

Equity, Equality and the Social Bond Theory In Schools: A Heads Up for Teacher Educators

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**An Editorial based on some past experiences
and planning for what may be coming next.**

ABSTRACT

Today's schools face challenges that go beyond those of the 20th Century, in addition to the more recent impact of No Child Left Behind. Common core standards and stipulations found in the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) call for new academic programs and ways for teachers to implement them. Integral to the ESSA are techniques for achieving social equity, equality of learning opportunity, and "wrap-around support systems for vulnerable communities." The community support systems concept can include what sociologists call the social bond theory. For schools and teachers to make those goals achievable within classrooms will require more emphasis on project-based teaching and learning.

Introduction

Just when we believe the 2016 initiatives for how to improve American schools can't get more confusing, we are hit with yet another updated version of Great Society efforts that first became law in 1965. President Lyndon B. Johnson and his congressional supporters passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that year, with the purpose of encouraging school districts to provide better services to underserved students and students at risk.

The 1960s decade was a different era in that schools were still controlled and financed by the communities they served, and were regulated by state agencies only in the realm of accreditation, teacher certification and district boundaries. Financial support from state coffers was minimal, and federal involvement was limited to grants for schools and districts that were willing and able to seek them. In fact, most federal money was issued to states in the form of block grants. Money from those grants was accessed through RFPs written and administered by state education agencies.

Fast forward to 2016, and we are looking at an educational landscape turned topsy-turvy by:

- the legal actions of the late 20th Century that, in the guise of equitable funding, switched the primary support of American schools from local communities to states,
- the growing importance of academic standards first issued by professional organizations and later adopted by state agencies,
- the notion that holding schools accountable is best achieved through the development and use of high stakes tests—conceivably based on standards and created or sponsored by individual states,
- the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as the 2001 iteration of ESEA (greatly influenced by Ross Perot’s “No Pass, No Play” initiative and the subsequent Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS]),
- the influence of NCLB in pushing the real control away from both school districts and states, and placing much of it in the hands of the federal government, and
- the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that essentially returns most significant school improvement processes back to the states.

ESSA Uses a Different Theory Base for Underserved Students

The original intention of ESEA to help schools improve their programs to better meet the needs of underserved students and students at risk has never been eliminated. However, the primary feature of NCLB pushed those aspirations into a one-size-fits-all mechanism to achieve scholastic equality. While there are those who claim it didn’t meet that goal because Congress never provided promised NCLB support money, the efforts to bring all students to a single measure of proficiency through AYP (adequate yearly progress) was never realistic. Why? Because to achieve AYP as stipulated required an extreme narrowing of curriculum in the elementary grades, reflecting the significant ignorance of policy makers as to what schools need to do to achieve such quantifiable goals as established in standards and the pencil and paper tests on which they were theoretically based. In addition, the NCLB approach ran roughshod over the need to address underlying causes for student failure, disenchantment, and even rebellion. Congress didn’t seem interested in how schools were to achieve the goals it set, only in penalizing them if they weren’t met.

ESSA, while not concentrating on the need to work with underserved students, nevertheless implies that it is inherent to the success of the Act. In fact, one feature of ESSA as issued by the USDE is the need for “competitive programs to encourage wrap-around support systems for vulnerable communities” (Education Week, April, 2016). The phrase emphasizes the importance of teams of adults (teachers, counselors, community service providers, etc.) in working with students, and is

connected to principles referred to as the Social Bond Theory first introduced by Travis Hirschi (Hirschi, 1969). In essence, Hirschi suggests that young people need to possess a sense of community, and that they will strive to find any group, good or bad, with which they can identify and become a part. Sometimes the community with which they identify is alien to generally accepted norms. History and current analyses of social convulsions and even minor disruptions prove the case that gangs, social and political movements, and even social malaise are the products of disengaged and disgruntled people who have found a smaller community that helps them cope within a broader and perhaps more dominant reality.

The Social Bond Theory presents a different set of challenges to schools, because the effort to serve diverse cultures, language groups, races, socioeconomic levels, and LGBT preferences has typically been seen as something that happens through the establishment of an inclusive building-level culture. In the 1960s and 70s, with regard to race, it was also considered to be a logistical obstacle that could possibly be overcome by busing students to schools far away from their homes. The problem with superficial interactions within a building, or mixing subgroups artificially through something like busing, is that they don't address the four key aspects of social bonding: (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement in conventional versus deviant or criminal activities, and (4) the common value system within an individual's society or subgroup. Students do not feel attached or committed to the values and perspectives of the dominant social reality, nor do they wish to become involved in their activities.

So, if the superficial mingling of cultures, language groups, races, those from different socioeconomic levels and even LGBT is not a viable solution, what is? What can schools do, in addition to the use of "wraparound" teams, to ensure that all students become part of a healthy and productive society?

Project/Team Focused Instruction and Learning

Underlying the social bonding idea are principles of fairness associated with equity, and a ranking system that supports feelings of equality and mutually perceived worth. That condition is rarely seen in American schools, with their emphasis on competition in the context of athletics, academic achievement, and social status. Even now, with the slow demise of bell curve grading strategies, there remains a competitive dynamic that superficially separates the ordinary from the exceptional. That superficial dynamic is usually in the form of standardized test scores, grade point averages, and other measurable data that exclude characteristics that promote skills in entrepreneurial enterprise, leadership prowess, creative energy, and sociologically intense curiosity.

There is now a movement that incorporates the goals of many organizations and programs such as p21, Fairtest, Teach to Lead, Coalition of Essential Schools,

Carnegie Foundation, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Curriculum Leadership Institute, and dozens of others. Along with Common Core and ESSA, virtually all perceptive educational leaders acknowledge the importance of the New Bloom's Taxonomy with creating, evaluating, analyzing and applying sitting on the top of the pyramid. Most of the recommendations strongly suggest a greater investment in team-based and inclusive project learning of the type that requires situational problem solving and process development (Markham, 2011) (Blumenfeld et.al, 2006). Included are elements of entrepreneurial risk-taking, leadership to achieve consensus, creative experimentation, and a solid effort to thoroughly include all races and genders. Very few school programs today use those techniques, primarily because they are time-consuming, difficult to articulate within a curriculum, and challenging to implement in the classroom in the context of lesson plans and teacher skills.

John Dewey once said schools should be microcosms of the society in which we live (Dewey, 1897). While that makes sense on many levels, trying to achieve such a goal has been frustratingly difficult. Even today, now that we are moving past NCLB and federally imposed and narrow accountability measures, there are many obstacles in the way. School leaders are waiting to see what each state, under the provisions of ESSA, will impose with regard to standards and high stakes tests. There is no doubt some states will continue with an NCLB kind of system, modified to be linked to Common Core standards or another version similar to them. However, others may be more daring and realize the importance of meeting the higher level of Bloom's Taxonomy in standards, local curricula, and both summative and formative assessments.

Ramifications for Teacher Educators

Our society in these early years of the 21st Century requires all graduates from school districts to be proficient in more than just technology and basic scholastic skills. They need to be bonded to each other to meet jointly chosen objectives and to solve problems common to us all. That can only happen if their teachers know how to participate in the development of such a curriculum, and can implement it in the classroom.

Helping our undergraduate teacher education students meet a future challenge they may not encounter in their first few years of teaching will require the development of transformative and continuing skills in project teaching and learning (Greeno, 2006). They will need to be taught how to create and implement instructional programs that call for scenario and case study development, effective cooperative learning strategies, role play techniques, and problem solving strategies that result in inclusive and mutually supportive outcomes.

Finding ways to merge academic understandings and insights with aspirations for a better personal life and mutually supportive society must be the essence of a successful 21st Century society.

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