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COMMENTARY

Teaching for equity: Where developmental needs meet racialized structures

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I read the article, "Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development" (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2018), with great interest. Trained in educational psychology as a developmentalist, and later coming to the learning sciences as a way to meld my concerns with learning with my interests in the social context of learning, I have long been a proponent of teaching in ways that support and build on the developmental needs of learners. This piece was a much-needed culmination and synthesis of the research on learning and development on one hand, and the research on teaching and learning on the other hand. I found the conclusions and recommendations spot on, and I thought the continual reinforcement of the importance of thinking about teaching, learning, and equity as being fundamentally intertwined was a critical contribution, since equity is too often an add-on. This article is key factor in the series, as it animates the two earlier pieces that summarize the research grounded in the science of learning and development and offers the connection to teaching practice that makes the work matter.

The real strength of the piece is its comprehensiveness and its syntheses across a wide range of scholarship to provide recommendations for practice, often illuminated by examples, which show the reader that teaching in complex, nuanced, carefully-designed ways is both possible and grounded in science. I also very much appreciated the recognition in the text that good teaching is certainly about what happens in the classroom, but that it is also about how schools are organized, how access is opened up or foreclosed, and about the system of supports that surrounds a learner along many dimensions, including cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Learning is a complex endeavor, and one that involves the whole child—not the brain or mind separate from the other developmental domains. Recognizing that important fact is critical to designing schools, systems, and classrooms that work with (and not against) the natural developmental systems and mechanisms that undergird learning. As a person who is deeply concerned about our failure to create systems of teaching and learning at any significant scale that serve students from marginalized groups well, combined with my worry about the divide between scholarship and practice in education, this article made me breathe a big sigh of appreciation, this is the kind of work our field needs, and this is the way we ought to be doing our work as scholars.

Given that, I view this commentary as an effort to supplement the important points made in the article. Toward this end, I would like to elaborate two points: (a) that we must acknowledge why teaching for equity is so important (e.g., equity in relation to what?); and (b) that social-emotional learning, to my mind, is as much about creating a context within which students can thrive emotionally as it is about teaching discreet emotional skill sets.

Why is teaching for equity so important?

The article centers equity throughout, and in doing so, drives home the point that a central component of good teaching is teaching for equity. The article rightly highlights children and their developmental needs, arguing that if schools are to meet the needs of young people, then they have to start with meeting children where they are. In doing so, we recognize that the contextual and environmental conditions that children face are deeply impacted by race and socioeconomic status (SES). The article also emphasizes malleability in relation to adaptation to challenging circumstances. This is important because too often, the connections between brain development and social context is a ruse for arguments about the damage that
social and neighborhood contexts do to Black, Brown, and poor children. Given this, identifying the context as a key factor, but not a deterministic one, and emphasizing the brain’s adaptability is crucial.

However, the way children are positioned by schools and social systems to be successful (or not) has a broader backdrop. While perhaps not within the scope of the article, I would argue that this backdrop is critical to understanding the nature of schooling, teaching, and learning, and its role in supporting the learning and developmental needs of young people. It is also critical to put into perspective how radical and disruptive the kinds of approaches that Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) are suggesting would indeed be if implemented. And, by radical, I mean that if we were to truly enact the types of instructional and schooling practice suggested across the education system, they would have an effect also on the levels of social mobility people are able to access through schools and would disrupt current systems of privilege.

At times, pointing out the long-standing and pervasive inequities in access to high quality schooling in the United States can feel like beating the proverbial dead horse. It is a history and present condition that we know well. However, I think it is important, when we are talking about how to organize instruction and a system that attends to the needs of all students, we need to recognize that the current system is built on a foundation that was not designed for equity. Schools, like other social institutions, are deeply tied to the values, histories, structures, and purposes of the broader society. Thus, our schools exist within a broader social system that has as a key function, the maintenance and reproduction of privilege for some at the expense of others. Our school systems have a long history of being intentionally and legally segregated through Jim Crow laws and processes such as residential redlining and discriminatory mortgage lending (Anderson, 1988; Rothstein, 2017; Shapiro, 2017). Desegregation in schools occurred due to court order and, often, especially in the south, were only carried out with the presence of Federal National Guard (Kluger, 2004).

Part of the rationale for the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education court decision was the idea that separate schools would never provide equal access to high quality teaching and learning, and that the only way to disrupt inequality was through integration (Kluger, 2004). However, while the country made significant and steady progress on the joint project of school integration and alleviating “achievement gaps” by race and social class through the mid-1990s, the trends have been moving in the opposite direction since then (Orfield, 2001). Orfield (2001) has argued that schools in the United States are more segregated now than they were immediately post-Brown. White students are the most isolated: the average white student attends schools where 77% of the student enrollment is white. Similarly, Black and Latinx students attend schools where more than half of their peers are black and Latinx (Orfield, 2001). Importantly, these processes of resegregation come hand-in-hand with funding differentials by race. A 2015 report by the Education Trust reports that nationally, districts serving the most students of color receive about $2,000, or 15%, less per student than districts serving the fewest students of color (Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015). What this means is that our school system nationally is, by and large, quite unequal and quite segregated.

Such inequalities underlie what has historically been termed the “achievement gap,” which is how we describe the fact that educational outcomes predictably differ by race, with white and Asian students achieving at the top of the achievement hierarchy, and Black and Latinx students at the bottom. Others have problematized the notion of the achievement gap, arguing that the gap exists in the opportunities that students have to learn and achieve, and that it is much more accurate to focus on the inputs rather than the outputs. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has taken this a step further to articulate the education debt that our nation owes to Black and Brown students. The notion of the education debt highlights that there has been an historical loss of potential and opportunity that has left communities without educational capital. Additionally, the debt has consequential and tangible impacts on young people, families, and communities.

All of this is important as backdrop, because it highlights the fact that providing high-quality teaching and learning for all students is a departure from current and historical practice. It also makes salient that the types of adversity that some students and communities face are structural—meaning their hardship is organized by a social structure that privileges some and disadvantages others, by virtue of race and social class. To my mind, it is important to contextualize the challenges that some families and communities face, in order to even more deeply understand that it is our obligation, in a just and democratic society, to provide equal access to high-quality teaching and learning in schools, of the type that Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) describe. In other words, that which Darling-Hammond et al. refer to as “adversity” is structural
and systematic, and we have a moral obligation as a society and as educators to create systems and structures that push back on these forces and create better alternatives.

I would also argue that equity work only happens when the intention is to create equity. In other words, creating new kinds of systems and structures that provide equal access to high quality teaching and learning doesn’t occur by happenstance. It requires a concerted focus on and commitment to disrupting inequality. While committing to teaching and schooling practices that support the full development of all students across developmental domains is certainly powerful, to truly do so would require an intentional commitment to equity at every level of schooling, including in the way that school districts organize access to schools, how school setting are organized (e.g., block scheduling, de-tracking, teacher professional communities, etc.), and through teaching and learning interactions in classrooms. As an example, my own collaborative work with a group of master teachers of mathematics identified the intention to create equity as a core ingredient in their formula for success at reducing achievement and opportunity gaps in mathematics at “Railside” High School (Nasir, Cabana, Shreve, Woodbury, & Louie, 2014).

What I am arguing is that centering equity in how we discuss teaching and learning is critical, and, when we do so, it might also be instructive to keep in mind the broader historical context that makes that work even more important.

**Social-emotional learning requires emotional safety**

The article also rightly highlights the importance of schools and classrooms supporting multiple domains of development, including cognitive, social, identity, and social-emotional development. Social-emotional development is critical to the processes of learning, and as Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) point out, is foundational to learners managing their own emotions, building positive relationships with others, and setting goals in the classroom (Gotlieb, Jahner, Immordino-Yang, & Kaufman, 2016). Adults, including teachers, are key in supporting young people in developing these social-emotional skills and competencies, and many schools nationally are implementing curricula to teach these important skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). At the same time, we know that classrooms and schools themselves are emotional and social settings, where too often, children from marginalized groups, especially Black students, face high levels of punishment, indifference, and even hostility from adults (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

The idea that classrooms and schools are not the same emotional contexts for different students is a key one. We know from the developmental literature that children have developmental needs that take on special salience and significance in certain developmental periods (Erikson, 1968; Lightfoot, Cole & Cole, 2008). In adolescence, for example, with respect to cognitive development, the brain becomes capable of complex and contingent thought, taking into account multiple ideas at once. Socially, the social world and peer relationship become ever more important, and as emotional intelligence develops in relation to new abilities to take the perspectives of others. Developing a sense of autonomy and competence is really important, and young people are figuring out what they are good at, what their value is, and whether or not those around them respect them to make decisions (Bishop & Downes, 2019). Furthermore, we know that identity and the development of a sense of self in relation to others, and belonging is a key factor (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006).

However, we know from the literature on race and school discipline that these developmental needs occur right at the time that Black and Brown young people are racialized in ways that ensures that they are least likely to receive what they need (Ginwright, 2010). As adolescents need to feel trusted, respected and competent, we treat them with suspicion. When they need fewer directives and more autonomy, teachers increase control of their bodies and activities. They need more connection, but are OTHERED by teachers and administrators and by disciplinary practices (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). They need to have room to make mistakes and explored, but are adultified and are expected to behave as older than they are (Ferguson, 2000; Okonofua, & Eberhardt, 2015). Belonging and identity are central, but they are vilified by society and are under suspicion (Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, Givens, & Bryant, 2013). My point is that right at the time when they need to belong, and to feel nurtured, respected, and attended to developmentally, the world and schools too often gives young people from marginalized groups the exact opposite thing. (Dumas & Ross, 2016; James, 2012; Lopez, 2002).

Thus, while increasingly, districts and schools are attending to the emotional lives of students with the
rise of socio-emotional learning curricula and classes, such approaches assume that the point of intervention lies with the students (that they need support to develop skill around expressing emotion), rather than in how they are viewed and treated in schools. This is fundamentally different than what we know about learning in settings outside of school, for instance in sports, where emotion and learning are often intertwined and environments are carefully constructed to provide the motivation that students need to engage learning, even when what are they trying to learn or accomplish is tough (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014; Nasir, 2012; Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Paris & Winn, 2013; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014).

Creating classroom environments where children from marginalized groups experience positive, healthy emotional support from adults is critical to supporting their emotional and social development. In a recent student of all-Black all-male classroom environments as a part of a district-wide initiative in Oakland, California, my research team found that teachers saw their work as providing spaces of love for Black boys, and in doing so modeled and created the opportunity for the development of social and emotional skills. Findings show that at the core of the classrooms were strong, positive relationships between students and adults, intentional attributions of positive traits and behaviors, and affirming cultural ways of being and doing (Givens, Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, & Vakil, 2016; Nasir, Givens, & Chatmon, 2019; Nasir et al., 2013).

My point here is that, yes, we need to attend to the ways in which classroom spaces become spaces where young people can learn social-emotional skills. However, we also need to attend to the emotional experiences young people are having in schools, the racialized nature of that experience, and ensuring that all students have access to safe classroom spaces where they are held in high regard and where they are emotionally safe.

I would like to raise one more point connected to this. In studies of teachers that demonstrate the kind of care that is important for students from marginalized groups, who tend to be dehumanized by traditional school structures and processes, studies have found that the commitment held by educators is both a commitment to the children themselves, but also a commitment to their communities as a whole and to equity. This is evident in Walker’s (1996, 2009) work on teaching in a segregated Black school in the early to mid-20th century, where she describes Black teachers who are committed to the uplift of the Black community, as well as to providing rigorous instruction for students. It is also evident in my own research on the Black male teachers in Oakland, where teachers in the program describe their teaching as a life calling that is connected to the political project of supporting Black students in a world that is not set up for their success. In our writing, we have referred to this as “politicized care” (McKinney de Royston, Vakil, Nasir, Ross, & Givens, 2017) to denote the way that care is both about expressing individual positive emotion, but also about using that as a tool to support equity and justice for students who have been marginalized.

Conclusions

I hope what I have offered in this commentary is a bit of contextualization both with respect to the racialized context within which the teaching and schooling practice that Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) describe occur, and in doing so, that I have highlighted how critically important and how transformative it would be if we found a way to enact the strategies Darling-Hammond and colleagues propose.

References


