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Having a Heart for ALL Students

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Having a Heart for ALL Students

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Abstract

The student body in today's general educational classrooms continues to increase in diversity, with many of the students being English language learners. This growth in the number of non-English speaking students brings challenges to educators. Students' test scores are the measurement of success for educators, resulting in a decrease of caring about students as individuals. This article addresses the importance and responsibility for Christian educators to reach out to non-English speaking students.

KEYWORDS: English Language Learners, Ethics of Care, Efficacy

Having a Heart for ALL Students

Fear, excitement, and indifference are only a few examples of the plethora of emotions that educators might experience when they find out they have non-native English speakers in their classrooms. Yet, having non-English speaking students in today's general educational classroom is not uncommon. As of July 1, 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated a Hispanic population of 41.3 million, with thirteen states containing at least one-half million Hispanic residents (2005). The January 2009 State of Texas Education Summary reports that in the 2007-2008 school year, 47.2% of the students were Hispanic, while students identified as White comprised 34.8% (2007). According to the U.S. census Bureau investigations in 2004, approximately 18% of the nation's elementary and high school students are Hispanic (2007).

Public school systems across the United States have seen a significant increase in the number of students who are considered to be English Limited Proficient. These students are known as English Language Learners (ELLs). Research has shown that it takes about two years to learn a social language and another five to seven years to become adept in the academic social language (Cummins, 2000).

Despite the limited ability of ELLs to read, write, and speak in English, the NCLB (2003a) requires these students to participate in state testing after only one year. The Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for each school includes the academic performance of these students. English language arts/reading and mathematics are considered separately to determine the AYP. For each subject, students are broken into subgroups. According to the U.S. Department of Education, these groups are as follows: students with disabilities, students with limited English

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proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, African American/Black, Hispanic, Asian, White, and Native American (2003b). As a result, the pressure for a certain percentage of each group of students to pass these tests has caused educators' focus on whatever is currently being shown to aid in improving test scores rather than on other aspects of the educational process.

Subsequently, the value of educating students as whole beings is lost because their acceptance becomes conditional on their test performance (Kohn, 2005). Ethics of care, the relational sense of caring (Noddings, 2005), is lost when one can no longer be shown concern and affection and given value simply for being an individual. Although an educator's ethics of care for English language learners is a vital aspect of education, it is often left by the wayside due to the expectations for ELLs to conform to the English school culture. In the 2006-2007 school year in Texas, only 68.5% of Hispanics graduated, 15.1% continued or received a GED, and 16.4% dropped out (2007). In the previous school year, the drop-out rate of Hispanics across the United States was at 22.1% (2007). An educator's ethics of care is linked to his or her efficacy.

Efficacy pertains to one's beliefs about capability, which in turn affects one's attitude, commitment, decisions and courses of action. Self-efficacy is specific to individual tasks (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004). Teachers with a high sense of efficacy manage their classrooms on the belief that all students are teachable when one is willing to put forth extra effort and utilize a variety of techniques to be effective (Bandura, 1997). In addition, one's efficacy may vary depending upon the area, subject or situation. However, efficacy is not synonymous either with the term 'effective' or self-esteem. Self-efficacy is the judgment that permits one to organize and carry-out various actions in different situations: "Self-efficacy mobilizes cognitive and motivational tools" (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2004, p.5). Further,

positive behaviors such as utilizing praise instead of criticism and persevering with low achievers have been positively related to teachers with a sense of self-efficacy (Kagan, 1992). Teachers with low levels of efficacy believe that the success of students depends on the students and their self-motivation.

Yoon suggests that “educators’ teaching styles, approaches, and interactions with students are based on their perceptions of the teachers’ roles and responsibilities” (2008). These beliefs are reflected in their teaching practices with respect to the class participation of the ELL students and in the dynamics of each student in regards to positioning in the class. Educators who see students as whole beings will actively look for ways to meet the needs of and integrate all students into the classroom learning environment. In contrast, educators who see ELL students only as ELL students and not whole people, will put forth less effort to encourage participation and growth unless the students themselves demonstrate extra effort (Yoon, 2008).

Effective educators are aware of this aspect of education and maintain a high level of care toward their students. Efficacy is a facet of ethics of care in that both produce certain levels of trust. Additionally, a teacher’s efficacy also plays an important role in the success of ELL students in the general educational classroom setting.

What does this information mean for Christian educators? Many Christian schools have not yet been as strongly affected by the influx of ELLs, nor do they have Adequate Yearly Progress requirements. Regardless, they have been impacted. Sadly, this author has observed some educators in Christian schools demonstrate little to no sense of ethics of care towards these students, even blaming them for negative aspects within the classroom.

How should educators, whether in a public or a private institution, respond to ELL students in their classrooms? First, they need to recognize that God has put those students in their

classrooms for the purposes of teaching, shaping, and molding not only the students, but the educators. Second, God ordained diversity when he scattered the people at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:5-8). All students, regardless of nationality or language, are important to and loved by God. Thirdly, Christian Educators have the opportunity to truly educate the whole child. Man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). God is three in one: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The triune nature of man can closely be related to the three parts we identify as: body, spirit and soul (Jn. 14:26). Each part needs to be nourished. The body is nourished through food. The spirit can be nourished through different avenues that affect both thoughts and emotions. For example, when a husband tells his wife that he loves her, it makes her feel good. Music can lift one's spirits and/or attitudes. The soul, however, can only be nourished through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

For this reason, understanding the triune nature of man is vital for Christian educators to truly be effective. In fact, this aspect can give an 'advantage' over other educators when working to educate the whole child. This author strongly believes that the most vital aspect of training a child is to train the heart. Proverbs 4:23 states, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." The mind and body are also important, but without the soul, the foundation is missed.

The importance of the heart can be seen by reading about the Kings of Israel. For many of the Kings, the states of their hearts are mentioned. II Chronicles mentions that Kings Asa (15:17), Jehosaphat (17:6) and Hezekiah (31:21) had hearts that were fully committed to the Lord and prospered as a result. Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but NOT wholeheartedly, and the people conspired against him (II Chron. 25:2). Christ cares about the hearts of all.

Christian educators need to take the time to learn about the ELL students in their classrooms in order to discover ways to reach the hearts of these students. Christ set that example by reaching out to all people, including the ‘unwanted’. These ELL students’ needs, both physical and social, must be taken into account as well. Observing, talking and listening are only three ways that this can be done. Christian educators should be an example to all other educators in reaching out to ELL students in their classrooms.

Christian educators need to acknowledge the accountability and responsibility they have before God and man with the term ‘Christian’ attached to their title. Others should be able to recognize a positive difference that the term “Christian” entails. Christian educators’ classrooms should exhibit quality and excellence, both in academics and in the level of ethics of care. In fact, having a high ethics of care encourages high standards for academics.

Christ encourages all Christians, regardless of profession, to be faithful, to run the race well (Phil. 3:12-14; II Tim. 4:7). The questions, then, that must be answered by Christian educators are: (1) Do Christian educators, through their words and actions, encourage high standards for all their students?; (2) Do Christian educators have the heart to encourage excellence in all areas?; and (3) Do Christian educators truly reach out to all of their students?

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