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# The Right to Learn: Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work in High-Need Schools

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## **THE RIGHT TO LEARN: PREPARING EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS TO WORK IN HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS**

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We believe that teachers in high-needs schools can create lively and vibrant classrooms in which children and teachers thrive and high expectations are combined with student engagement. This is not to deny the unique challenges that teachers may face in schools in economically depressed communities. The schools themselves may be “on most measures of quality and funding...woefully inadequate” (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Further, the reality of poverty undermines children’s optimal functioning: families are often beset by crises relating to health, employment and income, housing, safety, and well-being.

Less obvious social factors affect children’s schooling. The knowledge and skills that children acquire at home may differ in significant ways from those that schools require, leading teachers to define children by their deficiencies rather than their strengths (Delpit, 1995). Trust between parents and teachers may be difficult to establish due to differences in language, cultural assumptions, and values; parents may believe they lack the *right* to advocate for their children; and schools may erect barriers that prevent teachers and parents from working together. These factors impinge powerfully on children, teachers, and the entire school community; one result is severe teacher attrition in high-poverty schools (*The high cost of teacher turnover*, 2007; Cochran-Smith, 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act did not produce significant change for the better; most schools continue to lack resources and a cohesive philosophy grounded in children’s development.

Our collaboration on this article grew out of our concern about current educational practices. All three of us attended Bank Street College of Education in the late 1960s; the approach to teaching and learning that we encountered there continues to influence us. In becoming teachers, we were motivated in part by a commitment to social justice and began our careers working in schools funded by the federal poverty program. Since then, our professional work has included staff development, program development,

early childhood and graduate school teaching, and student teacher advisement; the examples we cite are drawn from direct observation in urban classrooms and schools.

Spending time in schools and listening to teachers' stories, we are painfully aware that—in the name of accountability—the early childhood curriculum is increasingly test-driven and academically narrow. We believe that educational equity is best served when learning is joyful, intellectually demanding, and connected to children's strong interest in the world around them. Looking at early childhood classes, we first describe the education we want for all children and the processes and practices that sustain it. We then outline how schools of education can equip teachers with the values, understandings, and strategies they will need to achieve these goals.

### **The Education We Want for All Children**

We want children to gain the skills and knowledge that will allow them to be confident, motivated learners; to understand and be actively engaged with the world around them; and to be part of caring classroom communities. Sadly, this vision of education is being hijacked by high-stakes standardized testing, which measures the narrowest set of capacities. In form and content, these tests are culturally biased and developmentally inappropriate. Yet testing is not going away and will continue to determine students' future options. Teachers must actively help children perform optimally on tests, while protecting children's right to a childhood that is filled with rich educational experiences and free of premature academic pressures. Balancing these dual goals is among the most difficult challenges teachers face today.

Lively and rich curriculum is essential to all children's development as learners and as human beings. Children's energy, intelligence, questioning, and risk taking—as well as their explorations, imaginative play, and expressive representations—belong in every classroom and school. In too many high-needs schools, pressure for children to “catch up” leads to constant instruction; classrooms, while orderly, are silent and sterile. We spoke with a kindergarten teacher in Brooklyn who had taken photos to document the work of the children in her class. She was struck by the changes in children's expressions:

during a 90-minute literacy block, children's eyes appeared glazed over; as they were involved with dramatic play, block building, art and other exploratory activities, their eyes were bright.

Engagement is integral to academic progress. Many academic goals are met “through a rich course of study that, as by-product, affects test scores” (Rose, 2009, p. 47). Facts become *living facts*, linked to children's purposes and experiences. However, we do not minimize the importance of educators' responsibility for teaching certain skills and concepts and for monitoring students' acquisition of both. In some content areas, as Biber (1973) noted, “formal instruction may be more efficient and, in fact, satisfying” (p. 2).

When rich and intellectually challenging curriculum is central to classroom life, children are more likely to work with perseverance and commitment, and develop “the qualities that are so essential to school success—self-motivation, self-discipline and resilience” (Noguera, 2007, p.1). Children motivated by, in Meier's words, their “sense-making” (1995, p. 170) are more likely to put skills to use. As Perrone asks, “What if our students learn to read and write but don't like to and don't?” (1991, p. 4)

Children's academic learning is deepened and their “sense of competent agency” (Dyson, 2003, p. 3) enhanced when teachers allow space for children's “unofficial worlds” (p. 2). When time is made for children's personal stories—at morning meeting, during dramatic play, and throughout the day—children feel more visible, and are drawn into classroom life. Jump-rope rhymes, song lyrics, television plots, and sports talk (Dyson, 2003) can also have a place as children learn to read and write.

Looking at the practices of effective black teachers, scholars have documented the value of relevant content (Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009), which may refer to what is in children's immediate world as well as to what may seem more remote to adults. Another New York City kindergarten teacher asked the children in her class, shortly after the earthquake in Haiti, what they knew about Haiti. The energetic responses led her to ask them, “What do you want to learn?” This discussion led to further study of Haiti, earthquakes, and the immediate needs of Haitian children. Parent involvement was high

as families joined their children in raising funds for children in Haiti. In classrooms like this, children learn on multiple levels: their capacity for compassion, sense of empowerment, and understanding of others develop alongside cognitive growth.

Children’s critical thinking skills and receptive and expressive language are strengthened through play, discovery, and open-ended discussion; opportunities for “cognitive give and take” (Rose, 2009, p. 48) encourage intellectual flexibility. As children present ideas and listen to others’ ideas, they also develop, in the words of Gladwell, a sense of intellectual “entitlement” that allows them to “negotiate, to question adults in positions of authority...to speak up” (2008, pp. 103, 105). It is precisely these abilities—to think critically and use complex language—that children in high-needs schools will require to effect long-term change in their lives.

Children who begin school with limited Standard English vocabularies benefit particularly from firsthand experiences coupled with discussion (Singer & Singer, in Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 19). We have observed that, unfortunately, these experiences do not occur in many high-needs classrooms. In many academically oriented schools in poor neighborhoods, talking isn’t allowed as children draw and write; the teachers’ questions, rather than being open-ended, are intended to elicit specific answers; and all answers are judged to be either right or wrong. Intellectual curiosity and complex language do not develop in such settings. Discussions are intellectually stimulating when teachers are free of outside pressure to *instruct*, and can *listen* to children’s ideas. In Diamond’s kindergarten class, as children observed caterpillars, a girl asked *why* caterpillars change into butterflies and the question was brought to a class meeting. James—an often inattentive English language learner—responded, “Because the caterpillar could get more beautiful to fly” (Diamond, 2008, p. 106). Despite the confused grammar, his contribution constituted a leap of thought that moved the class’s discussion forward. In this class, frequent occasions for genuinely open talk produced an “atmosphere of trust” (Dewey, in Cooper, 2009, p. 99) that invited a “free exchange of ideas” (Cooper, p. 99).

In every class, there are children, including those for whom English is a second language, who require more active support in developing competence and comfort with language. Teachers are responsible for employing strategies that build vocabulary in more focused ways. A teacher of four- and five-year-olds in Maryland pointed out the benefit of dramatizing familiar stories (e.g., *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*) to “hold children’s attention, give them language to associate with the actions, and involve them in the learning process” (M.M. Sigler, personal communication, October 18, 2009). Games, songs, poetry, chants, trips—all introduce and reinforce the use of new language, in concrete ways. Many math and science programs are also designed to reinforce the acquisition of vocabulary through hands-on experiences. For example, in the TERC first-grade math program, which includes conversational give-and-take, children use pattern blocks to make and record patterns “accurately.” As children work, they gain understandings of complex concepts (such as accuracy) and also become familiar with the vocabulary (words like *hexagon* and *trapezoid*) that allows them to articulate new ideas.

Social and emotional growth is of paramount importance; it is integrally tied to cognitive development. Children’s sense of well-being affects their ability to learn. A primary job of teachers is to establish a safe and orderly classroom in which children feel known, cared about, and respected as individuals, and where they feel connected to and responsible for each other.

It is crucial for teachers to understand the central role of play in young children’s social and emotional growth. Play stimulates inner language and enables children to better manage emotions and negotiate conflicts. Through play, children gain “practice in resilience and empathy”; they “gain a sympathetic view of self and others” (Paley, 2009). Paley describes the “puppy play” of a group of three-year-olds: crawling, saying “woof,” being walked and cared for. The play led to the participation of Emma, a child who had been silent, isolated, and self-absorbed. By playing out a theme that had special meaning for Emma, a “curriculum of the children’s own doing” (2009), the children made it possible for her to join the group.

Additional teaching practices which strengthen children's ability to work with and learn from others include pair or partnership assignments, group projects, and sharing of children's work. These practices depend for their success on the *deliberate teaching* of appropriate social skills. Many teachers devote the first weeks of school to teaching routines in all areas. In teaching partner reading, for example, they may show children exactly where and how to sit, how to mark the page they are up to, and how to decide which child will be reading first. As a result, children are able to enjoy the experience of reading together.

Teachers can offer direct instruction to help children get along and develop and sustain "positive friendships" (C. Loftus, personal communication, September 17, 2009). In high-needs neighborhoods, where children have few opportunities for outdoor play, teachers may need to support and facilitate such play. A kindergarten teacher in the South Bronx told us that she never allowed her class to use the school playground, saying "I can't let them play outside, they don't know how to play safely." She didn't see that the safe use of playground equipment—taking turns using equipment, not going *up* the slide, not pushing—was something she could and should have taught. Had these children been given the chance to use the playground, with guidance, their school experience—and childhood—would have been immeasurably enriched.

Finally, it is vital for teachers to make the time to learn about children's cultural identities and to form links to children's families and communities. By doing so, teachers validate children's uniqueness and sense of self and give all children in the class an awareness of their common humanity. In every classroom, rich family resources exist, and in fact, many early childhood classrooms include family studies as part of the curriculum by creating family books and sharing cultural traditions. Teachers may invite parents and members of the community to visit the classroom to share their knowledge and culture. One first-grade teacher invited a non-English-speaking Chinese mother to visit and teach the children to write the Chinese New Year greeting in Chinese characters. School aides and other staff may also be resources for teachers, particularly for those from outside the community. The children's knowledge of each other and of the world is

broadened when teachers “make the students’ culture a point of affirmation and celebration” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 126).

### **Establishing a Teaching Self: The Role of Education Schools**

The vision of education outlined here puts conflicting demands on teachers, requiring them to balance openness with intentionality, and empathy with authority and a firm sense of values and objectives. To navigate these divergent elements, teachers must develop a *teaching self*, which emerges over time. Education schools have the responsibility to make this possible: they give student teachers a strong foundation of knowledge about child development and learning; provide a theoretical context for student teachers’ interest in children and faith in processes of growth; and nurture the capacities teachers need, such as openness, reflectiveness, and curiosity. The course work should include extensive readings in child development and educational theory. This professional knowledge base will allow them, as teachers, to become experts: to make wise choices in their classrooms and to articulate and justify those choices to families, colleagues, and administrators.

Additional course work should introduce students to methods of observation and assessment. These courses serve as a framework for understanding the interplay between principles of learning and the behavior of individual children in a variety of settings. Student teachers need opportunities to use tools of observation and assessment as they learn to track children’s acquisition of discrete skills, and to “carefully capture the nuances” of children’s behavior and stories (Paley, 2009).

As part of their course work, student teachers must become knowledgeable about the variety of tests currently in use and develop a working vocabulary connected to standards and accountability. This will allow them to actively incorporate test content *as appropriate* when planning curriculum. For example, teachers’ use of children’s name cards for attendance can emphasize the learning of initial consonant sounds, which children are tested on in early childhood literacy assessments. In addition, teachers’ knowledge and understanding of testing will help them explain the meaning of test scores



to parents, which is particularly important when scores do not reflect students' day-to-day classroom functioning. It will also allow teachers to justify to administrators and colleagues the value of classroom activities as these relate to test outcomes.

A deep understanding of subject matter and instructional strategies is essential. Student teachers learn this best through their own planning of curriculum. They take into account children's developmental levels, culture, and interests, as well as curricular standards, and adapt material to make it compelling for their students and themselves. By planning a curriculum and then presenting it—including its rationale in terms of developmental theory and state or city standards—to their peers, student teachers gain experience in articulating the reasons for their educational choices. In today's test-driven climate, it is critical for teachers to be able to defend their practice. One way to do this is through consistent documentation of children's active learning.

Courses should demonstrate exemplary pedagogy by immersing student teachers in discovery learning. In some teacher education classes, for example, sessions are set aside for student teachers to build with blocks, and then, as a group, deconstruct the learning experience. Because discovery learning is new for many student teachers, it is imperative that they explore topics *as learners*, seeing for themselves the power of curiosity, playfulness, speculation, and reflection. As Duckworth puts it, student teachers will then "...have a chance to watch themselves learn" (2006, p. 59) and develop a more complex conception of the role of teacher and student in the enactment of curriculum. They will also learn, in Duckworth's words, to "...let go of a plan of how things are expected to proceed" (p. 62).

These courses, combined from the beginning with classroom experience, give student teachers the opportunity to apply developmental and educational theory, observational techniques, and instructional strategies in a specific classroom setting. Student teachers then see for themselves the developmental levels, interests, and learning styles of a particular group of children. For example, when first graders study the school building, visit the basement to watch custodians at work on the boiler, and work together

to construct a model of the school, student teachers develop a paradigm of learning that is engaged, experiential, organic, and mediated by social relationships.

In integrating theory and practice, student teachers benefit greatly from regular opportunities to explore ideas and participate in peer-group discussions. As they listen to each other and compare experiences, they make real the belief that “each person...has intrinsic value” (Carini, 1987, p. 12). These groups demonstrate a concern for individuals that “gives each of us responsibility in relation to others’ lives” (Diamond, 2008, p.150). In these peer groups, faculty advisors—experienced educators—support their student teachers’ growth, and model “the qualities and relationships we hope their students to exhibit...” (D. Meier, personal communication, November 23, 2009).

We believe that several aspects of teacher preparation deserve special emphasis for teachers going into high-needs schools.

### **High Expectations**

Faith in children’s capacities is crucial: a number of scholars have documented the profound impact of teachers’ high expectations on children’s school success (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In practice, this calls for teachers to look for *and find* student ability; as one experienced teacher put it, “Everybody’s good in this class at thinking” (Dyson, 2003, p. 215). Analysis of value-laden assumptions about children’s abilities is also essential. For example, a student teacher’s description of a child as “smart,” or “lazy,” presents the faculty advisor with the chance to talk about the powerful consequences of using words that label children.

### **An Ethic of Caring**

Education schools should foster an “ethic of caring,” referred to as one of the “instructional strategies ...successful in teaching black students” (Ware, in Irvine, 2002, pp. 33-34). Caring includes different aspects of emotional responsiveness: when teachers communicate a sense of joy and fun, children—and teachers—come to feel that “school is a good place to be” (Rose, 2009, p. 168). A sense of “connectedness,” of “family,” (M. Williams, personal communication, September 2, 2009) is mentioned by many educators who have been successful in high-needs schools. The sense of caring and belonging is

furthered through routines and rituals, like class meetings, that communicate a shared class history. It is deepened when teachers bring to the classroom their personal passions and interests.

### **Authority and Presence**

It is necessary for teachers to demonstrate authority and presence as adults, and “exercise that measure of understandable authority that is essential to a functioning learning environment” (Biber, 1973, p. 2). Studies of the practices of effective black teachers point to the importance of a teacher being a “warm demander” (Irvine, 1998). To help them develop classroom management skills, student teachers should be introduced to programs (for example, Responsive Classroom) that provide management strategies and tools so that they can learn how to organize an orderly room, create predictable routines, use classroom rituals, and frame expectations in clear and unequivocal language. As faculty advisors observe in classrooms, it is essential that they support the student teacher’s development of a sense of authority.

### **Awareness of Difference**

Schools of education must help student teachers understand the “awesome responsibility of teaching other people’s children” (Jackson, 1995, p. 31). Differences between teachers and children—of language, nationality, culture, values, race, and class—affect every facet of teaching. It is the obligation of schools of education to engage students in active ongoing exploration of their personal biases and cultural assumptions: “If you can’t see that your own culture has its own set of interests, emotions, and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else’s culture?” (Kleinman, in Fadiman, 1997, p. 261).

Toward that end, schools of education can also help students acquire firsthand knowledge of diverse cultures by organizing visits to, or short-term placements in, community-based organizations involved with housing, health, or employment. These experiences provide student teachers with opportunities to get to know people in the neighborhood, develop an appreciation of community strengths, and gain a concrete understanding of the impact of the local environment on children. Teachers’ familiarity

with children's worlds further allows them to "build on the personal, cultural and social strengths, skills and competencies that students bring to their classrooms...on their prior knowledge and experience...and help students see connections between curricular content, their current realities and future possibilities" (Hixson, in Sleeter, 2005, p. 4).

We give schools of education one last charge. We urge teacher preparation institutions to underscore the value of collegial support and help teachers, in practical ways, to establish this support for themselves. Support networks are key in sustaining the spirit and commitment of new teachers.

### **Entering the Profession**

It is our hope that teachers will enter the profession with an appreciation of the complexity of learning; the habit of looking for questions rather than answers; and the ability to learn from mistakes. It is also our hope that they will develop the same qualities that they want for their children: resilience, empathy, flexibility, belief in themselves as learners, and active concern for the well-being of others. These qualities are at the core of the emerging teacher's identity.

Teaching can enrich teachers' lives as well as the lives of their students. We want teachers to know the "power of teaching...this remarkable human relationship" (Rose, 2009, p. 168). The challenge for teachers is to find ways to hold to their ideals in today's schools so that they can teach with conviction and joy, *see* the children they teach, and honor children's capacities for learning.

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