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Improving Academic Achievement, But at What Cost? 

The Demands of Diversity and Equity at Birch Middle School

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This case focuses on an urban middle school that has recently seen much improvement in the academic performance of its students and its reputation within the community. These positive changes, however, have come about largely because of what might be perceived as a narrow focus on standardized curricula, pedagogy, and assessment techniques. Readers are asked to consider the relative costs and benefits of this focus; the implications of change for faculty, administrators, students, and the larger community; and what it really means to lead with a goal of social justice or equity in mind given the nuances presented in this case—nuances that are shared by many urban schools across the nation.

Keywords: equity; achievement gaps; urban education

Case Narrative

The Sociocultural Context

The school district in which this case is situated is a midsized urban district that serves approximately 25,000 students—39% of whom were designated as “limited English proficient” (LEP), 51% of whom were students of color, and 60% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. This diversity, however, is a fairly recent phenomenon that has occurred over the past three decades. As in most diverse school districts, teachers, administrators, and those with decision-making power are still largely White, middle and upper-middle class, native English speakers, and of a particularly conservative and tight-knit religious group. Throughout the state and in this particular school district, regardless of the measurement used, an achievement gap between White students and students of color has been consistently evident for many years. This case focuses on Birch Middle School, which is one of five middle schools in the district and has long been plagued by being considered the worst middle school in the district.

Birch is located in a westside residential neighborhood that has a long-established reputation as the home of the city’s gangs, drug dealers, and criminals. The extent to
which this reputation is accurate has fluctuated over the years, but its reputation is maintained within the local media and in the public imagination. The area includes medium-sized single-family homes, some of which are owner occupied and some of which are rented to families. Despite being larger than the homes in other parts of the city, these homes sell for considerably less than those in eastside neighborhoods. Birch is surrounded by large playing fields, a newly constructed elementary school, and homes and apartments occupied primarily by Latino and Pacific Islander families.

As you walk through the parking lot and into the front doors of the school, you are greeted by a large sign at eye level that reads, “Welcome to [Birch] Middle School—where failure is not an option, and success is the only option. Together We Can.” This theme of “together we can” is also displayed in other parts of the school, including on flags in the auditorium and on banners over some of the stairwells. Immediately next to this large colorful sign are smaller wooden signs announcing Birch’s “countdown to excellence.” In the middle there is a mirror at eye level with the statement “I can do it!” and on either side there is a sign for language arts and math with the number of days until students take the district’s standardized tests in these subjects. Students are reminded of the “countdown to excellence” almost daily during the morning announcements as well.

Before every late bell at Birch, the theme music from the television show *Jeopardy* plays over the loudspeaker, indicating that students have only a few more seconds to make it to their next class on time. The students at Birch make up the most concentrated group of students of color and students from low-income backgrounds in all of the district’s five middle schools. Birch is approximately 86% students of color, 77% students designated as LEP, and 96% students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Most LEP students are native Spanish speakers, but there are also growing numbers of students from Somalia and Sudan who speak native tribal languages. Of the students at Birch, 62% are Latino/a (primarily of Mexican descent), 14% are White, 13% are Pacific Islander (primarily Samoan and Tongan), 4% are African American, 4% are Asian American, and 3% are American Indian/Alaska Native.

**Birch’s Principal, Mr. More**

Birch’s principal, Mr. More, is a White man who has been a teacher, assistant principal, and principal throughout the district at the elementary, middle, and high school levels before coming to Birch as principal 2 years ago. He was extremely hopeful about the direction Birch was going and emphasized the goal of becoming a “90/90/90” school. He talked about the 90/90/90 research at every chance he had and noted that Birch had the 90% students of color and 90% low-income students elements and was working hard to achieve 90% high academic achievement. In collaboration with other staff, he guided teachers toward emphases in reading and math.
during his first 2 years as principal and planned to incorporate a “writing across the curriculum” element the following year. He was also instrumental in hiring an additional full-time administrator to focus exclusively on discipline and “setting boundaries” for Birch students. He could often be heard stating: “our primary focus at [Birch] is closing that achievement gap. That has to happen.” His focus on academics was evident in morning announcements, decor around the school, faculty meetings, assemblies, and reports to the district. Since Mr. More’s arrival, standardized test scores at Birch have been consistently rising. Recently, the schoolwide averages on the district’s Criterion Reference Tests (CRTs) were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Language Arts Test</th>
<th>Mathematics Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal proficiency</td>
<td>24% of students</td>
<td>11% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial proficiency</td>
<td>21% of students</td>
<td>11% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient proficiency</td>
<td>32% of students</td>
<td>27% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial proficiency</td>
<td>23% of students</td>
<td>51% of students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These percentages represent a significant improvement over those just 3 years prior. Being fairly new to Birch but a veteran of the district, Mr. More recognized and admitted willingly that Birch “has a tremendous amount of baggage associated with it” in terms of its poor reputation and image as a “toxic environment.” He was, however, quick to note that “that is changing in major ways.” He has been on a purposeful and focused “PR” agenda of changing Birch’s image within the district—an agenda that has not only centered on improved academic performance (the 90/90/90 goal and emphases on reading, writing, and math) but also discipline (hiring a new administrator and “setting clear boundaries”), a clean school (“this place might be falling down around us but it’s going to be clean”), and a welcoming environment when someone calls or visits the school (“it’s a wonderful day at [Birch]”).

**Birch’s Culture of Academics**

Under the guidance of Mr. More, Birch teachers were involved in a number of efforts to create a strong academic culture within the school. Reading, in particular, was such a pervasive aspect of daily life at Birch that I would characterize the school’s efforts as attempting to create a culture of reading. The school employed a full-time “Title I Director” whose primary responsibility was the reading program. This educator worked hard to train teachers on the reading program and effective teaching techniques and to keep them informed about students’ progress or lack thereof throughout the year. Every student spent the first period in a reading class.
with peers who were homogenously grouped according to their reading level. Students were tested every 8 weeks and assigned to new reading classes based on their new reading level. The recent gains in student reading levels were impressive: the school averaged almost a 2-year reading level increase in just 1 year’s time. This is significant because seventh graders entering Birch averaged only a fourth-grade reading level, so although they may not all be promoted to high school reading on grade level, they were reading significantly better than when they entered Birch 2 years earlier. The challenge facing Birch is also obvious when one considers that in any given year approximately 30% of seventh graders were reading at a 6.2 grade level or above and 30% of eighth graders were reading at a 7.2 grade level or above; in other words, less than one third of Birch students were reading at a grade level 1 year below their actual grade level.

In classes other than reading, teachers also worked hard to cultivate a strong academic culture within their classrooms. One teacher served on a committee during the summers that was charged with developing strategies for increasing the number of Birch students in upper-level classes at the high school. He related this work to his efforts in his classroom and how he stressed that his students would leave “knowing how to write a thesis statement.” He also worked hard to “cultivate an attitude” in his students that “I can compete with anybody,” because he believed that they enter the high school with a number of White, affluent students from an eastside middle school and “take a beating” in terms of believing that they are as smart or deserving of a good education. Other teachers also explicitly prepared their students for high school and college. One teacher emphasized the skills needed to format papers on the computer; she talked about how papers should be left-justified and titles centered, and she explicitly illustrated how to do these tasks on the computer. She also talked about single- and double-spacing and said “when you go to high school, you will double space.” And finally, she explained that instead of writing “by” and their name at the bottom of their papers, they “should make a header” in the top left corner that listed their name, date, period, and assignment and that “it’s a good habit to get into” because it would be expected in high school and when they went to college. Another teacher required students to develop PowerPoint presentations on a topic of their choice. He emphasized that the students were required to “keep it interesting” and create “presentations that we actually want to see!” He explained that the idea was to introduce students to the technology and to practice public speaking on a small scale.

Although these academic skills may seem obvious, most Birch teachers recognized that for their students to be successful in their later years of school they would need to know particular information that is generally not taught in school. Because these expectations are often assumed, many Birch teachers made a point of actually teaching them and explaining when and why students would need to know this information. Thus, Birch educators took seriously their role of arming students with the knowledge needed to succeed in higher education settings.
Standardization, Accountability, and Closing Achievement Gaps

The math, science, and language arts classes at Birch were routinized, strictly followed the core curriculum, and tested students often. Most math teachers organized their classes according to previous years’ standardized math tests, so rather than following the textbook or an order that made logical sense based on the concepts to be learned, they taught topics that were covered on the tests and spent more time on topics that were covered extensively on the tests. All math teachers were also required to test students every Friday using standardized tests that the district provided. These tests were shorter versions of the CRT, generally covered a handful of particular topics, and were meant to simulate the “real” test given at the end of the year. Teachers could track their students’ progress on these tests, and teachers whose classes did not demonstrate appropriate levels of achievement on the tests were given support in the form of a “math coach” from the district. Another practice that occurred in at least half the math, language arts, and science classes was to begin these classes with anywhere from one to three “problems of the day” or “warm ups,” which were often taken directly from previous years’ standardized tests. Such standardized and routinized patterns at Birch are clearly the result of pressures imposed by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Given that Birch students have historically underperformed on standardized tests, and given the imperatives for the school to improve performance, it is understandable that Birch teachers would resort to standardized “teaching to the tests.” This is one of the (possibly unintentional) consequences of NCLB that disproportionately affects schools like Birch.

The impact of NCLB is also evident in the recent addition of a series of language arts classes targeted specifically for what Birch called “the bubble kids.” Eighth-grade students who had scored just below the passing mark on their seventh-grade language arts CRTs were assigned to this class with the intent that they would be able to pass the test in eighth grade “with a little extra help” from the school. It is significant that this class was made available to a very particular group of students rather than all students who did not score proficient on the language arts CRTs. It was clear that Mr. More believed that their limited resources should be focused on a small group of students who were within a close enough range that passing seemed like a realistic goal. Indeed, the students in this class showed marked improvement on their reading scores and language arts scores when tested throughout the year—far more improvement than similar students who were not in this “extra” language arts class.

Thus, there exist the multiple ways in which Birch’s curriculum, pedagogy, and services were shaped by accountability measures and a desire to meet annual yearly progress and show improvement on standardized tests. Indeed, Birch met these goals in large number and was slowly changing its reputation within the district. Whereas it failed to meet adequate yearly progress just 3 years prior, it now not only met it but posted higher scores on the CRTs than other schools in particular subjects. It would
be fair to say, then, that many of Birch’s efforts had paid off. The strict emphasis on testing and the resources going toward students who seemed “within reach” did, in fact, result in higher overall test scores from previous years.

**Struggling to Center Social Justice and Equity Within This Context**

At least One Birch teacher in particular was extremely frustrated by what she perceived as the negative impact of NCLB and accountability measures on the education she was able to provide her students. Ms. Forest had been teaching math at Birch for a number of years, and when I asked how high-stakes accountability has affected her work, she said adamantly that “it’s one of the worst things in education.” Although Ms. Forest applauded the focus on disaggregated test scores, she believed that Birch had “recently gone too far,” and she noted that “they’ve raised test scores a lot, but we might be compromising other things for those results.” She further explained that accountability measures had had a significant impact on her work in the last couple years and, specifically, that “it makes it difficult to do critical pedagogy because there is no time for it.” She shared a number of examples of lessons and activities she used previously with her classes, all of which taught core math concepts but through topics related to social justice. She once used a video about environmental issues, for example, and her classes learned about statistics through analyses of data presented in the video. She also prided herself on using story problems that were culturally diverse in terms of the names, items, and topics they covered and on her ability to integrate diversity and social justice issues into her math lessons on a regular basis. Ms. Forest explained that Mr. More still expects her to teach the core concepts (i.e., like the statistics) but “without all the fluff” (i.e., the video). She was told by Mr. More the year before “to not do anything that didn’t directly improve test scores” and was not “directly related to the [standardized] math tests.” In just the past 2 years, Mr. More severely limited the activities she was able to do because “everything is so totally focused on test scores.” Ms. Forest tried to resist this trend; she explained that “I found myself closing my door and teaching how I think they need to be taught.” Her students’ test scores averaged more than 5% above the district average, but because they were not as high as other Birch math classes, “they were not good enough.” As a result, Mr. More wanted to limit her options even more. Rather than teach math according to how she was directed, Ms. Forest decided that she would teach a different subject altogether the following year; she lamented, “and it’s too bad because I was a good math teacher.” Interestingly, she switched to language arts not only because she was also certified in that subject area but also because she felt that there was more leeway in language arts. Although students also took standardized tests in language arts, she felt it was “a little easier to incorporate critical pedagogy in English because I can teach them to write about issues in a persuasive essay.”
Situating Birch in the Larger Debate Around Social Justice

Ms. Forest was also one of the only teachers at Birch who was explicit in her desire for greater social justice in the education system and, especially, for Birch students. Whereas almost all Birch teachers and administrators were strong advocates of “equality” and viewed their strong academic focus as fundamental to “providing an equal opportunity,” Ms. Forest believed that they had a responsibility to do something more. For her, that something more was related to social justice and had to include honoring and celebrating diversity as well as advocating for social change in both schools and the larger society. She did not want to diminish the strong academic focus at Birch, but she did not believe that that focus should be the sole focus or that it should necessitate the absence of critical pedagogies, multicultural education, and teaching for social justice. The differing perspective between Ms. Forest and Mr. More and the rest of the Birch faculty is illustrative of debates nationwide around what it means to educate and lead for social justice and greater educational equity. These debates are especially critical for schools serving students of color and low-income students because these students have been ill-served by our educational system for far too long; whereas some believe that NCLB-type approaches that center on reading, math, standardization, and accountability are the path to greater social justice, others maintain that these approaches simply continue the legacy of injustice and inequity.

Teaching Notes

This case focuses on an urban middle school that has recently seen much improvement in the academic performance of its students and its reputation within the community. These positive changes, however, have come about largely because of what might be perceived as a narrow focus on standardized curricula, pedagogy, and assessment techniques. The nuances presented in this case help paint a picture of the very real tensions present for educational leaders in schools where improved academic achievement has far-reaching implications not only for the students but also for the administrators, teachers, parents, and community as a whole. And if we hope to facilitate education that centers social justice and equity, the tensions may be even greater.

Although there are a number of issues that could be discussed about this case, I will present some discussion prompts and questions that focus primarily on the tensions around what it means to be an educator committed to social justice and/or equity within the context outlined above.

• Research shows that teachers are feeling tremendous pressure to not only plan curriculum explicitly around state content standards but also to draw curricular emphases directly from anticipated test items. This is even more likely to occur
among new teachers (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002) and teachers in schools like Birch that serve primarily low-income students and students of color (Lipman, 2004). The result, as Sleeter (2005) points out, is that teachers tend to “turn the standards into the curriculum itself. Doing this, however, is likely to result in boring, superficial teaching that favors memory work over understanding” (p. 44). Although test scores were rising at Birch, what unintended consequences might have resulted from their educational practices and leadership focus? How might a narrow focus on closing the achievement gap result in a poor schooling experience for kids?

- Consider the extra language arts classes that were offered to “bubble kids” at Birch. Do you think students who were not identified as “bubble kids” were “left behind” in this case? Given the reality of limited financial and human resources facing urban schools, how else might Birch have approached this situation?

- One could argue that standardized measures of achievement seemed primary to learning at Birch. This ordering of priorities is particularly significant given the larger context of education in this country. NCLB places increased burdens on schools like Birch that serve low-income students and students of color, and these schools subsequently feel pressure to “teach to the test” by focusing on standardized knowledge at the expense of culturally relevant and socially conscious education. Would you advise a shift in priorities at Birch? If so, what are the implications of change for faculty, administrators, students, and the larger community?

- Although Birch was largely succeeding in emphasizing academics and explicitly teaching their traditionally ill-served students about the rules necessary to succeed in high school, they stopped short of practicing culturally relevant pedagogy. As outlined by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b), culturally relevant pedagogy also requires that students acquire and maintain cultural competence and are educated for social consciousness and social change, but I observed little of these elements occurring within classrooms at Birch. So although Birch educators strategized around how their students could achieve greater success in the system as it is currently arranged, they were not equipping those students with the knowledge and skills necessary to change the system. Do the values of social justice and equity require us to do more than simply improve the academic achievement of students? If so, what else is required and how might we meet these multiple goals?

- What does it mean to lead with a goal of social justice or equity in mind given the nuances presented in this case—nuances that are shared by many urban schools across the nation? Consider, for example, this recently made assertion about equity (and its relationship to equality) in educational settings:

> Within popular discourse, what is meant by equality is the same thing as what is meant by equity . . . But we [the authors] understand these terms and their relationship differently and suggest that notions of justice must be intimately connected with these terms for equity and equality to have meaningful emphases. . . . Equity represents what is fair; what is fair is potentially more contested than what is equal. (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007, pp. 159, 164)
• How might Mr. More and Birch Middle School work toward greater equity? Do you consider equity or equality a guiding principle in your own work as an educator?

• Is it possible to keep the successes of the academic focus and also integrate critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and/or a strong goal of equity? If so, what might this look like? If not, which do you prioritize and why?

**Note**

This case is based on ethnographic data gathered in a real district. All names are pseudonyms, but all quotes are actual statements recorded by the author.

**References**


**Angelina E. Castagno** is an assistant professor in the department of Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University. Her scholarly interests focus on issues of diversity and equity within educational settings, particularly as they relate to Indigenous students and other students of color. Dr. Castagno can be reached at angelina.castagno@nau.edu.