Solving Our Educational Inequities, Beyond the Band-Aids

By MAGGIE WALSH         MAY 21, 2017

Last Fall, I was volunteering as a teacher’s aid in a middle school special education classroom; the work was mandatory fieldwork while taking Cornell University’s Art of Teaching introductory education course. On the last day of fieldwork, a bitter December day typical in the arctic tundra of Ithaca, New York, I was asked by the classroom teacher to lead the reading lesson for the day. That Thursday, I entered the classroom with a folder of notes, lesson plans, and handouts, unaware that the next two hours would come to define my experiences as a both a future teacher and Cornell Education student.

Moments after I handed out the first worksheet, a student, Daniel, began clutching his face in pain. He slowly raised his hand while simultaneously interrupting my discussion on vocabulary to ask teacher to go to the nurse. She silently shakes her head “no”, and points to me as a verbal cue for Daniel to pay attention. I collect myself again, and continue on with the list of words; only to be quickly distracted again when I spot Daniel in the back right corner of the classroom with his fist in his mouth. I look back at my list, trying to remember where I was, only to look up and find a black tooth in Daniels now-free hand.

Daniel, oldest of four, and raised by a single mother, was twelve year-old and already had a set of adult teeth that were decaying in his mouth. At this moment, I was terrified, as a new set of questions arose: Could Daniel pay attention in school when he was in such pain? What other issues does Daniel face due to a lack of healthcare? How many kids in this classroom are dealing with toothaches and rotting teeth?

This moment captures the major realizations I have made regarding education in America over the course of my Cornell career and education minor journey. I’ve learned that education initiatives rarely think of students holistically, but rather address inequalities within the school. But in order for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to thrive in the classroom, schools need to consider the personal needs that need to be meet before they can learn. These needs are clearly highlighted in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Equal opportunity to learn and achieve in

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1 Names have been changed to protect the privacy of students
the classroom demands that every student walks into the classroom door with their needs met.

Over my three years at Cornell University, I have come to three major realizations that, I believe, can help resolve issues with the achievement gap between low- and high-wealth students:

1) **Students’ preparation for the classroom and ability to learn throughout the day is dependent on their resources outside of the school building.** Deficiencies in health care, nutriment, or clothing resources will cause students to be physiologically unprepared to learn.

Students are individuals who exist outside the classroom, and any education equality reform initiative needs to address students as such. This realization was bolstered in the course *Society and Politics of American Education* taught by John Sipple, who outlines the causes of the achievement gap beyond quality of education. The course highlights the impact of *The Coleman Report* in educational research. The report is significant in that it concludes that the achievement gap and learning differences between white and black students is not so much a result of school deficiencies, but the inadequacies in resources African American children face pre-school and in the home. Black children are more likely to experience poverty than their white counterparts (*Percent Distribution of Households*); these students are subject to food instability, lack of adequate health care, dental care, and homelessness.

The study of the racial achievement gap in *Society and Politics of American Education* helped illuminate that these resource inadequacies cross over to classroom engagement. Can we expect student to learn to their best ability when they are hungry? Sick? In pain?

Before I started the education minor, I didn’t think about these inequities and the effects they have in the classroom. I had an unrealistic expectations that all students could learn to their full potential when their physiological needs were not met. But as seen in the Coleman Report, these inequalities can create large gaps with low and high income students.

The learning and academic achievement gaps that exist between low- and high-socioeconomic status students cannot be eliminated (or lessened) without a consideration of the lack of access to health care and nourishment low-income students face when leaving the school house and entering their home communities. When I continue on with my career in education, I plan to address the multiple factors that contribute to unequal opportunity, rather than solely school deficiencies. It is import to address issues surrounding poverty before expecting students to perform to their best capabilities in the classroom. Next steps include more comprehensive school health programs and more free or reduced meals. When schools take on these health responsibilities, they allow the student to focus on learning rather than their pain.
2) A classroom’s diversity is richer than physiological differences; a school consists of a diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds and resource capabilities that needs to be acknowledged when attempting to provide students with resources to help them learn to their fullest potential in the classroom.

Within a classroom, there is a ‘hidden’ diversity among students— a variance in socioeconomic status and wealth. In Professor Travis Gosa’s engaging course, Society of Race and Education, we discussed the assumptions regarding race and wealth as outlined in Inequality in the Promise Land, written by Dr. Lewis-McCoy. In this book— and class discussions that followed— it was highlighted that often race and ethnicity are the main focus when observing diversity in a school, with teachers using race as a shortcut to signify wealth. This way of thinking is harmful in that it fails to recognize the socioeconomic diversity within racial groups in a school. These stereotypes assume all black children are impoverished, and white children are not. This is a dangerous thought process in that it fails to recognize economic struggles that some students are facing. Without recognizing this diversity, it is impossible to begin addressing accommodations to help struggling students to keep up with their more affluent and better resourced peers.

In grade school, I had a teacher who, every year, made sure each of her students had a winter coat, and helped find a coat if a student did not have one. This personal practice started one winter when she realized one student was consistently absent during cold weather. Upon further inquiry, she learned that the family could only afford one winter coat that all the children shared; the days her student was absent, it was her sibling’s turn to wear the coat to school. When the teacher recognized a lack of resources kept a student from attending school, she was able to intervene and help accommodate for this deficiency. This behavioral change required the teacher to look beyond physiological diversity, and invest in learning about the student on a deeper level. The consequences of poverty cannot be seen at first glance, but rather are learned from teacher interest and investment in the classroom.

The actions of the teacher, and the principles highlighted by Lewis-McCoy illuminate that diversity, beyond racial differences, needs to be recognized by educators in order to insure all students can learn on a daily basis. When I begin teaching in a classroom, I hope to carry this realization to my own practices. Each student should be looked at as an individual with their own voice and story, not dismissed and categorized for my own convenience. Getting to personally know the students will help me understand their resources and their ability meet their basic needs. If I find these needs are not meet, I can work with other members of the educator community to help find resources and help for students.
In order for students to feel included and valued in their school, it is important for teachers to assign work and institute practices that can be performed by students no matter their socioeconomic status and access to school resources at home. Cornell University’s memorable course *Engaging Students in Learning,* taught by the notable professor, Dr. Duff, focused on classroom management that optimizes student learning and engagement. Part of the learning objectives Professor Duff set for children participating in Film Club field work was for students to feel affable—confident and important within the small learning community. This emotional developmental learning goal is one of the foundational needs (à la Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) that is required in order for students to direct their focus on learning instead of their physical and mental survival. Over the course of the semester working with the students in Dr. Duff’s fieldwork, I can conclude that belonging is partially dependent on believing the community is invested in your individual success. Investment can be signified on a narrow scope (having a teaching talk to a student about their personal life), or a broad scope (a school showing their investment an individual child’s learning). Often, when working with students, I showed this investment by asking students about their lives outside of the classroom. The practice was often reciprocated with more engagement with the lessons proceeding the interaction.

This practice is performed on a much larger scale in Ithaca, New York (Daniel’s hometown). In the school district, every student in the middle schools is given a laptop that they are then expected to bring to school every day. The act of handing a student a computer signifies that the school cares about the student enough to provide tools for success. This initiative—fairly common in higher income, suburban districts—is a holistic education equalizer; the program addresses the socioeconomic barriers students face when attempting to learn in and outside the classroom. By providing every student with a computer, a teacher can assign homework on the computer with the understanding that every student has access to that technological resource.

In *The Art of Teacher* lecture, taught by Professor Perry, we learned that this kind of initiative—designing policies that equips all students—helps avoid students’ feeling excluded or embarrassed when unable to complete homework or assignments because they do not have a computer at home and no access to a library after school hours. Giving students computers, and helping students enter on the same resource level, creates a sense of comfort and belonging among students. It illustrates that the school cares about them enough to invest in their wellbeing. This universal accommodation helps foster a school community that values inclusion of all students, as each student believes their needs are being considered and met in the schooling process.
This type of inclusion needs to be considered when planning on both the classroom and school level. At current time, it’s unrealistic to demand every student be given a personal computer by their school district, but the type of action should be a long term goal for major cities and districts over the country. As technology advances, students are more likely to lag behind their peers in educational resources, like computers, depending on their socioeconomic status. As I explained before, as a future teacher, I cannot assume all students are entering the classroom on the same level; in order for students to feel welcomed into their school community— not feeling ignored, an inconvenience, nor ‘different’ from his or her peers—I will have to work with my educational community to make an active effort in directly providing students with the academic resources they expect students to have to succeed in the classroom.

What I have outlined are holistic interventions in schools and classrooms that help address educational issues arising from poverty. We, as educators and people invested in the education of our children, have to begin seeing students as products of a community and their available resources, not just the product of schools. A solid curriculum and great teachers are important, but only one aspect that influences student learning. Education equality of opportunity can only be reached in this country if we, as a community, step in and equip students with the security, care, and tools for them to walk into the classroom with the same confidence and comfort as their more affluent peers.
Works Cited