

Preface

It *Even Happens in “Good” Schools: Responding to Cultural Diversity in Today’s Classrooms* is an important book that I have been trying to write for many years. The “it” in this title is a pregnant construct that specifically refers to the inadequate identification, assessment, categorization, and placement that are ingredients of poor teaching. Globally, the “it” may refer to subtle and obvious discrimination, bigotry, or xenophobia. In consonance with the book’s theme, the adjective *good* qualifies any of our nation’s schools. In spite of our pride and prejudice, all schools have some goodness or potential goodness in them. The goal is to make every one of them good using all available resources.

As I look back at the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case and our latest drive toward full inclusion in schools, I am left to wonder if our rhetoric matches our action. I am forced to ask, “Is this an old wine in a new bottle or a new wine in an old bottle?” Educators are faced with either blindly maintaining the traditional culture of the teaching profession or iconoclastically destroying the foundations of the teaching profession. These two extremes are wrong. I am reminded of the African fable of “two knives,” in which the sharp knife does not have a handle, and the knife with a handle is not sharp. From my perspective, we need to be progressive traditionalists who believe in maintaining the traditional culture of the profession, yet believe in making it progressive and modern. So, it makes sense that we strive to have a sharp knife with a solid handle!

Our debates on good teaching have been a little retrogressive and disingenuous. I believe we do not need teachers just because they are White or Black, or because they made high scores in standardized tests. We need good teachers who are progressive thinkers—such teachers believe in “quality with a heart.” In my conversations with scholars, educators, college students, high school students, middle school students, and elementary school students, it seems to me that we all agree on what good teachers do. We all also agree on what good schools mean. As a result, I become very surprised and disappointed when goodness in schools is politicized by even those whom we think will understand. No child likes a school with mean, insensitive, and inconsiderate teachers! Not long ago, I asked my children why they liked a particular school over another, and they collectively noted that in the good school, people smile, teachers care, and the principal greets students. This statement demonstrates what Dr. Thomas Lovitt (1977) wrote in his book *In Spite of My Resistance. . . I’ve Learned From Children*. How many teachers talk with or listen to their students? And how many parents talk with or listen to their children? The “good” school phenomenon has become puritanical. We act as if we are divorced from our children and youth. It actually reminds me of someone taking a gun and shooting himself or herself in the foot. To a large measure, truly good teachers are not afraid of doing the right things (e.g., assessing and teaching appropriately). It’s almost a taboo to have fun while teaching—*funness* is today misconstrued as *weakness*. In fact, any difference is viewed as a deficit. How can the teaching-learning process respond to the unique needs of students who act, talk, learn, and look differently when any difference is viewed as a deficit?

We are now in the 21st century, a century that is witnessing tremendous shifts in paradigms and powers, especially in the education of our children and youth. In more ways than one, education has been called on to improve individual and collective growth. This call for improvement has rightly or wrongly led to the rat race for school reforms, some of which have been focused on accountability. Although the call for

accountability has yielded slight gains in standardized norm-referenced test scores, it is doubtful that it has produced well-balanced growth in individual students. We have prescribed and used narrow, unidimensional perspectives to educate diverse students who are culturally, racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically different. We have also defined good schools from perfectionist perspectives—there are feelings that “good” schools are located in “good” neighborhoods or in rich communities that mirror cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic homogeneity. From my perspective, these views are not only wrong but also phony because they fail to deal with demographic and societal changes and realities.

This book responds to the critical question “What is a good school?” I believe a good school is a learning community that maximizes the potential of *all* its students, whether they are Anglo Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, or Native Americans. A school cannot be a good school when some of its students are misidentified, misassessed, mislabeled, miscategorized, misplaced, and misinstructed. I argue that a good school is a school with good teachers who have the courage to teach with real pedagogical power. We cannot and should not define good schools only from the perspective of their students’ high test scores. A good school should holistically educate the total child—academically, socially, emotionally, culturally, and globally. We want to produce critical thinkers, divergent thinkers, and problem solvers in our good schools. We cannot afford to have culturally myopic, narrow-minded teachers who cannot build on the strengths and energies that students bring to the classroom.

In this book, I thoroughly discuss the good school phenomenon using pertinent cases that expose real experiences of real people. My experiences have been helpful in documenting these cases. I believe that in every personal experience there are multiple educational lessons, and we must learn from them! Good teachers are good students who consistently broaden their horizons—these teachers know who they are, learn the facts when they are in doubt, change their thinking, use resource persons, build self-concepts, teach with divergent

techniques, make the right choices, and continue to learn. This book goes beyond tradition and introduces readers to basic ingredients of good schools where good teachers teach with enthusiasm.

As it appears, this book is thematically divided to address educational phases. Although these phases may appear independent, they are mutually inclusive. Good teachers have the power to shift their paradigms as they decipher visible inconsistencies and errors in these phases—most important, they have the power to do something about them. As students interact with peers, as students interact with teachers, and as teachers interact with parents, collaboration, consultation, and cooperation must transcend all relationships. We must believe that “it takes a responsible village to raise a responsible child.” The self, family, school, community, and government must work together to educate students for life. The whole village must be at work as students are appropriately identified, assessed, labeled, included, and instructed. As a consequence, throughout this book I advocate a “no-one-size-fits-all” technique. I believe that all good techniques must respond to intraindividual and interindividual differences in students!

In this book, many innovative ideas are espoused. They mean a lot to me! I want them to mean a lot to all readers (teachers, parents, administrators, professors, graduate and undergraduate students, researchers, consultants, community leaders, and experts). Although I do not believe this book is a panacea for all our school problems, I believe it offers unlimited multidimensional strategies for tackling these problems.

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