

Original Paper

Redefining Exceptionalism: The Importance of Removing Super Hero Language from Education

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Abstract

The concept of exceptionalism for some years has defined the way schools and society determine success. Abiding by this concept has become problematic for parents and students who believe they must achieve outstanding benchmarks to have greater access to opportunities. In addition, the Danielson Framework became a tool to identify which educators were operating under specific standards to ensure students' impressive performance. How education chooses to reframe exceptionalism while redefining success will ultimately determine how effectively schools can best support teachers and students to obtain achievable and realistic goals.

Keywords

culturally responsive, social justice, educational reform

1. Introduction: Exceptionalism Has Its Place

The word exceptionalism envisions people fulfilling and executing desired plateaus deemed unattainable. A considerable amount of pressure on educators and school districts to increase their performance levels to support learners' delivery of extraordinary academic accomplishments is hurting the profession. Educators remain expected to perform at a higher standard while being accountable to parents and students' needs. Even more so, they take on multiple roles every day to meet the needs of their students. Indeed, being exceptional means people have achieved new heights of success. To say people should not aspire to become exceptional would take away from what so many people and nations accomplished to improve society. In all actuality, very few people in history are considered exceptional. Historic men such as Albert Einstein or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. certainly are individuals that accomplished legendary and exceptional status. The prodigious sports feats of Michael Jeffrey Jordan and Muhammad Ali, as well as the technological accomplishments of humankind landing on the moon and Steve Jobs' creation of Apple, further speak to how impressively people can go beyond human boundaries.

However, what makes exceptionalism dangerous is when it becomes an expectation and a normalized benchmark of people's procurement. Like anything else, there is a realistic expectation, and standard individuals should maintain to reach a level of success. However, it does not always have to exist as something unusual or extraordinary. People can strive to accomplish and secure a level of happiness and comfort without being superlative. Exceptionalism has its place. Without centering this philosophical construct into a proper perspective, however, causes undue stressors and anxieties that can diminish individuals' ability to attain realistic expectations.

Education has, for some time, been over-applying the use of the word exceptionalism to capture what individuals understand as a noteworthy success. Such superhero language is generally expressed when a student receives an A plus-grade in a challenging class or in an advanced placement course. Also, with the way teacher evaluations occur impacts educators' ability to receive an equitable performance rating. Moreover, this does not mean that mediocrity should become the new norm. Instead, a more balanced distinction should be celebrated and evoked in education and throughout society to redefine what is meant by the phrase, remarkable.

2. Method

The research paper applied a critical race theoretical framing to review the research literature while applying an auto-ethnographic lens to evaluate teacher evaluation challenges. Also, social Darwinist and excessive capitalist theoretical constructs were adopted to indicate how exceptionalism continues to affect the way society defines success.

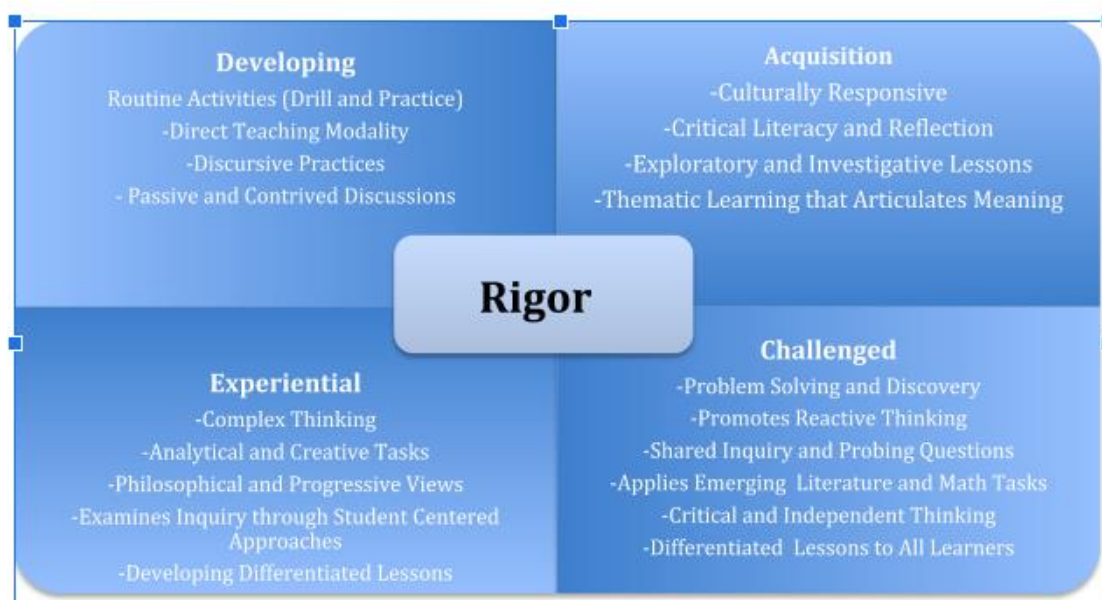


Figure 1. Cultivating the Teaching Practice

3. What Does It Mean to be an Educational Superhero?

For generations, educators have accomplished extraordinary feats in the field of teaching-and-learning to transform student progress and development. Truly, an effective teacher exists behind almost everyone's success story. The educators that continue to perform inspiring and heroic narratives:

- Have minimal resources in their classroom, yet they applied innovation, creativity, and discovery to propel their learners to achieve academic benchmarks;
- Departed from excessively bureaucratic models to develop independent schools to improve the educational outcomes of challenged and marginalized learners;
- Applied multiple roles to reach and connect to children and parents being either coaches, mentors, counselors, therapists, psychologist, or role-models;
- Exist as tutors and community activists outside of the school;
- Developing organizations or union activity that advocate for children and teachers to acquire equitable justice while improving their skills.

Teachers, in a way, are seen as super heroic. Despite the challenges continually surfacing in the profession from lack of pay, the gender-salary gap, racial inequities, a white-centrist curriculum, and over-testing, teachers indelibly remain at the cornerstone of what is good and optimistic about society. The challenge of being a superhero is that people expect them to perform or save the day, regardless of how difficult or challenging the tasks. As such, superhero language is constantly spewed and couched in education that declares:

- “To teach is to touch a life forever”;
- “Our task, regarding creativity, is to help children climb their own mountain as high as possible. No one can do more”;
- “A teacher affects eternity, he can never tell where his influence stops” (School of Education, 2018).

There are many more “catch-phrases” to describe what an effective and quality teacher should daily encompass that it is quite impossible to list them all in a book, let alone two. This is neither diminishing the essential and influential role teachers have on children and communities. Without question, teaching is a very fulfilling and inspiring field of work. Nevertheless, a question remains, is a teacher supposed to affect every child they encounter with this level of accomplishment? Is it even realistic for an educator to do so?

Critics of this position would argue that a teacher should strive to do just that, and if they cannot, they should not belong in the field of education. The number of pressures and challenges that consume the profession along with the socio-economic and other disadvantages that shape some students' lives and consummate schoolhouses seems impossible to satisfy everyone and everything, particularly parents, administrators, and policyholders. However, what teachers sacrifice and work toward promotes the belief that every child does matter. If a teacher cannot reach or help academically develop every child they encounter, does that make them a failure? Particularly in settings under resourced and dealing with

myriad issues.

4. Stewardship of Excellence

Public education's design or the creation of the Common School became fueled by philanthropists and educational theorists' desire to promote people's discovery of opportunities to obtain skills to succeed in the market (Bale & Knopp, 2012). Bowles and Gintis (2011) describe how Horace Mann's life work, an educational theorist and activist for public education, pushed for this sort of philosophy to become academic stewardship. In many ways, stewardship helps to describe how individuals can receive training to manage and produce viable outputs and designs in the capitalist framework. For centuries, education has stood at the doorstep of inculcating and nurturing people's talents to generate quality outcomes. However, despite education's caveat of applying false narratives, racial biases, inequities, and class disparities, the main thing the industry positively fostered is the ability to equip individuals with the basic ideas and skillsets, the three R's (reading writing, and arithmetic), to encourage human talents. The field of liberal art education continues to serve as a testimony of forwarding human agency, which provides students with an opportunity to decide what specific professions they want to embrace or gain training and expertise to achieve specific professional goals. According to Ralph Tyler's (2013),

The educational philosophers recognize that there are essential values in life, primarily transmitted from one generation to another employing education. They see the school as aiming essentially at the transmission of the basic values.... The point of view taken in this course is that no single source of information is adequate to provide a basis for wise and comprehensive decisions about the objectives of the school (p. 4).

As long as people found their way, so to speak, it was clear that the economy and the skills they brought to the market could lead individuals to make a mark on society while fostering social and economic independence. Likewise, those trained with management skills could teach and develop others in their field to produce efficient results to burgeon the economic means and necessities of society. In other words, a person did not have to be exceptional or remarkable enough to satisfy the capitalist engine or the status quo. There existed a sense of stewardship advanced by the way people received educational training to succeed. Today's education world appears to have transitioned from this sense of stewardship into a different direction, applying superhero language to capture what it means for a teacher or student to be defined as accomplished. Where did this start? Moreover, does it exist as a realistic expectation?

5. Theoretical Lens

Two theoretical lenses explain how exceptionalism took a stronghold in education. The first explanation deals with social Darwinism, a belief developed by Herbert Spencer. This English philosopher emerged in the late 19th Century to support the claim that inequality, inequity, and racial disparities were a result of genetics. The second postulation discusses the ideology behind excessive capitalism and how wealth disparities proposed a revised definition of success.

6. Social Darwinism

Post-slavery and during the height of European and Chinese immigration in the late 1800s, Americans were embattled in a racial and class struggle (Loewen, 2008). Virtually speaking, various ethnic groups competed for jobs in search of new opportunities to achieve the American Dream. The African American populations were recently emancipated from the ravages of slavery that came by way of a Civil War (Zinn, 2015). Reconstruction acts ensued from the war that promoted enfranchisement and educational opportunities that offered an improved status for African Americans. Unfortunately, the reconstruction acts were shredded with Andrew Johnson's presidency, who preferred to re-empower the former Confederacy to reunite the union. As well as, recent European and Asian descendants were persuaded to come to America to participate in a promised economy with the chance of improving their livelihood. However, the tasks they were commanded to perform were often challenging and highly exploitative. Inevitably, these different ethnicities would clash as they competed for positions in the labor market (Takaki, 2000).

The Populist Movement would soon emerge to unite the various ethnic groups into a social justice platform that demanded a change with the way capital was administered and dispersed in the economy. Instead of bickering and bludgeoning each other, the ethnic groups at the turn of the 20th-Century asserted the problem was not with them, but with the way, the capital was disfigured to allot the few with so much and the masses with so little (Zinn, 2015).

To turn the tide against populism while continuing to justify the wealth disparities that saw "By 1890, the top 1 percent of the U.S. population owned 51 percent of all wealth", eugenicists manifested to validate why "The top 12 percent owned an astounding 86 percent with the lower 44 percent of U.S. population—almost half the country—owned just 1.2 percent" (Morris, 2005, p. 2). The most renowned theorist to emerge during this timeframe was none other than Herbert Spencer, who reformulated Charles Darwin's evolution theory of the survival of the fittest. From his theoretical lens, the fittest or the most successful populations would do well in the American capitalist construct because they had stronger and better genes than those that struggled and were indigent. Spencer's supposition not only rationalized inequality, inequity, and racial disparities but also promoted exceptionalism. The wealthy were not extreme capitalist that exploited women and children in the barbaric factory models while working the Chinese to death on railroads and legally coercing African Americans into Jim Crowism. Instead, they were shrewd business people that expanded America's capitalist opulence and innovation.

The populist movement lost momentum after the presidential election of 1896, where William Jennings Bryan, a populist candidate, lost his bid for the presidency to William McKinley. In addition, eventually, the European immigrants acquired more economic opportunities in the labor market as a result of the unions securing workers' rights and pay while being accepted as white race members. African Americans, Latinx, and Asians would become challenged to find different emancipatory pathways to assuage American Democracy and economic advantages.

Unfortunately, today's schools reflect a social Darwinist construct when reviewing the tiered models that

exist around the country. School districts that have a great per capita expenditure rate and tax base insulate better schools and academic results. Whereas, those geo-areas that have low incomes and tax bases struggle to find effective schooling for their children.

7. Excessive Capitalism

The phrase that said, “Greed is good” from the movie, *Wallstreet*, pronounced from the character Gordon Gekko, asserted that greed essentially defined the laissez-faire approach for what made a person successful. According to the character played by famed actor Michael Douglas, excessive capitalist wealth, conspicuous consumption, and grandiose lifestyles fostered not only elitist principles but also decided what made a person relevant or not. Economic inequality seemed a necessary force to ensure the elite could maintain their status. Also, the idea of winning without any costs fostered in Oliver Stone’s film had become so marketed throughout society, for some time, since the 70s, that it had become normed.

Being driven and determined to succeed does not mean a person has to employ greed to achieve excellence. There are an old-fashioned way and philosophy called hard work, which seemingly lost its way due to the significant income disparities prevalent among the working class and well-educated individuals compared to those who run the corporations and bankroll society. A valued belief system formerly taught that if an individual set out to accomplish something, they were successful, e.g., raising a family, earning a college degree, existing in a successful marriage, and buying a home.

Extreme capitalism has conditioned people in the last 50-years that having the basics is not enough. Furthermore, to achieve the American Dream, and beyond, requires exceptional character. An ideology has produced, “The top 0.1 percent of the population controls as much total wealth—roughly 22 percent—as the entire bottom, 90 percent combined” (Schelling, 2019, p. ix). Having such inequity speaks volumes to the complicit nature of those that have to inform those without that their labor or lives are insignificant if they cannot acquire or obtain what the elite harbor. Such economic gaps and lifestyles for the masses become unattainable. A more striking lesson taught is that individuals that struggle with equipping themselves with an exceptional hue, or “get over mentality” will exist at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Within this economic, cultural matrix, even when people have achieved some level of grand success or accomplishment, they still have to find ways to cheat to either maintain or pass down their lifestyles to their offspring, as recently seen with the college cheating scandals. As David Callahan’s (2004) asserts,

“Cheating is everywhere. By cheating, I mean breaking the rules to get ahead academically, professionally, or financially. Some of this cheating involves violating the law; some do not. Either way, most of it by people who, on the whole, view themselves as upstanding members of society” (p. 14).

Callahan argues that the logic of capitalism separates winners from losers. To win, a person must present a compelling case of exceptionalism to outperform his or her competitors. Moreover, Callahan indicated

that everyone seems to have psychologically normalized or asserted what it means to abide by the exceptional clause.

Cities and municipalities across the globe are dividing and carving out territories that distinguish the winners from the losers. With geo-spaces redefining and separating the haves from the have nots, individuals who once thought they were well-educated and skilled enough to live alongside the halves are experiencing pricing out, which is causing them to reconsider what they once defined as being successful.

8. Where Education Went Wrong

The pressure to succeed and to become an independent person is more significant than ever before. With the rising costs of tuition and income disparities, students and educators feel untold pressures to exhibit and achieve specific benchmarks. Longer hours to attend school, more time on tasks that lead to shorter human-interactions and breaks, greater test-preparation, and more robust demand to obtain a sports scholarship have students and educator's anxiety-riddled. Students and educators have become so stressed by the demands of parents, educational boards, standardized assessments, and taxpayers to pursue an exceptional performance that learning and playing sports has become a chore (Bale & Knopp, 2012).

Work intensification in education has become so taxing that some educators have cheated to move the academic needle despite many of them having limited resources, supports, and interventions to help guide their students to achievable standards. Furthermore, there exists a sort of professional bullying if teachers do not exhibit exceptional talents to orchestrate student success. Many educators have either been forced to leave the profession or entirely burned out, which explains some of the causes for the widening teacher shortage and disappearing crisis happening across the nation.

Mainly, the first three years of an educator's life exist under extreme pressures to quickly master the professional standards of their industry to obtain tenure. How an educator manages their classroom while also buttressing student outcomes on standardized benchmarks often determine their professional longevity in education. Greater scrutiny and micromanaging exist for educators who are evaluated by a scripted formula and rubric to assess their teaching effectiveness.

9. Danielson Framework

Most of today's teaching force remains evaluated applying a Danielson rubric, which the framework spells out what technically defines a noteworthy or effective educator. Charlotte Danielson developed the educational rubric in 1996 as a way to assess teacher professional development. The rubric orchestrated a way for educators to blossom the necessary teaching skills to become effective classroom practitioners. Danielson's framework exhibits four essential domains (Planning and Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professional Responsibilities) and is composed of twenty-two professional criteria. Initially, Danielson believed the rubric would serve as more as a coaching and mentoring

benchmark to guide educators better to get the most out of their teaching style and the students they serviced (Olson, 2013).

However, in some ways, the rubric was” hijacked” by policyholders and educational bureaucrats. Essentially, they believed the framework should become standardized to punitively evaluate teachers while holding them accountable to Danielson’s model. As Charlotte Danielson (2016), herself, has suggested,

There is also little consensus on how the profession should define “good teaching.” Many state systems require districts to evaluate teachers on the learning gains of their students. These policies have been implemented despite the objections from many in the measurement community regarding the limitations of available tests and the challenge of accurately attributing student learning to individual teachers (p. 1).

For Danielson, her rubric was never designed to assert what should define excellent or effective teaching. Instead, the instrument was structured to serve as a guide for professional learning and teaching practices, which can vary and are not always definitive. As Danielson says, “Assessment techniques are “not like rocket science”, whereas “[t]eaching is rocket science. Teaching is really hard work. But doing that [describing what teaching ‘looks like in words’] isn’t that big a deal. Honestly, it’s not. But nobody had done it” (Morrissey, 2016, p. 2). Teaching judgments are often subjective and naturally connote biases that are not distilled to capture how effective an educator is in the classroom. Such teaching nuances and idiosyncrasies should be nurtured to support teachers’ continual growth rather than differentiating what makes for tremendous or exceptional teaching. Quite merely, teaching is too complicated and challenging to have one master tool dictate who is fit or not.

As Danielson’s framework became applied by school officials and administrators, her rubric evolved into a sort of checklist to determine effective, great, and subpar teaching. Based on a scaled score from one to four, her rubric was reconfigured to a point system to evaluate and determine which educators should or should not receive tenure. Teachers with an average score of one or two in any of Danielson’s four-domains received professional support to improve his or her performance. Educators that consistently struggled with administratively assigned low scores were either put on probation or eventually dismissed.

On the other hand, the evaluation scores were further used to support teachers’ growth. Educators were encouraged to strive to become a distinguished teacher, the exceptional clause, to achieve a score of four. The distinguished teacher, in many ways, is rooted in the superhero rhetoric. When reviewing the four-evaluation domains, a distinguished educator is required to exhibit the following attributes in domains one through four (teachscape, 2013):

- Domain One- Extensive knowledge, cognitive mastery, and pedagogical practices; adopting appropriate and intellectual engagement to achieve successful academic outcomes with students; collaboratively planning and developing intellectual processes to reach academic benchmarks and assessment scores.

- Domain Two- Developing and managing positive and productive classroom environments; inculcating high expectations and a responsive standard for critical learning; maintaining enthusiasm and joy for learning; establishing and supporting classroom norms and procedures that best manage student behavior;
- Domain Three- Providing high quality and effective teaching models that communicate effectively with students; adapting critical conversations that lead to higher-order questioning and researching; builds responsive and cultural practices in the classroom; designs lessons that challenge the learner.
- Domain Four- Incorporating professional development practices while fostering collegiality in the environment; contributing to the intellectual community by self-practice; leading discussions or professional development activities; coaching and peer mentoring educators.

When reviewing and assessing the literature and diagnosing what makes an educator distinguished, hardly anyone ever makes a score of four on all of the benchmarks and twenty-two categories regardless of how long they have been teaching or the educational credentials standing behind their name (Olson, 2013). As a result, some scholars and critics have argued that the distinguished category should not exist or, at least, result in a moderate renaming (Cromidas, 2012; Corbin, 2017; Morrissey, 2016). Specifically, when it has been attached to merit-pay and salary lanes in some school districts around the country (Cobin, 2017).

The rubric is particularly damning for a first, second, and third-year educator who can find the Danielson evaluation process extremely taxing. The highest score a teacher potentially could earn in their three years of teaching is a three, categorized as being proficient in a few of the twenty-two categories. However, to display, mostly scores of twos' and some one's put the teacher on notice that unless they achieve higher scores of three in a few years, which indicates a considerable amount of growth, they will be challenged to remain at the school. As Danielson argued, "I'm deeply troubled by the transformation of teaching to a performance that can be ticked off a checklist" (Corbi, 2017, p. 2). It should already seem understood that new teachers require time to support a practice of proficiency. Nevertheless, the exceptional clause of education does not grant a teacher the proper time frame, at minimum, to hit a score of three on a majority of the twenty-two categories to achieve tenure (Danielson, 2016). Essentially, an educator in a three-year window has to be gifted or superfluous to receive long-term acceptance into a teaching district, which demonstrates how subjective the rubric has become for evaluators to assess quality teaching performance. A great deal of research suggests that an average educator becomes mostly proficient in year six or seven (Wong, 2018; Wiggins, 2011). So, with how the rubric is applied, who can achieve such standards in a short window of time utilizing this methodology?

Some scholars, such as Grant Wiggins (2011) and Lang-Raad (2018), argue that normalizing educative assessment benchmarks provide teachers with more opportunities to grow into their profession rather than being driven by curriculum and evaluative rubric initiatives. Wiggins and Lang-Raad assert that evaluative tools are often too-far reaching for younger teachers entering the profession. By then, season vets have learned how to strategize effective practices and behaviors to achieve the desired benchmarks

scores (Morrissey, 2016). Unfortunately, this has stressed younger educators, particularly those with limited classroom experience, with believing they can never, truly, measure up to the benchmarks of what defines quality or effective teaching. Often the case, teacher unions, or educators have little say in the development and creation of their professional rubric (Author, 2019).

Generating a rephrasing of Danielson's framework to align with a more student-centered and teacher-driven assessment would bring greater depth and more reflection for developing educators. As a result, they will not feel restrained, inhibited, and over-taxed to live up to a point score that determines whether or not they are effective. Refer to figure 1 to display a potential example of what a reframing of Danielson construct could appear as (Center for Urban Teaching Development: Cultivating the Teaching Practice, 2018).

Each category is designed to represent the strengths and challenges the teachers manifest, allowing them to discover through mentoring, professional development, and best practices of how to continue to grow in each area. With applying this model, there is a sort of self-evaluative construct established so that quality teaching seems attainable, non-subjective, and participatory. The model also infuses an educator's ability to apply conceptual knowledge to access procedural practices while applying meta-cognitive tutelage. As a result, this can further strengthen a teacher's ability to achieve specific levels of accomplishments.

10. Crisis of Black-and-Brown Educator Evaluations

The pressure to abide and obtain quality evaluative scores applying Danielson's framework has become even more problematic for teachers of color, mainly black-and- brown professionals. Unfortunately, some students, parents, and educators portray pronounced subjectiveness toward this population, especially when it comes to effective teaching practices (Rosenthal, 2002; Weinstein, 20002). Limited exposure to blacks' behaviors, cultural patterns, and interactions further affects how black-and-brown educators are seen as ineffective practitioners. Despite research dispelling this notion of black-and-brown educators, biases are often couched with the way the framework is scored toward evaluating their performance (Barnum, 2018).

According to *Ed Weekly's* findings, "Still, teachers of color, especially black teachers, are 50 percent more likely to receive low evaluation ratings than white teachers within the same schools" (p. 2). A misinterpretation of cultural factors and biased perceptions have a lot to do with why too many black educators are seen as ineffective. How a black educator interacts with students and the diverse ways they choose to instructionally support learners should be understood by school officials before an evaluation. This means administration requires training and an awareness of the culturally responsive practices that often occur in a classroom led by a black educator (Kunjufu, 2002). When such professional development does not happen, too often, black teachers' tonality, expressions, and behaviorisms are seen as threatening, professionally disengaging, and not attentive to school norms. Often, the case of how well a black or brown educator has mastered whiteness dictates their score on the rubric (Kunjufu, 2002;

Embid, 2017; Barnum, 2018). Thus, they receive a lower evaluation score (Embid, 2017). The study further found that “Low-rated teachers of color are more likely to leave the profession than low-rated white teachers. The evaluation rating is a more meaningful predictor of teachers leaving than race or gender” (p. 3). When black educators receive inadequate evaluations and overtaxed critiques, they do not just leave a school, and they find it doubly hard to secure employment at another school (Barnum, 2018). They often leave the profession, which explains in part why the numbers of black educators continue to drop. So, do not only their schools close but also the inadequate evaluations that black teachers receive helps to push them out of education.

Adopting a revised evaluative approach to assess black-and-brown educators seems more necessary than ever before if society views them as essential figures in the classroom. Even more so, administrators utilizing this method must see the importance of receiving cultural coaching and responsive practices to score and evaluate black-and-brown educators effectively. This is essential if there remains an expectation to have the presence of a diverse teaching population serve as the intellectual stewards, role models, and mentors for all children.

11. Conclusion: Redefining Exceptionalism

How effective a teacher performs in a classroom assuredly dictates the level of academic success a student will achieve (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Good teaching-and-learning practices matter. Teaching students to set goals and strive to reach measurable success remains just as important. Although people should indeed strive to accomplish amazing feats, it should not exist as the standard-bearer for everyone to adhere to. Exceptionalism, as a theoretical postulation, should not be normed while defining whether or not a person is successful. Instead, success is something intuitive and sacred for the person achieving it.

Despite the exceptional American narrative of being the “beacon of light”, this remains very much a myth rather than truth (Loewen, 2008). Undoubtedly, there is fallibility in everyone’s narrative, and deciding not to admit or remain challenged to correct past wrongs only reinforces supremacist and narcissistic clauses. Public education, by its origins, reflects the racial and economic complexities fueled throughout society. As a result, education, indeed, should no longer adopt the exceptional tenet into its discourse. There remains a lot of what is right and positive about education. Specifically, with the way, the majority of teachers strive every day to improve students’ intellectual capacities. The liberal cannons fostered in education continue to beckon and catapult young people to learn and achieve success. However, the way society defines success has become too augmented and insanely taxing. This explains why a revised term is required in education to help people deviate away from the exceptional narrative rooted in a Darwinian construct.

Doing so will revitalize and modify Danielson’s evaluative tool, and not entirely push it out, to redetermine who is fit for teaching. Also, a reframing of the term, success will better guide and navigate parents’ and students’ digestion of achievable benchmarks. Ultimately, redefining success adds value and

positivity to society versus embracing elitist diatribes that justify divisions and inequity.

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