S.W.A.G. Creates Equity in Education

By Sheri Cole

I grew up in a single parent home. I was the oldest of three kids and my mom was a school teacher. Growing up, my siblings and I were involved in several sports: ballet, gymnastics, basketball, baseball, soccer, football, cheer, karate, etc. Our mom made sure we had a chance to explore every opportunity we wanted. In school, I was an "A" student and I enjoyed learning. My childhood was great. However, my family was poor; I knew that as a kid, but I *understand* it now.

Reflecting back onto my school experiences, I remember the feeling I got whenever a project was announced or expenses for sports arose. I always had a moment of "*how do I tell mom.*" I knew she would make it happen, but I also knew she would have "that look" in her eye; the look of "*how are we going to do this, I've got this, ok- let's go.*"

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Fast forward to my teaching life. I was sitting in a meeting about science fair projects as part of a committee that was tasked with approving student project ideas to be completed for the fair. Some students had great projects backed by unbelievable resources (access to college labs, NASA, engineers, etc). Other students did not have the same resources; they came from a home similar to mine. There is one student project that I remember clear as day. This particular project had a well written proposal and it required the student to collect water samples. In order to make the project even better, the head of the science committee wanted the student to collect water from several different bodies of water around the greater Houston area. I was tasked with telling the student that her project would not be approved without these samples. The look on the student's face was one I will never forget. I recognized that look; it was my mom's look, except this young girl was only twelve years old. At twelve, she understood, didn't just know, but *understood* that she was poor. Her family could not afford the gas to go to multiple locations; they had to buy groceries. Furthermore, her parents worked multiple jobs and did not have the time to go to multiple locations, otherwise they would miss work which would mean less income. It wasn't that this student did not want to improve her project, she couldn't afford to do so. I immediately went back to the committee and told them that she would not be collecting samples from multiple choices. The head of the committee was upset that this student would not get samples from several different water sources, after all "all she has to do is go to different places". This was the first of many comments that opened my eyes. It is not enough to provide each student with equal opportunity; we have to provide each student with the tools that they need to be successful students.

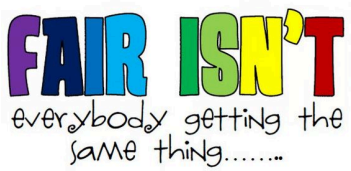
"What if in our quest for ensuring equality we are losing sight of ensuring equity"

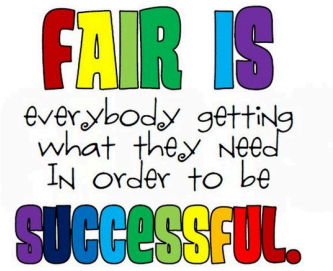
As educators, we want our students to succeed. We want our students to become productive citizens of their communities and world. But, what if *we* are the ones that are causing our students to have "the look"? What if we, through our actions and words, are inadvertently causing fear and anxiety to manifest within our students? What if in our quest of ensuring equality (that all students are treated the same) we are losing sight of ensuring equity (that all students are given the treatment they need to succeed). We don't mean to do this; we want to help our students. We want our students to excel, be

the best of the best, just like my colleague did when she tried to improve upon a young scientist's science fair project.

It is time that we step out of our comfort zone.

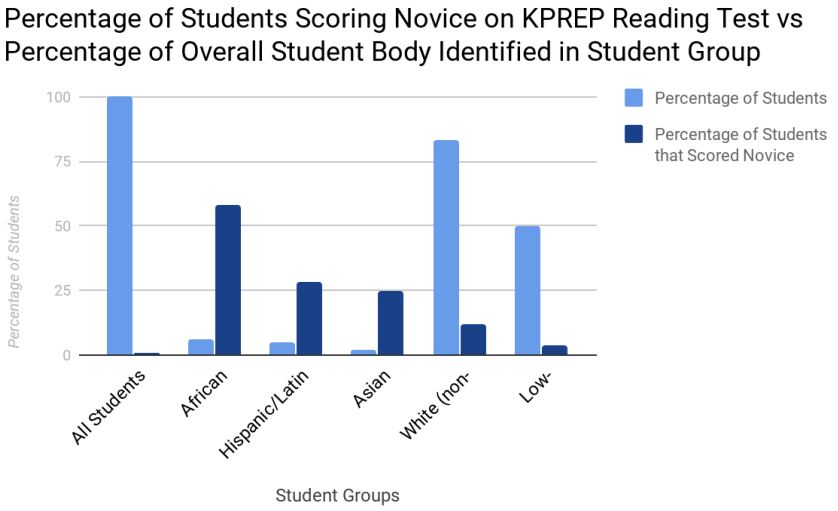
If our goal is to release productive students into the world then it is imperative that we ensure that we are doing everything we can to help each and every student become the best version of themselves. We must ensure equity among our students. In order to do this, we need to understand the challenges that our students are facing, challenges that we might not know, understand, or even think of because they are different than the challenges we have faced. We must educate ourselves beyond our content in order to understand the challenges that different groups face that impact their learning so that we can provide different treatments based upon their needs.





What can we do to gain a better understanding of our students, especially those students that are different than us? The answer seems obvious. It is not research, book studies, etc. (although all are helpful in their own rights). We must go directly to the source- the students. Let's form student groups composed of students from each of the "gap groups" and empower our students by giving them a platform to voice their concerns, struggles, frustrations, and positives. Let's set our students up with mentors like them so that each student can make a connection and learn/see "how to" first hand. Let's have our students educate the teachers on what we can do to guarantee equity within our schools. Then we can take this information and look at the research and literature on how to best serve our students.

I used my experiences as a student in one of the identified education gap groups (low socioeconomic) to develop a plan for how to reach student groups that are not only performing lower than the "average" student, but that share experiences similar to mine. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, I presented my plan to my school administrators.



Source: Kentucky Department of Education http://applications.education.ky.gov/src/Assessment.aspx

When I first presented this idea of being intentional in providing education equity to my admin team, the gap-group that I first wanted to focus on was the low socioeconomic students since this was the group to which I belonged as a student and this group had the largest number of students; however, after further discussion with my administrators and a deeper look into the data, we decided that our first student-group needed to be the African-American population. While this student group contained a smaller number of individuals, the education gap for this population was the greatest percentage wise and this held true for all subject areas. Therefore, in December

2017, my administration team and I worked together to identify three African-American students from each grade-level that showed natural leadership skills and had a drive to make a positive change for the education of African American students. We discussed the goal of our group with each student and their parents, and, after a month of planning, we met as a group for the first time in January 2018. As a group, we developed a group name, S.W.A.G.: Students Working (to) Achieve Greatness. This is the African-American chapter.

I, along with another educator, met with the S.W.A.G. group each Wednesday of every week from January 2018 through May 2018. At first, I was apprehensive about meeting with this group of students. This was a student group to which I do not experience the same struggles, and I, for the most part, never will. However, I was still able to use my experiences in having to overcome the obstacles beyond my control that affected my learning environment. I shared my personal story with these students. I got real with them in the hopes that they would see that while our experiences were not the same, our ultimate goals were.



Throughout the semester, we had some tough, yet eye-opening conversations. The students shared their personal education experiences and together we developed the top three obstacles that affect the learning of most African American students. These three obstacles are often unknown, or ignored, to teachers that have not shared the same experiences.

Ultimately, these obstacles are playing a large role in expanding the inequities in education that the African-American students experience. Within identifying these obstacles, and a few others, my eyes were opened as an educator and I began to see and hear what my students were experiencing.

For example, while on hall duty, I noticed that there were two groups of students congregating in the halls between classes. Both groups had roughly the same number of students, both groups were blocking the flow of traffic, and both groups were being equally disruptive. The only difference between the two groups, one was made-up of all African American students, while the other was made-up of all Caucasian students.

A colleague came out of her room and specifically told the African-American students that they needed to get to class; she was not rude or hateful at all. However, she did not say anything to the Caucasian group of students, which didn't break to go to class until two minutes later. This is a small, minor example of the inequities that our African-American population experience on a daily basis.

To other groups, it may not be a huge deal, but for these students, being constantly singled out can interfere with their focus and learning in the next class; this is a struggle that other student-groups do not have to overcome.

By being made aware of these inequities that my students are experiencing, I have been better at identifying them and/or their effects on students, and I have been making a conscientious effort to provide these students with what they need in the moment in order to be successful. Some of these needs may include a few minutes

to talk to their trusted adult, a minute to go get a drink and clear their mind, a chance to share their thoughts without being interrupted, or extended time on assignments they were unable to finish.

In addition to identifying the obstacles that African-American students must overcome, we worked together to help these students develop their leadership skills. The original plan was to have outside African-American citizens come in and speak to our S.W.A.G. students about various leadership roles within the community; however, while we had extreme support from various groups within the community when we first developed the group, we struggled with getting speakers to actually come in and share/mentor our students. I am not sure if this was due to lack of interest, poor timing, or poor communication on our part. This is one area of the group plan that will be revamped over the summer.

In order for the students to have their voices heard, we had them split into two teams and develop a presentation over one of two topics that can lead to education inequities, “Diversity in Curriculum” and “Imposter Syndrome”. Students had to research their topics and provide specific examples how these topics affect their learning, and then they had to brainstorm possible solutions and/or plans in order to help close the equity gap for the African-American population. These students then presented their presentations to the entire administration team. The students are now part of the solution.

Overall, while there were some “hiccups” along the way, based on the student feedback, this first chapter of the S.W.A.G. group was successful. The next steps for this group is to continue meeting weekly next year in order for them to develop their leadership skills and to continue to have their voices heard. Furthermore, with the information gathered this year, this school will develop a team of core teachers that will undergo intense training in the form of book studies, research, online courses, etcetera in order to better understand the obstacles that our African American students encounter that affects their education.

In August of 2018, each trained teacher will receive a group of 5-10 African-American students. Every African-American student within our school will be assigned a mentor teacher. This teacher will meet with his/her mentees on a weekly basis to provide extra support as needed. We will then begin to collect quantitative data based on behavior, grades, and testing scores to help further educate ourselves on the needs of these students in order to ensure they have what they need in order to be successful.

In addition, the second chapter of S.W.A.G. will be created in the same manner as the African-American chapter. I will begin working with the student leaders of the Hispanic-Latino group of students in order to better understand their needs. In fact, I had several Hispanic/Latino students approach me this year asking when their group was going to start meeting because their friends from the African-American group had been discussing “how great” it was to finally have someone listening to them and following through with information. Furthermore, the entire S.W.A.G. group will meet once a month in order

SWAG

Student Feedback

"This group is important so that we can get to another level and get a quality education"
~8th Grade Student

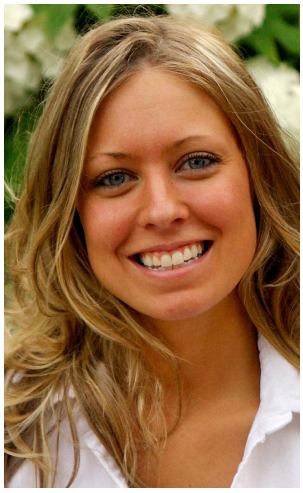
"I liked how I could express myself about going to a schoool with mostly white people in it" ~7th Grade Student

"This group also helps you learn how to be a leader and not be afraid no matter race or other factors." ~8th Grade Student

"Thank you for the things you did for me in this group. This group is amazing; it has changed my perspective on the world. I have learned a lot of things with this group including leadership skills and how to express my feelings in a different way." ~7th Grade Student

for the students of all chapters to have the chance have their voices heard by each other and to create a greater sense of unity within the school community.

In conclusion, while equality is important, equity is the key into ensuring student success. I had access to the same materials that every other student had while I was within school walls. These students have access to the same materials that every other student has while they are within school walls. However, it does us no good to ensure that all students have equal access to materials (technology, utensils, books, etc.), if we do not first understand that some students may need more access to different tools of education (including the most important tool, teachers) in order to be successful. Let's make a commitment today to let our students lead us into ensuring equity in education. While we may not be able to solve all of the obstacles in education, we can certainly be a brick in the path that leads to equity in education.



Sheri Cole, a 2014 Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching (PAEMST) finalist in the state of Texas, currently teaches at West Jessamine Middle School in Jessamine County Kentucky and has taught for nine years. Cole is highly involved in promoting student choice and student voice within the classroom and the school, as demonstrated by her involvement in creating several professional development courses ranging from pedagogy and student technology use to implementing student choice within the classroom. Most recently, Sheri has been involved in the 2017-2018 CTEPS group (Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions). She earned a bachelor's degree in secondary education from the University of Kentucky and a master's degree in education from Georgetown College.