Introduction to Special Issue

Marginalized Students in Secondary School Settings:
The Pedagogical and Theoretical Implications of Addressing the Needs of Student Sub-Populations

In determining the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young.

- John Dewey

*Democracy and Education*

Many believe that in order for true education reform to occur, those in power need to listen to the ones that matter and are impacted the most in such efforts – the students (Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Pizarro, 2005). Within the broader student population, however, there are “sub-populations” of students that have become relegated to the margins of their communities, families, schools and society. Too many have not listened to them in their pursuit of becoming more than what they are. These students have fallen victim to current life situations that affect their school engagement and identities as students. For many of them, school alienation, resistance, and ultimate marginalization becomes exacerbated by a misunderstanding of caring – teachers don’t care about them, so they don’t care about school (Valenzuela, 1999). In our current myopic state of high-stakes testing and a standardized curriculum, it is no wonder that today’s students are so disenchanted with their schools. The schools are concerned about one thing only – high test scores. And high test scores have become a way to systematically reduce our students to a numerical value that discards what makes them human, unique, and vulnerable. McNeil (2005) argues that “by rendering the extraordinary, awe-inspiring diversities (developmental, cultural, personal, social) inherent in our children into a single indicator - a test score - the system can function as a control system” (p. 93). Schools, especially secondary schools, simply want to have enough control over their students to ensure the facile image of stability. Valenzuela (1999) argues that we must authentically care for our students by going beyond just academic preparation, and realizing the urgency to meet the “material, physical, psychological, and spiritual needs to guide the educational process” (p. 110). In the midst of trying to achieve high test scores, our education system has lost too many students, especially those who are poor, of color, immigrant, or are learning English as a second language.

I argue that even greater educational reform efforts need to be enacted to tend to the needs of student sub-populations that fall under the categories of “minority,” “at-risk,” “Latino,” “African-American,” (and the like) and have become marginalized. Kozol (2005) reminds us that, in our current obsession with standardized tests and the worship of one test score that presumably reflects learning, “the stripping away of cultural integrity and texture from the intellectual experience of children, denial of delight in what is beautiful and stimulating for its own sake and not for its acquisitional equivalents, is a perennial calamity” (p. 119-120). In the midst of stripping away a meaningful curriculum and sheer enjoyment of learning, we engage in the dehumanization of education and our students. In essence, we are making our schools harvesting sites for more disengaged students, further marginalizing those who are already marginalized. And although Freire (1970) says that “the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic
struggle to transform the situation” (p. 47), have our schools really provided ways for students to go beyond their marginalized lives and to places of hope? That is why we must focus our attention to the students who have become marginalized in today’s secondary schools, to ensure that that is being done for students like them. This special issue does that, discussing research, thought pieces, and teacher reflections on pedagogy, programs and curriculum that seek out and discuss ways to create opportunities for marginalized student populations to move beyond their marginalization. The authors aim to give voice to students who need a voice, and to present new pedagogical ways of thinking about what may be the best way(s) to allow marginalized students to maintain their humanity in their pursuit of something better.

Galman begins this exploration of addressing the needs of marginalized student populations with a study on those who matter most to students (outside of parents or guardians) – teachers. She takes a critical look at the notion of the “teacher as savior” to students who live in poverty, crime or are not proficient in the English language. She examines how this frame of mind that many teachers have, most of them white, female, and from middle-class backgrounds, tends to marginalize such students even more because it puts the root of their marginalization on the students themselves.

The next three articles discuss programmatic and curriculum aspects of what works (and doesn’t) for marginalized student populations. Faltis and Arias discuss the academic and social consequences of relegating Latino immigrant students to “ESL ghettos.” They argue that, although ESL programs and classes that offer sheltered instruction and beginning language instruction are important, it is more important for educators to recognize that such instruction is limiting to Latino immigrant student potential. These students need to participate in communities in which they practice the language necessary to be successful in various content areas and gain the preparation needed for post-secondary education. The authors discuss ways in which schools can make immigrant students feel welcome in the social, academic and linguistic aspects of mainstream schooling. They conclude with ideas for policy changes for schools to help Latino immigrant students feel and become less isolated in schools from native-English speakers and interact more.

Judson, next, takes a look at career academies, a program that targets educationally-marginalized students and is designed to make the curriculum more applicable to future professional endeavors, their studies, and life experiences. The students remain as a cohort while they keep the same teachers. The career academies design allows the students to study together consistently and to build trust and camaraderie between each other and with those involved. In her study of two career academies, she finds that marginalized and less privileged students appreciate and utilize the philosophy and design of a career academy more so than privileged students.

Salinas, Sullivan, and Wacker present a qualitative case study of a World Geography teacher that presents the curriculum to her late-arrival immigrant students in a manner that engages their identities and questions the traditional curriculum. The authors suggest that curriculum and pedagogical transformation is possible, and it begins with a teacher who is dedicated, critical, and willing to challenge the status quo.

Harushimana suggests that schools and educators need to be more responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of African-born immigrants, a silent population within our communities, and distinct from African-Americans, with a history and culture of its own. She also notes differences in the way an education is viewed and valued by African-born immigrant communities here in the U.S., considering the lack of available schooling opportunities to disenfranchised and poor families in many African countries from which they come.

In their study of college-bound seniors from a high school in a border community between Texas and Mexico, Rutledge and Meza look at how low-income students use computer technology
to access information about and apply to colleges. They find that computers, much more than high school counselors, today have become powerful tools for students to acquire information on colleges to make decisions of where they will attend. One case study highlighted in their research shows how technology helped a student access her dreams of attending an Ivy League university.

To conclude this section on research and thought pieces on marginalized student populations, Fránquiz and Salazar-Jerez provide an interesting perspective in their analysis of Mexican “dichos” (wise sayings) and how they reflect the intersection of struggles in life, identity formation, and schooling for Latino youth, but offer bits of hope and redemption in that struggle. The authors provide a way for educators of Latino students to think about how such dichos can provide insight to critical and powerful ways to encourage bilingualism, support the ways in which Mexican parents view education, and to encourage Latino students to support each other in their personal, social, linguistic, and schooling struggles.

The final section of this special issue is done by teachers or recent former teachers in the field who pass along their knowledge, insight, and wisdom from what they have learned working with marginalized students in their content areas. Wallace begins with a poignant piece on her experience with what were labeled “at-risk” students in the Synergy program at her high school when she was teaching science. As a cohort, or what they called a “family,” the students succeeded and found that teachers having high expectations and caring for them was just as important as teaching the curriculum well. Wallace talks about how the students learned well beyond the curriculum into a realm that reflects what they learned about themselves and about life.

Next, Stafford-Levy takes the reader into a “time capsule” of reflection on her praxis and work with teen mothers, her ability to engage students in work with just one computer that resulted in a product they were proud of, and the call for teachers to reflect on their teaching in order to better serve their students. She reminds the reader that reflection on one’s teaching is transformed through tapping into the thoughts and ideas of other great educators and philosophers who knew that we needed to think about how to improve education in its many forms.

Mahon describes the collaborative work that goes on in a successful ESL program in the earlier grades before middle school. She describes how her school in North Carolina follows an inclusion model (rather than a “pull-out” model), where the English language learners (ELLs) remain a part of the core curriculum classroom. She mentions how the ESL teachers at this school actually go to the mainstream classrooms to team-teach with the content area teachers and provide individualized and small-group instruction to the English language learners. Although set at the elementary level, Mahon’s paper provides insight to why effective teaching of ELLs at the elementary level lays a crucial foundation for student success at the secondary level, helping to prevent English language learners from becoming marginalized linguistically, socially, and academically.

The section on teachers’ voices and experience concludes with the amazing compassion, insight and pedagogical skill of Deborah Svedman. In education for 27 years, she offers ideas on teaching sheltered math to high school Mexican immigrant students learning English as a second language, as well as a humanizing pedagogy that is crucial for both teacher and student success. In her effective teaching strategies she also suggests how the use of Spanish to teach English and the knowledge of student culture is powerful. Svedman concludes with the idea that high expectations and providing opportunities for hope is essential for any teacher working with marginalized student populations.

Reynaldo Reyes III
References


