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Milner, H. Richard. (2010) *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

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A few months ago, I had the distinct pleasure of attending a lecture series at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, where Dr. H. Richard Milner was the guest lecturer. During his talk, titled "Toward(s) a Multicultural Approach: Celebrating Diversity and Equity in Our Schools," Milner passionately highlighted the importance of recognizing the many gaps that exist into today's classrooms, particularly stressing the importance of recognizing opportunity and diversity gaps. Milner challenged educators to change their stereotypical "mindsets" and to take the roads less traveled when dealing with social ills that arise in schools and classrooms across the nation.

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At the completion of the lecture series, I was fortunate enough to purchase Milner's book, *Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps and Teaching in Today's Classrooms: Start Where You Are, but Don't Stay There*. This book, even more enlightening than Milner's presentation, challenged me to reflect on my practices as a teacher, administrator, and teacher trainer. Milner should be lauded for speaking passionately to educators about the directions they should travel in order to ensure schools celebrate diversity and equality for all students who enter to learn.

Milner's book explicitly emphasizes several overarching thematic ideas that educators are encouraged to embrace in order to close the many "gaps" that exist in our schools relative to children of diverse backgrounds. These thematic ideas are as follows: (a) setting aside middle-class "ethos"; (b) expanding knowledge of race, poverty, and other social constructs; (c) accentuating the positive moments of working with children from diverse backgrounds; and (d) listening to what children of diverse backgrounds have to say, as they have voices too. These thematic ideas, which emanates from Milner's scholarly work, also guide this book review.

In Chapter One, Milner introduces his empirical research via a strong theoretical framework that describes opportunity and diversity gaps; then, throughout the book, he builds upon his framework in the form of cultural narratives. Through his opportunity and diversity gap framework, Milner helps the reader to understand that when educators are encouraged to study social and binary constructions (such as race [Black vs. White], gender [male vs. female], sexual orientation [heterosexual vs. homosexual], and class [rich vs. poor]) within an educational context, they do not do so in order to make or develop excuses for children considered among marginalized groups within these constructions. He states such study is not purported to make people empathize or sympathize with these children. Instead, he proclaims that such study is done purely to expose what is known as social injustice embedded within the institutionalized systems that hinder the progress of these disadvantage individuals. This significant framework enables individuals who may not understand the plight of advocates for diversity and equality in schools come to a

clearer understanding of these subjects. Often, when people are presented with opportunities to discuss issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, they tend to feel uncomfortable: Tatum (1997) suggests that suggest feeling of discomfort stems from people's lack of knowledge or training in the areas of diversity and equality. Milner devises a clear framework for addressing such situations, which lower the anxiety levels of potential readers regarding these issues.

Milner's framework embraces five concepts that are vitally important to readers in their attempts to understand diversity and opportunity gaps, and discusses the roles these gaps play in society generally. Milner's framework provides clear insights into the following interwoven concepts: (a) "color blindness," (b) "cultural conflicts," (c) the "myth of meritocracy," (d) "low expectations and deficit mindsets," and (e) "context-neutral mindsets." Milner eloquently explains the relationships and connections between these notions in order to expose diversity and opportunity gaps in education. First, the concept of color blindness has to be examined in order to expose human tendencies to downplay and ignore race as an important factor in many contexts. Second, within the same vein, Milner discusses cultural conflicts, which are the unfair cultural tug-of-wars that arise between teachers and students in the classroom due to colorblindness. Third, Milner suggests that his framework would be void without an explanation of three additional concepts: the myth of meritocracy, low expectations and deficit mindsets, and context-neutral mindsets. He challenges educators to rid themselves of the myth of meritocracy that people, in general, "acquire success or failure because they earn it" (p.181). This ignominious idea, coupled with the idea of low expectations, has affected how teachers, particularly White teachers, have interacted with children from diverse backgrounds. Milner additionally criticizes educators who possess the context-neutral mindset and fail to consider students' backgrounds when applying their teaching methods.

Throughout the book, Milner's constructive manner helps educators realize that social injustice may inherently exist within their worldviews due to their middle-class belief systems and upbringing. Therefore, Milner suggests that educators undergo a personal catharsis in order to

eradicate any stereotypes that may hinder them from performing at their optimal best in the classroom.

In one of the many ethnographic accounts found in the book, found in Chapter Two, Milner highlights the case study of an urban schoolteacher, Mr. Hall, who is young and White, and who has challenges concerning the nexus between race, relationships, and teaching. As a result of his approach to such challenges, many of the Black students view him as “being a racist” (p. 51). In fact, Mr. Hall, does not understand why race and relationships are important factors in the classroom and thinks that his only reason for being employed in this urban school is to “teach science” (p. 46). After setting aside his middle-class ethos, Mr. Hall understands that race and relationships are important, and this understanding allows him to connect with his students more effectively. As time progresses, Mr. Hall’s students begin to see him in a different light and considers Mr. Hall as “cool and with-it”(p.47).

Milner’s example of Mr. Hall represents the accounts of millions of teachers and educators across the nation. If the truth is told, Mr. Hall is not the only one guilty of having biases that affect overall performance in the classroom. Many teachers have or have had this struggle, including me.

As a young African American teacher who landed a first teaching position in an urban high school, I had difficulty setting aside some of my middle-class upbringing, which affected how I understood and interacted with my students. I had zero tolerance for many issues that arose in my classroom, failing to consider that many of these issues stemmed from larger social issues in our nation and communities—a point Milner alludes to several time in his book. I, too, had to set aside my middle-class ethos in order to survive and become a better teacher for my students. I had to look within myself to find those instances in my life to which my students could directly relate, and as a more established educator, Milner’s description of such internal work strikes chord.

As established earlier, most educators’ personal biases develop as a result of lacking essential knowledge, which should have been gained through teacher education programs, to eradicate their already-present belief systems

concerning children of diverse backgrounds. Milner advocates for the restructuring of teacher education programs to support more courses geared toward teaching children of diverse backgrounds. This notion is grounded in the ideas of previous researchers (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) who claim that teacher education programs fail to prepare teachers to address issues of diversity in the classroom.

The majority of Milner's subjects are either individuals who have to learn about diversity as they practice their craft or individuals who are driven by their personal missions to integrate diversity into their classrooms because of situations (both negative and positive) they have experienced in their personal or professional lives. To support this type of subject selection, Milner discusses how integrating diversity into the curriculum becomes a personal mission for one of his subjects, Dr. Johnson, who works in a primarily White high school:

Dr. Johnson did not begin her work at Stevenson high School deliberately

avoiding issues of race and diversity. On the contrary, because of what she had observed and experienced both with and outside of the school context, she had to come to understand how important race and diversity were to her teaching practices. She found that although she was teaching in a predominately White setting, issues related to race, culture, and gender were still salient to her work. (p.80)

Milner's example of Dr. Johnson describes a teacher who realizes that integrating diversity into the curriculum is both beneficial to her students and the subjects about which she teaches, regardless of the cultural makeup of her class.

Milner's book reveals the multiple benefits of working with children of diverse backgrounds, as he encourages educators to accentuate the positive moments of working with such children. Each of the teachers studied in the book deals with challenges that later become victories, as they experience positive moments with the students they teach. For example, Dr. Johnson faces rejection from both White students and colleagues as she attempts to diversify

her English curriculum. As a result, the school administration changes her teaching assignment. She is no longer able to teach ninth-grade English but is forced to teach twelfth-grade English for the remainder of her time at the school. Initially, Dr. Johnson has difficulty adjusting to such a change, not because of any inability to teach twelfth-grade English, but because of the spirit in which such change has taken place. Later on, however, students begin to understand the importance of Dr. Johnson's attempt at integrating diversity into the curriculum. As a result, Dr. Johnson is respected by the students and is selected each year (by the mostly White student body) to present diplomas to the graduating seniors.

The educators surveyed in Milner's book recall many positive moments of working with students of diverse backgrounds. However, these positive moments are often overshadowed by many of the challenging moments these educators encounter, which hinder them from solely accentuating the positive aspects of working with children of diverse backgrounds. Despite these challenges, the educators persevere in working toward positive moments. I firmly believe Milner's book helps educators give voices to children of diverse backgrounds. Milner encourages educators to listen to the students with whom they work, insisting that educators need to assist students in "having conversations about self and facilitating student reflections on self" (p. 83). According to Milner, this strategy, in turn helps students develop their own voices to speak about themselves, others, and society. Having students develop and share their voices is an essential component to the diversity curriculum.

With strong evidentiary support from other diversity and equity scholars, Milner dispels the myth that teachers of diverse backgrounds have an easier time teaching students of diverse backgrounds. Milner speaks against this "phenotype" notion. However, Milner never provides an ethnographic account of a teacher from a diverse background who struggles to teach, to relate, and engage students of diverse backgrounds. On the one hand, all of the African American teachers described in the book were successful in their attempts to teach African American children. This seems to suggest that teachers of diverse backgrounds do have an easier time teaching students of diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, White teachers

seemed to struggle to relate to and teach African American on many occasions, as described in the book. In fact, Milner dedicates an entire chapter titled, *White Teachers Learning to Teach*, to suggest this idea. In my opinion, these examples suggest that White teachers need more help as they attempt to teach African American children. This is a topic that may require further investigation. Milner does provide an ethnographic account of an African American teacher who is able to successfully teach White students. Such criticism does not take away from the overall quality of the book.

Educators who wish to learn more about diversity and equity gaps in schools should embrace this scholarly work. Milner's book provides entry to new conversations concerning diversity and equity in schools. It gives educators a certain level of appreciation for the many differences that exist in American schools and encourages them to advocate for children of diverse backgrounds even more. I share Milner's views and am encouraging schools and school districts to rethink the way they think about issues concerning children of diverse backgrounds. Most importantly, I am challenging teacher education programs to rethink their curricula so the teachers these programs produce are prepared to address the many diversity needs in public schools. Milner provides an exceptional framework that encourages educators to begin by addressing their knowledge of and approach to diversity, and provides them with practical strategies that will help them increase that knowledge and improve their approach. Milner's framework provides a refreshing way to celebrate difference and start a new journey to better diversity in our schools.

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