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Race, Class, Gender in Global Perspective

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**Background**

The Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment provides that a state may not “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” This statute applies to public elementary and secondary schools since they are funded by the state. The requirements outlined by the Equal Protection clause date back to 1954 and the landmark supreme court case Brown v. Board of Education. In perhaps one of the most famous and important rulings issued by the Court, it stated: “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs…are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment” (Johnson, 2020).

The court’s decision had a vast impact on public education. For the first time in the history of the United States, schools had to desegregate or face violating the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment. “What followed was roughly 50 years of desegregation efforts in public schools, and numerous court decisions regarding the constitutionality of those desegregation efforts. Over time, the focus evolved from ending and remedying the vestiges of discriminatory practices to integration efforts that sought to promote the diversity of the student population in public schools” (Johnson, 2020).

Diversity is a heavily discussed and debated topic in schools around the United States today. How can teachers ensure that all of the students in each class feel welcome and loved? How does one create a curriculum that celebrates not only diversity in the sense of the color of a student’s skin but their gender, socioeconomic status, and upbringing?

In writing this ethnography I sought to answer the following questions through academic research, interviews with educators who have had a multitude of different careers within the teaching profession, and my own experience as a teacher intern within the Georgia State Teachers Education Masters Program. How does intersectionality impact a student’s educational experience? What can teachers do to mitigate any negative effects? And how does a student’s race, socioeconomic status, and gender effect their success in school? Intersectionality is a valuable tool educators can use to understand why some students struggle while other students excel in school. Diversity in schools is both preferable and beneficial, but can also present hardships for many students. It is important that educators understand the challenges diversity can create and are prepared to be allies for all of their students.

**Academic Literature Review**

Vonzell Agosto and Ericka Roland, in their article “Intersectionality and Educational Leadership: A Critical Review”, write about the necessity of acknowledging the importance of intersectionality and furthering research on the topic within education and educational leadership. The authors state:

“the core ideas of intersectionality can be applied in educational leadership. Its use in the study of educational leadership could potentially strengthen transformative leadership as an educative oppositional knowledge project focused on intervening in interrelated systems of oppression. First, its emphasis on the experiences of social groups, social structures, and social oppressions challenges methodological individualism with analysis of individual organizational relationships and practices. Second, intersectionality also supports critique and researcher reflexivity on how education and education research is transformed by ways of relating, knowing, being, and leading” (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 259)

The authors assert that intersectionality is a tool that researchers can use to engage analytically for better understanding educational injustices (Agosto & Roland, 2018). They identify three forms of intersectional analysis: structural, political and representational. According to the authors, “these forms refer to overlapping structures of subordination in which marginalized people are situated, the material consequences of interactive oppressions, the erasure of people’s experiences at the intersections of multiple oppressions and the cultural construction of identities that result in negative stereotypes that are used to discredit marginalized experiences” (Agosto & Roland, 2018, p. 259).

Although there has been some research done on the topic of intersectionality and its application to education and the educational experience of students and parents, Agosto and Roland write that much more needs to be done. Through further research the authors hope educators and administrators alike will gain a better understanding and/or ability to acknowledge power and privilege held by the majority, articulate both individual and collective purposes (public and private good), deconstruct social-cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity and reconstruct them, balance critique and promise, effect deep and equitable change work toward transformation: liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and excellence, and demonstrate moral courage and activism (Agosto & Roland, 2018)

In their article “Teachers, please learn our names!: racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom” Rita Kohli and Daniel G. Solorzano, similarly to Agosto and Roland, address the importance of educators acknowledging their power and privilege. The authors push for teachers to deconstruct the social-cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity and reconstruct them such that they acknowledge intersectionality and its potential effects on students inside and outside of the classroom.

Kohli and Solorzano write about how the mispronunciation or in some cases changing of students’ given names in the classroom is a racial microaggression that can affect the child in the classroom but can have larger implications on how they feel about themselves, their family and their heritage (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). In some cases adapting a child’s name can cause bullying and long term effects associated with lowered self-esteem.

“As a baby, identity and self-concept are developed through a family’s repeated use of a child’s name. A child begins to understand who they are through their parents’ accent, intonation, and pronunciation of their name. Additionally, names often frequently carry cultural and family significance… When a child goes to school and their name is mispronounced or changed, it can negate the thought, care and significance of the name, and thus identity of the child” (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012, p.444).

Kohli and Solorzano document multiple situations where educators either refused to attempt to pronounce a student’s name during roll call, neglected to take the time to learn to pronounce the name appropriately, created a new pronunciation (often “whitewashing” the name or using a pronunciation other students might make fun of) and in some cases just created an entirely new name for the student (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). Using critical race theory (the idea that institutions are inherently [racist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/racism) and that [race](https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human) itself, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is a socially constructed concept that is used by white people to further their economic and political interests at the expense of people of color), the authors studied the effect that altering a child’s name could have on them long-term both inside and outside of the classroom.

The authors assert that the mispronunciation of a student’s name can have the same effect on that student as going to a school where textbooks never reference their culture, attending a school where none of the teachers and administrators look like them, or going to school where they never hear their home language spoken or acknowledged (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). They write that altering a student’s name “highlight[s] a type of culture ‘othering’ that contradicts our goals for multicultural school environments” (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012, p.451). Finally, Kohli and Solorzano write that name alteration demonstrates the power teachers carry that can essentially influence a student’s long term sense of self and worldview. They conclude that understanding intersectionality and the effects that racial microaggressions have on students long-term is an easy way to ensure students look at their educational experiences in a more positive manner (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012).

Travis S. Wright, in his paper entitled “Countering the Politics of Class, Race, Gender and Geography in Early Childhood Education,” writes about the negative effects the lack of free or poorly executed free kindergarten and pre-kindergarten can have on students’ long term educational outcomes (Wright, 2011). Wright details the issues families face when seeking out early childhood educational opportunities, and notes the significant disparities in access and quality.

In his research, Wright writes that while preschool enrollment has been increasing for decades, the increases have not been equal across all segments of the population (Wright, 2011). There is a noticeable variability by race, socioeconomic status, and geography. Children from families living above the poverty threshold were enrolled in preschool programs at a 60% rate, while those children living below the poverty threshold were enrolled at only a 51% rate (Wright, 2011). The educational background of a child’s parents was also a significant predictor of pre-school attendance. Children with parents that did not complete high school were only half as likely to attend pre-school (Wright, 2011). Somewhat surprisingly, Wright found that due to financial welfare programs, children in the lowest income families had better educated and trained caregivers than those in the intermediate income levels.

“Beyond access, the quality of learning experiences has tremendous sway in their impact. High quality preschool instruction has been consistently demonstrated as an important education support for students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds” (Wright, 2011). Wright writes that student-teacher ratios, class sizes, space requirements, teacher education levels and quality of curriculum are key factors in assessing the quality of a preschool. Wright found that schools in areas with higher levels of poverty and diversity often had higher teacher turnover, higher rates of students to teachers, overall larger class sizes and teachers with less experience overall (Wright, 2011). Wright concludes his paper by stating [that], “findings from this analysis suggest that in order to provide high-quality early childhood education for all children, policy makers and advocates must address structural and attitudinal inequalities” (Wright, 2011).

According to June Thomas and Cathy Stockton, “socioeconomic status has been seen as a strong predictor of student achievement…the influence of student background was greater than anything that goes on within schools” (Thomas & Stockton, 2003). In their research, Thomas and Stockton analyzed data from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) and found that if only data from schools with low levels of poverty were used, the United States ranked second out of twenty-three nations. Alternatively, if data were used from only high poverty districts, the United States ranked only above Nigeria and Swaziland (Thomas & Stockton, 2003).

Although socioeconomic status is viewed as one of the strongest predictors of student success in schools, Thomas and Stockton’s research indicated there are several ways to combat the negative impacts of socioeconomic status on students. Class size, high teacher tenure, low levels of teacher turnover and parental involvement when used effectively could all help to negate the poor effects of a student coming from a poor household (Thomas & Stockton, 2003).

“In a study of mother-only, mother-extended family, and two-parent families with children in first through third grades, concluded that the two measures of parent expectations had a somewhat stronger influence than did the economic variables… Cultural effects of a race and gender interaction for African American males among elementary school-aged children were stronger than socioeconomic status in predicting reading achievement. (Thomas & Stockton, 2003). Thomas and Stockton conclude that the most important thing we can do in order to ensure that no child is left behind regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic status is to give teachers the necessary training and parents the necessary assistance to ensure all children have the best opportunity to be successful (Thomas & Stockton, 2003).

**Ethnographic Interviews**

\*Permission was given to use real names.

**Jane Schmidt**

Jane Schmidt is a retired teacher from Iowa. She holds a Bachelors in Education K-6 from the University of Iowa and a Master’s in education from the University of Northern Iowa. She taught for 43 years in grades ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. During her time as an educator she taught in two rural schools in small-town eastern Iowa, an inner-city school in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota and multiple schools within the Ankeny community school district in central Iowa.

The first question I asked Jane, and all of the educators I met with, when we met was what she believed was the biggest characteristic that students brought into the classroom that impacted their potential success inside of the classroom. I wanted to know what students bring into the classroom as part of their lives that are out of the teachers’ control, as well as if and how teachers are able negate any negatives those characteristics might have on the student’s ability to be successful academically, socially, and psychologically at school. Without hesitation, Jane answered that in all of her educational experience the single biggest characteristic that affected a student’s ability to learn when they entered her classroom was the student’s parents’ ability or interest in being involved. Jane emphasized that parents who are not involved in their children’s lives for whatever reason, whether it is because they have to work all the time to put food on the table, that they have substance issues, divorce, or simply because they do not want to be, it is the biggest stressor that students bring into the classroom from their outside life.

Jane said the first thing she does each year is reach out to every parent. “Not all parents will respond. If you have a parent that has had one negative experience in the classroom after another, they may have a lot of anxiety each time the school contacts them. I had a student in my class that had been labeled Emotional Behavioral Disorder. The truth was he had Tourette Syndrome. I knew if I could not get his mother invested in school he was going to continue to struggle. From the first day of school I would send notes home about something great he had done that day. Sometimes it was as simple as sitting still for a couple minutes, other times is was a great grade he had gotten. The more positive information I sent home, the better she responded. By the end of the year we couldn’t keep his mother out of the class. She loved to volunteer and see first-hand how he was accelerating.”

Jane said that it is a first instinct for many new teachers to reach out to parents when students have done something negative. She believes it is imperative that parental communication, even when an issue needs to be discussed, still contains positive reinforcement as well.

During our conversation it was evident that Jane was very comfortable and confident that she could help students and their families through positive communication. I asked her if increasing parental involvement in the school was ever discussed in staff meetings. “We often discussed them in grade level class meetings because as teachers you are much closer with your individual cohort of teachers. Often these conversations came when a new teacher would join and be struggling with a student and a more experienced teacher had information about the family that would help the new teacher make positive steps with the family. We were sure to never warn teachers about students or their families. It was always more of a ‘just be sure to use this technique’ or ‘reach out to the family in this way’.”

Jane and I spent a lot of time talking about ways to get families involved in their child’s education inside and outside of the building. We did not really speak about issues of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. When I brought up the topic, she said that often low SES and race went along with parents not being involved for whatever reason. I asked her if any of her schools had specific diversity recognition programs. She spoke about when she worked at an inner-city school in Minneapolis and how in a school that was diverse on every level the way she celebrated diversity was just to treat every child as their own person. “I worked in a K-3 school in downtown Minneapolis where we were locked down every day. Once the drop off time had passed the gates locked and nobody was allowed in or out until pick up time came. I learned more about teaching a diverse student body in my 4 years there than in the rest of my career. I had a student who slept in her car at night because her mother was a prostitute. They lived in a one bedroom and if her mother had a client she had to sleep in her car. I had a student that told me her sister was approaching 13 and in their family that meant it was time for her to get pregnant for the welfare money. If her boyfriend couldn’t take care of that, her father would. I took a gun out of an eight-year old’s backpack because he was going to rob the office at the end of the day to join the Bloods. Joining a gang would help provide his family protection and better financial support. These were all great kids. All diverse kids, but a diversity recognition program was not going to help them. What helped them was teachers, administrators, and all faculty and staff recognizing their individual needs and ensuring we met those needs.”

We spoke specifically about intersectionality and students’ educational experiences at the end of our meeting. Jane felt that intersectionality and how it affected each student often changed as the age of the child advanced. “I always taught k-5. The behavior I would see, and the overarching expectation of a black male was different that the expectation out of a black female. The same could be said for a poor black male versus a rich black male. It is our job as educators not to try and fit our students into neat little boxes. That is how we promote injustice. Instead know each student for who they are and what they need. If you do that you can really prevent race, gender, and socioeconomics from being too much of a detriment to a student’s future, at least in your class.”

**Dana Whittemore**

Dana Schrader is a 12th grade teacher in Davenport, Iowa. She holds a Bachelors in both Health and Sports studies and Mathematics Education 6-12 from the University of Iowa. Dana also holds a Master’s Degree in Educational Administration from the University of Northern Iowa as well as a coaching certification. She has been teaching upper level math at a Title One school in Davenport for 8 years.

As a white woman, Dana is the minority at her school. When asked about the biggest stressor her students bring into the classroom, without hesitation she responded, “they are poor. Their families are so poor many of them only attend school because they know they will get fed breakfast and lunch if they show up. There is a high possibility that those are the only meals they will get that day.” I asked her what she felt she could do for those students to negate the effects of their poverty. “The most important thing I can do is understand that calculus isn’t at the top of their mind. Food, work, violence, a place to sleep those are at the top of their mind. I cannot find their family a place to sleep. I cannot make them enjoy school enough that they do not want to drop out. I can hand them some money for lunch if I find out their account is below zero and the school will not give them food that day. So honestly the best I can do is pay attention and notice if a student doesn’t seem themselves. Then, if I am lucky, they will trust me enough to let me know what is going on so I can help where I am able.”

I asked Dana if this is something where the administration can help. She is in a unique position to answer this question because not only is she an educator at the school, but she also steps into an administrative role if an administrator has to go on leave for any reason. “Our administration truly does the best they can to assist students, families, and teachers. Our school benefits because we are so diverse, but we also experience many of the pains schools with vast diversity experience. In my experience, with diversity comes vast differences in socioeconomic statuses. When you see such a vast difference between what some students have and others do not, we see a lot of theft and fights. When you see violence, we often see the development of small gangs. We have parents along the entire spectrum of involvement from what I call helicopter parents to parents that would prefer their child drop out and help make money for the family. Our administration is dealing with all of these issues, helping assist the teachers with all of these issues, and keeping up with the million different and always changing state expectations. They, like the teachers, are doing their best. Sometimes it feels like out best just isn’t enough.”

Finally, Dana and I spoke about diversity more in general and what she can do to celebrate diversity on all levels in her school. “My school is so diverse that the best way to celebrate my students is to get to know each one. Besides getting to know each of my students in my classes, I try and spend time in the hall during passing periods. The more students’ names I know, the more I can connect, the better chance I have to keep them in the building and out of trouble. If I can help keep them out of trouble and get them to graduation, that is something to celebrate.”

**Deb Brady**

Deb Brady has a Bachelor’s of Science in Early Childhood Education and a Masters in Elementary Education. She also has her Administration certification. During her 35 year career she taught kindergarten, K-6 Gifted Support, and was a K-5 Principle all in the suburbs of Philadelphia. During her career as an educator she was also the lead Union Education representative.

Much like Jane Schmidt, Deb said home life was the single biggest outside influence students bring into school that affects their educational outcomes. “Home life one hundred percent. Kids going through trauma, a home divorce, abuse, death of a family member, how are those kids supposed to focus on math, science and language arts? Socioeconomic issues go hand in hand with home life. The impact of single parents who do not have time to prep their kids to get ready for school is almost impossible to overcome. What was expected of parents to prepare their child to go to preschool or kindergarten when I started teaching 35 years ago versus what we expect now is ridiculous. I would venture a guess that what we expect out of kindergarten kids now is what we expected from second semester first graders in the past. How is that helping low socioeconomic status families who cannot afford to have a stay home parent or pay for top of the line day care? In this area (suburb of Philadelphia), low socioeconomic status and race often go hand in hand and for that reason we are putting an entire group of children behind from day one and from no fault of their own.”

“As a principal the best thing I could do was help my teachers learn the most effective ways to initiate parent contact. I also participated in contacting parents for positive reasons as often as possible, even when a student was in my office for negative reasons. I was blessed to have a great PTO president that ran events year-round that helped students with families struggling financially. My favorite was when my school stopped having kids bring school supplies at the beginning of the year. Instead we contracted a company that sent everything that was on the lists of needs produced by our teachers. The families who we knew could pay did buy them from the company for their children. Those that we knew could not got them for free. This way on the first day of school all kids had the same supplies and for that matter all kids had supplies. We also had a discretionary spending fund for Spirit Wear. Only my PTO president knew what students it was spent on. On spirit days this ensured all kids had the clothes and nobody was left out. Feeling like part of the group is very important for the little ones especially. A bad experience in lower grades will only get worse as they get older.”

Deb and I talked about diversity training and workshops as well as what teachers and administrators alike can do to help kids. “The most important thing is knowing the kids. In my school we did de-escalation training and crisis intervention. When I say we I mean the teachers, administrators, lunch staff, custodial staff, and all peripheral staff. The more people in my building that know the names and demeanors of students, the more prepared we are to not only educate them but to ensure they feel loved. Personal connections are the most important thing educators can do to help any student from any background. If you can connect with a student and you can build their trust you can help them with absolutely anything.”

I asked Deb if she had anything else she wanted to contribute and she said, “gender, race, sex, finances, family situations and so much more, our children bring those issues to school every day. There are a lot of teachers out there that know their facts and their content, but if you want to be a great teacher let your students know that they have your trust they do not have to earn it. Let them know you want to know what they like and don’t like. Let them know you care about them and what they care about. The grades will follow if you do that.”

**Conclusion**

The research shows that factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status can all effect the outcomes of students in school and at home. It is imperative that educators and future educators are aware of the research and understand what they can do to ensure they do not exacerbate the challenges students their families are experiencing. What I learned from educators that have been in the field for over 80 years is that the best way to combat those factors is to express empathy, love, and understanding for each child. Educators and administrators alike must treat each student as their own person and address any issue individually. In doing so, teachers can show students that they are seen as a person, and not part of a larger group or societal problem.

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