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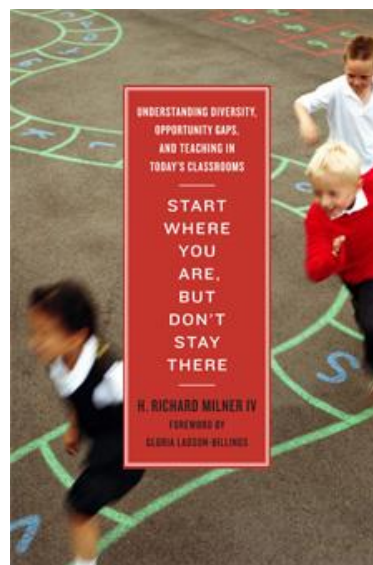


Milner IV, H. Richard. (2010) *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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With our schools becoming more ethnically and linguistically diverse at higher rates than ever (Howard, 2010), preparing teachers to find success with the diverse students they will meet in the classroom is one of the most significant jobs of teacher educators (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Melnick & Zeichner, 1997, 1998; Milner, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Though important beyond measure, the preparation of teachers for diversity and equity can be a challenging task for teacher educators given teachers' wide-ranging



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backgrounds with issues of diversity and their varied dispositions toward learning the underlying issues inherent in the struggle for equity in our nation's schools.

I teach predominantly white, monolingual undergraduate- and graduate-level practicing teachers about the importance of diversity and equity in their personal lives and pedagogical decision-making. And though I have found tremendous success with students and greatly enjoy facilitating these courses, I have continually struggled to hone-in on the most impactful and relevant texts and materials to guide course discussions, assignments and activities. Often education professors rely on citation- and jargon-loaded journal articles and books, written mostly by and for scholars, to guide undergraduate and graduate coursework. And given the complexity and nuances present in the work of training teachers for diversity, scholarly articles and book chapters sometimes fall short of really resonating with the inexperienced teachers I work with in my courses.



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Thus, after having previously taught master's-level students on issues of equity and diversity, during the spring of 2011, when I taught my first undergraduate-level course, I wanted to add something to the course syllabus that gave real voice to teachers who have grappled with issues of diversity. And being a fan of H. Richard Milner's (2009) approachable framing of issues of diversity and teacher-friendly style of writing, seen in his book *Diversity and Education: Teachers, Teaching, and Teacher Education* (see, www.edrev.info/reviews/rev886.pdf for a review of this volume in this journal), I was most excited to get my hands on his latest scholarly work, *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms*. I gave it a quick read, immediately added it to the syllabus, and it proved to be the piece that resonated most significantly with the future teachers in my section.

Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There is a well-written, approachable, and deeply resonating volume that centers issues of diversity in the actual lives and experiences of teachers who grapple with the struggles and successes inherent in working in diverse classrooms. Milner (2010) frames his book with a staggeringly concise and powerful re-thinking of the oft-misunderstood achievement gap –

the *opportunity gap framework*. He then expertly weaves in the cases of a diverse array of teachers at various stages of their career journey, while utilizing their own voices and experiences to remind some and introduce to others the urgency, inherent-complexity, and exceeding joys of working toward diversity and equity in the classroom.

In chapter one, Milner (2010) outlines, defines and explains the conceptual framework that he introduces as a source of context and analysis for the various cases. The core areas of this framework are drawn from research-based theories found in the existing literature on diversity and multiculturalism, and all issues highlighted in the rest of the book are situated somewhere within the areas included in the framework. The first area is *colorblindness*, whereas educators need to confront and grapple with how salient race was and still is in schooling. Milner demonstrates that it is essential for teachers to move from individualized ideas of race and racism to understanding the raced-based, systematic and structural barriers that continue to permeate and dictate the life outcomes of both teachers and students in classrooms.

The second area is *cultural conflicts*. In this regard, educators whose ways of understanding curriculum, instruction, and classroom management are dominated by an adherence to more traditional, Eurocentric and middle-class ideologies find themselves in ideological conflict with students who do not adopt these ways of knowing. Drawing from Delpit's (1995) notion of the "culture of power" existing in classrooms, Milner (2010) posits that teachers unaware of, or resistant to understanding, embracing, and utilizing students' cultures risk misreading and misinterpreting their behaviors. If teachers are not mindful, these cultural conflicts can result in devastating outcomes for students, (e.g. disproportional suspensions, unwarranted assignment to special education).

The third element of the framework is the *myth of meritocracy*. Situated in the ideal that all students in the United States have equal opportunities for success, educators who subscribe to the myth believe that anyone who has the ability, follows the law, and works hard enough can obtain their piece of the "American dream." However, this myth can blind teachers to the racist, classist, and sexist systematic inequities and structural

barriers that prevent culturally and ethnically diverse schoolchildren from having better school-based opportunities.

Educators who subscribe to the fourth element of the framework, *low expectations and deficit mind-sets*, might unknowingly fail to recognize the wealth of culturally based know-how that students bring into the classroom. Teachers who view their students through a deficit orientation see what students lack and might provide uninteresting lessons situated in an undemanding curriculum and maintain low academic and social expectations for their students. In addition to providing lessons and assignments devoid of rigor, deficit-minded teachers participate in an unending cycle of blame that negatively influences student engagement and learning outcomes.

The final concept of the framework, *context-neutral mind-sets*, refers to the importance of teachers realizing the significant bearing contextual realities hold in influencing school practices. Whether schools are rural, suburban, or urban, teachers should understand the inherent differences in what it means to teach within these various contexts. Teachers, who fail to realize that schools are situated within already established communities, do so because they neglect to understand how the community and people within these communities can and should influence the schooling outcomes for students. If not mindful of these context-specific conditions, teachers can unknowingly contribute to the systematic disempowerment of families and community members who could otherwise serve as valuable support systems for schools.

Following chapter one, Milner (2010) begins a series of three chapters, which provide rich portrayals of a diverse group of four teachers grappling with diversity dilemmas in their classroom contexts. In chapter two, Milner discusses the case of Mr. Hall, a White male science teacher in a diverse urban school, Bridge Middle School. At the beginning of his career Mr. Hall thought little of the cultural and racial backgrounds of his students, as he maintained the familiar color-blind and diversity-blind mindset. For Mr. Hall, his job was to do one thing - “teach science”, and he held little regard for the diverse students he instructed, as well as to the social and community

context in which he taught. However, after an incident where he corrected student misbehavior and discredited rap music to his students, they began calling him a racist.

While Mr. Hall did not attribute his behaviors as racist, he thought about his students' perceptions. This triggered his acknowledgement of his need to know his students more and forge better relationships with them if he wanted to teach them science. By sharing his own personal narrative, growing up poor in the rural south, or "in the woods", Mr. Hall managed to build the necessary relational bridges to students in his urban classroom. Instead of shying away from the cultural conflicts that arose in his classroom, he thought of these as opportunities to learn and develop. While Mr. Hall had the necessary subject matter knowledge, Milner (2010) notes that he had to "develop knowledge about whom he was teaching science to, and this effort had to be ongoing" (p. 75). In addition, Mr. Hall developed rigorous learning opportunities for his students considering limited school resources, he always handled discipline issues in his classroom instead of referring students to the administration, and he provided students with multiple opportunities to find success socially and academically in the classroom.

The case of Mr. Hall highlights key and often seen issues in the preparation of teachers for diverse contexts. Mr. Hall possessed the subject knowledge, and the instructional methods, but because of his color-blind stance he could not see how important race and culture were in how his students perceived him. However, when he embraced the racial and cultural differences of his students he was able to see the similarities present between himself and his students, and as a result was able to push students to achieve even more because of his relationships with them. Dr. Johnson, who is profiled in chapter three, much unlike Mr. Hall initially, was thoroughly keyed-in to how her cultural and racial identity contributed to her role as a teacher to her mostly white students.

In suburban Stevenson High School, Dr. Johnson, a female, African American language arts teacher with 26 years of experience, saw issues of race, culture and gender as salient to her work in a predominantly white context. Milner (2010) utilizes Dr. Johnson's case to highlight how the confluence of race, diversity and opportunity manifest

in the curriculum and pedagogical decisions in not only diverse school contexts, but also in mostly white settings, as well. For Dr. Johnson, as an African American teacher, moving beyond the Eurocentric canon of literature that dominates most high school English courses was central to her teaching. Though she was not necessarily teaching to members of the marginalized groups reflected in some of her curriculum, she thought that it was crucial to expose students to the diverse array of life narratives her mostly White students would likely encounter outside of Stevenson High School. Not only was a consideration of race and ethnicity central to Dr. Johnson's curriculum decision making, but also as a woman, she ensured that students were exposed to women writers as well. Milner (2010) captures her sentiments on the intersections of race and gender: "Women are also important because most of the writers were White men. I want my girls to read about women, too... They are on their way out into the real world, and everybody they meet in the world might not look like the people here... this is what's important..." (p. 85). Students had trouble understanding why she centered so much of her literature course on issues of race and privilege, and it became increasingly obvious that she was alone among teachers in her quest to create opportunities for students to grapple with issues of diversity.

Because of her equity-centered approach, she was heavily scrutinized by her students and colleagues and even had her freshmen classes taken from her to assuage disgruntled parents. Dr. Johnson grappled with being labeled a racist by her freshmen students, and by working under an administration that seemingly agreed. However, she found strength in realizing how successful she was being at opening the eyes of her seniors, who she thought were more developmentally ready to wrestle with the issues of diversity she presented. She remained resolute in providing students not only a diversity-focused literature course, but also a safe and nurturing classroom environment in which to explore these complex and sometimes troubling issues.

In chapter four, the experiences of two African American teachers from Bridge Middle School (Mr. Hall, as discussed in chapter two, was also a teacher at Bridge) are featured. Mr. Jackson and Ms. Shaw, both outstandingly effective teachers, share similar underlying values that

guide their practice with their diverse students. Ms. Shaw, an experienced veteran of the field encouraged students to develop a mission-orientation to their education. In this regard, she pushed students to see and recognize the importance of race in their lives, and she encouraged students to view the purpose of their education in getting them outside of the confines of their community. While Ms. Shaw's story is powerful, Milner's (2010) discussion of Mr. Jackson was the highlight of the chapter.

Mr. Jackson, a math and science teacher with seven years experience, heavily utilized music and popular culture as a means of both connecting to students' interests, and keeping students' engaged in the classroom activities. While Mr. Jackson shared the same phenotype as many of his students, he was acutely aware that his success was more a result of how he taught, managed, and engaged with students and less as a result of his race, solely. Mr. Jackson, a video gamer, a DJ, and a father of three, was responsive to what students were interested in because not only was he interested in popular culture himself, but he also was keyed-in to the interests of his school-aged children at home. Mr. Jackson stressed the importance and relevance of learning through helping students see that school could be *cool*. He realized that once he hooked some of the more popular students into the learning activity, then other more reluctant students would follow.

Using Mr. Jackson's case as a foundation, Milner (2010) provides a review of literature that supports the benefits that can come when teachers bring popular culture into the learning context. While Milner discusses how teachers can rethink how to utilize students' interests in music, movies, sitcoms, reality shows, and magazines, the most refreshing and original perspective was drawn from how teachers can use students' video gaming knowledge as a starting point for other classroom-based learning endeavors. For this section, Milner draws from the work of James Gee (2005), who notes that video games provide a multitude of ways for students to build a strong sense of identity. Gee also emphasizes that gaming allows students to produce and create knowledge, as opposed to just consuming it, which is a mark of optimal classroom learning. In addition, Gee posits that video games are designed to usher students through various dimensions of life and learning. Whereas preliminary and foundational knowledge come early in the

game, students gain more sophisticated learning through more complex gaming situations. In sum, whether through music, video gaming or any other source of connections to popular culture, Milner notes that Mr. Jackson excelled with his students not solely because of his race, but because he tapped into the sources of knowledge shared by the students in his classes. In addition, he provided opportunities for students to critique elements of popular culture through the content and skills gained through interactions with the more standard curriculum. In chapter five, Milner (2010) shares the learning and challenges of six white teachers learning to work for diversity. Milner explains that most white teachers he has encountered did not see themselves as racial or cultural beings. Moreover, these teachers implicitly saw white, middle-class as the norm to which “others”, including those with cultural or ethnic diversity, should be compared. In addition, themes drawn from teacher interviews provide insight into the pervasive and damaging thinking of well-meaning educators.

Given these underlying mindsets, Milner (2010) posits the need for teacher education programs to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to address opportunity gaps. To stress this need, Milner discusses the fear many white educators have in even using “raced” language and notes the importance for teachers to understand their own familial and historical references to issues of race and racism. Milner also highlights promising facets of these teachers’ transformations. Teachers keyed-in to the lack of role models for students of color and even noted that the lack of teachers of color was not only a school-wide issue but also a district-wide concern. In addition, these teachers also saw promise in incorporating diversity into their pedagogical decision-making through techniques like utilizing bilingual texts in the classroom and fighting the racist and homophobic language they heard or even used growing up.

Milner (2010) closes the volume with a section devoted to conclusions some thoroughly useful recommendations for both classroom and school-wide practices that should help students and educators build and sustain meaningful relationships. To become more effective, Milner (2010) suggests that teachers should interview students to get to know and understand their life histories, develop

assignments that elicit students' experiences and interests, and attend the extra-curricular activities of their students. At the school-wide level, Milner recommends an increased focus on parental engagement through language-learning resource programs and workshops geared toward empowering reluctant parents to have a voice and more active role in their child's education.

In addition, Milner recommends semester- or year-long diversity-related themes for school curriculum or programs. Milner also proposes that a school-wide book reading or a movie-viewing event could facilitate building community around touchy racial or class-based issues. Lastly, holding a community-centered dinner would foster connections around educational issues between faculty, students, staff, families, and other community members.

After having taught the volume as an anchor text in two courses, I can strongly support the usefulness and powerful impact it has had on the thinking and practice of the fledgling teachers with whom I have helped train. The challenges that my students had with the ideas resided mostly in grappling with the unexpectedly dense concepts discussed in chapter one. I encourage readers and teacher educators assigning this work, to spend considerable time unpacking the various terms, concepts, and assumed understandings that serve as the backdrop for fully comprehending the opportunity gap framework. While Milner does an exceptional job in chapter one of eliciting the major points inherent in the issues of the myth of meritocracy, deficit orientations, and context-neutral mindsets, what I found was that these were very new concepts for students, and each topic was rich enough for a week if not semester long discussion. Because of Milner's comprehensible language, chapter one appears like a quicker read than it actually is. However, after spending significant time with this more foundational chapter, readers could be provided a more solid basis with which to understand future chapters.

Chapter two is Milner's (2010) greatest success. Students resonated tremendously with the well-written account of the struggles and victories of Mr. Hall. Milner unabashedly paints Mr. Hall as the vulnerable, yet hopeful, assured, yet humble teacher that many of my students were. As evidenced in response journals and cite after cite

in final papers and discussions, it became quite clear that Mr. Hall was at least in part, who they were and hoped to become.

Overall, *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There* is a comprehensive and approachable volume for teachers hoping to better provide equitable learning outcomes for students. The opportunity gap framework is rich enough to provide fodder for doctoral-level discussions; however, it is quite streamlined, because it filters down the most salient issues at play in the mindsets of many teachers. While administrators and policy makers could benefit from using this book to inform policy implementation for marginalized students, in particular, this book would better serve the interests of teacher educators and practicing teachers looking for tangible and powerful examples of what we hope all teachers will do – embrace, embody, and exude equity for all students.

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