, we differentiate our instruction. Tomlinson (1999) states, "In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's" (p.2). Stated another way, "...fairness is not about treating everyone the same and doing the same thing all the time; rather, fairness is about recognizing the individual strengths and needs of the individual child and doing what is fair for each one of them" (Kirylo, 2004a, p. 5).

Third, reflective practice is continuous in assessing possible biases that may negatively impact classroom practice, leading to positive change when necessary. For example, as it relates to one's discerning possible gender bias, Frawley (2005), among other things, suggests that the teacher critically examine classroom behavior and interaction through critiquing videotaped lessons. Fourth, reflective practice suggests we establish a meaningful dialogue with students, parents, and caregivers, with active listening as the heart of the dialogue (Kirylo, 2004b). Freire (1990) asserts, "Yet only through communication can life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. . . . Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 61, 81).

Fifth, reflective practice promotes constructively working with colleagues, other support staff, such as the school/district social worker/psychologist, and other outside agencies. To be sure, the depth of the quality of the relationships among the adult population working in the school has a significant impact on student success and accomplishment (Barth, 2006). Sixth, reflective practice implies that one is continuous in keeping abreast professionally. Indeed, there is a positive correlation with those who keep up professionally and effective instructional practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Conclusion

In summary, when working with a diverse student population, the task is not to save, as Mary seemed to indicate at the beginning of this article. What Mary needs is to be immersed in reflective practice, which includes, as I have characterized it, building on strengths and improving on weaknesses, meeting the individual needs of students, examining the possibility of biases, establishing meaningful dialogue with students and parents, building positive collegial working relationships, and keeping up professionally. When Mary moves more in-depth toward the above, she will see her work in a very different light, and she will be imbued with deep satisfaction, knowing that she is doing the best she can in making connections with Michael and her entire diverse student population, aware that her efforts will never be in vain. John Wooden (2004), the legendary basketball coach, puts it this way: "Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming" (p. 37).

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