

Diverse Classrooms Require Innovative Educators

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Abstract

Educators are responsible for teaching increasingly diverse students in today's technological society. Changes in students, technology, and community contexts require educators to determine which resources will engage learners. Engagement can be fostered by using educational tools such as popular culture, technology, and differentiated instruction. While teachers must determine which strategies will be effective, they must also overcome barriers put in place by school divisions, communities, and themselves. Being a classroom teacher seems like an almost impossible task, at times, but is necessary to ensure a future full of individuals who are academically, socially and emotionally strong.

Today's educators have the responsibility of teaching in schools that are becoming increasingly diverse. Students are changing, but so is our society and the technology within it. These changes require educators to step out of their comfort zones to engage 21st century learners. While teachers are expected to use best practices to reach every student in their diverse classrooms, it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine which best practices will foster engagement and growth within learners. Many teachers use pop culture, technology, and differentiated instruction to ensure that students are engaged in their learning. These educators may understand how to accomplish success in all learners, but many barriers slow educational progress. School divisions and societal pressures often create these barriers. However, many are put in place by the educators themselves. Teachers must understand the learners within their classrooms and use best practices to get these students engaged in their learning; however, they must first overcome the barriers built by others and themselves.

Changing Classrooms

Classrooms are constantly changing in the areas of students and their diverse needs, community pressures and changes, and technological advancements (Dixon, Yssell, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014; Mills, 2010). Learners are entering classrooms with many different needs that were either not present in the past, or not recognized by educational systems. Many students speak different languages in the home environment, and have different family structures and increasingly diverse learning styles (Dixon et al., 2014; Katz, 2008; Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017). There are also differences in motivation, ability, need, and interest. For example, two learners in the same classroom may have similar interests and abilities; however, Student A is a kinesthetic learner, while Student B is a visual learner. While Student A and Student B have similar capabilities, the teacher must create a learning environment that meets each learner's needs in order to ensure the success of both. Educators must understand their students' needs, strengths, and backgrounds, and use this knowledge to help the learners reach their full potential, while adapting to community changes.

Not only are learners becoming increasingly diverse, the communities they live in is also changing. An increasing number of children experience struggles (Alim, 2011; Katz, 2012). These struggles lead to students who feel like outcasts within the classroom, and this feeling of alienation affects their learning. It decreases motivation and interest, while increasing the feeling of being misunderstood (Low, 2010). Teachers must listen to these learners, help them see beyond the stereotypes, and understand that their struggles make them stronger. An increasing number of students come from homes with unsupportive parents (Chen, 2015). This lack of support causes children to seek acceptance and belonging elsewhere. These children are exposed to many different people and ideas that may not be appropriate (Tekinarslan, Kennedy,

& Nicolle, 2015). For example, Student C comes from a supportive home, while Student D does not. Student C has a close relationship with her family and they encourage her to find positive friendships through extra-curricular activities. Student D is ignored at home and finds a sense of belonging with an older group of people who are involved with drugs and gang activity. These differences affect not only the learners' time outside of school, but also their classroom experience. Educators must use their students' backgrounds and prior knowledge to ensure success, while also using the technology that is increasingly prevalent in today's society.

The amount of information available to learners has increased since the 1990s, due to new technologies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Students are becoming more dependent on technology, specifically social media, to get a sense of belonging and communicate with their peers. They are interacting with the virtual world as much as the real world for communication and entertainment (Adams, 2009; Lasmana, 2010). Technology is a symbol of social status, identity, and acceptance for youth (Li, Snow, & White, 2015). This dependency on technology has become a stronger pedagogical force than regular schooling and is a critical part of learners' lives (Kervin, 2016; Kesler, Tinio, & Nolan, 2016; Tekinarslan et al., 2015). Educators need to understand this dependency and use it to their advantage. Relevancy is important to students (Bush, 2016), and the teachers' understanding of learners' technological dependency will help them to foster engagement and make learning relevant. As learners and communities change and technology becomes more prevalent, engaging learners becomes more challenging for educators.

Fostering Engagement

Educators need to take learners' needs and interests into account and use tools such as popular culture, technology, and differentiated instruction to foster engagement and ensure success for all. Popular culture is a powerful resource that can be accessed through media to help learners construct multiple meanings within texts (Adams, 2009; Jocson, 2006; Kesler et al., 2016). It can also assist students in forming their own identities and making sense of the world around them (Kontovourki, 2014). Educators can use popular culture to help learners understand the different types of language and how these various languages are used within texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Teachers must access resources such as popular culture to engage students and teach them how to interpret and assess information around them. While popular culture is a very useful tool in classrooms, technology is the driving force behind it.

In the 21st century, technology has advanced significantly, students have become dependent on it, and it has become an extremely useful tool within the classroom. Technology has the potential to appeal to all learners, engage them in their learning, and "be used in an assistive capacity to increase student access to instruction" (Spooner, Kemp-Inman, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Wood, & Davis, 2015, p. 52). Teachers can use online resources and digital tools, which students may already have experience with, to extend learning beyond the classroom setting (Chen, 2015). Doing this will make instruction more relevant to the students and invest them in their own learning. Teachers can use educational tools, such as digital play to assist in literacy learning (Kervin, 2016), iPoetry to help students receive "authentic writing practice" (Li et al., 2015, p. 6), and virtual reality to experience a wide range of interactive activities that would otherwise be inaccessible. While technology and popular culture are useful tools for engaging 21st century learners and making them successful, instruction needs to be differentiated in order to ensure that students feel valued and cared for in their learning environments (Katz, 2012).

Differentiated instruction is a tool used by educators to provide optimal learning environments. Teachers need to find students' strengths and foster a safe and respectful learning climate within the classroom. The students should be involved in the process of creating a democratic classroom, wherein everyone feels valued (Katz, 2012; Konrad, Helf, & Joseph, 2011). Differentiated instruction is flexible and enables educators to cope with student

diversity, adopt specific teaching strategies, invoke a variety of learning activities, monitor needs, and push optimal outcomes (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Teachers also need to develop caring relationships with students and acknowledge them as individuals with hopes, fears, and anxieties (Alim, 2011). Each learner's academic, social, and emotional well-being should be taken into account. An example of a group of youth, who are strong socially, is the group of boys presented in Dacey's (2017) article regarding a group of young men who found a child alone in the rain. The boys knocked on every door in the neighbourhood to find the child's parents. Educators need to foster the creation of strong citizens. Optimal classroom environments that include popular culture, technology, and differentiated instruction can engage learners, ensure relevancy, and create great citizens of tomorrow.

Educational Barriers

Teachers need to understand the diverse needs within their classrooms and engage in best practices to reach their students; however, many are unable to do so due to divisional, societal, or self-made barriers. One main barrier at a divisional level is funding, which could lead to a lack of resources and technology for educators to use within their classrooms. Professional development (PD) opportunities decrease when funding is low. Many teachers do not use popular culture, technology, or differentiated instruction due to a lack of PD within their divisions (Chen, 2015; Dixon et al.; Katz, 2012). A lack of PD causes a disconnect between differentiated instruction understanding and implementation (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Funding also affects classroom sizes and assistance within the learning environment. When educators face all of these obstacles, they feel less confident in their ability to overcome them (Dixon et al., 2014). Overcoming these divisional barriers can happen with increased funding; however, without other supports, such as cooperative parents, the process is more difficult.

Parents who are unsupportive may have strong opinions regarding how classrooms should function. Many educators face opinions that texts may bring forth controversial and challenging messages for students (Kesler et al., 2016). They also face community pressures around what is appropriate and what types of media and texts should be used (Low, 2010). For example, when one teacher engaged his students in an interactive activity involving popular culture and online resources, a student in the class questioned the assignment, which was engaging to the majority of the class. The teacher explained the reasoning behind the assignment, and the next day the student's father came in and expressed concern about the assignment. The father wondered why they were using computers instead of textbooks and worksheets, similar to what he had when he was a student. Every day, educators must deal with parental and other pressures, while continuing to engage and challenge their students' views of the world around them. This is not an easy task, and some give in to the pressures placed on them. While many teachers use engaging resources to help support their learners and to overcome divisional and societal boundaries, others create extra barriers themselves.

Educators must adhere to best practices; however, many teachers do not use the tools necessary for the success of 21st century learners, and create barriers for themselves and their students. There are many possible reasons for the creation of these barriers. Educators may feel the authority shift from teacher to learner, because today's youth tend to be more knowledgeable regarding technology and popular culture (Low, 2010). Some educators believe in maintaining stereotypes and the status quo instead of "helping students learn to challenge it" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 314). For example, a student has been attending the same small school since the first grade, and every staff member at the school has watched this student grow up. A new teacher enters the building and hears that the student is difficult. Other staff members suggest possible resources to use when dealing with this student, based on their own prior assumptions and resistance to change. However, the new teacher is determined to give this student a fresh start and teach him to challenge his circumstances, based on his different

beliefs regarding curriculum delivery (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). Whether self-created or imposed, educational barriers have a large influence on student engagement and achievement.

Conclusion

Teachers have the nearly impossible job of acknowledging the diverse needs within their changing classrooms, using best practices to foster engagement, and overcoming obstacles put in front of them, in order to help individual students reach their full potential. Educators must look beneath the surface of learners and find the potential within each individual. They must use relevant educational tools to foster engagement and get learners invested in the curriculum. Then, they must overcome the obstacles put in front of them, while teaching students how to do the same. While educating our youth and ensuring that they are strong academically, educators must also attempt to ensure that learners are strong socially and emotionally. Students need to feel cared for, valued, and accepted in order to be successful. Teachers must understand their learners' diverse backgrounds, use engaging resources, and push through the barriers in order to ensure that the future is full of individuals who are strong academically, socially, and emotionally.

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