

**Educational Excellence and Learner Diversity:  
Can the Teacher Achieve Excellence in All Students?  
(Kecemerlangan Pendidikan dan Kepelbagaian Pelajar:  
Bolehkah Guru Mencapai Kecemerlangan untuk Semua Pelajarnya)**

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ABSTRACT

*The attainment of excellence is the ultimate goal of any systematic endeavour. Education is not an exception in this regard as the teacher's effort in imparting knowledge to his students is expectedly intended to facilitate effective and meaningful learning. Yet the diverse socio-economic backgrounds, psychological orientations and even religious persuasions of the learner have significant roles to play in determining the success rate achievable in the teaching-learning process. Hence the question: can the teacher achieve excellence in all students, in the face of learner diversity? The purpose of this paper is to articulate the multidimensional nature of excellence in education and to identify diverse various strategies that are capable of aiding the attainment of excellence in learners, in the face of educational diversity. The significance of such an analysis lies in the fact that it provides a meaningful explanation on the growing concern over the possibility or otherwise of the teacher's achievement of excellence in all his or her students. The paper is both critical and analytical in its method and relies on respected authorities in articulating the concept of diversity in education and its relationship with grading, educational accountability, and educational excellence. It concludes that excellence is somewhat synonymous with progress, success, achievement, distinction, victory, fulfillment, accomplishment and other words of similar nature, all of which should be regarded as relative in the face of learner diversity which, itself is a challenge to the success of the teacher's efforts in the classroom.*

*Keywords: Learner diversity, educational excellence, strategies, multidimensional, educational diversity*

ABSTRAK

*Mencapai kecemerlangan merupakan matlamat akhir bagi setiap usaha yang dilakukan secara sistematik. Bidang pendidikan tidak terkecuali dalam hal ini, iaitu guru berusaha untuk menyampaikan ilmu kepada para pelajar dengan lebih berkesan dan bermakna. Walau bagaimanapun, latar belakang sosioekonomi yang berbeza, orientasi psikologi dan keyakinan dalam beragama mempunyai peranan penting dalam menentukan tahap kejayaan bagi sesuatu proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Persoalannya, adakah setiap guru berupaya mencapai kecemerlangan untuk semua pelajarnya yang memiliki kepelbagaian pembelajaran? Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti kepelbagaian dimensi kecemerlangan dalam pendidikan dan mengenal pasti pelbagai strategi yang boleh membantu pelajar mencapai kecemerlangan dalam pembelajaran serta menghadapi kepelbagaian dalam pendidikan. Kepentingan analisis ini adalah untuk memberi penjelasan tentang kebimbangan guru terhadap pencapaian pelajar-pelajar mereka. Kaedah kritikal dan analitikal yang digunakan dalam kajian ini adalah bergantung kepada pihak yang berautoriti dalam menjelaskan konsep kepelbagaian pendidikan dan hubungannya dengan pemarkahan, kebertanggungjawaban dan kecemerlangan dalam pendidikan. Kesimpulannya, kecemerlangan agak sinonim dengan kemajuan, kejayaan, pencapaian kecemerlangan, kemenangan, pelaksanaan, kesempurnaan dan lain-lain perkataan yang dianggap sebagai sama dalam menghadapi kepelbagaian pelajar. Kesemua ini adalah cabaran kepada guru untuk mencapai kejayaan di dalam bilik darjah.*

*Kata kunci: Kepelbagaian pelajar, pendidikan cemerlang, strategi, multidimensi, kepelbagaian pendidikan*

INTRODUCTION

The continued changes that are being experienced in the modern world have necessitated that special attention be paid to the training of teachers who themselves are implementers of school curricula. The need for such special attention is informed by the fact that populations are

becoming increasingly diverse. The implication of such diversity is that cultural and linguistic differences in student populations have become a challenge that is peculiar to teachers working in urban centers. What is even being experienced today is that "teachers in most rural and traditionally homogeneous schools are faced with the challenges of working with increasingly culturally and

linguistically diverse student populations (Zahn et al. 2007: 331). For the wheel to come full circle, it is pertinent to illustrate with a study conducted by Lindsay and Sandell (2007: 1) which finds that in a school district in Minnesota, 19% of the students are from homes with a primary language other than English and that families in these homes represent 16 different languages". This is just one instance of learner diversity that may pose a challenge to the teacher in his pursuit of the achievement of excellence in all his students. Another area is socio-economic backgrounds which may constitute a kind of diversity in the form of the students' access to opportunities (Association for Childhood Education International (2007). Yet there are other manifestations of learner diversity that may be challenging to the teacher in his vigorous pursuit of the realisation of excellence in his students (Hadis 2005). It is in view of such challenge as constituted by learner diversity that it becomes pertinent to ask whether the teacher can actually achieve excellence in all his students, bearing in mind the fact that the attainment of excellence is the goal of every human endeavour, as would be demonstrated in the following section.

#### THE CONCEPT OF EXCELLENCE

Wanderlust for the attainment of excellence is a primary aspiration of many developed nations of the modern old. The vigor and rigor involved in the pursuit of the realisation of that goal appears to be a basic instinct of humankind. A series of questions may be asked at this juncture: is the attainment of excellence central to mankind? Is excellence the ultimate goal of man in every walk of life? Must the same standard apply in determining or measuring the degree of excellence in learners notwithstanding their diversity. Can non-attainment of a particular standard of excellence as set by a school system be tagged failure as unfulfilled aspiration on the part of some learners notwithstanding their diversity? Answers to these questions shall be provided in this paper.

Fantini (1986: 91) has clearly and unequivocally called attention to the fact that "mature societies enter into these diagnostic periods with openness to debate and emerge with a commitment to the quest for a new level of achievement." He further observes that the desire for excellence pervades human life since it is the nature of man to reach for beyond his present stage into ever-expanding visions of opportunity. Targeting high expectations is said to be carrying enormous responsibilities with itself and low achievement is said to be capable of leading to frustration in both the individual and the society.

The concrete materialisation of excellence may be in the form of serious review of the entire social infrastructure. It is after embracing a vision of excellence, that a society can become vulnerable to the verdict that it has not yet attained it. Such a society will be expected to carry out a careful assessment, a recommitment to the goal of excellence

and a redefinition and restructuring of the means by which it can best be attained. The absence of the standard of excellence will naturally lead a society into a posture that is less than outstanding.

Like society, the educational system shows some degree of commitment to excellence from time to time. Reginald (1964: 84) for instance alluded to a national report, which concluded that while the public schools may have embraced a goal of excellence, they have fallen far short in practice. Another report, according to the United States National Commission on Excellence, once stated that "without the achievement of excellence, the public schools put the entire "nation at risk". In his *Pedagogic Creed* (1964: 9), John Dewey warns that it is necessary to prepare the coming generation for a new and more just and human society, which is sure to come, and which, unless hearts and minds are prepared by education, is likely to come attended with all the evils that result from social changes effected by violence." The heart of the matter in Dewey's assertion here is the fact excellence in education. Notwithstanding, there is a need for an articulation of the theoretical framework of the subject of this paper. And that, of course, is the focus of the next section.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Education is fundamentally aimed at improving the lives of people through knowledge. No sane person is expected to anticipate reforms, which do not intend to improve upon the status quo. Nelson (1990: 309) opines that improvement is elusive without a sense of direction; an improvement may be so minor that it is virtually immeasurable or it may be very extensive. The question should always be asked: how do we know which reforms are going in the right direction? The answers to this question is expected to address in terms of the long-range goal of the system. The reason for this is that these goals set the basic agenda, and tactics, which will change schools towards the achievement of that goal. And the goal that should be used in education as the basis for planning, and as the main criterion against which to judge various efforts, is excellence. In the opinion of Kenneth (1995: 9), excellence as a goal sets our vision high, but still provides an ideal which has the flexibility to change as conditions change. He further states that excellence is the appropriate education goal for a nation which has already achieved world recognition in democratic self-government in science, in the arts, in literature, in business and industry, and in the protection of human rights.

The term excellence has not always featured in people's discussion and that explain some may consider such a discussion on excellence as this as merely a product of this age. Fantini (1986) notes that the word quality, at times, appears as if it were synonymous with excellence. According to him, excellence is sometimes substituted with the word 'best' or 'superior' and at other times the

substitutes are the word 'noble' and the words 'first class' or 'distinction'. It is really not the label but rather the intent that matters here.

The tension between equality and excellence has been described by Bacharach (1990) as a reflection of a tension between two basic societal values. Yet there is no strain in drawing a bold line of demarcation between the two. Equality is concerned with the assurance that all individuals in society be given an opportunity to succeed while excellence is concerned with assurance that there will be an adequate pool of well-trained individuals to take charge of vital functions in the society. It is conspicuous in this differentiation that equality that presupposes accords some consideration to what may be called diversity in the society or in human setting for that matter. Accordingly, while arguing that excellence implies that the "best" students reached their full potential, Bacharach asserts that although on the surface it would appear that equality and excellence do not imply a zero-sum game, they are rooted in different social philosophies. Palousky (1990: 311) does not share the sentiment of Bacharach and therefore posits that it is illogical to suggest that excellence and equality are opposites. Excellence, according to him, does not automatically exclude equality. To be equal does not mean that we cannot be excellent more so that the democratic idea of excellence that is advocated as a goal for the schools actually improves equality. The description of excellence as providing for all to be excellent even shows clearly that it (i.e. excellence) is the best form of equality and excellent society.

However, the promotion of excellence and equality at the same time in the schools is difficult, but worth the effort. Its difficulty in fact lies in the question of learner diversity. Nelson (1990: 301) has identified two major premises for this approach to reform in education. And while one offers clear and open opportunity for all to achieve, the other sets standard for performance. A meticulous consideration of the two roles mentioned here reveals their interrelatedness. Moreover, that the schools need to emphasize excellence in academic study is common knowledge that needs no elaboration. Yet the reality is that excellence cannot always be measured by applying the same standard to all situations, in view of learner diversity, which is why there will always be need to address the implications of excellence in the context of the subject under discussion.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF EXCELLENCE

Several attempts have been made towards the definition of excellence. The result has been the availability of a handful of definitions loaded with a multiplicity of implications. Kenneth (1990) defines it as a provision for the realisation of developmental goals. In this sense, excellence can occur in the daily work of individuals.

An example of excellence cited by Kenneth is that of a cabinetmaker who carefully fits together fine-surfaced pieces of wood. Such a person, in the opinion of Kenneth,

could be regarded as exhibiting a pride of workmanship that represents excellence. This definition, no doubt, makes excellence a relative term. One could also add to this exemplification a stockbroker who examines company financial statements with care and diligence before making recommendations; he can also demonstrate excellence. Gross (1989: 78) sees excellence as achievement, success and learning at high levels. Silverman however does not subscribe to Gross' view and rather insists that "excellence" cannot be defined as success because our culture refuses to recognize the contributions of many disenfranchised groups, particularly women, who attain excellence in areas like homemaking and childrearing. He submits that excellence may, on this basis, be conceived of as "a synonym for success, achievement, or psychic growth, depending on one's definitional structure". The specific definition he favours and cherishes is however, "the process of working toward an ideal standard of performance in a consistently high standard of performance in a socially valued endeavor". Roaper (1996: 31) regards excellence as "a standard for gifted students to develop as ethical and moral human beings while Gardner (1961) defines it as striving for quality in all areas of a society. The opinion of Gardner matters much in this connection as he has devoted an entire book to the subject. One is tempted to agree with Nelson (1990) in his statement that store clerks, bankers, florists, computer mechanics, politicians, artists, hairdressers, librarians, and workers in all other occupations can show excellence in their work. Excellence therefore becomes a great motivation, with intrinsic and extrinsic rewards", Nelson rationalises.

In substantiating the various definitions of excellence given in the foregoing, it may not be out of place to allude to the contributions of two giant thinkers who influenced the worldview, Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. They indeed developed theories of the universe as a fixed, dynamic, and relative system. According to Mario (1986), the differences between the Newtonian and Einsteinian models represent two entirely different views of how to organise schools for productive learning. It is of high relevance to add that the Newtonian view of mechanistic universe defines the world as big machine, with a fixed purpose, general discoveries and definable rules. When applied to the school, the closed, static view brought about fixed notions of intelligence as measurable I.Q. and a fixed age-graded sequence. The school is like a machine based on uniform principles to which all must adjust standardised testing academic tracking and standardised human classification. Mario (1986) posits that the adaptation of the factor model to the public schools will culminate in an encounter with the masses of students by processing them through what Mario calls "a type of assembly line tied to standardisation and a normative structure." One is now constrained to ask to ask if such a standardisation should apply in the face of learner diversity. The question now is: does the classroom situation not call for some flexibility in view of learner diversity.

One cannot overemphasize the influence of these concepts on the dynamic and relativistic theories of new worldview developed by Albert Einstein and others. In the Einstein theory, flexibility becomes more desirable than a fixed state, owing largely to diversity. Based on the understanding that the world is characterised by dynamism among others, flexibility becomes one of conditions for discovering and adapting, to the changing nature of the environment. And if applied to organisations, this flexibility as observed by Gordon, “becomes one of the hallmarks of successful adaptation in the pursuit of excellence” (p. 85). One cannot, but agree, at this juncture, to the Oxford Dictionary (1999) definition of excellence as the ‘quality of being very good which is why the school is often regarded as the centre of excellence’. Such a definition as given in this regard suggests that excellence is a habit of mind and that, in fact, is worthy of explanation, at this juncture.

#### EXCELLENCE AS HABIT OF MIND: ANOTHER LOOK AT LEARNER DIVERSITY

According to Doyle (1986), problematic behaviours or attitudes tend to occur most often during passive individual activities. Such attitudes or habits are not without some implications on the attainment of excellence. Paul (1992) caught the essence or implication of such habits in his model of thinking-intellectual honesty, integrity, and humility coupled with curiosity and intellectual independence born of an inquiring mind. It has been repeatedly said at various angles of human endeavors that “excellence requires hard work, discipline application, and above all, an attitudinal disposition that implies one will put forth sufficient effort to do any work at the highest level possible of which one is capable at a given time”. There is no gain saying that ethical dilemmas are capable of affecting an individual attitude to various things. That explains why ethical values are sometimes reinforced by formal rules. Their primary underpinning may even be to curb informal norms of behaviour, which may adversely affect the attainment of a laudable goal. Passon (1988) is of the opinion that “when we engage in thinking and reasoning in the pursuit of knowledge we need to help students understand that human decision-making has to consider the moral and ethical side of argument lest arrogance and the art of manipulation become the model for achieving ends”. This statement shows the centrality of habits of mind to the pursuit of excellence in intellectual enterprises. According to Sandra (2003) teachers occasionally encounter students whose behaviour is disturbed or difficult to manage that teachers need to seek additional help from experts either to develop better strategies for coping with particular students or to find some other solutions. Teacher’s failure to provide effective solutions to such problems may deter such students from making a success of their academic life. It will always be of high importance to help students achieve excellence by

keeping cognizant of their diversity and positively influencing their habits of mind and by helping them recognise the seriousness of intellectual enterprise and relevant process of thinking. The present writer agrees with Joyce’s father-in-law’s feeling that “whatever is worth doing, is worth doing right” (p. 14). And this goes a long way in showing the correlation between excellence and habit of mind. Yet, one more question begs for an answer, at this juncture: what is the relationship between excellence and grading in the face of learner diversity?

#### LEARNER DIVERSITY, EXCELLENCE AND GRADING

Before approaching the specific details of the connection between excellence and grading, it is important to briefly identify the distinctions among some concepts that are closely related to grading with a view to showing their interrelatedness. Such concepts are assessment, evaluation, measurement and testing. While assessment refers to the procedures used in appraising student learning, evaluation is concerned with making judgment about the relative or absolute worth of entities as varied as an essay, a class project or specific curriculum whereas measurement involves when we seek information regarding the extent to which an individual demonstrates a particular characteristic or behavior. A test, on its own, “comprises any assessment procedure used systematically to measure a sample of behavior provided the test is administered in formal setting such as a classroom, laboratory, or gymnasium, with standardised (uniform) procedures for administration and marking”. An example of assessment as given by Sandra (2003) is planned observation, description and reporting of Year 2 students’ performance on a set reading task. Judging the quality of a sculpture submitted as part of a final examination in visual arts is an example of evaluation while counting the number of correct answers given by Year 2 students in a test of number facts, and assigning a numerical value is a kind of measurement. Scheduling a group of students to complete a given number of questions based on material covered or subject matter taught in this week’s Arabic Literature class, for instance, is a form of test. Each of these four concepts is closely related to the concept of grading which, according to Asraf (2004), “is an issue that merits serious discussion as it is closely tied to our notions of “standards” and “excellence” and what we want our students to achieve. Alluding to Thorndike (1921), Hopkins and Stanley (1991), Bassinger (1997), as well as Ebel and Frisbie (1991), Asraf maintains strongly that the view of grading has not changed very much today, stressing that “grades should be assigned according to standards that they may be not what she calls “an arbitrary ‘judgment’ of a student’s performance”. Asraf’s submission is explanatory when she emphasizes the need to “view standards according to what students should learn and how well he or she has to master what is to be learnt. It is evidence in the foregoing that there is a symbiotic

relationship between grading and standards. Grading has some role to play in determining standard which itself is a twin concept of quality or excellence. Excellence can only be said to be reliable when founded on a standard grading system. Yet that standard grading system must keep cognizance of various dimensions of learner diversity. Otherwise, the foundation, whatsoever it is, of excellence collapses, thereby rendering excellence baseless and unfounded. Asraf emphasizes the need for the proper knowledge and continual reflection on the best ways to approach grading in the teachers' development of just, reliable and "defensible" grading practices that will yield reasonably accurate measures of the achievements of their students in the face of learning diversity. It is now left for this paper to attempt an answer to its ultimate question: can the teacher achieve excellence in all students?

#### CAN THE TEACHER ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE IN ALL STUDENTS?

It is common knowledge in the educational parlance that decisions relating to assessing are crucial, delicate and sensitive and can even make or break a learning situation. This is because "assessing is not limited to the conventional marking of written work but also includes many other aspects such as project or syndicate work, informal feedback, self and peer assessing" (Harris and Bell 1994: 96). What is of interest to this paper are the aspects of assessment that are capable of aiding learners' learning and the challenge posed by such aspects of learning. It is a challenge to the teacher that learners need not have all their achievements recorded as both the learners and the teachers need to monitor, determine and make judgments on progress throughout the course of learning.

The challenge involved in this lies in the fact that learners do not all learn at the same pace as some may witness an upward trend in all the learning domains namely the cognitive, the affective and the psychomotor while others may be on the upward trend in their cognitive domain and downward trend in their affective whereas others may summarily be low achievers. Such a situation, coupled with the diverse backgrounds of the learners, will most probably impede the teacher's success in achieving the objectives of his teaching of the students. Accordingly, he may achieve appreciable success in some, some manageable degree of success in others and yet abysmal failure in others. This explains why documentation arising from such a teacher's evaluative effort or judgmental decisions may not be reliable altogether, given the possibility of discrepancies and inaccuracies in such a circumstance as earlier described.

The challenge in question does not require a major change in the actual methods or tools of assessing but rather in the underlying philosophy and the aims of their use or application. There are several ways of determining the attainment of excellence in a learner. They include informal and casual observations, teacher organised marked

questions, standardised tests, and assessment criteria devised and used by the learners themselves (Harris & Bell 1994). There is no gainsaying that each of these types of assessing has a place in facilitating learning, but not all of them may be realistic or desirable in any particular situation. To ensure the attainment of excellence in all his students in the face of their diversity, the teacher is expected to carefully choose an assessment method that is suitable and appropriated for the intended purposes, expected outcomes and constraints.

It is pertinent to state at this juncture that this paper does not intend to provide specific details of such specific assessment instruments, but rather to articulate how best the teacher can achieve excellence in his students in the face of learner diversity. The heart of the analysis is that the teacher is required to use his creativity in improvising for every learning situation an assessment method that is capable of exposing the deficiency of every learner to enable the teacher cater effectively for the specific learning needs of every learner by ensuring that no learner is left behind even in the face of diversity for, a creative, resourceful and versatile teacher is undoubtedly capable of achieving excellence in all his students.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper has articulated the teacher's challenge in achieving excellence in the learners in the face of diversity. It analysed the interrelated nature of excellence with standard, quality, achievement and success and why its attainment must be carefully pursued or aided. It proffered meaningful answers to such questions as, "What is excellence?", "How is excellence defined, determined and attained?", "What is the connection between educational excellence and learning diversity?". It especially provided a meaningful answer to the question: "Can the teacher achieve excellence in all students without keeping cognizance of the issue of diversity"? The paper demonstrated that such an explanation as proffered therein is capable of aiding the teacher's navigation of an expressway to his students' attainment of excellence in education. The paper however emphasised the need for continued research on its subject as its scope does not cover the details of specific assessment instruments which is an area that is open to further research or future investigation.

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