
Seeking Home: Portrait of a Changing Urban Teacher Education Program

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The value of teacher education is being questioned at the same time as schools are facing the challenges of budget shortfalls and unfunded mandates. Efforts to professionalize teaching are being undermined by overly authoritarian control of the curriculum and test-driven reforms. But schools of education do know how to stay the course. This article is a portrait of one teacher education program working with the local community schools to bring about change and to prepare teachers who are culturally competent discipline experts.

Portraiture is a method of inquiry that seeks to illuminate (Lightfoot,1997). It is a qualitative inquiry method with elements of ethnography, case study, and narrative--a blend of aesthetics and empiricism that aims to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. What follows here is a portrait of the teacher education program at my university. This portrait was created as one of multiple teacher education portraits for an AERA session chaired by Patrick and Karen Jenlink (2005) in April of 2005. The session focused on the question of how teacher education programs are responding to the challenges of preparing teachers to teach in classrooms that are increasingly multiracial and multicultural at the same time as they deal with the politics of federal and/or state mandated accountability and testing. Specifically, the session organizers wanted to know how our urban teacher education programs attempt to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive, politically conscious, and pedagogically concerned with issues of social justice.

The following portrait starts with an exploration of the challenging context of our teacher education work because external forces compel us to do what Neilsen (2006) calls "seeking home." As a learning community, we continually ask "who we are in heart and mind" (p. 25) and right ourselves in relationship to disquieting influences, doing what we can "to be at home in the world." (p. 25) It is a challenge to be at home in this postmodern world where we can grasp the significant relationship that exists between education and the greater society and understand the importance of equity and democracy, but, along with our public school colleagues, experience constant compromises to systems of power and influence over which we have no control. The second part of the portrait highlights how we manage to claim a bit of solid ground in

this constantly changing landscape and create a space where we can help new teachers learn to interrupt the flow of cultural edicts and envision more just and democratic schools.

The Challenging Context of Our Work

Scene One: I am sitting in the audience at the annual conference of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) and a panel of Washington consultants (Griffith et. al, 2005) warns that the current administration is interested in funding alternative routes to teaching. These insiders want to impress on us as teacher educators that our work is poorly understood and little valued by the current powers that be. They explain that many policy makers believe universities educate new teachers primarily for the tuition dollars, paying little attention to teacher quality or teacher shortage areas. Lacking any real understanding of what it takes to prepare and retain teachers, these decision makers believe in licensing teachers on the basis of content knowledge tests. The speakers challenge, “Where is the research that shows that teachers educated in your teacher education programs are adding value to the American education system?” And suddenly we are wondering ourselves why we have not focused more on making a case for the work we do.

Scene Two: I am writing a letter to the tenure committee at our university to help them understand why my colleague’s collaborative, community-based research agenda is worthy of tenure and not an abdication of individual scholarship. In the School of Education, we have to make our decisions about research projects and significant work in coordination with the community and schools. Our work is also directly impacted by the bureaucratic constraints of licensing teachers. We are not free to make all of our own decisions, but rather must consider how our programs meet legal requirements that are subject to change at the whim of non-educators in the public arena. For instance, we now have to prepare our elementary education students to pass a “phonics” test put in place by our state legislators, and two years ago, we were given a year to implement an unfunded mandate to create a post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program requiring only 18 graduate credits to complete.

Scene Three: It is spring, and I am teaching preservice teachers a class at a local middle school. This school has changed since we first started working here. It has been impacted by the *No Child Left Behind Act*, largely an unfunded mandate (Karp, 2001), that has made testing the central focus of all efforts to improve student learning. Today the teachers are in the next classroom having a celebration because their students’ test scores shot up. It is not much wonder. At a five day institute last summer, a team of teachers and the principal from this school were taught a variety of strategies for improving the school’s

test scores. For the first six weeks of the school year, the entire school did nothing but prepare students to take the state tests in language arts and mathematics. The science and social studies teachers, even the art and the gym teachers, participated in practicing for these tests everyday for the six weeks. As a school, they solved the short term problem of not making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), but the students lost six weeks of instructional time that would normally have been spent on more in-depth curriculum and despite the faculty's best efforts, the school scores took a terrible dip the following year.

We get our teacher education students off campus and out into the schools from day one of the program. But the value of this is questionable when even our most stalwart school partners, who have in the past operated from clear teaching and learning frameworks, are reshaping their teaching practices in response to this overwhelming pressure to raise test scores. They feel they have no choice given the authoritarian dictates coming from central administrators who believe that weekly test preparation exercises are more important than integrated units of study. They are being held accountable for these kinds of preparations rather than children's deep and insightful learning.

Our local Title I schools are the most beleaguered of all. They have lost the right to make their own curriculum choices and have to choose from programs based on Scientifically Based Reading Research. These programs focus on direct instruction rather than the reading process and provide the poorest students with unadorned and simplistic reading selections while students of privilege continue to learn from a wealth of interesting and content-rich reading materials. Supposedly, research shows these materials and methods are best suited to teaching low performing students. But this is not the research done by teacher educators, it is the research done by businesses and think tanks with a product or ideology to promote (Garan, 2002).

Unfortunately, our state and local policy context is no better. In 1992, the Indiana legislature established the Indiana Professional Standards Board as separate agency for "governing the preparation, testing, licensing, induction, and re-licensing of Indiana's education professionals." (IPSB Website) This agency took on the task of creating new professional standards and licensing framework for teachers in Indiana. This meant all of our programs in teacher education had to be redesigned to meet new standards, a process that took countless hours. In 2002, we made the shift to the new license framework which includes a two-year induction period for new teachers. These new teachers are to be mentored by specially trained mentor teachers as they complete portfolios in their second year, but the state has never provided the funding for the training of mentors or the scoring of portfolios. School districts have been scrambling to meet the provisions of the law as best

they could, but now in 2005, the House Education Committee is proposing that the Indiana Professional Standards Board should be rolled back into the Department of Education where it would no longer have any autonomy in setting policy. Clearly our efforts to raise the bar in terms of the new professionals entering the teaching field are in jeopardy of being for naught. High, performance-based standards get in the way of an agenda to get teachers into the field through alternative routes.

In the meantime, the mayor of Indianapolis has been given the right to charter schools and nearly a dozen charter schools have been opened in the city. The large school district with whom we partner is now losing about 500 students a year and because the laws have been written so that the dollars follow the child, this district will lose about \$6 million through this funnel. (IPS Fact Sheet) This is especially damaging in face of the state budget for education which provides differential funding to school districts based on a variety of factors. Growing school districts get a higher percentage of the budget than shrinking districts. The district we work with would qualify as a growing district if it were not losing so many students to charter schools. The district is also supposed to get additional funds because it serves so many children at risk of academic failure, but the “complexity-index” does not cover the cost of services to these children. For example, it costs the district approximately \$2 million more than it gets each year to buy the textbooks the students need and \$4 million to pay for the services needed by ESL learners. The 2006-2007 biennium budget being provided by the state is going to leave the district with \$17 million less than it needs to provide a basic education to the children it serves. The district is in the process of pink-slipping 200 teachers and letting everyone know they can expect class-sizes of 40 students when the budget goes into effect.

It is no secret that our city schools are failing. Seventy per cent of the students who enter our community high schools fail to graduate. The schools are not overcoming the effects of extreme poverty, homelessness, foster care, and limited English. But there is a growing community commitment to do something to make a difference. A local foundation provided a major grant to one of the small private universities nearby to provide leadership in creating change. A small think tank has been established, and they are providing technical assistance to the school district, looking to the small school movement in cities like Boston and New York for ideas. They have attracted the interest of the Gates Foundation and are in the process of converting five high schools into multiple small schools. It is an ambitious group, driven by moral commitment and the belief that only seismic change will disrupt the status quo. They are working with a new superintendent. The teachers are angry and uncertain, but twenty-five small high schools are being set up. And we meet and counsel and help

with instructional change as we try to meet the needs of colleagues in the schools as well as the needs of our student teachers.

The Ways We Are Changing

As a Teacher Education program, we have changed dramatically in the past decade. Ten years ago, the defining characteristic of our program was its attractiveness to part-time students. Our classes were taught in the evenings for the convenience of people who wanted to further their education while maintaining their daytime jobs. The campus was a commuter campus, but that is changing as the community looks more and more to us as a viable four year institution. In our early days, we worked with some exceptional elementary school faculties, helping them to create schools based on inquiry, democratic practices, and multiple intelligences. We wanted to take students with us to these schools, so we started to pilot daytime programs wherein certain professors and whole cohorts of students moved out to partnership schools. As we worked in these settings in new ways, we saw much more of our students' development and lack of development. With more experience in the schools, we could see that in many cases, our students--especially those who were not in these partnership schools--could have done what they were doing without ever taking classes from us. They were teaching school like they had seen it taught their whole lives. We took this to be the challenge. We had to interrupt the normative narrative that was far more powerful in determining what our students thought and did than our teacher education classes.

We are still struggling to meet this challenge, but ten years of dialogue, dialogue, dialogue and inquiry, inquiry, inquiry has brought us to a new place. We now claim that we are an *urban* teacher education program and that our graduates will be the best *urban* teachers possible. By that we mean they will understand how the concepts of inquiry, democracy, diversity, and social justice illuminate teaching and learning in the complex context of city schools. They will have the intellectual rigor and social networks to struggle against the numbing power of hierarchy, control, and anonymity that turn teachers into technicians and students into "objects to fear and coerce." (Ayres, 2004, p. 18) We make it our goal to prepare teachers who passionately reject the notion that teachers are technicians who work without thinking too deeply or caring too much. Instead, we are attempting to educate teachers who are trained to ask questions, cross boundaries, use community assets, foster democratic practices, and care about each and every youngster and family in the schools. We see teachers with these qualities as the cultural workers our city needs to make social justice and democracy a real part of the life of our

community.

This mission might seem unrealistic in the face of the all the detrimental forces at work in the world of schools and teacher education if we did not know the power of a functional inquiry community. In spite of all the obstacles, we have been changing and building a responsive program, and we believe it is our training in inquiry—our ability to ask questions, to seek out related knowledge and data, to design interventions, and to assess their value—that gives us forward momentum. We believe this is a critical time for us to embrace our role in building the community's future because we do have the capacity to learn from our own efforts, and we can teach others how to do so as well.

We recently invited Deborah Meier, past principal of Central Park East and author of *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995), to our campus and a faculty member who was reflecting on Deborah's comments remarked, "We really are a small school, aren't we. We have to work together to create the curriculum and to assess how well it's working. We have to find ways to know our students well enough to be certain they have reached our expectations. We have to walk the talk and practice democracy and social justice. And our students have to see us as educators they would like to emulate and work with on projects that we are passionate about."

This insight was helpful in that it framed our work in ways that valued what we have accomplished, but also pointed to the work that we need to continue to do. We have spent many hours in curriculum teams, teasing out the big ideas, the concepts, and the knowledge we need to teach. We have aligned our teaching to the standards so that our students can demonstrate that they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to teach. We have been at the table with our partnership schools, discussing the multifaceted work of educating new teachers and children simultaneously in classrooms and of designing professional development opportunities that will deepen the teachers' abilities to meet the needs of the children. We have hosted action research groups and taught courses onsite at the schools. We have also studied our own teaching and assessed our students' learning.

In essence, we have taken down the ivory tower and used the bricks to pave pathways into the community. We still have something significant to teach, but we also have new questions that are going to involve us differently in the community. For instance, how are we going to resolve the problem of classrooms where too many children are suffering from the effects of poverty? How are we going to address the issue of schools that do nothing but test prep for the first six weeks of school? Are we willing to sit in sweltering (no air-conditioning) classrooms like the children and teachers of the public schools? How

do our students teach art or incorporate technology into their classes when there are no supplies or computers? How do we create schools that teach all children what they need to know to live and work in the 21st century?

Our answers are tentative and subtle, but important. First, we have to interrupt the cultural belief systems that perpetuate inequities. These belief systems are omnipresent at every level of our context. They are at work in the minds of our School of Education faculty, and we have to continue to explore what we understand about diversity and social justice as a faculty. They are at work in the high schools where our student teachers teach. The failing African American high school students we have encouraged to consider our university as their next educational step tell us they are not prepared to pass the tests required for getting into the university because their teachers do not teach them. They are treated as if they cannot learn and have no value to the community. One of our elementary principals called this spring with the same concern. He wanted to know how he could change the attitudes of some teachers in his building who believe the children coming by bus from the poorest neighborhoods are incapable of learning.

Even though we are an urban campus, most of our students come from suburban and rural settings. They drive in from all directions and many of them have their first experience with an African American or Latino teacher in our program. Many of them believe in the American dream. They believe that everyone has the same potential to succeed and that the attainment of their own families is a sign that they are willing to work hard and make good decisions. In short, they believe their families have earned the right to their privilege and power, and that those who are disadvantaged are without the will to earn the same status. These deficit views include expectations that the schools in the city must be hopeless, unlawful places where no white person would be safe.

When we made a decision five years ago to claim “urban” as part of our mission, we phased in a plan to stop using suburban schools for field experience and student teaching placements. This shift has not been easy. We have had to recruit many new school partners, and these are not schools with the resources to make our lives comfortable and convenient. We have all sweated out the August heat and swatted the bees in September as we work in the old brick buildings with no air-conditioning or screens. We have informed students that they need to meet us at certain disadvantaged schools, only to have them report that their parents, boyfriends, or spouses forbid them to go there. They call and write the Chancellor to complain that we are irresponsible and that no one could learn to teach in “those” schools.

Our work is to change these attitudes and to open the students' minds to the assets that these schools draw on. We need them to internalize the importance of social justice and to see how teachers can make a difference in these contexts. This is not easy to do and we have some students, like Scott, who spent two days at the middle school where he was placed for student teaching and came back demanding that we change his placement to the suburban school where he already had a coaching position waiting for him. In the course of the conversation, he highlighted again and again that being up north would be the best thing for him. It would put him in position to get the job he wanted, and he was clear that should be our concern as well. He also argued that he could not possibly learn to teach in a school where the students were not ready to learn and the teachers don't teach them. We worked with Scott, giving him extra support. But we did not move him.

Fortunately, we are having successes as well. Students like Jean actually change significantly as a result of our program. She writes:

As I move towards graduation, I think more and more about what type of school I want to teach in. If you had told me just one year ago that I would be considering teaching in the [City] Public School system, I would have told you "no way". But now, after my experience at [Edison High School], I cannot imagine teaching in any other district. I have worked hard to get where I am, and teachers are needed in schools like [Edison School] to teach kids that anything is possible. The children in this school are not that different from other kids. They just have a different kind of life when they leave school. They are just as intelligent, hard working, and talented as any other child in this state. But these kids do need a little something extra. They need teachers who care about them. They need the best teachers this state has to offer. They deserve to have this and much more. They deserve me, because I am going to be the best teacher I can be.

We know that it takes far more than a positive disposition toward students to work in an urban school, but this development is foundational to the work of becoming culturally competent. The classes and experiences in our program have to help our students rethink their own identities and see new possibilities. We accomplish this in part through a focus on critical literacy. We teach our students to be consciously aware of how texts and teaching practices position people and privilege some voices while silencing others (Leland & Harste, 2000). We help our students to understand how cultures and other systems of interaction position people and how everyone plays a role in culture making. And we teach about agency--no one has to be a helpless victim. There is always an alternative to the status quo if we are willing to take social action.

In addition to interrupting the cultural belief systems that impact the experience of all educational stakeholders, we aim at preparing our

teachers to be the most knowledgeable content teachers possible. We challenge them to discern the major concepts of each discipline and to plan backwards from those key constructs to create units of study that are engaging and meaningful. We teach our students to start with assessments of what the individual learner knows and to fashion instruction that connects to and extends that knowledge. As our students begin to grasp the nature of the diversity that exists in every classroom, they see that teaching is really not “teaching” at all, but rather a continuous process of providing meaningful support to learners who are doing the cognitive and emotional work of trying to understand the world and their place in it.

Again we are asking our students to make seismic shifts in their beliefs and ways of knowing. They push back and the faculty recognizes that we have to work as a team, as a program, to keep reiterating the same conceptual framework so that the students have enough connected experiences to build the mental models they need to be constructivist teachers. In the teacher education program, none of us works independently. We are a democratic community wherein decisions get negotiated and worked out for the greater good. Everyone has a voice, and everyone has responsibilities.

It remains to be seen what impact we will have on our community over time. We are in the initial stages of setting up a research network and developing urban masters, leadership, and doctoral programs. These initiatives will give us more ways to simultaneously interact with the community. We know we have no choice but to figure out how to do more with less, given the context of education that surrounds us. And we understand that we are clearly swimming upriver given the edicts that are being handed down to the schools. We cannot afford to totally exhaust ourselves or we will be of no use to anyone. So there are many fine lines to walk as we pursue our mission of social justice. Perhaps the best part of our situation is that we are not alone. We know that we are just one locality in a much larger network of teacher educators who understand the importance of public schools to the preservation of our democracy. We take heart in the words of Bill Ayres (2004, p 146) who writes:

We can, of course, recognize and insist that the present moment—in spite of all we are told—is not the end of history. The present moment is not a point of arrival. It is as dynamic, contested, full of energy and in-play as any moment ever was or ever will be. History was not made in the 1960’s or the 1990’s or during the great wars. History is being made right now. What we do and what we don’t do matters.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. was fond of saying: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” This is an invitation to fight for something better.

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