

Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There

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Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There

Author: H. Richard Milner IV (2010)

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Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There is a book mainly intended for use by teachers, but would also be beneficial to anyone working with children on a regular basis (including but not limited to administrators, researchers, guidance counselors, and coaches). The author of the book, Milner, focuses on issues of diversity, opportunity, and teaching in the educational setting and the interrelated connection between the three ideas. He decides to focus on these issues because of the “achievement gap” between white and non-white students that currently exist in the U.S. White students consistently perform better than their minority counterparts in the educational setting. He takes a very different approach to this topic, however. Instead of placing emphasis on the achievement gap, he chooses to view this issue in terms of an “opportunity gap.” While many researchers and educators seem to concentrate on standardized test scores, Milner decides to focus more on the process of teaching the individual student rather than test results. His tactic of focusing on *teaching* rather than *testing* proves to be an insightful one. The author identifies five critical areas that must be addressed in order to eliminate these opportunity gaps: 1) color blindness, 2) cultural conflicts, 3) myth of meritocracy, 4) low expectations and deficit mind-sets, and 5) context-neutral mind-sets.

Many U.S. teachers operate under the premise of color blindness. They do not see race as an issue in the classroom and refuse to acknowledge it. If many teachers do this, the

author argues that it is because they feel that if they do consider race as a factor. The author rejects this point of view and insists that teachers must recognize race because it does potentially shape children's construction of their identities and worldviews.

Cultural conflict is the second running theme throughout the book. A student's cultural background influences their ideas of what is right and wrong. When the teacher's cultural background and expectations of classroom behavior differ from the student's, conflict often arises. Many times teachers are quick to discipline students for behaviors that they see as socially unacceptable before ever teaching the child what the expectations are. Because behavior norms can differ greatly from one culture to another, it is vital that teachers take this into account when educating and disciplining students.

Milner refers to the myth of meritocracy that pervades our educational institutions. Many educators feel that the only thing relevant to a student's success is his/her work ethic. There exists that idea that if someone is willing to work hard, he/she can and more importantly *should* experience success. In reality, there are many other factors that influence a child's ability to do well in school. It is our job as teachers to recognize those other factors and do our best to help the child work through these other issues so that he/she may become more effective in the classroom. All children are different. What works for one child may not work for another. Therefore, it is essential, that we work with every child in order to ensure success.

The fourth area of concern is the deficit mind-sets and low expectations by many educators when it comes to minority students. Instead of building on the knowledge that students do bring to the classroom, teachers try to "fix" the students and remediate them so that they might catch up with their "normal" peers. A huge emphasis is placed on trying to improve students test scores to the point of not letting any creativity or critical thinking into the classroom. Teachers force students to review the basics over and over again in hopes that they will master the material and be able to regurgitate it on a standardized test. Meanwhile, no meaningful learning has actually taken place.

Finally, the author argues that teachers sometimes operate under a context-neutral mind-set in their careers. Many teachers do not consider the community where the school is located a relevant factor. They feel that teaching science, for example, should be the same no matter where the school is located. By ignoring the community aspect of students' backgrounds, they are missing out on a valuable resource. Teaching should not look the same in all schools. The communities where the students live should be a relevant factor in the teacher's planning process.

By focusing and elaborating on these five areas of concern, Milner hopes to open the eyes of educators and change their way of thinking. He also uses examples of four different culturally aware middle school teachers to showcase how teachers can effectively deal with and overcome issues related to diversity in the classroom. Mr. Hall, a white male teacher in a diverse urban school setting, quickly realized that if he was going to connect with his students he had first to learn who they were and adjust his teaching practices accordingly. He allowed his students to see him as a real person open to communication. Dr. Johnson, an African-American female teacher at a suburban white school, had a very different experience. She persisted in her goal of implementing a

diversity-oriented curriculum even when the majority of her students were white. Parents, other teachers, and administrators didn't always agree with her methods but still she persisted. Her goal was to help the white students understand the privilege that they possessed and see the world from a different point of view. Finally, the author focused on two African American teachers (one male and one female) at a diverse urban school. Mr. Jackson connected with the students by using music as an educational tool in his classroom. He found a way to incorporate the knowledge and interests that they possessed in an effective way. Ms. Shaw chose to focus on community. She related her lessons back to the students' communities and empowered them to change their communities for the better. Each of these teachers found a way to effectively address issues of diversity in their classrooms in their own unique ways.

In my opinion, this book is a must read for anyone who works with children especially teachers. I know I will use the knowledge gained by reading this book to face issues of diversity head on in my classroom. I will make a concerted effort to teach students the behavior expectations of my classroom at the start of the school year and not discipline them before they have had a chance to practice these behaviors or see them in action. I cannot hold a child accountable for his/her actions until I am sure that I have made my expectations clear and that the student understands them. This is especially true for English Learners who are navigating a new language and a new school/classroom culture. The author's discussion about deficit mind sets and low expectations also spoke to me in a personal way. Often times when I have students in my sixth grade math classroom who have never passed a standardized test and are at a second grade reading level, I do lower my expectations for them. I now realize that students may pick up on this fact and feel defeated before they have ever had the chance to really try. In the future, I will find productive ways to utilize the strengths and talents that all students bring to the classroom instead of focusing so much on their areas of weakness. The information presented in this book allowed me to view issues of diversity, opportunity, and teaching in a whole new light.

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