

An Interview with Solomon Abebe: Diversity in Education – Second Edition

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Abstract— Solomon Abebe was born and raised in Ethiopia, and Solomon later came to the United States to study. He earned his degrees from Hesston College, Goshen College, Eastern New Mexico University and New Mexico State University. After several years of teaching and administrative experience in K-12 and higher education, he is currently a professor of education at Taylor University where he teaches Foundations of American Education and supervises Student teachers. In this interview, he discusses the second edition of his edited book on Diversity in Education and responds to questions about the topic.

Index Terms—About four key words or phrases in alphabetical order, separated by commas.

1. How was the first edition received? What changes have you integrated...

How well a book is received perhaps is judged by (if one cares) how many copies of the book the publisher has sold. Other than inquiring that all authors receive their personal copy, I did not inquire how the book was doing the last three years since publication. My class certainly enjoyed reading and discussing the issues raised in the book. I certainly know that the book is not one of the best sellers. We have included clarifying context in some, added ideas in some chapters, and adjusted new sources as well as including new chapters. New to this edition are: Assessment for learning; School Law; and a chapter on the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

2. Who edited the religion chapter, what is the summary?

Dr. Tammy Mahon revised the Faith/religion chapter. As we all remember, when the colonists arrived in this country early 1600, it was assumed that they simply established schools like those they had known in Europe. Colonial elementary schools then were primarily religious. These schools were meager by today's standards, but they were important forerunners of our contemporary schools. Much has changed since.

Three suggestions to take from this chapter are:

How children are raised, fed, clothed, engage in family relationships and religious traditions and practices are influenced by these experiences. This in turn contributes to shaping who children become including their beliefs, values, and behaviors (Gonzalez-Mena & Pulido-Tobiassen, 1999).

a. Teachers who do not perceive the value in understanding each student's background are not teaching to the whole child. Home backgrounds and experiences have an impact on the learning process. Much of the current neurobiological research is indicating that young children's brain development is influenced by several factors including environment. This means that home life will be a contributing factor in children's development in areas such as culture, values, social as well as faith and religion. As children grow up within the home, the families' faith and religious beliefs shape how the world is viewed. Teachers who understand this aspect of development will design learning experiences around content that will foster respect and expand knowledge and skills for greater depth and breadth in content areas' subject matter.

b. Today's classrooms are a mirror of their communities. As our communities become more diverse so do the classrooms. Due to the mobile nature of our society and due to technological advances communities are becoming more and more a part of the global society. In the past, it was common to consider only very large cities as diverse and part of the global society especially in the area of business. But due to technology advancements in communication and business, even small rural communities are becoming diverse and a part of the global society. Teachers are expected to prepare students for the future as citizens and for various career fields. Part of the process of preparation for the future would mean expanding students' worldviews in order to develop respect for others including the area of faith and religion...as many religions might be represented in the classroom.

Greater understanding of others' worldviews offers diverse individuals greater ability to work together for common causes in the world. Teachers can prepare lessons and experiences to help students respect not only their own worldviews, but others' too, so that they are ready to engage in a global life.

c. Students need knowledge, skills and attitudes that will allow them to think critically in order to be effective within a global society. This means teachers need to approach teaching about religion

differently in the classroom. They can provide learning opportunities about various world cultures with how religion and beliefs have an interrelatedness with daily life and history. Providing students with opportunities to study about religions and other cultures' beliefs provides a more complete understanding of differences and how they influence thinking and daily life activities. It also provides students with a greater understanding of historical events and current world leaders' decisions and actions. It has the ability to be a way to remove barriers to learning how to live in our current and future global society.

3. In terms of the impact of the family unit- Which author has written on this topic and what are their main points?

Drs. Angelov and Bradely-Levine revised the chapter. The authors assert that working with families can be one of the most challenging aspects of being a teacher. With this in mind, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and diversity of family structures, as well as a real world example of best practice when working with families across language and cultural differences.

- a. Partnering with families is often one of the most challenging efforts schools face in providing a high-quality education for all children. Educators' obligations toward children exist no matter what language they and their parents speak, how much money their families earn, or what abilities the children may have. While a number of issues could be addressed relative to the varied political, social, and economic elements of relationship between schools and families, this chapter focuses on describing the diversity of family groups from different perspectives. Environmental issues like the families' own schooling experiences, general academic achievement, wealth and language often produce psychological and social barriers to partnering. Yet this diversity of families provides opportunities for educators to become more inclusive and supportive within the schooling community. American families are characterized by great diversity today.
- b. Researchers have found it challenging to isolate a single variable or behavior that leads to a student's academic success or failure (Henderson, et. al., 2007). However, the general correlation between family engagement and student success is well documented (Henderson, 2007). There are no easy answers for educators wishing to partner with families. Educators must be willing to engage with families in a variety of ways. For example, families have ethnic and cultural connections between and among members. A child develops interpersonal skills based on cultural norms within a family group, and through daily interactions that are modeled and exhibited to that child. These patterns of interaction and communication vary. Children acculturate to the

values and practices of their particular family based on 1) daily interactions and communication and 2) their sense of connection to their family (Henderson, 2007).

- c. Thus, as the definition of families has become more diversified, educators' perspectives must change. The assumptions upon which schools have rested engagement with families are inadequate today, especially if they emanate from personal values and beliefs with an uncritical eye. The experience of families negotiating the educational system is often challenging. Understanding their experiences allows educators, researchers, and policy makers to envision how decisions that directly impact the educational experience of students and their communities are made. Religion, race, immigration, poverty, unfamiliarity with the educational system, and linguistic differences are also strong cultural influences in the way families respond to and interact with educators.

4.... What do Children from Diverse Cultures Bring to Learning and Teaching". Who wrote this chapter and what were their main points?

Dr. Hailemariam revised the chapter on Culture and addressed the question, "What do diverse learners bring to school?"

This chapter discusses the attributes and experiences children from diverse cultures bring to public education initially designed for the majority, monoculture, and is not yet ready to accommodate their culture-based needs. Urgent discussion on this topic is critical in light of demographic changes in the U.S. population.

The main purpose of this chapter was to highlight the foundational skills culturally diverse children bring to the public school, the potential conflict between their culture and the school culture, and opportunities for learning and teaching. Culturally diverse students bring rich experiences that can enhance learning for all. However, there are challenges for culturally diverse children, their parents, and the school system. Some of these challenges emanate from cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications. Until recently, schools did not start paying attention to English language learners, and some view these children as having deficits that need to be remedied. As a result, children of color are disproportionately represented in special education programs (Rosenberg, Westling, McLeskey, 2008). This chapter will hopefully contribute to better understanding of culturally diverse children, i.e., they bring a wealth of experiences and cultures that schools should build on. In summary, the following is a brief discussion of what culturally diverse children bring to the learning and teaching environment:

- a. *They bring unique and rich cultures*, not right or wrong or inferior or superior, that should be embraced and respected among the many cultures that make up the United States. The games they play, the food they eat, the

cloth they wear should be a source of intrigue and conversations for expanding the horizon and worldview of children, particularly in the age of globalization and instant communication. Those from the nonwestern cultures bring a collectivistic worldview; they appreciate interdependence and value communal effort and success. On the other hand, some may have completed the acculturation process and have been beat by the system. In such cases, they bring their tired attitudes (if you do not care, I don't care).

b. *They bring unique and rich languages.* They may be bilingual or English learners. They know they have the cognitive flexibility and agility to learn multiple languages, because they have already mastered one, and they can generalize the skills to the second language. We understand that first and second languages share most of the same linguistic systems. They should be encouraged to develop both the first and second languages. But they can also be tentative, because they have to navigate through two cultures; they may not yet be self-assured in the dominant culture.

Further, they come to school at different stages of their cultural and language acculturation. They may be quite new to the country and to the dominant culture. One of the first institutions school age children face within a few days of arrival in the U.S. is the local school. And, some may have very different written systems and sounds. Thus, they require individualized and meaningful educational support.

c. *They bring unique and sensitive communication style.* Some may not be as direct as the dominant culture, because they value indirect communication. Most bring high regard for adults, teachers, and authority figures and they may not feel comfortable engaging in direct conversations with them.

d. *They also bring their beloved parents.* Culturally diverse parents have the same aspirations for their children as parents from the dominant culture. They want them to be successful and contributing citizens. And, they do what they can to support their children, including invoking a higher power. However, the U.S. school system is new to most of them. They see educators as expert professionals who educate their children. So, they may not see how they can contribute to the educational process. Language is a barrier as well for some.

Over 30 years ago Ruiz (1984) said that culturally diverse children possess a worldview and a wealth of experiences that is waiting to be tapped. This statement is still true today!

5. Have there been any changes in state and national policy regards the education of diverse student populations? Who has written on this?

Dr. Brown revised the chapter on the impact of state/national policy on diverse learns. In recent history, there has not been a sobering and critical report in education since the "Nation at Risk." Ever since, nationally and state-wide reforms have taken greater strides to improving education. Twenty-first century students pursue schooling in an era of educational reform. Education during this time can be exciting and

focused on ever-higher levels of achievement. However, this reform era is also a time of high anxiety testing and externally determined curriculum and methods that often lead to frustration for both teachers and students. This reform exists at the state and national levels, including the determination of required curriculum and mandated progress exams, often with decisions about the future of schools and individual careers based on test results. Evaluating the impact of these reforms on diverse learners will be shown to be problematic, as will other policies and policy debates at the state and national level.

a. Students are affected by policies and statements from state and national leaders in addition to official education policies.

Policies on child welfare and the status of immigrants are specific areas where government policy affects student welfare, ability to fully participate in school activities, or even to give honest answers to school personnel concerning their families. Public statements by public officials about immigrants, minority citizens, poverty, and/or the LGBT community may also cause students to feel unaccepted. Students without proper health and nutrition will not be able to compete fairly with their peers. Students made to feel like outsiders will not have the same attachment to school and in the most severe cases may not feel safe to attend. As a group, they will not achieve at the same levels as students who are cared for, included and made to feel safe and welcome at school.

b. Educational policies at both the state and national levels requiring all students to reach the same benchmarks at the same age on high stakes tests also limit schools' ability to meet diverse needs.

While school systems and college programs have worked hard to find and utilize tools which allow students of varying backgrounds and abilities to approach material in diverse ways, the bottom line is that all student achievement is then measured based on scores on the same exam.

When the school's existence and the teacher's pay and career are attached to these scores, increased pressure is placed on both teachers and students to prepare to score well -- instead of designing and implementing curriculum and evaluation based on the specific needs of diverse students. Subject matter is increasingly limited to only practice that will lead to acceptable scores. In Indiana, the tests themselves have multiplied in length and frequency and eliminating more and more instructional time from the school year and costing of millions of tax dollars.

c. Everything is in flux.

Parents have begun to fight back through movements such as Opt Out. Support for one national set of Common Core standards and exams has declined among both the public and political leaders. Perhaps most importantly, the 2016 elections are underway. There is a clear distinction between

the parties this year. With one side calling for celebration of diversity, inclusion and opportunities for all, and the other for deporting undocumented individuals and isolationism, the election itself may serve as a referendum on the will of US voters. The new US education law (ESSA) supports a return to state control, making elections for Governor and State Superintendent of importance for what may happen in each state. However; the law still includes federal approval of state plans so that the views of those elected to Congress and the White House may well continue to take precedence.

Dr. Brown advocates for returning as much control as possible as close to the classroom as possible. Teachers are the best experts on curriculum and assessment for their own students. Local citizens, businesses, and universities are in the best position to evaluate the preparation of local graduates. Local voters have the power to change school boards and select new leadership providing accountability for the quality of their schools.

6. We seem to be in a standardized, test driven, data driven culture. We seem to be focused on assessment in an increasingly diverse population. Your thoughts?

The first edition emphasized evaluation of learns and the teaching process. In this edition, Dr. Wynn discusses the value of assessment for instruction and highlighted three basic ideas, among many others, as take away for readers.

a. Cultural Take-Away:

Assessment practices in P-16 schools cannot remain static in an ever-changing global connectedness. The mingling and blending of multiple ethnic backgrounds require schools that maintain the purpose of assessment but not necessarily its traditional practices. Schools must interject more project-based assessments into academic lessons so that problem-solving and other critical thinking skills can be demonstrated without a heavy reliance on the English language and/or American customs. Cultural responsiveness is essential when educators implement assessment strategies.

b. Political Take-Away:

Political influences on assessment practices are very evident in today’s educational climate. Depending on scores from a variety of standardized tests, district and individual schools must plan their annual budgets. Incentivized rewards are made available to these schools by federal and state legislative bodies in the form of block grants and assistive monies to help provide for the extra expenses incurred when working with diverse groups of students, such as those in economically distressed areas or those with language barriers. Students with exceptional needs, such as disabilities or giftedness, also require above average expenditures by school districts. Political influences on diverse assessments are becoming ever more common and complex.

c. Professional Take-Away:

Although state legislatures and school boards often dictate student academic standards to school districts, it is the

classroom teacher who must implement lesson plans that increase the likelihood that every student will master those standards. These teachers, who themselves are monitored and evaluated by professional teaching standards of licensing, must discover and use dozens of formal, informal, and performance-based assessments to reach their increasingly diverse student body. Lessons are adjusted based on student learning data, leading to the now common practice of data-driven decision making.

7. “En loco parentis” seems increasingly important. Who has tackled this issue vis a vis diversity and can you summarize?

Dr. Charles Waggoner took on the challenge to put together ideas on perspectives on school law that make sense and is understandable to the lay person.

The concept of *in loco parentis* is a legal doctrine that has at least two fundamental components that are relevant to the school teachers and administrators and serves as a lens through which much of school law flows. *In loco parentis* means in place of the parent. *In loco parentis* serves as the ultimate legal equalizer for the treatment of all children. All children in our schools, be they rich or poor, black or white should be offered the same educational opportunities and considerations, as “if” these children were your very own. As with most issues of law and this includes school law in spades, the answer to your question depends on several factors, unless it is something so cut and dried such as duct taping a special education student to his desk. That has been litigated and ‘everyone’ knows that it will get the administrator/teacher in deep difficulty. So, to explain it better, here are scenarios in Q & A format that would amplify *in loco parentis* as you stated it in your question:

Question 1 - Does *in loco parentis* involve cultural or ethnic or behavior patterns of student and their parents? Does the school official need to consider what the parents would do according to their cultural or religious views in dealing with a student problem? If so, how would the school go about this?

As an example, a school district is required to allow a child and/or teacher to take some time off to celebrate a religious occasion that may not be the prevalent belief of the community. The time may be a day or a particular time during the day. Some accommodations need to be made by the school district. Dietary considerations would be another example.

Question 2 - Is the school liable for incidents that occur away from the school campus? Do school personnel serve *in loco parentis* in incidents such as these?

This is a very difficult question to answer definitively. State courts have rendered various opinions. Some schools do not allow their staff to go off campus to break up a fight across the road from the school, for example. Other districts direct personnel to intervene. Courts have ruled that if school personnel know of a specific difficulty occurring blocks from campus that intervention should occur. (An example might be that students report



being harassed by gangs several blocks from campus.) Bus stops provide another area where issues may occur. Whether or not the district standing *in loco parentis* has authority at the bus stops depends. If students are on an official school event there is little question that the district has responsibility. (An example here would be that the volleyball team trashes a fast food place after the game.)

Question 3- Is the idea of *in loco parentis* included in official school policy and in student / teacher handbooks?

In loco parentis should be a policy in school district policy manuals and referenced in staff and student handbooks. Whether it is or not depends on the school district.

Question 4 - News about and court cases involving transgendered bathrooms and locker rooms are happening seemingly almost every week. How does the legal concept of *in loco parentis* fit into this issue?

Transgendered restrooms and locker rooms are dependent upon the laws of individual states that have enacted specific legislation. Many state boards of education have issued opinion papers concerning the issue. Teachers and administrators will need to be watchful of this topic as it develops over time.

8. What impact does CAEP have (if any) on teachers and education? Who are the scholars who have written on this topic?

Drs. Carinci and Jacobson, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) contributed to the chapter. This process is relatively new. Only a handful colleges and universities have adapted CAEP process. They are the authority in developing the standards and are instrumental in articulating the process.

Beginning in 2013, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) became the single, specialized accreditor of educator preparation in the United States and adopted a new set of demanding standards to raise the bar in educator preparation.

As the new single specialized accreditor for educator preparation in the United States, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) prioritizes that a diverse pool of educators is prepared to work effectively in raising the achievement of all learners. CAEP's emergence comes at a pivotal time for education due to the convergence of raised academic standards and significant efforts to improve the effectiveness of instruction for an increasingly diverse population of students. The general public is insisting that educator preparation providers (EPPs) rise to the challenge by responding to the changing needs of the education workforce.

This means new teachers should arrive "classroom-ready." The CAEP Standards, which serve as the basis for accreditation review, were influenced by the stark conclusion of National Research Council (2010) which found: "A primary obstacle to investigating . . . many . . . important

aspects of teacher preparation is the lack of systematic data collection, at both the national and state levels." Likewise, Crowe (2007) found there is a problem with the "availability and quality of data about nearly everything having to do with teacher preparation" (p. 2). Evidence-based accreditation can be used as a lever to address these challenges. Specifically, the chapter details the attention to diversity in the CAEP Standards and ultimately uses the accreditation context and available research to make the case for why those who prepare educators need to attend to diversity in the preparation of future teachers. **The 5 standards were created in the following context: As such, a new context for higher education and educator preparation form the backdrop for CAEP's work:**

- Providers, especially colleges and universities, like America's public schools, have been under increasing pressure to become more accountable for their completers' effectiveness, given the considerable amount of public and private investments, financial aid, and tax exemptions that support higher education.
- Programs that prepare people for specific professions also face expectations that they will be more accountable, a condition that applies to teacher preparation as well.

9 Lastly, who is the publisher and how can teachers and principals and others get a copy?

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