

Views about the Status of the American Education

The study is conducted throughout the fall semester of 2021-2022 in an Upstate higher education institution, in Western New York. The study involved three sections of the required FYE (first year education) general education for the incoming freshmen at the four-year college institution. The study was based on the in-depth analysis of the book, 'Clap when you land' by Elizabeth Acevedo. The book represents aspects of cultural, social, even religious identity, and increased self-awareness of two teenagers (half-sisters), one from New York, the other from the Dominican Republic. Through studying of this book, the students, freshmen, first semester participating in the course, aim to the in-depth analysis of the book, especially in relation to the human existence and continuous evolving of understanding of individual presence and personal input and mark on contemporaneity in a diverse world. The goal is for the students to perform high-level analysis on the importance of the connectivity, personal existence, and self-worthiness in an intertwined diversified world. Perennial values of family, tradition, unity in diversity are emphasized.

Keywords: *freshmen, diversity, general education, pandemic*

Literature Review

One simple way of understanding the impact of students' diversity is related to students' demographic data in any classroom. As mentioned by Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (2011):

Nationally, the "average" classroom would fit the following portrait: Of its 30 students (15 girls and 15 boys), 17 are White, five are African-American, six are Latino (three Mexican-American, one Puerto Rican, one Central American, and one Cuban American), one is second-generation Asian-American, and one is American-Indian. Two of the African-American students, three Latino students, and two White students come from families who live below the poverty line, while another four White students are from upper-income homes (p.42).

A latest projection on the US demographic is presented in the following article:

"Between 2014 and 2060, the total population is projected to increase by 31 percent, while the number of children is projected to increase by 12 percent. Most race and ethnic groups are projected to experience growth between 2014 and 2060, with the largest rates of growth projected for the non-Hispanic Two or More Races, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic groups. The exceptions to this trend are non-Hispanic White children and non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native children. The total non-Hispanic White alone population is projected to decrease by 8 percent, while the number of non-Hispanic White alone children is projected to decrease by 23 percent. The number of single race non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native children is projected to decrease by 20 percent" (Colby, S.L. and Ortman, J.M, abstract).

1 Regarding the long-lasting effects of the changing composition of the US
2 population, an important step is acknowledging the diversifying composition of
3 the school-age population, and its impact on overall school performance.

4 There are several sources for cultural diversity in our modern society. Many
5 of these societies comprise of different ethnicities, religious and cultural beliefs
6 which are impacting on several societal levels' ways of life. A society cannot be
7 held together unless its members share certain basic values. If some of these
8 societies did not see the point of reciprocity and fairness in every human relation
9 and insisted on living in society on their own terms, or if they denied obvious facts
10 about the social and individual self-expression and rejected the empirical and
11 scientific mode of reasoning about them, no common life would be possible within
12 (Faitar, 2017).

13 In addition, the research explains there are reasons why each society should
14 respect the cultural, religious, societal differences that exist within its constituents.
15 Every individual's culture is a part of their distinctiveness. It profoundly shapes
16 who they are and what they become, and therefore it is of great importance and
17 meaning to them. Their self-respect is coupled with respect directed not only
18 toward members of different cultures, as individuals, but also toward these cultures
19 at large. Respecting cultural minorities would imply respect for their culture. This
20 is not to say that their culture may not be criticized for any pitfalls or even some of
21 its practices precluded. However, we need to keep in mind that that there is no
22 culture that is self-authenticating.

23 Multicultural education can help instructors legitimately use a variety of
24 teaching methods and an expanded array of assessment methods so that students
25 not only can learn more but also, their comprehension of content would be
26 accurately evaluated. A major challenge for multicultural education as a field is the
27 gap between theory and practice. In part this gap has resulted from the challenging
28 nature of the insights provided by multicultural education. Additionally,
29 multicultural education research has rested, often implicitly, on a critique of the
30 reproductive function of education that has diminished its impact on practice
31 (Bruch, Jehangir, Jacobs and Ghare, 2004).

32 **The Teacher's Role**

33 In today's society all of the US teachers are facing the major challenge of
34 high-stakes testing and accountability teaching in this diverse environment. The
35 educators, teachers and administrators are confronted with the challenge of
36 individual and institutional accountability process first enacted through the *No*
37 *Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, and then re-iterated in 2009 through the President
38 Obama's administration. The degree to which all students are attaining academic
39 achievement is assessed through performance standards (Guthrie & Schuermann,
40 2010, p.208). The implementation of higher academic standards involves rigorous
41 timelines and appropriate strategies for improving teacher's education. Efforts to
42 increase the quality of teachers will potentially enhance the academic
43 achievements of the very diverse student population. It is anticipated that by 2020,
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1 minority students will make up about 48 percent of the nation’s school age youth
2 (Banks & Banks, 2007, p.vi).

3 As teachers, it is our job to make each child feel welcomed and respected.
4 This is the sole reason why the educational policy makers should chart the pristine
5 territories of building in the 21st century a culturally responsive schooling. Diaz-
6 Rico & Weed (2010) stated, “Culturally responsive schooling is defined as
7 effective teaching and learning occurring while in a culturally supported, learner-
8 centered context where each student’s culture is recognized and respected during
9 learning and social activities throughout the school day. The cultural strengths
10 students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student
11 achievement” (p.265). They also explained that there are four major components
12 of culturally responsive schooling and they are defined as: 1) respect students’
13 diversity, 2) work with culturally supported facilitating or limiting attitudes and
14 abilities, 3) sustain high expectations for all students, and 4) marshal parental and
15 community support for schooling (p.265).

16 In respecting diversity, by taking into consideration the diversity
17 encompassing features, we may end up not knowing what to emphasize more
18 aiming to thoroughly addressing it. It is the complex aspects of academic ability,
19 multiple intelligences, learning styles, thinking styles, gender, attitudes, culture
20 and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, home language, and developmental readiness
21 that are to be understood and promoted for an efficient learning (Kagan, 2007).
22 Apparently, teachers who are members of the mainstream culture recognize that
23 they need to adapt culturally to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)
24 students, just as these individuals learn to accept and adapt to the mainstream.
25 With the goal of respecting students’ diversity in mind, also comes the importance
26 of validating students’ cultural identity. Cultural identity –defined as having a
27 positive self-concept or evaluation of oneself and one’s culture –promotes self-
28 esteem. “Students who feel proud of their success and abilities, self-knowledge,
29 and self-expression, and who have enhanced images of self, family, and culture are
30 better learners” (Diaz-Rico and Weed, 2010, p.280).

31 In addressing the role of the teacher in a classroom, it is beneficial to
32 understand it directly from the teaching floor in today’s classroom.

33 As specified in the most recent study applied to the American schools, and
34 released this summer, “the world’s top education systems’ analysis implies the
35 greatest role in the formation of a child professional outlook and existence, beside
36 their family, is their school teacher. The undeniable influence of the teacher’s role
37 model is quintessential in the achievement of a child” (greatschools.org/article,
38 Aug.8, 2022).

39 An encompassing look at the success of students is also offered by a
40 “GreatSchools.org” article. It uses data to understand how giving College Success
41 Awards to high schools help all students prepare for, and succeed in, college
42 (Carol Lloyd, July 27, 2022). In the same article, it is specified that at ‘Newark’s
43 North Star Academy’, the underlying policy is geared toward providing academic
44 support to most of their students who take STEM classes. The alumni department
45 are the ones maintaining incessantly the on-line discussion with the students

1 through e-mails, professional help, numerous visits to the school, making possible
2 for the students to graduate and succeed in the STEM disciplines.

3 Other research has looked at the influence of the race of the teachers —
4 including Hispanic and indigenous teachers and teachers of color on the
5 performance of students. In the afore-mentioned research, the impact on the value
6 of Black educators is the most conclusive. The National Bureau of Economic
7 Research published their 2021 research concluding that Black children with at
8 least one Black teacher in grades 3 to 5 are 29 percent less likely than their peers to
9 drop out of school and 13 percent more likely to go to college.

10 And in the same vein of thought, another important information: “Teaching is
11 still seen too often as women’s work,” Janelle Lewis, the director of leadership and
12 learning at “Teach for America” says. “And the conclusion of the abovementioned
13 source explains that men in the field say it doesn’t pay well to try having these
14 jobs.

15 According to a recent study at Stanford, only 2 percent of the public schools’
16 teachers are Black male teachers (Bristol, 2022).

17 18 **How do we teach**

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20 According to Carol Dweck (2015), one of the most prominent psychology
21 researchers on motivation, personality, and development, the secret to raising
22 smart kids is to not instill in them the idea that they are smart. More than thirty
23 years of studies led the Stanford University scholar to believe that the secret to
24 making kids of all ages learn and overcome obstacles in their knowledge acquiring
25 process is to encourage them to focus on the process of learning, and not on the
26 intelligence and gifted qualities that may have been attributed to them at some
27 points in their lives. People in power, teachers, parents, and counselors consider
28 that it is important to praise children’s innate abilities. Nonetheless, this reinforced
29 mindset led to prevention of fulfilling potentials in athletes or students. As Carol
30 Dweck suggested, “parents and teachers can engender a growth mindset in
31 children by praising them for their persistence or strategies (rather than for their
32 intelligence), by telling success stories that emphasize hard work and love of
33 learning, and by teaching them about the brain as a learning machine” (January 1,
34 2015).

35 Another definition that comes to explain the importance of raising ‘gritty’
36 kids as portrayed in the everyday school learning process is also highlighted in the
37 work of Willingham in 2016.

38 “Being gritty means being deeply committed to a long-term goal and
39 following through on that commitment by pursuing it over the course of the years”
40 (Willingham, 2016, p.29). The author continues with straight-to-the point
41 examples; the fact that grit means measuring someone’s willingness to continue in
42 spite of following a ‘bumpy’ road is portrayed by talented musicians who
43 diligently practice, and by competitors in a spelling bee competition, who continue
44 to study even when it seems that they know all the words. The above-mentioned
45 author also noticed that the grittier students were able to give reasons for
46 persevering that transcended their own personal success (p.29). They were the

1 ones who wanted to continue in spite of the strenuous work because that implied
2 something greater than their initial goal of a chosen career.

3 When trying to address diversity, many instructional methods might be
4 applied, and the multicultural approach is one of them. The multicultural approach
5 as emphasized by Koppelman and Goodhart (2005) is “based on a commitment to
6 pluralism; its guiding purpose is to prepare students to be active participants in a
7 diverse, democratic society” (p.292). The Multicultural Education seeks to reform
8 the entire process of schooling and does not stop with the improvement of
9 individual and collective attitudes. It is mainly catered toward addressing societal
10 change. It seeks to also develop skills and a strong knowledge base that will
11 support multiculturalism (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p.162). The Multicultural
12 Education is taught based on recommended practices around defining elements
13 such as, curriculum, instruction, home/community-school relationship assessment
14 of learning, and other school-wide issues.

17 **Methods**

19 A survey with the same five questions regarding important names from
20 different spheres of arts, entertainment, sciences, and politics was applied in the
21 three sections involved in the first-year experience, common core class of the
22 students in their first semester. The questionnaire was specially formulated to
23 highlights knowledge regarding important representatives of our society present in
24 the general dynamic, and the decision- making process relevant to the
25 contemporary society. The survey also tries to highlight the general level of
26 understanding in the importance of multiculturalism and diversity in the societal
27 development.

28 Since the read content referred to the importance of the Latino/a/ex heritage
29 as portrayed by the author, the survey aimed at revealing the implication of the
30 existent cultural heritage in the students’ understanding and explanation of the
31 quintessential impact of cultural upbringing in the contemporary economic,
32 political, cultural, in the American societal evolvments.

33 The survey includes questions for Latino/a/ex representation in important
34 society’s domains:

- 36 1. Name an artist;
- 37 2. Name a writer;
- 38 3. Name an entertainer;
- 39 4. Name a scientist;
- 40 5. Name a politician, Congress man/woman.

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42 Their answers were recorded and based on their general answers, a general
43 conclusion was formulated.

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Findings

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3 In the process of analyzing these answers, thirty people’s inputs were
4 recorded.

5 While each group (of five) could give a correct answer to the questions
6 regarding Latino/a heritage in the arts and entertainment industries (Jennifer
7 Lopez, Camila Cabello, Selena Gomez), in the writing/communication sphere,
8 only Elizabeth Acevedo, the current reading book’s author came up in their
9 answers. There was only one other worthy mentioning of a representative artist of
10 the Latino (a)/x heritage, the Frida Kahlo’s name.

11 Regarding the science/STEM fields only one of the six groups mentioned a
12 prevalent name, embraced by all mass media, Dr. John Torres. The famed
13 doctor is currently a NBC News and MSNBC Senior Medical Correspondent
14 always present in the CDC news related to the emergency notifications and
15 updates related to the COVID pandemic. No other science/STEM representative of
16 Latino/a descent came to mind when understanding the impact of science and
17 technology fields on the evolution of a diverse/multifaceted, multifunctional
18 society.

19 In the political realm, three groups, from six available, mentioned the name of
20 Alexandria O. Cortez. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known by her initials AOC,
21 is an American politician and activist. She has served as the U.S. representative for
22 New York’s 14th congressional district since 2019, as a member of the Democratic
23 Party. This was the only political figure name of the required cultural descent
24 present in the answers to the questionnaire.

Discussions

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29 In summarizing these findings, it is prevalent to say that while some
30 knowledge was present in the arts/entertainment industry representation for the
31 Latino/a/ex population, the domains of STEM, and the political/social justice
32 realms were less populated in students’ minds with highly prominent Latino/a
33 influencing names. It is cumbersome to mention that an important segment of
34 knowledge propagation, and cultural representation dissemination was gravely
35 missing from the student spheres of information. They weren’t exposed or
36 confronted, during their middle and high school years, with the importance of
37 understanding of the cultural interplay and interwoven threads of the multicultural,
38 multi-existential fabric of the American civilization. It would have been beneficial
39 to be studying adequate multicultural/ multilingual literature on different topics for
40 the students to comprehend the immense benefit of having various cultural,
41 intellectual, social, diversified influences of a society in a contemporary world.
42 The footprint of a multifaceted society must be accounted for at the individual, and
43 multinational level at any given moment. Leading figures of all intellectual,
44 cultural, socioeconomic existence of any society are to be accounted for in 21st
45 modern world.

1 In the future, also the preparation of the in-service and pre-service teachers
 2 would be deemed as quintessential in acknowledging the multitude of challenges
 3 the society’s diversity poses. In addressing diversity, especially knowing students
 4 nowadays come from most minority backgrounds, it is mandatory to adapt and
 5 extend training into modes of communication and teaching needed to reach an
 6 overwhelming diverse student population.

9 Conclusions/Recommendations

11 In terms of main further research, it would be advisable that the conducted
 12 study would be repeated with new cohorts at different academic years, freshmen
 13 students who start the freshmen year with the knowledge imprinted by their former
 14 high-school teachers based on the curricular requirements of the pandemic and
 15 post-pandemic years.

16 In conjunction, a better perspective regarding the status of American
 17 education, would be given also by using the same incursion into the knowledge of
 18 these contemporary generation regarding various segments of minority
 19 populations, heralding cultures, values, perspectives, social and economic norms
 20 different from the mainstream society. The inherited value of the individual
 21 reading, writing, composition, and the cultural, social, existential knowledge of a
 22 humane society of the twenty-first century should shine through in the era of the
 23 new challenges present everywhere.

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