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Book Review

*Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity,
Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classroom*

Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classroom

Milner, H. Richard, IV. *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2015. Print.

Milner's motivation for this book was the glaring necessity to "move the discourse from the exhausted 'achievement gap' lament to a more robust and nuanced discussion of why school failure persists for some groups of students" (xi). Milner moves discussion away from the achievement gap dialogue to his unique concept of opportunity gaps. Within this discussion is an exploration of how to address and then overcome opportunity gaps, largely guided by narratives.

Acknowledging Opportunity Gaps and How to Address Them

Introduction and Chapter 1

Milner gives five interrelated areas or tenets to address opportunity gaps. These are (1) a rejection of color blindness, (2) an ability and skill to work through and transcend cultural conflicts, (3) an ability to understand how meritocracy operates, (4) an ability to recognize and shift low expectations and deficit mind-sets, and (5) a rejection of context neutral mind-sets and practices. The teachers Milner followed each demonstrate one or more of these mind-sets and abilities. In addition to these five tenets, the teachers addressed three important areas crucial for empowering both students and teachers to succeed: diversity, opportunity, and teaching.

Teachers and Their Responses to the Opportunity Gap

Chapters 2 - 4

White Male Teacher, Diverse Urban School: Relationships and Race Matter

Mr. Hill, an urban middle school science teacher, explains that to teach his diverse classes he had to first (1) learn from his students, (2) understand the impact of race in the classroom, (3) create opportunities to create relationships with his students that transcended cultural differences, and (4) seize the opportunities of uncomfortable experiences (Milner 46). The students had to allow Mr. Hill to teach them. To accomplish this, Mr. Hill connected to his students through relevant personal stories, maximized his resources, took an interest in his students outside of the classroom, and emphasized forgiveness in conflict resolution.

Black Female Teacher, Suburban White School: Addressing and Transcending Cultural Conflicts

Dr. Johnson, a suburban high school language arts teacher, found that a welcoming environment, which is also an empowering space, fosters discussion and consequently learning about both the material and peers (and, by extension, community). To achieve this, Dr. Johnson largely drew from her own experiences as way of transcending cultural conflict and used multiple literacy worlds to connect multiple identities and, with that connection, create deeper reflection. Within this, there are examples of the possible consequences of difficult conversations and how these discussions must come from personal experience.

Black Male and Female Teachers, Diverse Urban School: Recognizing Assets in Unexpected People and Places

Mr. Jackson, an urban middle school math and science teacher, explains that “a teacher’s responsibility is to learn about what is happening with students in order to teach them successfully” (Milner 108). Inside of this is a recognition of the significant role played by students’ perceptions of teachers and then their perception of school itself. Even more important is the students’ understanding of how their peers perceive them. Knowing this, Mr. Jackson emphasized image, the use of popular culture as a connection, and multiple opportunities for success in his classroom.

Ms. Shaw, an urban middle school social studies teacher, adopted a mission-minded approach to education. She encouraged students to consider their role in the community and their contributions to humanity. Her sense of responsibility to her students went beyond the classroom. Many students recognized Ms. Shaw as fulfilling an “other mother” role.

White Teachers Learning to Teach: Bittersweet Challenges and Possibilities in Teacher Preparation

Through six white teachers, Milner recognized that many teachers “did not see themselves as racial or cultural beings. They saw others as having a race or a culture” (Milner 151) and used their own experience as a norm. This ignorance of race and culture contributes to opportunity gaps when teachers do not recognize their own internalized or exhibited racism, which shapes their attitudes and practices. Professional identity is “importantly intertwined with racial and gender identity” (Milner 174). When this is left unrecognized, students suffer. Unfortunately, as teacher education is unregulated, this is often unaddressed.

There were four struggles that most of the white teachers demonstrated. They were (1) a difficulty understanding the relevance of diversity and a fear of making diversity an issue when it was not, (2) afraid of offending and therefore avoided certain ideas, (3) grounded in family history and unaware of the consequences on their own beliefs, and (4) in danger of stereotyping their students and unintentionally lowering their expectations (Milner 177).

Suggestions to Address the Opportunity Gap in Your Classroom

Chapter 5, Conclusion, and Epilogue

To address the opportunity gap in your classroom, begin by (1) stressing the value and importance of learning, (2) being engaged in students’ lives, (3) using popular culture, (4) doing more with your resources, (5) committing to high standards, (6) understanding equity, (7) building and sustaining relationships, (8) understanding power structures, (9) understanding yourself in relation to your students, (10) giving students entry into your world, (11) presenting the classroom and school as a community, (12) dealing with the presence of race and culture, (13) understanding your responsibility as a teacher, (14) developing a critical consciousness, (15) creating inclusive and diverse classroom and school practices, and (16) recognizing broader implications (Milner 145-6, 184-192, 197).

Most importantly, value your students and your relationships with them. Be inspired to inspire, motivated to motivate, and empowered to empower.