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Developmental Achievement versus Standardized Growth: Common Curricula & The Not So Common Student

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Developmental Achievement versus Standardized Growth: Common Curricula & The Not So Common Student

Introduction

The process of teaching and learning is being driven more by standards developed outside the classroom than by the students in that room. This research challenges the presumed value of standardization in public education, especially the notion that student achievement is synonymous with performance on summative criteria insensitive to the unique characteristics of every child.

Due to a multitude of human variables, no student is *standard* and none can therefore be standardized. By its very nature, a standards-based education generates gaps among students with different backgrounds. The infusion of *common* standards, curricula, pedagogy and assessments greatly challenges a teacher's ability to diversify instruction in order to effectively address the needs of individual students.

A truly effective learning environment is a place where no student feels disadvantaged by his or her unique background, but instead is empowered by it. School leadership and staff must therefore help every child connect personally with the curriculum, his or her teacher(s), peers and school.

The overarching question driving this study: "How do educators effectively meet the individual needs of highly diverse students in this era of standardization?" In other words, how do we maintain the human element of teaching, which is so critical for positive child and adolescent development?

Changing Landscape

The American public education enterprise continues to reflect societal interests and needs. The demands on public education have become greater and more complex.

Education reform. Throughout the history of American public education, curricular reform efforts have involved a frequent shifting between "rigor" and "relevance" (Steinburg, 2010). Focused on rigor, contemporary public policy intimately links teacher and whole-school performance with measures of student proficiency based on academic standards (Schafflhauser, 2010).

As a result, public education is increasingly being driven by data (Davis, 2008). Although school personnel devote a great deal of time and attention to standards-based student achievement scores, such data typically reveals little if anything about the individual student and his or her interests, aptitudes and aspirations (Kameneytz, 2016). Missing is important feedback about the formative process of learning, which is unique for every child.

A narrow focus on standards-related data dehumanizes education (Singer, 2018). Learning is a highly individualized process, not a factory line production. Educators

cannot be expected to produce a standard product because no two children are the same—and never will be. The current approach to educator accountability is flawed because standardization emphasizes conformity and thus falls short of guaranteeing each student the opportunity to achieve at his or her highest possible level (Feldman, 2012).

Instability. The stability of today’s families has been immensely impacted by national, state and/or local economic insecurity (Hacker, et al., 2011). Especially in larger communities, schools have experienced fluctuating enrollment throughout the academic year as families search for employment and/or a place to live. Some students will enroll in two or more schools in a given year or spend each grade in a different institution.

When children move from one place to another, it is often difficult for them to develop and maintain critical academic and social skills (Institute for Family Studies, 2015; McFarland, 2011). Concrete and meaningful connections with peers and teachers are severely compromised.

Diversity. For various reasons, a number of public school systems have been experiencing changes in their student demographics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Stevens, 2015; Howard, 2007). This is evidenced by the expansive role of student services, which encompass: poverty, race and ethnicity, language, disabilities, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and sexual orientation.

Additional Responsibilities. American public schools have had a long tradition of *in loco parentis* whereby school officials are expected to assume parental status and responsibilities while students are in their charge (Stuart, 2009). Recently, there has been a cultural resurgence of this doctrine. In addition to delivering instruction, educators are faced with teaching children proper behavior, ensuring student attendance, addressing physical and mental health needs, and assisting with student and family welfare (Volmer, 2012; Resnick, 2006).

Decreased Funding. Traditional support for public education has become less stable in many communities (McKinney, 2017; Leachman, et al., 2016). Local and state aid has not kept pace with even baseline expense (Scott, 2012). In fact, several public school districts across the nation are grappling with a significant decrease in revenue. To help balance the budget, some have reduced staff. This has resulted in increased class size and thus a higher student-to-teacher ratio.

In other words, schools are expected to do more with less during a time of societal instability. The impact, of course, is realized in the classroom. While being held accountable for standardized measures of achievement, many public educators are experiencing a steady increase in class size, diversity, and student need.

Action Research

This study was initially conducted during the 2010-11 regular academic year. It has since been replicated with similar results. The following is from the original research.

Examined are two team-taught 10th grade social studies classes. Both groups of students were highly diverse. Many had low reading levels, were credit-deficient, and had a high rate of truancy and disciplinary referrals as freshmen. Utilizing curricular standards simply as a framework, the classroom teachers individualized instruction based on student strengths, backgrounds, interests, and needs. They employed content literacy, constructivism and project-based learning strategies.

Student Profile

Individual student data was collected at the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year, and whenever a new student joined either class.

Average class size was 32 students. The majority were from low income families. About one-quarter of all students had a disability, and nearly 20% did not speak fluent English.

Low Income	63 %
Special Education	23 %
English Learners	18 %

The majority of students were non-white. Of these, 30% were Hispanic. Other racial/ethnic groups included African American, Asian, and Native American.

Caucasian	45 %
Hispanic	30 %
African American	10 %
Asian or SE Asian	10 %
Native American	5 %

Student reading lexiles, as measured bi-annually via the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), ranged from 150 (Below Basic) to 1350 (Advanced). The average lexile score for the combination of both classes was 700 (Low Basic). SRI identifies suitable reading proficiency for 10th graders between the lexiles of 1000 and 1200.

Entering the 10th grade, 28% of students from both classes were credit-deficient. Also, 44% were habitually truant as freshmen. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, a “habitually truant” student is absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days on which school is held during a semester (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2012).

Both classes were team-taught by the same staff (i.e., social studies teacher, special education teacher, and student teacher). Given such a wide range of student backgrounds, skill levels and aptitudes, the following principles were formulated by the teacher team:

1. A highly productive learning environment begins with us.

Education is NOT about programs but always about relationships. It is therefore critical

that teachers consistently model positive interaction, teamwork, trust and respect. To effectively serve a diverse group of students, differences among the teacher team were viewed as assets (e.g., training, experience, interests).

2. Students will always be our focal point.

“What does the student need from each of us in order to achieve?” was the central question. All persons in a classroom play a vital role in the learning process, students and teachers alike. As such, everyone is obligated to help each other succeed. Teachers cannot expect their students to effectively collaborate and learn together if they as professionals do not.

The mission of the teacher team was to establish a culture of positive relationships whereby respect and caring are highly valued. Everyone was intentionally made to feel welcomed. Since many students lived in extreme poverty, the teacher team also believed it was important to provide for such basic needs as school supplies, nutrition, and emotional security. This became infectious, as students began to reach out to each other. They even raised an incredible amount of food items for the Salvation Army.

Students were encouraged to assume ownership of the class. They could decorate and post messages in designated areas. Additionally, students were given opportunities to engage in open discussions about a variety of topics, including how to improve their educational experience. This not only led students to experience academic success, but fostered the development of new skills that could be carried over into other disciplines.

3. Instruction will be highly individualized.

Although core standards provided curricular structure, this course was designed to fit the students—versus making them adjust to the course. The teacher team was concerned that placing highly diverse students in a “standard” type of learning environment would significantly disadvantage some individuals, if not most.

To ensure the achievement of every student, and thus the whole group, student data was gathered and analyzed to create individual profiles. Information included: assessed academic skill levels (especially reading), transcripts (courses and grades), student services provided (e.g., ELL, special education, social services, health), attendance and discipline records, as well as any personal background information (e.g., participation in co-curricular activities, career goal and/or jobs held, ethnicity, family).

Note: Standardized state assessment data were not utilized because insight about the individual student was lacking. Only test scores were provided. The teacher team instead relied on data relevant to holistic student development. Not opposed to data, the team thus emphasized student-driven/data-supported decision making (vs. data-driven).

The individual profiles emphasized student strengths, but also highlighted limitations and needs. From this, the teacher team was able to personalize instruction. Gaps were bridged in student backgrounds (e.g., language, culture, socioeconomic level) and

academic skills (e.g., literacy, content, and context). Corridors were constructed to help students effectively navigate academic standards as well as the school's middle class norms and "hidden rules." Students were placed in learning situations where they could fully utilize their individual strengths. The profiles also enabled the teacher team to identify potential problems, and thus be prepared to provide assistance.

4. Maximum student participation for every lesson.

Brain research indicates there is increased meaningful, remembered learning when students are actively and interactively engaged, comfortable socially and emotionally, intellectually challenged, and in enriched learning environments (Richardson, 2003).

Each lesson was designed to balance rigor with relevance. Achievement targets were established for every student and for the whole class. Instruction was focused on the incremental development of higher-order thinking skills. Achievement targets were therefore continually being raised one notch above current level of performance.

In addition, each unit of instruction included something every student could relate to (i.e., background, personal interest, aspirations). By also providing students a degree of input and choice, the goal of the teacher team was to have each student find purpose and meaning in his or her learning experiences.

While establishing a culture of mutual respect and strong peer support, students were encouraged to work with and proactively assist one another. This included peer-to-peer readings, small group projects, simulation exercises, and study group sessions.

Multi-modal strategies were used to deliver instruction (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile), including a variety of classroom technologies (e.g., mind-mapping, gamification, digital text, social media). The teacher team also made an effort to utilize academic interdisciplinary connections that reinforce student learning both within and outside of this particular course (e.g., biology, economics, health, language arts).

5. Multiple ways to demonstrate learning.

An individualized approach to instructional delivery demands flexible measures of achievement. Given the view that every student serves as his or her own norm, the teacher team was keenly focused on every student's progressive development along the course continuum. Whole class performance data tends to lose sight of the individual student, and the teacher team did not want to risk doing that.

Students were provided a variety of ways to demonstrate what they have learned. All criteria subject to evaluation (i.e., grading) included clear instructions, guidelines and/or rubrics. Per every assignment, the teacher team asked students to repeat what they were to do. For performance-based activities, student progress was determined by the quality of their projects, primary source research, summative reflections, and discussion.

Students actively engaged in tracking their own progress. Proactive planning discussions were held with those who began to fall behind. Together, the teacher team identified what was happening, why, and how to improve the situation.

The teacher team also posted weekly whole class achievement (i.e., grade average). This proved to be a tremendous motivator, especially as progress improved. The class set its own goal, and they were eager to see the bar move upward each Friday.

Approach to Instruction

The teacher team made a conscious effort to not disadvantage any student on the basis of his or her ethnicity, socioeconomic background, aptitude, academic skill level, interests or needs. Although a variety of individualized instructional strategies were utilized (e.g., personal interest, material adjusted to the students' reading levels, scaffolding, multi-sensory, journaling), the primary focus was on content literacy, constructivism, and project-based learning.

Content area literacy:

Many students struggle with understanding course content. Differences in reading level, language, culture, experience and other factors often lead to misinterpretation. Simply being presented with the correct explanation is usually not sufficient (Klein, 2008).

Content literacy is the ability to use reading, writing and speaking to construct and retain knowledge (Misulis, 2009). Students learn how to use information in an effort to understand and reason about content area concepts. Teachers provide appropriate background information and then guide students on how to effectively read, write, communicate and think.

Although not reading specialists, each member of the teacher team participated in content literacy training. The students were provided direct, explicit content literacy instruction. Graphic organizers for each unit were generated jointly by the team and the students. The teacher team also employed the following strategies:

- Preparation (e.g., text preview and exploration);
- Organization (e.g., text framing; main ideas, key vocabulary, essential details);
- Elaboration (e.g., connecting text with student background knowledge); and
- Monitoring (e.g., students tag what they do not understand).

Constructivism:

According to the theory of constructivism, we “construct” understanding and meaning through our experiences and by reflecting on those (Brooks & Grennon, 1999). We become creators of our own knowledge by asking questions, exploring, and assessing what we know. In the classroom, then, students are placed in situations that require them to solve problems, building upon what they already know.

Instruction focuses on key concepts and is aligned with the student's level of development, which includes pre-existing conceptions (Palmer, 2005). Students seek information, form opinions, make decisions about the relevancy of information, and apply concepts to new situations. Teachers build a bridge between what students already know and what they are to learn (Gagnon & Collay, 2006).

The teacher team provided students with a problem to solve. As they worked in small groups, our role was to coach, moderate and suggest. Students were also asked to reflect on their learning. Elements of constructivism that were employed:

- Engagement—stimulate thinking and help students access prior knowledge (e.g., demonstration or video clip);
- Exploration—time to think, plan, investigate, and organize information (e.g., reading authentic document);
- Explanation—reflective activities which help students clarify and modify their understanding (e.g., structured questioning);
- Elaboration—students apply their understanding to a real-world situation; and
- Evaluation—task guidelines and scoring rubrics.

Project-based learning:

Students need to make a true hands-on connection with their academic activities in and outside of the school environment. Although many learning experiences are hands-on, much of what actually takes place remains at a surface level (e.g., note taking, test preparation, completing worksheets). Deeper learning occurs via true application.

Yet, we can never fully replicate real-life learning experiences in a classroom for every student (Boss & Krauss, 2007). Project-based learning (PBL) attempts to fill this void by giving students structured choice based largely on their past and present experiences.

Providing students “voice and choice” is perhaps the most imperative element of PBL. Students are given a *voice* in projects to choose, and how they will reach agreed upon learning objectives or targets. The *choice* feature emerges when students determine the way to share their learning process with others (Buck Institute for Education, 2012).

Students are therefore granted the opportunity to propose projects unique to their interests or lives, which are also aligned with key course content. When provided these elements, students are able to retain what they have learned versus forgetting the bits and pieces of teacher-driven instruction (i.e., rote memorization).

The role of the teacher team, then, was to largely facilitate and guide. Students received help with generating challenging questions, structuring their tasks, and reflecting on what they learned from the experience. Throughout, the teacher team made certain the projects remained focused on the concepts being investigated and were thus connected with course content. Some projects involved the whole class, while others were done in small groups or individually.

Results

During the course of the academic year, both class sections experienced a significant improvement in work completion, grades, attendance and behavior.

1. Both classes finished the 10th grade U.S. History curriculum in March, approximately three months early. Every standard (and benchmark) was achieved. The teacher team then focused on preparing students for the 11th grade and beyond.
2. The composite grade average for both classes at the end of the second semester was 92%. Only one student did not pass, which was his choice.

Note: This student attended every class, presented no behavioral issues, and was highly capable. He informed his parents, teachers, student support personnel, administration of his desire to fail every class. A tremendous effort was made to convince him otherwise, but he did not waver.

The average rate of failure at this school was about 30% during the 2010-11 academic year. In other words, 30% of the student body did not pass at least one academic course per semester. More stunning is the fact that the failure rate in some other social studies classes ranged from 40-60%. Yet, these two classes were highly impacted by student diversity and need (e.g., academic, language, behavioral, socioeconomic).

3. From the first semester to the end of the school year, truancy decreased by 27%. In fact, unexcused absences were rare by the start of the second semester.
4. NO student received a disciplinary referral. In-class behavior interventions decreased by 50%. Class was rarely interrupted due to a behavior issue.

At the end of the school year, students were asked to complete surveys about their classroom experience. The return rate was 100%. Results:

- 93.2% preferred student-led activities (i.e., constructivism mixed with project-based learning) because they left feeling more prepared for the “real world.”
- 89.3% preferred projects as summative assessment tools versus traditional tests because they felt the projects allowed them to truly “show what they had learned.”
- 6.8% would have preferred a more traditional model classroom, with homework, textbooks, tests, pre-packaged curriculum, and the like.

The survey also encouraged students to offer constructive feedback and comments on what they liked or disliked about the class and curriculum. Notable quotations directly from students include:

- “Projects are a great way to comprehend material because they not only ask you to fill in the blank, but to exploit that blank and give it a story.”
- “I preferred student-led activities because in reality, most of us have 2 years left of school, after which we make 99% of the decisions.”
- “I love the way the class was taught this semester. It taught us how to live the stories that we read. Also, we were able to learn things using our different way and point of view.”
- “I LOVED the projects idea! I agree most people are great test takers, but learn more with hands-on activities. Overall, the projects are fun and interesting!”

Implications for Teaching

Again, both classes included several students deemed “high risk.” Many were already credit-deficient by the start of their sophomore year. Some could barely read, much less speak English. There were those with extensive disciplinary records. What could have been a labor-intensive disaster turned out to be a tremendous success. Why?

Individualized Instruction:

Standards and benchmarks served merely as the curricular framework. Planning of instruction was based on an ongoing assessment of student backgrounds, interests, strengths, and needs (individual and whole group profiles). Every lesson was therefore designed to “fit” the students. No student was forced to fit the lesson. Achievement targets were designated for every student, always one notch above his or her current level of performance. This approach required us to be flexible, as we were constantly making adjustments based on student development.

For instance, our students had an extraordinary range of reading levels. Our focus on content literacy allowed each student to identify and understand key concepts (i.e., separating “need to know” from “nice to know”). As a result, one did not need to master reading in order to comprehend content and achieve at a high degree.

Sustained Engagement:

Engaging students and keeping them engaged is no simple feat, especially with large and diverse classes. Knowing the students and adjusting instruction to them worked very well for the teacher team.

Engagement efforts were carefully planned. Each unit of instruction included something every student could personally connect with (e.g., culture, language, values and beliefs, present living situation). Most important, the teacher team wanted students to realize they have something of value to contribute.

Of course, not everything in the curriculum attracts all students all of the time. The teacher team realized that some students will not feel entirely connected with all of our lessons. By generating enthusiasm for an activity, the teacher team was able to raise student curiosity and interest. Enthusiasm is contagious. Teachers cannot expect students to be engaged in a lesson if they themselves are not engaged.

In addition, instruction was designed to be reasonably challenging in order for students to experience genuine success and thus gain a true sense of accomplishment. As the learning activities became increasingly complex, all students were assured of the teacher team's belief in their ability to achieve. The main purpose of having students track their progress was for each to realize their strengths and assume greater ownership of the learning process. This worked, as students continuously set higher achievement goals for themselves and even for the whole class.

Supportive Learning Environment:

The learning process is personal and social. Students thrive in environments where they feel accepted, nurtured, and safe. Relationships are far more important than standards and packaged programs.

The teacher team was committed to creating a classroom culture that was highly respectful of every individual, a welcoming place where all knew it was safe to express themselves and be who they really are.

For instance, a number of students had a long history of truancy and many were credit-deficient. The teacher team made certain everyone was given a new slate. Even if someone was having an off-day in class, the teacher team assured him or her that tomorrow will be a fresh start. By not focusing on past issues, students were better able to move forward.

This did not mean a free-for-all, however. Parameters, expectations and consequences for stepping over the line were clear, reasonable and fair.

Strong Sense of Community:

Despite living in the same area and attending the same school, students have different interests, abilities and family backgrounds. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher team noticed they tended to socialize and work with peers "more like them." If allowed to continue, social skills development would likely be restricted (i.e., peer interaction, communication, and collaboration). Ultimately, this would severely limit learning opportunities. The teacher team wanted students to identify with the class and thus achieve a greater understanding of the relationship between self and others.

To prevent students from congregating into separate groups, seating assignments were carefully planned. Students were also placed in a multitude of situations where they met, worked with, and depended on others outside their clique. Furthermore, each group activity was purposefully designed to make certain every student was given equal

responsibility. As this evolved into class culture, the teacher team was better able to move from planned grouping to random partnerships.

The teacher team also continuously modeled caring and respect for one another. For instance, some of students lived in extreme poverty. No one was punished for not bringing the basic “school tools” to class. Instead, the teacher team had plenty of pens, pencils and notebook paper on hand. Nutritious snacks were also available for anyone who was hungry. Students were never expected a student to say “thanks,” but they always did. The teacher team treated every student with respect, and this example carried over from peer-to-peer.

Similarly, the teacher team focused on the strengths of students who happened to have a disability. Students of color and those learning English were encouraged to share their perspectives and insight. The learning experiences of high-ability students were enriched. As a result, both classes evolved into accepting, nurturing and supportive communities.

Positive Teacher-Student Interaction:

In addition to fostering positive interaction among peers, the teacher team developed an appropriate and effective relationship with every student. Especially in highly diverse classrooms, students will check to see if all are treated equally or if some are being favored over others. In fact, students will often test this!

Trust and respect have to be earned. To accomplish this, provide support whenever it is needed and remain positive even while your buttons are being pushed. Also, clarify your role as the teacher and stick with that. Do not venture into the grey area between teacher and friend, as it becomes too complex and confusing for students. When just one student perceives you as a friend, this can cause problems within the group. You care about each student, but cannot be a pal.

Effective Staffing:

Large, diverse classrooms require more than one instructor. In team-taught classrooms, teachers must function as equal peers. Since the class belongs to the students, there is no need for adults to compete for title or control. Together, you are the collective resource students need the most. Model a highly collaborative environment, and work together to create a culture of positive relationships.

Conclusion

A system of legislated learning is similar to a factory production. It is calibrated, standardized, data driven, and includes quality control mechanisms. Product outcomes determine an employee’s merit and drive marketplace competition despite the fact that public education has always been a non-profit enterprise.

As a result, curriculum and instructional practices are influenced more by standards developed outside the classroom than by the students in that room. A sustained effort to

meet the required standards moves instruction along a relatively flat plane, toward the standard middle. This may be a reason why standard scores of student achievement, nationally, appear to have remained relatively flat.

At the policy level, academic rigor is viewed as means by which students are to attain improved student achievement outcomes. However, education experts often disagree on the definitions of rigor and achievement (Center for Public Education, 2012).

A focus on standardized achievement data risks losing sight of the individual student. Such data does not take into account the wide variety of personal factors which influence student development (e.g., interests, aspirations, strengths, language, culture, life at home). Furthermore, standards-based achievement measures do not assess such important skills as critical thinking (Steinburg, 2010). This type of data therefore lacks utilitarian value for teaching and diversifying instruction.

According to Valenzuela (1999), subtractive schooling occurs when the dominant culture views the culture of other students as deficits to be overcome, rather than assets to build on. In addition to underestimating ability, this view can diminish a student's sense of culture and thus his or her social capital.

An assets-based approach to learning focuses on the strengths every student already possesses (Glickman, et al., 2014). From this study, the authors found the following “4-Rs” as essential to ensuring every student is provided a meaningful education:

- **Relationships** (encourage, foster, support and reward learning);
- **Relevance** (what each student finds personally relevant);
- **Rigor** (challenging and achievable on an individual basis; next reachable notch);
- **Resources** (what education leaders must provide teachers and their students).

Academic standards served as the curricular framework, and instruction was highly individualized. The teacher team focused less on student proficiency with the standards, and more on formative development. Student achievement significantly increased as a result.

For students to develop at their highest possible level, they should not be expected to conform to us or to the curriculum. Instead, WE must adjust to our students. If not allowed to develop at his or her own rate, nor assume ownership of the learning process, students are at risk of not realizing their full potential. This can easily cause learning gaps, frustration, and eventual shut-down behavior.

Student achievement is much more than a prescribed label. Achievement is personal, and its measure must take into account an individual's progressive steps (e.g., academic, social, behavioral). The true meaning of learning is not where one ends, but rather the journey he or she has taken to achieve each milestone. When students realize this, and experience genuine success, they will be inspired to assume greater ownership of their education.

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