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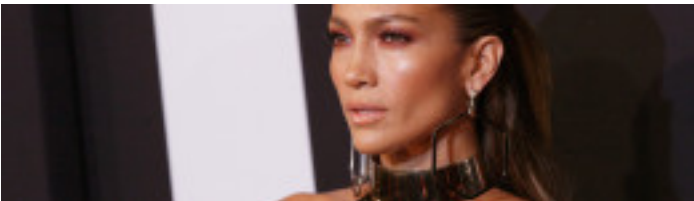
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Equality?!

Posted: 03/04/2014 3:29 pm EST | Updated: 05/04/2014 5:59 am EDT

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Years ago, I taught fourth grade in Saint Louis Public Schools. As a Teach for America corps member, it had been drilled into my head that I should spend the first weeks of the school year establishing rules and procedures and creating a classroom culture that would be safe, inspiring and challenging, while helping students to invest in our big goal. While teaching rules and procedures came fairly naturally, investing students in our culture and goals seemed daunting, foreign and impossible. I can still hear St. Louis Teach for America Executive Director Eric Scroggins' warning ringing in my head: "If

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casas/early-education-4893373.html) "Creating a positive classroom culture and investing your kids in big goals, you'll construct the achievement gap, not close it." 

The first quarter of the first year, I failed to establish a classroom culture that would invest my students in our big goals, and Eric was right; I was probably widening the achievement gap, not closing it. But after a tearful Halloween-evening phone call with my mom, an elementary school teacher turned professor, I returned to school determined to get it right.

In the weeks that followed, I did a lot of things to build a classroom culture that would get my kids on board with our big goals. Some of these efforts worked. Many failed. However, the one that had the biggest impact on the way my students approached their own education was teaching them that, in our classroom, "equal" didn't mean everyone would get the same thing; it meant everyone would get what they needed to succeed. I watched in amazement as the nine and ten year olds who filled my classroom every day began to understand how to advocate for what they needed from me, from their classmates and from their parents in order to be successful.

As I examine the education policy debate being waged in state capitols across the country, I realize that the adults who are creating and participating in this debate could really stand to learn a great deal from my former students. My students could teach our policymakers that everyone should be approaching education with the idea that creating an equal education system should really be about how to get every student what they need to succeed.

Just as my students and I didn't always immediately agree on what they needed to reach their goals, the debate about improving our education would certainly still exist, but it would be about what kids need, not what districts need, or what teachers need, or what superintendents need.

We could start right here in Missouri, where we are in the midst of a serious debate (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kate-casas/mo-court-liberates-childr_b_3431052.html) regarding the best way to serve kids in unaccredited school districts. Last week the 34 members of the Missouri Senate did engage in a debate, which, to their credit, was largely about giving kids what they need to succeed. Now, as the debate moves to the House of Representatives, I hope they, too, will focus on how we give all kids the tools for success.

I imagine if they are able to do this, legislators will see that in order to provide equal opportunity to all kids, some might need a real full-time virtual option, others a charter school that has an extended day and year, and still others access to a private school that is able to provide an intense focus on character development. This kind of debate could also make superintendents finally understand that providing an equal opportunity in the district they run might mean willingly paying tuition for a child with autism to attend a school that will meet his needs better than they can. It could convince school boards that leveling the playing field for kids means they should allow a child to stay in her school, even after her family is forced to move across district lines. It would place a focus on the need to decentralize decisions about curriculum, school calendar, contracts and personnel.

Just like in my classroom all those years ago, if we're trying to make sure everyone has the exact same thing, the debate about creating equality and quality in our education system will just continue to be toxic. However, I remain hopeful that the adults making education policy decisions can learn, like my nine and ten year olds did, that giving everyone the exact same thing won't result in quality or equality for all.

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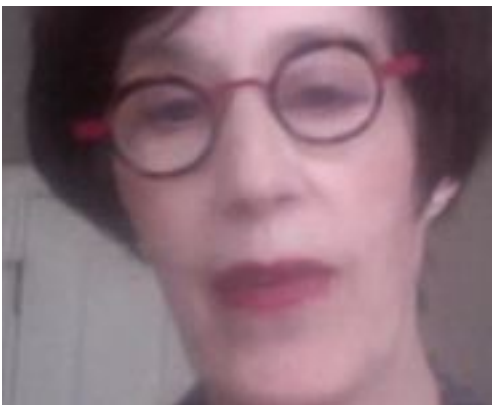
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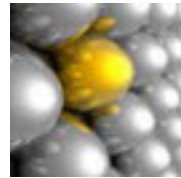
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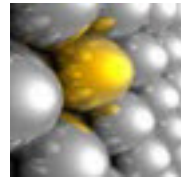
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