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PLACING EQUITY FRONT AND CENTER
SOME THOUGHTS ON TRANSFORMING TEACHER EDUCATION FOR A NEW CENTURY

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This article explores what it means for teacher education programs to place diversity front and center. Using a social justice perspective on teacher education, the author argues that schools and colleges of education need to radically transform their policies and practices if they are to become places where teachers and prospective teachers learn to become effective with students of all backgrounds in U.S. schools. Specifically, she suggests that teacher education programs need to take a stand on social justice and diversity, make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education, and promote teaching as a life-long journey of transformation. The author provides several examples of how to do this.

To have knowledge of another culture does not mean to be able to repeat one or two words in a student's language, nor is it to celebrate an activity or sing a song related to their culture. To acknowledge and respect is to be able to understand and apply this knowledge to everyday classroom activities. It is to be able to make changes or modifications in one's curriculum or pedagogy when the needs of the students have not been served. It is to be patient, tolerant, curious, creative, eager to learn, and most important, non-authoritarian with students. In order for a teacher to promote excellence in education, there has to be a real and honest connection between the needs and cultural values of teachers and students. This is culturally responsive education.

—Lizette Román (Nieto, 1999, p. 144)

Lizette Román, a bilingual teacher, wrote these words in a journal that she kept for a class she took with me a number of years ago. For her, values, attitudes, and beliefs that respect and honor students are far more significant than notions of multicultural education and culturally responsive education that remain at a superficial level. Her journal excerpt reflects a deep understanding of what it means to develop a multicultural perspective with a social justice orientation.

How can teacher educators approach diversity with a social justice orientation? I started thinking about this question many years ago when I first began to teach teachers and prospective teachers. The field was in its infancy in 1980 when I taught my first course in multicultural education, but it was already clear to me that much of what took place in classrooms and schools in the name of diversity was little more than window dressing. Back then, adding a unit on "Christmas Festivals Around the World," or an assembly program during "Brotherhood Week" was about as far as attention to multicultural perspectives went. A few years later, some schools were commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and including a few examples of multicultural children's literature in the curriculum.

Yet, I was beginning to see that most approaches to multicultural education avoided asking difficult questions related to access, equity, and social justice. These questions strike at the heart of what education in our society should be, and they are, above all, about schools' institutional practices. Although it has long been a stated goal in the United States that all youngsters, regardless of family background, should benefit from their education, many students have not. School conditions in

our society have been consistently, systematically, and disproportionately unequal and unfair, and the major casualties have been those students who differ significantly in social class, race, ethnicity, native language, and gender from what is considered the "mainstream" (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Tyack, 1995; Weinberg, 1977).

Schools and colleges of education have not been innocent bystanders in the history of this educational inequality. On the contrary, despite recent attempts in teacher education programs across the country to include multicultural issues, many programs have been steeped in negative assumptions about diverse populations based on deficit theories. These theories include the perspective that students from non-dominant groups are genetically or culturally inferior, or that they bring little of value to their education. In addition, teacher preparation programs have been characterized by a conservative ideology that emphasizes assimilation and the maintenance of the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Placing the blame for student failure primarily on students and their families has freed schools of education from considering how their own policies and practices in teacher education have colluded to perpetuate academic failure for those students who differ from the majority.

Negative assumptions in teacher education programs about diversity are due to several reasons, including the nature of the population served by teacher education programs, the assimilationist ideology undergirding these programs, the types of courses and practical experiences that prospective teachers receive, and the nature of the professoriate. The nation's teachers have become more monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual in the past quarter century: The percentage of White teachers grew from 88% in 1971 to 90.7% in 1996, whereas the number of Black teachers decreased from 8.1% to 7.3%, and those classified as "other" have decreased from 3.6% to 2.0% during the same time (National Education Association, 1997). Moreover, the majority of current teachers have had neither extensive per-

sonal experiences nor professional training in cross-cultural issues, and most would prefer to work in a suburban setting teaching White, middle-class youths (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Schools of education have been equally slow to increase their faculty of Latino, African American, indigenous, and Asian backgrounds. Between 87% and 96% of professors of education are White, a glaring statistic that reinforces what one researcher has called the "pitifully homogeneous" higher education faculty (Irvine, 1992).

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Today, I am even more concerned about the sluggish pace with which teacher education programs are addressing social justice and equity. In spite of the enormous changes that have taken place in our society, some schools and colleges of education are still functioning as if we were preparing teachers for the classrooms of half a century ago. But we are living in a new century, with growing cultural and linguistic diversity, international communication, and tremendous access to information. It is also an age characterized by enormous inequities and a lack of democratic opportunities for many people. An education that is both rigorous and critical is absolutely essential if young people are to participate meaningfully in this new century.

The tremendous demographic changes evident in our society have serious implications for teacher education. Between 1981 and 1990 alone, more than 7,300,000 people immigrated to the United States, an increase of 63% over the previous decade (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). The very nature of immigration to the United States has also changed dramatically: Whereas previous immigrants came almost exclusively from Europe, most now come from Latin America and Asia (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). In addition, about 14% of the nation's population speaks a language other than English, compared with just 11% in 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993; Waggoner, 1994). These changes are also visible in our public schools: By 1992, 50 of the largest 99 school dis-

tricts in the United States had enrollments of more than 50% students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994).

Racial and ethnic segregation has also been on the rise. In fact, the largest backward movement toward segregation for Blacks since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision occurred between 1991 and 1995 (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997). For Latinos, the situation is even more dramatic: By 1995, 74% of Latinos were attending predominately "minority" schools, and these are also among the most high-poverty schools in the nation. Latinos are currently the most segregated of all ethnic groups in our schools (Orfield et al., 1997). At the same time, poverty in the United States has also increased: The percentage of persons living below the poverty level was 12.6% in 1970, 13% in 1980, 13.5% in 1990, and 14.5% in 1994 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Poverty is especially grim among people of color: 33.1% of all African Americans, 30.6% of Latinos, and 18.8% of other people of color live in poverty, as compared to 9.9% of White residents (Taeuber, 1996).

ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS DIVERSITY

Since the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) (1973) endorsed the essence of multicultural education by adopting a widely disseminated policy statement, *No One Model American*, the responsibility for schools of education to respond to issues of pluralism in their curriculum and practices has been on the public agenda. The statement, seen in the light of the more critical approaches to multicultural education that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (McLaren, 1995; Nieto, 2000a; Sleeter & Grant, 1987), may sound hopelessly naive and incomplete. However, in 1973, it was the first clear indication that attention to race, difference, and social justice were finally to be taken seriously by the educational establishment.

Only 4 years after this statement was adopted, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) issued standards that required all of its member institu-

tions to pay more focused attention to diversity in their curriculum, instruction, and field placements. However, in spite of the good intentions of the AACTE statement and the subsequent NCATE standards, Gollnick (1995), in an extensive review of changes in teacher education over two decades, found few substantive changes related to diversity in colleges of teacher education. The slow pace of change has resulted in uneven efforts to transform the curriculum, programs, and clinical placements of preservice and practicing teachers.

What is the responsibility of schools of education to prepare teachers to work with students of diverse racial, ethnic, social class, and language backgrounds? What should all teachers know about their students, and what skills do teachers need to be effective with them? Teacher education programs with specializations in multicultural and bilingual education, in English as a Second Language (ESL), and even more so, those that combine these strands, are better equipped to prepare teachers to answer these questions and, therefore, to face the challenges of the growing student diversity in our nation. Programs without such strands are frequently guided by the assumption that the job of schools of education is to train teachers to work in "regular" (i.e., White, middle-class, and monolingual English) classrooms. Typically, teacher education programs give little consideration to the fact that all classrooms in the future will have students of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds and whose first language may not be English.

In what follows, I propose three ways in which equity can be placed front and center in teacher education programs. I arrived at these suggestions based on many years of work in teacher education, and on some recent attention I have given to language diversity in particular (Nieto, 2000b). It is my belief that schools and colleges of education need to consider these issues when educating teachers and future teachers, whether or not these teachers expect to work in racially and ethnically mixed or bilingual settings. Specifically, I suggest that teacher education programs need to (a) take a stand on social justice and diversity, (b) make social jus-

tice ubiquitous in teacher education, and (c) promote teaching as a life-long journey of transformation. I will briefly describe what I mean by each of these.

Take a Stand on Social Justice and Diversity

From the time that compulsory schooling in the United States began, the ideals of equality and fairness have struggled with the ideals of pluralism and diversity (Dewey, 1916; Spring, 1997). That is, the balance between *unum* and *pluribus* has always been contested. Answers to the question of what to do about diversity have ranged from grudging acceptance of differences to brutal policies that enforced the view that there is only one way to be American. How schools of education answer the question of diversity can result either in assimilation as a goal, in which case, students of diverse backgrounds are expected to abandon their identities in order to succeed, or to think of ways to use diversity as a resource in the service of learning.

When schools and colleges of education take a stand on social justice and diversity, they can better prepare teachers to work with students of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Although the mission statements espoused by schools and colleges of education are grandiose declarations about the purposes of education in a democratic society, they often have little to do with teachers' day-to-day practices. Faculties need to focus on putting these lofty statements into practice by preparing teachers to help their students face the challenges of a pluralistic and rapidly changing society. Practicing and prospective teachers also need to learn how to promote the learning of all students, and to develop educational environments that are fair and affirming. When they focus on issues such as these, schools of education are more likely to design programs that advance the values, attitudes, and skills that teachers need to be fair and effective with all students.

Make Social Justice Ubiquitous in Teacher Education

Social justice and diversity are not the same thing. Given the vastly unequal educational outcomes among students of different backgrounds, equalizing conditions for student learning needs to be at the core of a concern for diversity. Thus, "celebrating diversity" through special assembly programs, multicultural dinners, or ethnic celebrations, if they do not also confront the structural inequalities that exist in schools, are hollow activities. A concern for social justice means looking critically at why and how our schools are unjust for some students. It means analyzing school policies and practices—the curriculum, textbooks and materials, instructional strategies, tracking, recruitment and hiring of staff, and parent involvement strategies—that devalue the identities of some students while overvaluing others. When social justice is a major lens with which we view the education of all students of all backgrounds, then diversity gains a place of prominence in the teacher education curriculum.

Although there is a need to continue to offer specialized courses for bilingual, ESL, special education, and other teachers who spend most of their time with specific groups of students, as a profession we can no longer afford to teach only specialized teachers about children of diverse backgrounds. All courses need to be infused with content related to diversity, from secondary math methods to reading. Prepracticum and practicum placements, other field experiences, course assignments, and course readings also should reflect support for racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and other types of diversity. Schools and colleges of education might also rethink admissions requirements, giving priority to candidates who are fluent in at least one language other than English and who have had extensive personal and professional experiences with learners of diverse backgrounds. In sum, diversity would become part of the normal experience for all prospective teachers.

Infusing the curriculum with content in diversity may help expand the vision of prospective teachers. Using a social-justice lens can also influence the way that future teachers think about, relate to, and work with students of diverse backgrounds (Cochran-Smith, 1997). However, simply changing the curriculum and the nature of the students in teacher preparation programs is not enough. Like most teachers, most teacher educators are also White, middle-class, and monolingual English-speakers, and many have had little academic experience or training in diversity. Teacher educators must rethink how their courses need to change to include content about racism and other biases, about their attitudes and values concerning students of various backgrounds, and about strategies for working effectively with diverse populations (Howard, 1999; McIntosh, 1988). Even more important, if we are serious about giving diversity a positive status in the general teacher education program, schools of education will have to recruit a more diverse faculty with specific training and experience in multicultural education and second-language acquisition.

Promote Teaching as a Life-Long Journey of Transformation

The process of affirming the diversity of students begins first as a teacher's journey. A journey presupposes that the traveler will change along the way, and teaching is no exception. Moreover, if we expect teachers to venture on a journey of transformation, teacher educators must be willing to join them. Until we, as a profession and within our individual schools of education, take stock of ourselves by questioning and challenging our own biases and values, little will change for prospective teachers.

Learning to affirm students is not just an individual journey, however. It is equally a collective and institutional journey that happens outside individual classrooms and college courses (for a detailed discussion of the following ideas, see Nieto, 1999). To help prepare them for the journey, schools of education need to give teachers and future teachers opportunities to do at least the following:

Face and accept their own identities. As has already been mentioned, most teachers in the United States are White, monolingual, middle-class females and they are teaching a student body increasingly diverse in native language, race, ethnicity, and social class. Due to their own limited experiences with people of diverse backgrounds, they seldom question their racial, native language, or social class privilege (McIntosh, 1988). One consequence of this way of thinking is that culture and identity themselves are defined as problems. Yet, teachers also have cultural identities, even though many of them may have learned to forget or deny those identities. Likewise, although teacher educators may assume that prospective teachers of African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American backgrounds are somehow automatically prepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds simply by virtue of their own backgrounds, this is not always true (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Nieto, in press). Schools and colleges of education need to provide prospective teachers of all backgrounds—not just those from majority backgrounds—with opportunities to reflect on their identities and privilege before teaching children from diverse backgrounds.

Become learners of their students' realities. Teachers and prospective teachers also need to learn to become students of their students. This implies at least two types of processes. First, teachers need to learn *about* their students, a change from the one-way learning that usually takes place in classrooms. For this to happen, teachers must become researchers of their students. Second, teachers need to create spaces in which they can learn *with* their students, and in which students are encouraged to learn about themselves and one another. As in the quote by Román at the beginning of this article, learning about one's students is not simply a technical strategy or a process of picking up a few cultural tidbits. Teachers do not become culturally or linguistically responsive simply by taking a course where these concerns are reduced to strategies. Even more pivotal than strategies are the attitudes of teachers when they are in the position of learners. Developing a learning climate

where these attitudes can develop is an important role for teacher education programs.

Develop strong and meaningful relationships with their students. Students learn to think of themselves as learners when they identify with school and with their teachers. This means developing strong and meaningful relationships with their teachers. In the words of Cummins (1996), implementing true educational reform that has a goal of turning around deep-seated and long-term discrimination requires "*personal redefinitions* of the ways in which *individual educators* interact with the students and communities they serve" (emphasis in original, p. 136). This type of redefinition is longed for by students, as I discovered in research with students of diverse backgrounds (Nieto, 2000a). Ron Morris, a young man who had experienced little success in school until he reached an alternative high school that was based on a model of genuine relationships with students, explained the problem eloquently:

> When a teacher becomes a teacher, she acts like a teacher instead of a person. She takes her title as now she's mechanical, somebody just running it. Teachers shouldn't deal with students like we're machines. You're a person, I'm a person. We come to school and we all [should] act like people. (Nieto, 2000a, p. 265)

Become multilingual and multicultural. Teacher preparation programs can wax eloquent about the value of cultural diversity and the benefits of knowing a second language, but if they do not provide their students with the opportunity to learn another language or to become multicultural in outlook, they lose a vital opportunity to put their beliefs into practice. Schools of education need to make it worthwhile for their students to become multilingual and multicultural by having incentives that help them view diversity as an asset. These incentives can include credit for learning another language, refusing to accept course work that does not reflect attention to diversity, and support for academic work that is tied to community service.

Learn to challenge racism and other biases. If prospective teachers are expected to simply follow the decreed curriculum, and if they are not taught to question standard practices such as rigid ability-tracking or high-stakes testing, they are unlikely ever to question the fairness of these practices. Helping prospective teachers become critical is a fundamental role of teacher education programs, and it means challenging not only the policies and practices of the schools they will work in, but also those of the teacher education programs they are in. A critical stance challenges teachers to question seemingly natural and neutral practices. For example, if teachers want to help all students develop literacy, it makes little sense to ask parents who speak a language other than English to speak English to their children at home. In teacher education programs, a critical stance means that future teachers and professors both should question practices such as isolating multicultural and bilingual education as an elective or screening practices that make it impossible for a more diverse student body to become teachers (including an overemphasis on grades with little attention paid to skills they might already have in language ability and cultural awareness). Facing and challenging racism and other biases is both an inspiring and a frightening prospect. It is especially difficult for young teachers (and undergraduate or graduate students) who have little power or influence among more seasoned school staffs. That is why all teachers also need to develop a community of critical friends.

Develop a community of critical friends. It is imperative that future teachers learn to become critical colleagues, that is, teachers who are capable of developing respectful but critical relationships with their peers. Working in isolation, no teacher can single-handedly effect the changes that are needed in an entire school, at least not in the long term. Developing a community of critical friends opens up teachers' classrooms and their perspectives, so that they can acknowledge that all students should be the concern of all teachers. What is needed are not simply peers who support one another, essential as this may be, but also peers who debate, critique, and challenge one another to go beyond their current ideas and practices. Developing a community of critical friends is one way of facing difficult issues, and it is one more step in

the journey of transformation. In teacher education programs, professors can support collaborative work by assigning students to work together on projects, and they can model it by teaching collaboratively with their colleagues. Teachers and future teachers who learn to work collaboratively and in a spirit of solidarity in their teacher education programs will be better prepared to help change schools to become more equitable and caring places for students of all backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

Although individual teachers can make a tremendous difference in the lives of their students, my focus on teaching as a journey is not meant to imply that teachers alone can change the schools. To make a significant difference on a broad scale, individual efforts must be joined by collective and institutional changes. At all three levels, teacher education programs have a critical role to play in pushing the agenda for social justice and equity in our nation's schools. They can do so by offering teachers and prospective teachers courses and other experiences that focus on questions of equity and diversity and that challenge deficit notions about the capabilities of students of diverse backgrounds.

What they learn in their teacher education programs can have an enormous impact on the attitudes and practices that teachers bring with them to the schools where they work. If teachers and prospective teachers learn to challenge societal inequities that place some students at a disadvantage over others, if they learn to question unjust institutional policies and practices, if they learn about and use the talents of students and their families in the curriculum, if they undergo a process of personal transformation based on their own identities and experiences, and, finally, if they are prepared to engage with colleagues in a collaborative and imaginative encounter to transform their own practices to achieve equal and high-quality education for all students, then the outcome is certain to be a more positive one than is currently the case.

The ideas I have briefly sketched in this article suggest some of the changes needed to help

schools and universities shift from a focus on assimilation as their goal to an agenda of respect and affirmation for all students of all backgrounds. Lizette Román, the bilingual teacher whose words began this article, suggested that culturally responsive education needs to go beyond learning a few words in a student's native language or celebrating a cultural activity. If teacher education faculties take these suggestions concerning diversity and social justice to heart, they must be willing to undergo a profound change in outlook, ideology, and curriculum. Through such a process, schools and colleges of education can become more hopeful places, because in the long run, we will be preparing better teachers for all students. The promise of social justice and equal educational opportunity for all, still an elusive dream in our society, will be closer to becoming a reality.

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