

Inclusion and Differentiation:

How Freedom High School can Address Diversity

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Introduction

Diversification of population in our country and in our schools is continuously on the rise. As the population diversifies, this leads to greater challenges for teachers and schools to support a changing community as well as their student population. Students differ greatly in terms of their cultural background, language competence, academic readiness, learning styles, motivation, and interests (Pozas, Letzel, & Schneider, 2020). This is indeed the case in Freedom High School, which once had a white majority, but is now serving minority students. This change in demographics has led to an increase in the student population with greater needs, such as English learners. To address the challenges that come with increase in diversity, many schools have adopted tracking their students based on their skills and academic readiness. However, studies have shown that tracking students can limit student interaction, potential, and create inequitable learning environments. Instead, Freedom High School must adopt inclusion and differentiation to provide opportunities for success to all its students. Differentiation encourages inclusion, which provides students with opportunities to work with a diverse group of peers that can enhance their learning. Also, differentiation can enable teachers to appropriately support their students' specific learning needs to ensure successful learning for all students of various unique backgrounds (Pozas, Letzel, & Schneider, 2020).

Growing Diversity

Diversity of our community means diversification of our schools. According to Tefera, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno (2011), by 2050, minority groups in America will continuously grow, with the number of Latinos and Asians expected to triple. The authors also believe that by 2050, the number of students of color will increase somewhere between 44 to 62%. This change in demographics is apparent in Freedom High School, which serves students

in the cities of Oakley, Antioch, and Brentwood, California. Racial demographics of Oakley in 2000 reveal that White Americans made up the majority at 75.5%, with Latinos making up 25%, Black and African Americans at 3.4%, and Asians at 2.9% (Bay Area Census, n.d.). However, by 2019, White Americans hold a small majority at 56.7%, while minority groups continue to grow. Hispanic and Latinos population increased to 35.9%, Black and African Americans make up 9.8% and the Asian population at 6% (United States, n.d.). Consequently, Freedom High School, which once used to serve majority white students, has become extremely diverse. According to US News (n.d.), Freedom High serves 67% minority students, with Hispanics making up 45% of the population, Black and African American students at 11%, and Asian Americans at 8%. These rapid changes in student population has created challenges for the school.

Growing EL Population

Growing diversity is leading to growth in student populations that are in greater need, such as the English learners (EL). According to Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri (2003), the number of EL students have dramatically increased. According to their estimate, EL student population has increased 105%. This trend is evident in Freedom High School as well. In 2019-2020, there were 188 total of EL students. Out of that total 166 EL students spoke Spanish at home (Ed Data, n.d.). This increase in EL population mirrors both Freedom High's and the city of Oakley's population, the largest population in the school is Hispanic and Latino population. Unfortunately, EL Students often find themselves challenged in their academics.

EL students find challenges in academics for various reasons. Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri (2003) describes several reasons why EL students attend school less prepared and disadvantaged. Many EL students live-in households or neighborhoods that are of low

socioeconomic backgrounds. Consequently, families of EL students move frequently, causing instability in their lives and their learning. In addition, EL students, who do not have mastery of the language will be expected to study the same curriculum as non-EL students. Such circumstances can create obstacles that may be too daunting for many of the EL students to overcome on their own. Consequently, this has led to many schools including Freedom to utilize tracking EL and other low performing students in hopes of supporting their needs better. However, such a method has many pitfalls.

Issues of Tracking

Tracking may seem like a solution to address growing diversity and EL populations, but there have been some major criticisms towards this approach. Tracking refers to the practice of dividing up students based on their achievements or abilities (Betts, 2011). For example, EL and other students with special designation can be tracked in either different classrooms or sometimes even entirely different schools. Teachers who teach in tracked classes, will modify the rigor of the curriculum based on the student population they serve. However, this is not enough to support these diverse groups of students. For example, not all EL students are the same. Some have been in the U.S. longer, while some are brand new to the country. Some have been learning English for years, while some are new to it entirely. These different levels of abilities hence will require different needs for each individual student. Even though EL designated classes such as sheltered classes, may try to adjust their curriculum, one type of curriculum cannot cater to the various and unique needs of each student. According to Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri (2003), the older EL students with greater abilities stuck in EL tracked classes, will not be challenged enough and lose their potential for academic growth. In addition, children need social interactions from what Vygotsky called a more knowledgeable other, to help

them develop cognitively (Subban, 2006). Thus, when students are forced to be tracked with low performing students, they will lose out on the opportunity to interact with higher performing students, which could lead to a disservice in their academic and cognitive growth. In addition, putting students into low achieving groups can stigmatize young students to lower levels of tracks for the duration of their school experience (Tefera et al., 2011).

Need for Inclusion and Differentiation

Differentiated instructions is a solution to support diversity and equity for all students. Differentiated instruction can be defined as, “teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles” (Subban, 2006, p. 940). Differentiation requires teachers to learn about their students’ background, interests, readiness levels, language, strengths, and weaknesses. Using these references, teachers create individual and unique instructions that can cater to individual students in their class. By doing so, all students are given opportunities for success, academically challenged, and allowed to work with others that they can learn from (Subban, 2006). Referencing Carol Ann Tomlison, Santamaria & Thousand (2004) describes differentiation can allow teachers to: 1. Take students from where they are; 2. Engage students using different modalities of learning; 3. Allow students to compete with others, as well as themselves; 4. Provide opportunities for students to learn; and 5. allow them to be flexible in their instructions.

Unlike tracking, differentiation encourages students to be challenged and fosters their growth. Students will not see their unique backgrounds as a stigma. Instead, differentiated instruction can acknowledge and even empower their uniqueness, by giving them multiple opportunities where their strengths and interests would shine. If differentiation is done

appropriately, students will be provided with instructions and goals that are not too difficult nor too easy (Subban, 2006). Also, having EL and other special designated students working with other peers, fosters inclusion. Inclusion encourages students to work alongside more knowledgeable others, that can help them develop their critical thinking skills through collaboration and interaction. Research has shown that inclusion and collaboration has been extremely beneficial for minority students and low socioeconomic students who were in highly inclusive classrooms (Tefera et al., 2011). Research has also shown that test scores of special education students, who were given differentiated instructions did far better than those who were taught in traditional methods (Subban, 2006). Regardless of a student's background, if they are given the opportunity to work with others that are in different academic readiness, as well as challenged appropriately to their current levels, there will be greater chances for academic growth and learning.

Conclusion

The growing diversification of the student population in Freedom high school is happening all around the nation in both urban and suburban schools. With the growth of diversity, Freedom as well as countless other schools must face ever growing challenges of supporting students with various levels of academic readiness, disadvantages created by those who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and various levels of language comprehension. However, Freedom must not make the mistake of tracking students. Tracking students deprives students of opportunities to challenge themselves, creating limits and stigmas for students' potential for their academic growth. Instead, Freedom must turn to utilizing differentiated instructions. Because differentiation promotes inclusion, allowing students to work with peers that they can learn from. In addition, instruction that caters to students' learning

needs, which will provide students with greater opportunities for them to be challenged at their current academic levels.

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