



Responding to the Moment

Social Justice Teacher Education for Systems Change

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Abstract

This article is a call to action to prepare new teachers to be social justice change agents both inside and outside of the classroom. Framing this work is a driving question inspired by the current political moment and articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*: How can teacher education programs better equip pre-service teachers to form *and* maintain social justice commitments in school environments that are resistant to change? In response, four skill areas are discussed: (1) developing a social justice pedagogy for systems change; (2) understanding, navigating, and shifting organizational cultures; (3) participating in educational governance; and (4) building coalitions within and beyond schools.

Introduction

At present, the United States is experiencing a global pandemic for which no vaccine exists and widespread civil unrest in response to systemic and violent

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racism against African Americans. For months, schools have been closed and instruction has moved online, medical care facilities and public health officials have mobilized without proper supplies or clear federal guidance, and unemployment numbers have skyrocketed because much of the nation is sheltered in place. Images of public demonstrations from across the country and globe fill the airways and flood social media, as young people from diverse walks of life defy local curfews and fight against police brutality and White supremacy. Words like “uncertain” and “unprecedented” increasingly frame our day-to-day conversations and reflect anxiety about what is to come.

This moment magnifies the gross inequities in American society and brings focus to decades of neglect to the systems and institutions responsible for promoting and protecting the public good (Ruff, 2020). For many, these events are cause for expressions of rage and frustration, tough conversations, and organized action to dismantle the mechanisms of oppressive social relations. For teacher educators, it is a time to commit our programs to providing new teachers with tools for reinventing schools. This article takes inspiration from the sociopolitical climate and builds upon the work of this issue’s authors to call for a reconceptualization of teacher education as teaching for social justice and systemic change. To this end, the sections that follow center on responding to this question: How can teacher education programs better equip pre-service teachers to form *and* maintain social justice commitments in school environments that are resistant to change?

Equipping New Teachers as Change Agents

The scholarship in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* provides insights into an answer to this question. Together, the six studies have implications for how to reorient teacher preparation programs to the goal of cultivating effective change agents through coursework, field placement, clinical experiences, induction, and classroom pedagogy. Four skill areas that build from this theme are: developing a social justice pedagogy for systems change; understanding, navigating, and shifting organizational cultures; participating in educational governance; and building coalitions within and beyond schools.

Developing a Social Justice Pedagogy for Systems Change

Across the nation, teacher education programs emphasize culturally responsive approaches to working with diverse student populations. To this effect, introductory courses often build from literature that stresses supporting pre-service teachers to reflect on and recognize their privilege, positionality, and biases to humanize and recognize the unique assets of diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Two pieces in this issue add to this literature and illustrate the complexity of this developmental stage. Minkoff explores how intergroup dialogue can

serve as a vehicle in the development of “sociocritical pedagogy” and Karabon and Gomez Johnson investigate the subjectivities of and conceptions of culture held by preservice teachers in the rural Midwest shape pedagogical practices. Despite efforts to confront bias through reflection and discussion on privilege and hegemony, the latter study found that ethnocentrism persisted. Together, these projects illustrate the challenges associated with shifting pre-service teachers from cultural deficit perspectives to asset-based views of learners.

While these projects underscore the importance of supporting pre-service teachers to move beyond their own cultural views, the research settings of these inquiries are not in places where diverse youth’s voices and perspectives are directly represented. The literature on youth-driven, collaborative, and problem-based engagement can offer a powerful setting for prospective teachers to witness cultural differences in action. Youth participatory action research, as a case in point, as well as other models of community responsive pedagogy build from young people’s perspectives and cultivate both critical thinking and active participation in reforming the social world (Titiangco-Cubales et al, 2014; Cammorrota, 2015). This context complements the findings in Beck’s case study on implementing social justice teacher education, which took place in a teacher residency program. Residency programs, like other settings where teacher reflection occurs while immersed in the lives of learners, provide rich opportunities to recognize cultural differences while engaging students in systems change projects.

Understanding, Navigating, and Shifting Organizational Cultures

Navigating schools to advocate for equity and inclusion poses numerous challenges for new teachers. In particular, the realities of limited time, materials, and resources and pressure to conform to institutional policies and practices can make holding onto values of equity and inclusion extremely difficult. Coursework for pre-service teachers should include theories and practices for understanding how organizational cultures form and evolve so new teachers can identify forces that maintain the status quo and recognize opportunities to push for meaningful changes. In constructing these units of study, instructors can borrow from the literature on school reform and educational leadership related to distributive cognition and learning (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). In this issue, Truxaw’s investigation of dialogic discourse in a first-grade dual-language classroom highlights the ways in which knowledge about organizational culture can be utilized to better respond to the needs of diverse learners through tailored support.

Participating in Educational Governance

Over the past twenty years, educational leadership programs have increasingly added courses on policy to equip school administrators with the means to navigate state and federal influences on curriculum, instruction, and other aspects

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of education that were once solely the domain of local decision-makers and practitioners (Timar, 2010). Teacher education has not followed suit, and many programs neglect educational governance as a critical dimension of preparation for the field. It is often the case that newly credentialed teachers have little understanding of how and where decisions are made about the resources and practices that shape the conditions of their day-to-day work, and it is likely that even fewer enter the profession knowing how to participate in these processes. In their analysis, teacher educators, Navarro, Shah, Valdez, Dover, and Henning, identify challenges to equitable and culturally sustaining pedagogy such as school restructuring, mass teacher layoffs, school leadership harassment, and curricular reforms. These conditions, these scholars argue, directly and negatively impact social justice teaching. Moreover, these conditions also provide rich examples of why more teachers need to be at the table in places where decisions are made about how and for whom schools work.

Building Coalitions Within and Beyond Schools

An important skill for growing their commitment to social justice is for new teachers to build supportive networks to navigate, resist, and change school structures that maintain social inequities. Implications from Wilhelm, Woods, del Rosal, and Wu's examination of teacher advice networks suggest that teaching pre-service teachers network strategies in preparation for their induction experience is a worthwhile way to help them navigate their school setting and protect their social justice commitment. Similarly, new teachers also need explicit instruction on how to connect with community. A significant body of literature focuses linking the learning needs of students of color to their communities (Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2007). For teachers who are not from these communities, it can be challenging to know how to identify places and build relationships that will bring local wisdom to the classroom. Pre-service teachers often need support on how to identify and build relationships with wisdom holders, community leaders and elders, and other resources to bridge the social lives of students to the classroom, listen to and amplify the concerns of families and other local stakeholders, and mobilize for more culturally responsive schools.

Recommitting the Field to Systemic Change

Teacher educators cannot control how their students' practices evolve once they leave our programs. But we can implement program content to better empower new teachers and evaluate which and how well elements of this work provide alumni with the skills to develop and maintain socially just practices, enjoy longevity in the field, and institute organizational and systems change for inclusion and equity. Furthermore, we can also advocate for induction policies and programs that pro-

mote the protection of social justice goals and formulate longitudinal research that explores how mid- and late-career educators maintain their commitment to equity and inclusion in structures that were unfriendly to their efforts.

The systemic nature of discrimination and violence against African Americans and other minoritized groups requires all of us to examine how existing paradigms cultivate and maintain subtle and pervasive structures of oppression. Teacher education programs often conceptualize the work of teaching as inward looking, or focused solely on the classroom as a self-contained environment that can be relatively insulated from the outside world. While the classroom is among the most significant tools for providing conditions for learning, new teachers also need an introduction to the field that emphasizes how systems such as housing, health, food, and law enforcement impact their students *and* how to engage in advocacy that articulates these linkages and pushes for change.

Undoubtedly, the impediments to implementing the skills discussed in this article are significant and many. Over the years, preparation programs have lessened the number of courses, units, and clinical hours to fill labor shortages and streamline the process of placing pre-service teachers into schools and classrooms. If after completing our programs new teachers struggle to maintain culturally sustaining pedagogies, create conditions for effective and equitable practices, and participate in school governance, we need to resist market-based influences that keep new teachers from being the active agents for change that they can be and that we need. The struggle to eradicate systemic racism and other forms of oppression will continue. But in this moment, let us respond to the call for change and take deliberate action to better prepare teachers to exercise power in schools and transform our education system.

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