Chapter 9

Differentiation Challenges in Inner City School

Tymika N. Wesley
California Lutheran University, USA

ABSTRACT

There is no way to disguise the challenges that currently plague our field, and our efforts to overcome them have been largely unsuccessful. In the following chapter I will discuss one of the major pedagogical challenges facing teachers today—differentiation—and why this challenge is particularly complex in urban schools. We often do not consider the contextual issues that exist in the schools that serve the populations that these reforms claim to empower. My goal is to paint a picture of the interconnected issues that often create conditions that make student success a greater challenge and further marginalize groups of students we already label as “at risk.” Continued discourse is necessary surrounding systemic and structural inequities that continue to affect schools that serve culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Howard & Navarro 2016). We need to work toward eliminating the differentiation in the quality of instruction students receive in schools across our nation or we must acknowledge an additional layer to the term “at risk” student.

INTRODUCTION

I am what many would consider an experienced educator. I have taught K-12 students for over a decade and have spent the last several years as an assistant professor in a teacher education program. I currently spend my days preparing future teachers for both the joys and challenges associated with the field of education. I watch my students’ pens scribble across the page frantically as I provide them with the fundamentals of teaching. I see the light in their eyes brighten as I tell them inspiring stories from my edifying interactions with students, and I watch that light dim ever so slightly when I begin to share with them inequities that continue to marginalize the very ones whom we are charged to empower. I recognize the look of horror on the faces of my pre-service teacher candidates because I, too, experienced the same gut-wrenching feeling when I was a candidate in my teacher education program. That feeling emerged as I slowly began to uncover the underlying systemic inequalities that exist within our public school
system and solidified as I started teaching and realized the long-term impact these inequities have on students educated in urban schools. There is no way to disguise the challenges that currently plague our field, and our efforts to overcome them have been largely unsuccessful.

Jonathan Kozol, the well-known and respected educator and activist, wrote _Savage Inequalities_ in the early 1990s. In the text, Kozol examined the inequities that existed across school systems in our nation and described the depressing and devastating reality some students and teachers face. I remember being filled with rage and confusion as we read and discussed his text during my teacher preparation program. I was angered by the fact that the children who needed the most were often given the least and confused that as a nation we would allow the education of our future generation to occur under such horrendous conditions. After a glance at the publication date of Kozol’s text, I realized that it had been a decade since he shared his findings with the world. With a sigh of relief I thought to myself, “Schools today cannot possibly resemble the ones Kozol described. Surely society answered Kozol’s call for action, and we have improved conditions under which our most vulnerable are educated.” I spent the majority of my career teaching in South Central Los Angeles, and it did not take long for me to realize that Kozol’s words still rang true.

In 2005, four years after I began teaching, Kozol published another book entitled _Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America_ in which he continued to highlight and discuss the inequities that exist in U.S. public schools. Five of the schools Kozol visited were in the state of California, and my current school was highlighted in this book as one of which we should be ashamed. As I read the description of my school through the eyes of an author who I had grown to respect and admire—overcrowding, asbestos, rats, cold and disconnected classroom environments—I felt an immediate sense of uneasiness. I wanted to be able to discount his assertions. I felt a need to defend my school, my colleagues, myself, but after honest and critical reflection, I realized that the purpose of Kozol’s book was to bring further awareness to the challenges that prevail in our schools and who these challenges affect the most. I truly believed that the majority of educators at my school site were dedicated to providing our students with a quality education and so I became blind to the conditions, blind to the fact that our words and our hearts did not match our actions and blind to the fact that although we cared, collectively we continued to miss the mark of providing students with the best education possible. And sadly, we were not alone.

Despite multiple reform efforts public education has failed to fulfill its promise of providing equitable educational opportunities to all students (Moses & Rogers, 2013). In the following chapter I will explore the underlying challenges that affect teachers’ ability to address the academic needs of all students and the contextual implications these challenges have on long-term student success. This exploration will be framed around the concept of differentiation and will be told through the lens of my personal experience as an urban educator struggling to become the instructional expert my students critically needed. I will conclude with implications that will hopefully guide a more focused and explicit dialogue about the complexities involved with providing equitable education.

BACKGROUND

I made a choice to teach in the inner city well before I was hired as a teacher and thought I was prepared for the challenges. My first teaching assignment in the Los Angeles Unified School District was at a year-