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High-Needs Schools: Preparing Teachers for Today's World

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High-Needs Schools: Preparing Teachers for Today's World

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Introduction
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Editor's Note

This issue of Occasional Papers has an online supplement featuring images and materials that amplify the traditional text—www.bankstreetcollege.edu/gs/occasionalpapers. In an effort to sustain a more interactive and collaborative relationship with our readers, the site also offers you a place to comment on what you have read and to engage in conversation with others who are preparing teachers to meet the challenge of turning failing schools into successful ones.

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INTRODUCTION

jonathan g. silin

In the second decade of the 21st century, some schools are in trouble and some schools are not. The subject of this Occasional Paper is the preparation of teachers for schools that—lacking sufficient resources, effective leadership, or vocal advocates—are failing to educate their students by any reasonable measures.¹ Often located in economically and socially stressed urban communities, these schools are overflowing with students from historically underserved groups and families of newly arrived immigrants. We want to prompt thoughtful conversations about the needs of these students and their teachers without naming problems and imposing solutions in ways that the primary actors in this challenging drama might not recognize or accept. This attention to the self-perception of the communities we serve is essential to the ethics of care in a democratic society.

In recent years when legislators and presidents have turned their attention to troubled schools, they have increasingly supported quick, dramatic fixes to persistent and complicated issues. Readers of this volume will be familiar with such panaceas: close the school; dismiss the principal and/or half the staff; place the district under court supervision; create alternative, publicly funded schools outside the “system.” The federal response has offered a limited menu of one-size-fits-all solutions to a myriad of issues that take different forms in every context.

The teachers and teacher educator contributors to *High-Needs Schools: Preparing Teachers for Today’s World* offer a more variegated set of responses grounded in a diversity of local experiences. Their approaches to researching and understanding the immediacy of becoming a teacher are based on decades of working in hard-pressed urban schools and the institutions that supply them with new educators. The multiple authorship of all but one of the essays published here attests the complexity of the task at hand and the need for collaboration at every level of the educational endeavor.

1 Prior Occasional Papers have addressed a progressive approach to the education of all teachers (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, OP #18), alternative routes to teacher certification to speed effective teachers into high-needs schools (Silin, 2008, OP #20), and the creation of more inviting career paths to retain excellent teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2006, OP #16).

Most of these essays focus simultaneously on the noisy, busy, sometimes chaotic classrooms where children spend their days and on the often more restrained, if not constrained, classrooms where adults learn to become teachers at night. Compelling classroom practices and engaging teacher preparation go hand in hand in these essays. As a group the authors ask: what kinds of experiences will help novice educators become wise and mindful guides, capable of creating settings conducive to students' learning and growth?

Three major themes thread their way through this volume—the need for new teachers to create culturally responsive curriculum, to become engaged members of the larger school community, and to participate in effective school-university partnerships.

While culturally responsive pedagogy makes sense in all schools, it is essential to the success of under-resourced schools where students may come from diverse backgrounds that often are not represented in traditional curricular materials. As Coviello and Stires so ably demonstrate, teacher research builds local, immediately useful knowledge about students and their families. It also holds potential for career long learning. Mascarenhas, Parsons, and Burrowbridge also emphasize the central role that learning about the larger community beyond the classroom plays in encouraging thoughtfully adaptive teaching responsive to the lived realities of students. In short, whether through action research projects or community-based internships, new teachers need to know how to learn about the worlds they will inhabit.

As Goodman suggests, culturally responsive teaching refers to contemporary modes of communication as well as to what students learn about community life. He describes the way that student-made documentary film projects can enable adolescents to find their own voices and become politically engaged. While the tools are changing, the uses to which they are put—examining the social world with a critical eye to the uses and misuses of power—harken back to our progressive roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Teachers must be prepared to use the new technologies by experiencing them first hand and to understand the social purposes which they can serve.

Culturally responsive teachers invest in becoming politically-savvy community members. Barrett, Ford and James, for example, emphasize that experienced and neophyte teachers alike need to appreciate the complex systems in which they work. From their perspective, the changes required in high-needs schools will only come about through collaboration with all the stakeholders in a community, not

through the efforts of lone heroes working in isolated classrooms behind closed doors. Drawing on her own teaching experiences, Pam Jones makes a similar point in her interview with Linda Levine. It's critical to know when to stay in a high-needs school and when to pull up stakes and move on. It's also critical for young teachers to hear the compelling stories of those who have learned to survive and thrive while working to turn around troubled schools.

Diamond, Reitzes, and Grob suggest that the politics of surviving and thriving in high-needs schools requires high expectations, an ethic of caring, authority and presence and an abiding awareness of difference. They would add that only when new teachers are encouraged to develop a *teaching self* can they successfully navigate the inevitable tensions between openness and intentionality, empathy and authority, with a firm sense of values and objectives.

Finally, several of the essays, including Mascarenhas et al. and Stires and Coviello emphasize that only strong school-university partnerships can provide the structure for effective student teaching experiences. Most striking, Barrett, Ford and James offer a disarmingly honest portrait of one collaboration project gone astray. Over the course of a difficult first year, the “researchers” describe how they learned to focus on relationship-building rather than curricular change, on creating spaces for healthy dialogue among all community members rather than between teachers and university professors, and to recognize the very different perspectives that everyone brings to the task of school improvement. They are helping to build a context in which student teachers can learn the importance of a collaborative school culture to fostering student learning.

Our authors are not naive. They know what schools can and cannot do to promote a more just society. They also recognize the tension between offering constructive criticism and blaming those who are caught in the grips of an intractable system. Most importantly, they know that they are speaking about teachers who will work in an educational world awash in standards, high-stakes tests, and other out-comes-based performance measures of student achievement.² They recognize many ways in which the proliferation of mandates, highly scripted instructional guides, and the narrowing of the curriculum all continue to deskill

2 The impact of this trend has been described in several *Occasional Papers* including our second issue, Vito Perrone's, *What Should We Make of Standards?* (Perrone, 1999, OP #2) and our more recent *Classroom Life in the Age of Accountability* (Boldt, Salvio & Taubman, 2009, OP #22).

and de-professionalize teaching. Performance-based pay, the end of tenure, and the targeted use of federal dollars by the Obama administration all function to keep teachers teaching to the test. Even with diminishing resources, these same teachers are called to “differentiate” instruction in classrooms filled with an ever more demanding range of students.

Despite the difficult education climate new teachers face, our contributors argue that they can still attend to who their students are, build on what they already know, and form strategic community collaborations. These educators know that teaching is far more than testing, schooling far more than just surviving, and education not limited to learning how to make a living. New teachers in high-needs schools flourish when they understand the fundamental role of education in sustaining a vibrant democracy and uphold the highest standards for what all students can achieve when challenged by a meaningful, multidimensional curriculum.

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

julie diamond, fretta reitzes, betsy grob

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 stud-

ies 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 first-hand 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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NO TEACHING MORE FULFILLING: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAM JONES

linda levine

- *What prompts and sustains an ardent commitment to urban teaching?*
- *How can we help the next generation of teachers acquire such a commitment?*
- *How can a teacher educator's compelling stories and images, drawn from her own classroom experiences, lead aspiring educators to embrace the challenges of working in high-needs schools?*

I was moved to a deeper consideration of these issues over dinner with a Bank Street colleague, Pam Jones. A midwesterner by birth and a Princeton graduate, this young African-American woman was originally interested in pursuing a career in public policy. She credited her mother and other mentors for helping her forge an enduring commitment to quality education for all.

In a semistructured interview I conducted with Pam a month later, she elaborated on her thinking, shared personal memories of impressive and oppressive teachers, and recounted key aspects of her journey to a career in urban teaching and teacher education. What follows is a transcript of that interview.

Pam is an advisor and instructor in the Dual Language/Bilingual and Special Education Department at Bank Street College. She is currently in a doctoral program in curriculum and teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University.

LL: Pam, what led you to where you are today?

PJ: First and most important: My mom's passion for education affected me as a child in ways she didn't realize. When she received a brochure from the Cincinnati public school system about a relatively new K-12 bilingual program, she had the choice of Spanish, German, or French—and chose Spanish—for which I am ever grateful. From first to twelfth grade, I was in a bilingual program. Spanish is a part of my life.

I was taught by some amazing educators—and others who were less than

supportive. Even in second grade I would say to myself, “If I am ever a teacher, I am going to do things differently from Mrs. M.” Conversely, I had an amazing first-grade teacher, Mrs. Hall, who understood me as a person and a learner and recognized my potential. She really saw me and pushed me in ways I needed to be pushed.

I didn’t plan to go into education. I was always on the political path because my mom was also very passionate about politics. I was probably one of the few seven-year-old kids in 1977 sitting near the TV watching Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat, and Jimmy Carter. I was excited because my mom was excited. I watched my own little shows, but I also watched the news every day since I was five.

In 1992 I was accepted into a program called Princeton Project ’55, created by Ralph Nader and some of his 1955 classmates to give Princeton students the chance to go into nonprofit and public sector careers. I worked at a community center with a wonderful director, Lois Broerman. I started at their thrift store. I worked briefly with the senior citizens’ outreach program, which I enjoyed, then spent the bulk of my time with the preschool and daycare.

There I had a feeling that I’d never had in my life—self-fulfilled in a way I had never been before. When I walked into the classroom and all the kids yelled, “Miss Pam!” even if I were dog-tired and hadn’t slept for what seemed to be days, I would be ready to get up and go. That said something to me. I was still on the political path, still doing work in the policy/political arena, but that left an impression on me. What sealed the deal was working for Jumpstart as a researcher. As I sat there doing my job, observing children over time, I kept wanting to jump that fence from being the observer to being the person who was actually with them. Kids would come and ask me, “What are you doing? Can you come and play with me? I want to build blocks.” Of course, being a trained researcher, I knew I couldn’t engage with them and would just say, “It’s OK. I just want to watch YOU play. Go ahead.” But inside I kept thinking, “I really do want to read books with them. I really want to sit down with them at lunch. Why do I have to stay on this side of the table?”

When I focused on that question, I realized I should do something about it, that maybe instead of being an educational policy researcher I really wanted to be an educator. I had those same feelings when I worked in policy at another organization. I was sitting there reading, doing research, and writing, which I do love. But as I traveled to Colorado Springs, to Puerto Rico, and to Upper

Manhattan to evaluate programs, I wished, as I was talking to the teachers, the program evaluators, the kids and parents, that I was the one being interviewed instead of the one interviewing. I tried to listen to that. I enjoyed that work but felt I would prefer being a part of it instead of being the person talking about it.

And I chose public education because that's where I lived as a child and where I received an amazing education. I wanted to see if I could be the Mrs. Hall for someone (as opposed to the Mrs. M). I wanted to provide a counterpoint for students who've had or would likely have a negative school experience.

LL: Pam, let's talk about teaching in underserved urban schools.

PJ: Everyone has the right to pursue whatever type of teaching they believe is best for them. But for me, there's no more fulfilling teaching than in high-needs settings.

Last week, at a school where I taught just a couple of years ago, I saw all my former students who were kindergartners then...at least 50 of the kids I'd taught and worked with. I'd just placed a student teacher there and hoped to be working with them again on other projects. As I left that Bronx school, I thought, *"There's no better place in the world."*

Consider the following example from the same South Bronx school I mentioned a moment ago. At this school, administrators supported teachers on a daily basis. The kindergarten teachers wanted to revamp the writing program, which was lacking in substance. We suggested to the administration that we research other programs that could benefit our students more. Not only did they allow us to use a new program, but one administrator provided us with three to four full days out of the classroom to learn the program—and she accompanied us! Support did not stop at the training phase but continued with close monitoring of the new program's implementation.

There's just something about being able to help level the playing field. There's something powerful about being able to go into a place that in many ways has been written off and provide what every child deserves. There's something about seeing great things happening in a building that for many reasons could be condemned. But great things are happening! And they should happen there just as they should happen anywhere. There are so many possibilities in urban education that just aren't realized.

LL: When you talk about this, you close your eyes. You swallow hard.

PJ: Yeah! Most of my time teaching was in the Bronx and in Hunts Point, specifically. This is an area that makes many people, when they hear the name, shudder

and mutter, “Oh, sorry” or “Good luck” or “Whoa! Good for you. You must be made of strong stuff” or “You must be fearless.” Yeah, it’s a tough place. No second guessing about that. At the same time, it’s a rich neighborhood, emblematic of what is happening in others often characterized as tough. Like so many of those other places, it is ripe with opportunities!

I know things are happening in urban education that are really unfortunate. Not enough has been done to engage the people who live in urban centers in the conversation about education. So much richness there has been overlooked. Too often people come into the community and say, “Excuse me. OK, we’re gonna do this, this is what’s best for you.” There’s a lot of imposing of curriculum that doesn’t really connect with or enrich children’s lives. This type of instruction goes just so far.

There’s too much teaching to the test. When I go into many urban schools, this is what I see. There’s this misperception that what it’s going to take to pull the school and the kids out of this perceived abyss is the testing. This model of so-called instruction is antithetical to what good educators know should be happening.

I see schools that fight against this trend, schools that approach education in a more holistic and honorable way—where they actually educate everyone. It’s not: Just send your kids to school; we’ll go over the multiplication tables; we’ll drill, drill, drill, drill for the test and then they’ll graduate and be able to go on to the next grade. When I see better things happening, it really warms my heart. By better things, I mean instruction that is concept-rich and truly differentiated to meet kids’ distinctive strengths and needs.

When I see public schools like Hyde that require parents and families to be involved, staff that is competent and committed, students engaged in work and on themselves as people, I want everyone to see the best that can happen in urban public schools!

LL: In this era of test-driven instruction, how do you encourage aspiring teachers to go into school settings where it’s increasingly difficult to provide what children deserve? What do you say to them?

PJ: One thing I do is appeal to their sense of justice; children in every setting, urban settings included, deserve the best and the brightest teachers. And I draw on my own experience as an urban educator, emphasizing that tremendous professional growth can occur for young teachers in places where so much work needs to be done. For someone who’s committed, who’s hungry, who’s determined to help

make a difference, this is a great place to be.

LL: Suppose one of these candidates says, “I hear what you’re saying about personal growth and that is really important to me, but wouldn’t I get that teaching anywhere, you know...first being a novice and just learning more about the kids and the curriculum over time? Why is teaching in high-needs schools so different?”

PJ: I have had people say or at least hint at that. What I think, being honest, is that there are some people who just won’t want to go there. I’ve had students e-mail me and say, “Oh my goodness, I’ve found myself in a bit of a pickle. I don’t have a job right now—I’ve got to find a place. Do you know of a place?” And I’ll give them three to four of what I think are really great leads. When they see the address, some of them say, “Oh, um, yeah, I was thinking more of...you know...”

Not everyone is meant to teach in every place. It’s about knowing where you could serve children best. Some people are best suited to teaching in another environment. That’s totally fine. But for the students who are pondering, “Maybe I could teach there,” I really do try to encourage them. I think what’s often standing in the way of going into urban education are the stories in their heads, things that they’ve heard, possibly even a negative experience they’ve had at some random PS, IS, or MS.

Look, I’ve had horrific experiences in urban public schools that didn’t turn me off teaching there because I was well aware of the possibilities and openings that do exist. And so when a grad student says, “I’m at PS Awful. I’m at PS The Worst Place on Earth, and I think it’s all gonna be like that,” I share my own stories with them and then say, “I’ve been there. I’ve taught in my own less-than-ideal school. And here’s what you need to know: There are other less-than-ideal schools out there but there are many PS Oh Yes’s out there. There are so many places where you’re needed, places that require so much work but you’d get support, be given guidance, where you’d get experience that I believe you’d be really happy and fortunate to have.”

LL: How essential is it for a teacher educator to be able to say, “I’ve been there. I’ve *taught* at PS Awful.”

PJ: Of course it matters. If the person advising a prospective urban teacher can’t say that, then they need to put them in touch with someone who can. It’s vital to have had the actual experience or bring in someone who’s had that experience. I’ve had the hope and faith there was something better out there because I had seen that, too. I had visited schools where I saw great things happening, so even on the

darkest days, I was able to draw on those images of “there’s something else.” Kind of like Dorothy, clicking my heels: “There’s no place like...I KNOW there’s something else, I KNOW there’s something else. And it’s a place where I can work, where I can actually help, and where I can grow.”

LL: So what kinds of images do you recall at those really daunting moments? When things are not going right for you or for students or for aspiring teachers, you seem to draw on those images. Could you elaborate?

PJ: At PS The Worst Place in the World, let’s say it would be an average day or a worse than average day, where you would have violence, no administrative support—in fact the opposite of administrative support: a lot of sabotage, a lot of threats, letters to file if you don’t do this, reminders to “close your door, take care of your business, but don’t bother us with this.” You’re an island unto yourself and if you can’t do that, then you’re not a good teacher—and good teachers scream all day because kids need to be yelled at. And people come to believe it. One day, for example, two third-grade students said to me, “Ms. Jones, you know, this weekend our moms got together because they’re friends— we’ve been in school together since kindergarten—and they were saying you don’t yell enough. You really need to yell. That’s why the kids don’t really listen all the time when you talk because you don’t yell. You have to start screaming.”

That was a powerful moment. I didn’t say to myself, “OK, note to self: Monday, YELL!” I said, “Note to self: Finish the year out and find a place where you can be who you are, that matches who you are, a place that resonates with you, a place with which you are philosophically in sync.” And, thank goodness, at that time I was studying at Bank Street. I had my advisor here, other faculty and students who assured me that there were high-needs schools that weren’t like PS The Worst Place in the World.

My decision to leave that situation was one of strength, not weakness. I saw my departure as standing for two different yet equally important things: (1) a necessity for my future as a teacher and for my future students and (2) a message that needed to be sent to the administration and to any and all who believed untenable situations should be tolerated.

I could not fathom the thought of staying in a hostile, negative, and un-supportive environment. Why? Because it was an environment that demanded that I morph into something that I was not and never would be. I wasn’t—and am not—a screamer. I wasn’t—and am not—a punisher. I didn’t—and don’t—believe in teaching to the test at the expense of real learning. When teachers stay in unten-

able situations, it sends the message that these circumstances are tolerable and should be continued. The nature of this situation was so dire, in my opinion, that I knew staying was not an option for me. I wanted the administration to realize that *this* teacher understood the difference between acceptable and unacceptable, viable and unviable teaching environments. This is not a rallying cry for teachers in tough schools to flee. On the contrary, I always hope that teachers can make beneficial change. There are some schools, however, where the current conditions are not conducive to growth or meaningful change—and this is where I advocate an exit.

I also held the image in my head of Head Start centers very close to Bank Street that were serving the same population of kids I saw at the school I left, but it was a world of difference. Great stuff was happening! So I was able to say, “I’ve seen it. I saw it for months on end. I took copious notes on it, wrote reports on it, I know that it exists. I’ve seen teachers working with their students in quality, substantive ways and seen administrators support their teachers.”

LL: Is this a good place to discuss school leadership?

PJ: I was talking to one of the best ones the other day, one of my former administrators. She leads by example. She walks the walk. She doesn’t yell. She believes in being clear about what she expects people to do, but she really has an open door policy. It’s not lip service—her door is always open. And then you come to the opposite: “I don’t have time for this. You got my memo. Do it.” The first one practices what I call “responsive and supportive leadership.” She encourages teachers’ ideas.

LL: Many teachers and school leaders are very frightened and discouraged these days because of the test-driven climate. If things don’t move fast enough according to external mandates, they’re in danger. What are you seeing?

PJ: It makes everyone frantic, like the hamster on the wheel. People feel as if they’re going, going, going. You don’t have time to stop or do the stuff that really means something. You have to keep on pushing the same buttons, pushing the same test prep skills at the expense of teaching things that are really lasting. Last year in my advisement group, I had almost all TFA [Teacher for America] students. A few of them were and still are in schools like that and, in the sanctity of our group, we refer to them as PS Test Prep. They are required to instruct a specific test prep strategy at a certain day and time. If they’re not and someone walks in, there’s going to be hell to pay.

LL: How do you keep these folks from getting burnt out and walking away

because they can't use what they've got?

PJ: It's crucial to find ways to make the material come alive for the kids so that it has meaning and applicability to their own lives. I'd call this ethical subversion of the mandated curriculum.

I'll share an example from teaching my former third-grade class: We were required to use a widely accepted math program based on rote memorization of formulas and constant repetition. As a teacher with a conscience, I couldn't go to school day after day and deliver this curriculum "as is." I took the preconstructed lessons and altered them so that they did not consist solely of worksheets and drills. Rather, kids were up and out of their seats playing math basketball to learn addition, subtraction, and multiplication facts. They also conducted a survey to learn how to plot data on a graph.

I go to great lengths to show my graduate students actual teachers who are in settings like theirs but managing to teach around the test prep. I show them images of other teachers, tell stories about them, keep pretty good records of my own ethical subversion of the mandated curriculum, and I share them. They get a lot out of that and I actually did a whole series of sessions on advocacy with them.

LL: A series?

PJ: I see the weekly advisement group at Bank Street not as a course but an opportunity to build on certain concepts and skills my advisees need. When I saw a number of them being pushed in certain directions and being threatened in one way or another, I decided to include on our agenda an initiative in advocating for yourself in your setting. I'd rather they not be shrinking violets.

I often draw on my own school experiences to help them see how to overcome obstacles. One year, for example, all the teachers on the grade were told to complete the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System assessment in a very short—and, truthfully, unreasonable—amount of time. We were told that if we did not complete the assessment by the due date, a letter would be placed in our files. In response, we met as a grade-level team and decided to stand strong as a unit, rather than as single individuals challenging the unfair expectations. Ultimately, because every teacher on the grade agreed to fight this, the administration conceded. We were given the extra time we needed and no letters were placed in our files.

LL: Teachers learning to advocate for themselves! How about advocating for the children?

PJ: We talked about different ways to advocate for the kids: academically, emo-

tionally, socially. One theme that keeps coming up is advocating for kids who are struggling. It's hard when a teacher is told, "You know, I don't see this," or "We'll get to this," while she believes the child needs help. Ultimately, my goal is to enable advisees to use resources that will benefit their students and their overall teaching practice.

LL: What do you tell new teachers about such constraints on their teaching?

PJ: I try to give them tools for those situations. My advisement group is comprised of dual language as well as bilingual and special ed teachers. This year, some of my students were expected to teach in a dual language classroom without a dual language program at the school, so they didn't have the support they needed. Being a first-year teacher is already daunting. But then to have to develop a program from scratch? I try to help them navigate the bureaucratic superhighway, so they are not just out there flailing.

I invited my colleague, Francisco Najera, to come and talk with the group. He was able to provide background on dual language and bilingual programs, especially as they exist in NYC. That definitely helped. Generally, what I've tried to do is connect my students with other professionals who are really close to their respective settings and can support them.

LL: What do you believe all teacher educators need in order to guide the next generation of urban educators?

PJ: I'll speak personally. I don't want ever to be out of touch. I think that for me to be the most responsive teacher educator, I need to draw on recent examples and experiences. Almost two years ago now, I went back and tutored 10 of my students from Hyde for a brief time—not nearly as long as I wanted to—but I wanted that recent experience. I never want to be out of practice and actually have taken some steps to build up my own practice so that I can keep teaching kids of that age.

For me, it's nonnegotiable. It's crucial. I don't say everyone has to return to work with kids but this is how I plan to remain an effective guide for the next generation. And I think everyone should consider ways to stay in touch. When I go out and work with my advisees in their classrooms, yes, that's being in touch—but for me, that's not enough.

Finally, and of course this applies to teaching in all settings, it's crucial to appreciate and advocate for the benefits of collaboration. No teacher, no matter how dedicated and competent, especially one in a high-needs setting, can ever hope to sustain—or improve—a school by herself. Bank Street's advisement process is designed to build the habit of working together with colleagues and

other stakeholders to provide the education everyone's children deserve.

LL: What do you say when you hear, "Oh, I'd like to put my students in a high-needs school, but they first have to learn how to teach from people who are doing a good job. So I'm not sure I can put my students in a setting like that."

PJ: Teacher educators need to examine their assumptions about what they'll find out there and who's doing a good job. You can find great teaching in a high-needs school and abysmal teaching in a high-needs school. You can find great teaching in a private school and abysmal teaching in a private school. I think people have to put their assumptions in check and say, "Let's go and see what's happening here first and not rely on taken-for-granted ideas that may well be inaccurate or out of date." People should look at what is really happening in a school so as not to miss out on great teaching opportunities for their students!

PREPARING TEACHERS FOR HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS: A FOCUS ON THOUGHTFULLY ADAPTIVE TEACHING

arlene mascarenhas, seth a. parsons, sarah cohen burrowbridge

Currently, there is an urgent need for all schools to provide students with a quality education so they can succeed in and beyond school. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) mandates that all students meet state standards by 2014. This legislation also calls for closing the achievement gap that exists based on ethnicity, race, economic status, and language. While achieving these goals might be realistic for schools with ample resources, highly skilled teachers, and parental and community support, there are many factors that make it much more difficult for high-needs schools to do so.

The Ready to Teach Act (2003) defined high-needs schools as those in which at least 20% of the student population live below the poverty line. High-needs schools face many challenges, including underqualified teachers, a poor teacher retention rate, limited financial resources, substandard facilities, and a lack of materials (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Reichardt, 2002). Students in high-needs schools exhibit a wide diversity in school readiness, background knowledge, language proficiency, and culture. The National Assessment of Educational Progress report (2002) demonstrated that eighth-grade students in high-needs schools scored lower on achievement tests and were less likely to graduate on time than their counterparts in more affluent schools. The report also indicated that 75% of twelfth-grade students in high-needs schools lacked basic math skills, while 80% of those students lacked basic science skills. Similarly, the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reported that fourth-grade students in high-needs schools were likely to have lower reading scores than students in schools not classified as high-needs.

The Council of Great City Schools, an organization comprised of 57 large urban school districts, reported in 2000 that of the 6.5 million students in its schools, 40% were African American, 30% were Hispanic, 21% were White, 6.4% were Asian/Pacific, and 0.6% were Alaskan/Native American. Over 60% of these students received free or reduced-cost lunch, and 11.4% had individualized educational plans (Foote & Cook-Cottone, 2004). Yet, nationwide most teachers are White and middle class (Zumult & Craig, 2005), and they most frequently do

their student teaching and internships in schools with a White, middle-class student population—in stark contrast to the student populations in high-needs schools (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). For example, Hollins and Guzman (2005) described a study that found that a large majority of teacher candidates had “limited experience with those from cultures other than their own and few had long-term interaction with people of other races and cultures. Findings indicated that these teacher candidates did not feel prepared to teach students from diverse backgrounds” (p. 482).

A review of the literature revealed similar findings. Sleeter (2001) reviewed the research on predominantly White preservice teachers, examining their knowledge of other cultures and their beliefs about children in urban settings. She illustrated that while the cultural diversity of the United States has increased, institutions that serve primarily White populations have not changed their teacher education programs accordingly. The findings of a more recent study (Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006) were similar. These patterns, traditions, and research findings highlight the need for teacher education programs to change their approach to preparing teachers who are able to succeed in high-needs schools.

How Can Teachers Be Successful with Students in High-Needs Schools?

To be successful in high-needs schools, teachers must be able to differentiate their instruction—that is, to adapt it to meet the needs of all students (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers who effectively differentiate their instruction accommodate their diverse learners by modifying curriculum, methods, materials, and lessons (Bearne, 1996; Tomlinson, 2001). Planning for differentiation has received extensive attention in the literature and in professional development. However, there has been less emphasis on the actual practice of differentiating instruction in the classroom. Highly competent teachers constantly monitor students’ progress and adapt their instruction as needed—often on the fly—to provide students optimal support and guidance (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Consider the following examples.

Ms. Johnson, a second-grade teacher in a large urban Title I school with a diverse student population, read *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats to her students.¹ After the read aloud, to illuminate the links between the students’ lives and the text and to strengthen the reading-writing connection, the students were

1 All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms.

asked to write about a time when they had played in the snow. Ms. Johnson discovered that one of the students in the class, a recent immigrant from Sierra Leone, had never seen snow and therefore could neither relate to the topic nor easily write about it. The teacher adapted her instruction by grabbing an atlas and asking the student to show her Sierra Leone on a map and tell her about the climate in his home country and the recreational activities he participated in there. He told her about swimming at the beach, so she encouraged him to write about a time when he had gone swimming, highlighting the story's focus on recreation and thus still accomplishing the objective of the assignment.

Another example of adapting spontaneously to differentiate instruction occurred in Mr. Murphy's fifth-grade classroom in the same school. He was reading *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis with a predominantly African American reading group. The book presented several civil rights issues. The students were fired up and wanted to voice their opinions. Rather than continue with his intended plan of finishing the chapter, Mr. Murphy adapted his instruction by encouraging his students to talk about their feelings regarding how civil rights were addressed in the book. Following the discussion, he had them write about a time that their civil rights, or those of someone close to them, had been violated.

These examples illustrate how teachers in high-needs schools capitalized on "teachable moments" (p. 352, Glasswell & Parr, 2009) to differentiate their instruction. In the first example, Ms. Johnson brought the student into the activity by building upon his previous experiences, increasing his likelihood of learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). In the second example, Mr. Murphy abandoned his planned lesson to sustain his students' engagement with a topic that was relevant to their lives and important to them. This type of differentiation enhances instruction, allowing students to access content and engage in higher-order thinking. For the purposes of this paper, we characterize this kind of on-the-fly differentiation as *thoughtfully adaptive teaching*.

What is Thoughtfully Adaptive Teaching?

Teacher educators have long suggested that effective teachers are adaptive (Borko & Livingston, 1989; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Duffy, 1991; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzone, 2007; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). For example, Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) state, "On a daily basis, teachers confront complex decisions that rely on many different kinds of knowledge and judgment and that can involve high-stakes outcomes for student futures" (p.

1). Similarly, Anders et al. (2000) explained:

Dilemmas characterize the nature of classroom teaching...Creative responsiveness, rather than technical compliance, characterizes the nature of effective teachers. In short, classrooms are complex places, and the best teachers are successful because they are thoughtful opportunists who create instructional practices to meet situational demands. (p. 732)

Moreover, research has demonstrated that teachers identified as being highly effective adapt their instruction to meet their students' needs (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Taylor & Pearson, 2002). Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, and Morrow (2001) wrote the following about the exemplary first-grade teachers in their study: "Rather than adapt children to a particular method, teachers adapted the methods they used to the children with whom they were working at a particular time" (p. 208). Likewise, Williams and Baumann (2008) reviewed the literature on exemplary teachers and found that "excellent teachers demonstrated instructional *adaptability*, or an ability to adjust their instructional practices to meet individual student needs" (p. 367). It is important to note that thoughtfully adaptive teaching requires extensive knowledge of content, pedagogy, and learners. We argue, in light of the evidence presented above, that adaptive instruction is particularly important for meeting the needs of students in high-needs schools. The following example from the research literature illustrates this point.

In a study of high-needs schools that successfully implemented the *Success for All* reading program, researchers found that highly effective teachers deviated from the script to meet the needs of their struggling readers by adapting the material (Klinger, Kramer, & Harry, 2006). They stated that teachers who were confident in their procedural knowledge and who had a deep understanding of students' individual needs were skillful in making spontaneous adjustments to their instruction. For example, one teacher in their study felt that reading should be interesting and fun. She adapted the reading program by modifying the amount of time spent reading the stories if she felt they were boring. In order to make them more exciting, she enhanced the stories with interesting activities, even if it took the class longer than the suggested time to finish the reading (Klinger et al., 2006). Such adaptations are often based upon skilled educators' knowledge of their students and their professional vision of what effective teaching entails. Developing the strength of mind to teach against the grain is challenging for new

teachers (Parsons, Metzger, Carswell, & Askew, in press).

Although researchers have suggested that effective teachers are adaptive, we know little about what teachers actually do when they adapt their instruction or why they adapt it at any given moment. Accordingly, researchers have engaged in classroom-based studies to examine what teachers do when they modify their instruction and the rationales they use (Duffy et al., 2008). This research has provided tools for studying teachers' adaptations. Based upon a five-year investigation, looking at more than 40 teachers in multiple Title I schools, researchers have created coding systems to capture both how and why teachers adapt their instruction when working in high-needs schools (Parsons, Davis, Scales, Williams, & Kear, 2010). These coding systems help researchers study the relationships between adaptive teaching and other aspects of instruction.

However, the findings of this longitudinal study were troubling. In light of the considerable attention given in the literature to thoughtfully adaptive teaching and of the extensive time the researchers spent observing in classrooms, one would expect that they would have documented many instances of thoughtful adaptations. However, that was not the case. Although teachers did adapt their instruction frequently, the adaptations were not at the level of metacognitive thoughtfulness associated with thoughtfully adaptive teaching (Duffy, Miller, Parsons, & Meloth, 2009). Sixty percent of the 353 adaptations identified were rated at the lowest level of thoughtfulness, and fewer than 3% were rated at the highest level of thoughtfulness (Parsons, Davis et al., 2010). This finding provides further motivation for teacher educators to examine how to help novice teachers adapt their instruction in thoughtful ways to meet the challenges of students in high-needs schools.

Accordingly, a top research priority for teacher educators should be to study their own practice, examining their effectiveness in preparing thoughtfully adaptive teachers who are ready to enter high-needs schools (Parsons, Massey et al., 2010). In the next section, we present promising theories about how to provide such preparation.

How Can Teacher Educators Prepare Thoughtfully Adaptive Teachers for High-Needs Schools?

Two aspects of teacher education seem to be particularly important for preparing teachers to be able to thoughtfully adapt their instruction in high-needs schools. The first is developing partnerships between teacher education institu-

tions and high-needs schools. The second is helping teacher candidates articulate and enact a vision for their instruction.

Partnerships

As already noted, thoughtfully adaptive teachers are effective because they constantly assess their students' strengths and weaknesses in real time. Developing this ability is difficult for beginning teachers. However, socioeconomic and cultural differences can present additional challenges for new teachers who are interacting with children from diverse backgrounds.

One way teacher education programs can help teacher candidates develop the ability to adapt their instruction for diverse students is to create strong partnerships with effective high-needs schools. Such partnerships create a community of learners in which all parties are committed to doing what is best for the students they serve. This context facilitates opportunities for teacher candidates to have a variety of interactions with the students and families in these schools. As noted above, the majority of teacher candidates are White, middle-class females who frequently have had little previous exposure to diverse ethnic and racial groups (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Teacher candidates benefit from spending time in high-needs schools and with the students, parents, and other members of the community they will serve (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; McIntyre et al., 1996).

For example, instead of just observing and participating in classroom instruction, teacher candidates can also attend and take part in PTA meetings, school board meetings, parent-teacher conferences, assemblies, community days, lunch periods, and recess. Such a range of experiences can give teacher candidates a richer understanding of the students, the community, and the norms of high-needs schools. As a result, they will be better prepared to thoughtfully adapt their instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. Indeed, research has demonstrated that teachers often adapt their instruction based upon their knowledge of the students they are teaching (Parsons, Davis et al., 2010). Teacher educators must therefore provide ample opportunity for teacher candidates to be exposed to the backgrounds and cultures of the students in high-needs schools because knowledge of oneself and of others is an essential foundation for constructing, evaluating, and altering curriculum and pedagogy in culturally responsive ways (Delpit, 1995). Banks et al. (2005), for example, found that Latino/a students' academic performance was strengthened when their community knowledge

was tapped, as the following example shows.

Ms. Johnston teaches sixth grade in a Title I elementary school with a diverse student population in a large suburban district. When her class was studying American Indians, she started the unit by showing them a variety of primary source images and tools. Many of her Latin American students said that some of the objects or pictures reminded them of their home countries. She immediately saw this as an ideal opportunity to incorporate the students' own cultures in her unit. She adapted her instruction by assigning a two-day project requiring students to interview their parents about daily life in their country of origin. The students were asked to bring in artifacts or pictures to share with the class and were encouraged to make connections with their home cultures throughout the unit. This helped to build a strong, meaningful base for the new knowledge the students would encounter in the next unit.

Teacher candidates should also be aware that their own worldview is not universal, but instead is greatly influenced by their gender, race, ethnicity, cultural background, social class, and life experiences (Banks et al., 2005). Consider the following example. After her class had studied the Holocaust in depth, Ms. Brock, a first-year teacher in an inner-city elementary school, took her students to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, to see the *Daniel's Story* exhibit. The exhibit shows Daniel's family's decline from normal beginnings to life in the ghetto and finally in a concentration camp. To Ms. Brock's shock, when her students exited the exhibit they seemed virtually unfazed. In later discussions, the students said that the concentration camp, with its bunk beds and untreated wood floors, resembled some of their homes. Ms. Brock found the experiences of Holocaust victims unspeakably horrible, while her students were not similarly affected. She quickly realized that her students did not necessarily share her worldview.

Finally, it is important that teacher candidates' observations and experiences in high-needs schools be closely connected to their coursework. It is also vital that the teacher educators who prepare candidates for work in high-needs schools have extensive experience in working with such schools and populations. Coherence between fieldwork and coursework provides teacher candidates the opportunity to apply their new academic learning to the specific classroom settings in which they are placed, and then return to their courses to discuss the questions raised by their experiences in schools. To support this learning, teacher educators can make candidates' learning meaningful by designing coursework to complement those experiences. Students learn best when academic content connects authentically to their

lives (Bransford et al., 1999). Through substantial observation of, and interaction with, students and expert teachers in high-needs schools, teacher candidates can develop a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, people different from themselves. The knowledge of students' backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, school readiness, and learning styles that they acquire through such experiences will help them grow as thoughtfully adaptive educators.

In sum, partnerships between teacher education institutions and effective high-needs schools provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to have varied experiences that expand their awareness of the students, communities, and cultures with which they may work. Relevant coursework in conjunction with this enhanced understanding fosters teacher candidates' abilities to thoughtfully adapt their instruction.

Visioning

A second component of teacher education programs that can support the preparation of thoughtfully adaptive teachers is helping teacher candidates articulate and refine a vision for their teaching. As discussed above, teachers who work in high-needs schools face tremendous challenges. In addition to working with students who are extremely diverse in their academic readiness, background knowledge, language proficiency, and home cultures, teachers in high-needs schools are often faced with extensive instructional mandates (Cummins, 2007).

The current demands for school accountability have had a significant impact, particularly on high-needs schools (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Watanabe, 2008). Anticipating negative repercussions for failing to raise high-stakes test scores, high-needs schools frequently turn to programmatic instruction in search of a quick fix (Allington & Walmsley, 2008). However, the research shows very clearly that it is the teacher, not the program, that most influences students' learning and achievement (Allington, 2006; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Moreover, these mandated programs often emphasize methods of instruction that are in contradiction with what is known about how students learn (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Bransford et al., 1999; Pearson, 2007) and that are insulting to teachers as knowledgeable professionals.

To prepare teachers for the realities of high-needs schools, teacher educators must instill in their students the resolve to do what is best for children, regardless of instructional context and corresponding mandates. Researchers have suggested that teachers who thrive have a *vision* for their teaching. Ideally, teacher educators

should continue to help new teachers maintain their visions as they enter the difficult first years of teaching.

Visioning has a long history in the research literature and has been conceptualized in various ways (Fairbanks et al., 2010). Vision has been described as “a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher and fuels independent thinking” (Duffy, 2002, p. 334). Fairbanks et al. characterized it as “a teacher’s personal commitment to go beyond curricular requirements” that is “rooted in belief or personal theories about what teachers envisage for their students” (p. 163). Hammerness (2006) portrayed vision as teachers’ images of their ideal classrooms; Corno (2004) described teachers’ visions as internal guiding systems. And Turner (2006) emphasized teachers’ visions of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Fairbanks et al. (2010) demonstrated how all these conceptualizations of visioning are rooted in self-awareness. This self-understanding translates into a strength of mind. Teachers with a clear vision know why they are teaching and are empowered to work toward making their vision a reality. For example, Hammerness (2003) stated, “If teacher educators can help teachers develop, articulate, and defend their own purposes, they may be more able to develop the agency and courage to make informed decisions and perhaps ultimately understand how to ‘teach against the grain’” (p. 55). Unfortunately, visionary teachers working under restrictive programs are often put in the difficult position of choosing whether to follow the program or to do what is best for their students. It is our stance that teachers should *always* do what is best for students.

Helping teacher candidates articulate and refine a vision of themselves as educators will develop their ability to thoughtfully adapt instruction. When teachers are compelled to think deeply about why they are teaching and what they want their students to become, they grow conscious of the values and ideals that shape their vision. Teachers who have a clear vision for their instruction when they enter high-needs schools—where diverse students and curricular mandates are the norm—are more likely to do what is best for their students, differentiating instruction to meet a wide range of needs in spite of less-than-desirable working conditions and restrictive mandates. Indeed, Fairbanks et al. (2010) stated:

[a vision] provides a platform from which teachers initiate adaptations such as ‘teachable moments,’ and may be the source of the persistence and perseverance that fuels teachers’ efforts to resist restrictive policy mandates...teachers with a vision may strive to be more thoughtfully adaptive because they have a driving personal commitment to impart more than just

what is required. (p. 164)

The following account illustrates this point.

Ms. Gray teaches eighth-grade English Language Learners in a rural school district; most of her students are recent immigrants. Her vision is for students to not only develop English language proficiency but also maintain their cultural heritage as they become active, successful participants in U.S. society. According to the school system's pacing guide for eighth-grade social studies, the history of American Indians is to be taught early in the first quarter. The culminating activity of that unit, as originally designed by Ms. Gray, was to have been the creation of a museum in which students displayed their research on American Indian tribes. She planned to differentiate instruction within the unit by allowing students to choose which tribe to study and how to display their learning; giving them leeway with regard to how much they used English and how much they used their first language; and allowing them to collaborate with peers if they wanted.

However, when she introduced the unit, several students made it clear that they wanted to study the history not of American Indians, but of their own cultures. Recognizing this—and driven by her vision—Ms. Gray adapted her instruction by changing the focus of the assignment. The unit still culminated in a museum display, but Ms. Gray had students conduct research and report on the indigenous people of their home countries, rather than on American Indians. She responded to the students and disregarded the school system's pacing guide. At the same time, since the adaptation met the curricular objective, cultures of the world, Ms. Gray was able to draw upon student interest and be guided by her vision while still following the school's required curriculum (though not in the recommended sequence).

Prerequisites

In the previous sections, we outlined two teacher education practices that are likely to increase teacher candidates' ability and propensity to thoughtfully adapt their instruction: 1) partnerships between teacher education institutions and high-needs schools, and 2) visioning. However, it is important to note that these recommendations are effective only if they are integrated into teacher education programs that provide candidates with extensive knowledge of content, pedagogy, learners, and assessment. These elements are the foundation of effective teacher

education and have been reviewed extensively in the literature (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

The reviews cited above also suggest that effective teacher education programs are coherent; include extended and high-quality field experiences; emphasize reflection; use research-based strategies such as case studies, teacher research, portfolios, and performance assessment; and continually engage in program assessment. Without such principles as components of a teacher education program, partnerships and visioning are likely to be ineffectual. For instance, even if teacher candidates can articulate their vision, they are unlikely to become effective teachers if their training program lacks a coherent curriculum. We therefore posit that teacher education programs that are already effective can be enhanced by developing strong partnerships with high-needs schools and helping teacher candidates articulate and refine their vision for teaching. In turn, these practices will increase the likelihood that new teachers can thoughtfully adapt their instruction to meet the challenges faced by students in high-needs schools.

Conclusion

All students deserve a high-quality education. However, there is a continuing disparity between the quality of education that students receive in affluent schools and the quality of education that students receive in high-needs schools. To address this inequality, it is the responsibility of every teacher education program to prepare candidates effectively to be able to meet the needs of all students, including those in high-needs schools. Differentiation, which is particularly vital to effective instruction in such schools, is embodied in *thoughtfully adaptive teaching*. Teacher education programs can promote this practice by creating partnerships with successful high-needs schools and helping candidates articulate and refine a vision for their teaching.

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TOWARD 21ST-CENTURY LITERACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: FACILITATING STUDENT DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS

steven goodman

Students in high-needs schools are growing up in a world awash in digital recording, entertainment, and communication technologies. Though they are immediately drawn to these technologies, to use them thoughtfully and creatively students need to develop literacies for critically analyzing (reading) and producing (writing) overlapping image, sound, graphic, and print-based texts. The great majority of students in high-needs schools live in impoverished communities hit hard by the recession, and these social and economic conditions often have a significant negative impact on their learning (Eckholm, 2009; Meier, 2009). The high poverty, dropout, and unemployment rates that shape their schools, communities, and life opportunities are well documented (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; O’Conner & Hilliard, 2009; Noguera, 2009; Luo, 2009).

In spite of those conditions or perhaps *because* of them, I would argue that schools use the social problems students face as learning opportunities and use the teaching of 21st-century digital literacy skills to foster their active community engagement. Teaching for both critical media literacy and democratic citizenship requires an integrated multilevel approach. In this process, students develop fluency across multiple literacies, apply newly acquired skills to create media projects, and build a sense of agency (Goodman, 2003). The goal is to enable them to challenge the institutions and public policies that negatively impact their schools, families, and communities.

While this approach may be demanding for both student and teacher, case studies of apprenticed learning programs in out-of-school settings (Halpern, 2008) provide models and show powerful outcomes from social-issue youth media projects. Youth video, radio, and magazine programs operating across the country give young people a voice and engage them in social justice issues; funders also report that such programs both help young people relate to adults and peers in more positive ways and improve basic literacy skills—reading, writing, and communication—that can boost academic achievement and strengthen the ability to transition successfully into adulthood (Stuart Foundation, 2006; Investing in Youth Media, 2006).

The challenge then for teachers is to bring the promising practices of com-

munity-based youth media programs into high-needs school settings; to create a “space of action”—as Greene (1988) has called it—outside the taken-for-granted givens of the system. Within this space, teachers can help repair and restore their students’ self-image and sense of agency as active and critical learners. Teachers must make the case to principals that such an alternative approach is transformative and will increase student engagement and meet new 21st-century literacy Common Core State Standards.

Unlike more traditional teacher-centered, textbook-based methods, teaching students to plan, research, shoot, edit, and present documentaries improves critical thinking and literacy skills because they are practiced in a social setting and situated in the real-world context of a video project. Students work on these skills because they see a purpose for them and care enough to make that effort. They become more than interested. They become immersed; or as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described it, they find pleasure in their work and fall into the “flow” of it.

Preparing teachers to engage their students in video inquiry projects requires some technical facility in video making. More importantly, it requires a knowledge of a pedagogical method and a methodology. That is, teachers need to learn a set of practices that they will enact in the classroom as well as the values and principles that animate those practices. Preservice teachers generally face an additional set of challenges, since they first need to develop basic classroom management techniques before feeling confident in using inquiry-project-based strategies.

I will discuss three of those core principles by examining excerpts from a 14-minute video project that students produced in a New York City middle school.¹ While the themes of student inquiry projects vary, these excerpts represent common elements that teachers can help their students incorporate across the video inquiry and production process.

Democratizing the Production of Knowledge

A video documentary project democratizes the traditional process of producing and distributing knowledge in schools in four important ways. First, in choosing their own topic, students bring a question, event, or problem from their life into school as a valid subject of study. Second, this empowers the student producers and

1 This student documentary and other projects described in this article were facilitated by teachers who received inservice professional development and weekly on-site coaching from the Educational Video Center, of which the author is founder and executive director.

their school peers to reference their lived experiences as legitimate sources of information and storytelling and, accordingly, to speak as authorities about their documentary subject. Third, students pose questions to adult experts (e.g., police officers, judges, principals, or scholars)—who, outside this camera-mediated interaction, would have higher status and power over them—and can then appropriate and edit these comments alongside their own. Fourth, the students can translate information they gather from traditional print-based sources—such as books, newspapers, magazines, and Web sites—into graphic and verbal modes of communication—such as quotes that move across the screen or spoken narration—to make that information more accessible to broader audiences.

Through in-depth video interviews with their peers, students transform private experiences into publicly shared reflections with multiple perspectives. For example, speaking in his group's video (*I Color: School and Racism*, 2007), here is what one middle school student had to say about racial and ethnic stereotypes:

During school, like, there is many people that make fun of my race. And, because I'm Mexican. And I don't care what they say. But like, for me to defend myself, I use the same thing...It provokes me when they say a joke and somebody else laughs. So I have to say it back. 'Cause I don't want to feel left out.

The student's story of humiliation and retaliation is validated and framed in the video by another expert, Pedro Noguera, an urban sociologist from NYU who is also a Latino:

Many times, just because you are a male and black or brown I think you experience stereotypes. People will make assumptions that you are, say, a troublemaker. Or that you might be the kind of person who would do something wrong. So I experience that too. Yeah. Going into stores and have people assume that I'm a shoplifter, or something like that.

Finally, the students expand the frame even further, connecting both stories to the national phenomenon of bias in television news reporting by using the following on-screen graphic: "The National Association of Hispanic Journalists found that only 1% of nearly 12,000 stories aired yearly on evening news focus on Latinos. Roughly 80% portray them negatively."

Developing a Sense of Moral Agency

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois writes about the phenomenon of double consciousness:

. . .this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Extending DuBois's race-based notion of double consciousness, we can imagine the struggle of the low income students of color described in the Alliance for Excellent Education's achievement gap report (2009) to reconcile the perception they have of themselves with the image that the dominant social institutions have of them as they are tested, labeled, tracked, punished, and medicated. Negative perceptions of low income youth of color, particularly black males, as "problem students" and "slow learners," are more than privately held attitudes; they become part of social and public institutional practice. Research has shown that:

- children of color are far more likely to be subjected to metal detector searches and to attend schools with permanent metal detectors than nonminority middle class students are (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 20);
- in comparison with middle class children, children on Medicaid are given antipsychotic drugs four times as often and are given more powerful medication for less severe conditions (Wilson, 2009);
- in proportion to their enrollment in New York State schools in the 2004-2005 school year, black male students were accepted to Gifted and Talented programs at approximately one-fifth the rate of white male students and were expelled from school nearly four times as often as white male students were (Dillon, 2009).

In the face of such social marginalization, becoming engaged in community documentary projects can develop students' sense of efficacy and moral agency. This can occur in two ways: first, when students research solutions to pressing problems, such as racial and ethnic stereotyping in school and in the media, they participate in a public dialogue. Creating real work for real audiences in their school and in their

world, they are actively contributing to the collective good and well-being of the broader community. Second, by interviewing local leaders such as Noguera, and learning about organizations such as the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, students come to see adults as possible role models and allies. They meet others who share their experiences and are actively working to address problems of poverty, racism, and other out-of-school social obstacles that are typically rendered invisible by the school curriculum and the culture of testing.

Engaging in Social Practice of Multiple Literacies

Schools have traditionally taught literacy as an individual cognitive process involving the ability to decode text (reading) and to code language in visual form (writing). As Gee (2003) describes it, “In school, words and meanings usually float free of material conditions and embodied actions. They take on only general, so-called decontextualized meanings...” (p.86). From a social linguistic perspective, “Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs” (Gee, 1996, p. 41).

When they are creating video documentaries, students are organically engaged in a contextualized social practice through which they learn to use multiple literacies to change the way the world around them is represented and interpreted. They not only conduct interviews and research a subject they have chosen, based on their own lived experiences (for example, stereotypes in the media, bullying in school, or teen sexuality), but also have the social space to think, act, and become social journalists.

Students who struggle to communicate through the written word are not excluded from this process. In fact, they flourish when given multiple access points in the collaborative process of media production, whether as camera operator, interviewer, audio composer, or editor. Telling a story with a beginning, middle, and end; crafting a message for an unknown audience; editing and revising their work through group critique sessions—these are all transferable literacy skills built through social practice.

This deep learning and language development occurs not only because of multi-modal communication but also because of the different kinds of sources students use to tell their stories and make their arguments. As noted, in the I Color video segments students gathered stories about ordinary, concrete school experiences from their peers. They included additional statements from adult experts who con-

nected their personal experiences—for example, going to the store and being suspected of shoplifting—to the broader social phenomenon of racial profiling. The students built on this story-based information as a cognitive scaffold and used statistics, as they would in a research paper, to connect that information to the more abstract idea of the news media as a system that can employ stereotypes to misrepresent people—in this case, Latinos.

This scaffolding process evokes Vygotsky’s (1986) belief that everyday or “spontaneous” concepts “clear the way” for more abstract, systemic, or “scientific” ones:

The development of a spontaneous concept must have reached a certain level for the child to be able to absorb a related scientific concept. For example, historical concepts can begin to develop only when the child’s everyday concept of the past is sufficiently differentiated—when his own life and the life of those around him can be fitted into the elementary generalization ‘in the past and now’; his geographic and sociological concepts must grow out of the simple schema ‘here and elsewhere.’ In working its slow way upward, an everyday concept clears a path for the scientific concepts and its downward development. (p. 194)

Community of Practitioners

One of the best ways for teachers to incorporate the principles and practices of student documentary projects into their repertoires is to experience them directly as learners, and then reflect on their learning within a community of practitioners. Each summer, teachers gather for weeklong institutes at the facilities of the Educational Video Center (EVC), a media education organization based in New York City, and work there collaboratively to plan, research, and produce their own short video projects. Each day they reflect on their experiences, discuss the facilitation strategies that the EVC staff developers model, and review the techniques they would use with their own students.

In the workshop, teachers go through the same process that their students will experience in the classroom. They discuss what the focus of their investigation will be, take risks using new technology and interviewing strangers, and argue with each other over the selection, order, and meaning conveyed by the footage they are editing. They change their minds over the direction of their project; become consumed by the question they are addressing; work long hours to meet a deadline; and bond as they create and share their work. In connecting the process of composing a

documentary to writing an essay, teacher participants learn how such a video project also calls for a guiding theme, research, argumentation, sense of audience, editing, and revision. Teachers see how making a documentary is a strategy for creating civic engagement, bringing students out of the classroom to critically address the world and its problems.

Key Stages in the Project

Over the course of the weeklong institute, participants experience key stages in the process of planning, production, and reflection, through which they will then facilitate their students' work in school. The following are snapshots of some activities drawn from EVC's "Youth Powered Video" curriculum (Baudenbacher & Goodman, 2006).

Topic Selection

Teachers begin by brainstorming subjects for their group documentary inquiry in response to these prompts: What issues or problems are of greatest concern to you right now? What issue or topics do you want to know more about? How might the community be helped by a project exploring this issue or problem?

After questioning the group, clarifying some of their ideas, and eliminating and combining others, the EVC facilitator uses a Graffiti Board activity to help them develop their ideas further. The remaining topics are written on sheets of newsprint, and the sheets are taped up around the room. Teachers then jot down their thoughts in response to these questions: Why would this topic make a good documentary? What questions would you like this documentary to answer and who would you interview?

This experience models for teachers how inclusive, iterative, and reflective the process is. Empowering students to deliberate and choose the subject of their inquiry shows teachers how to democratize the relations of power in their classroom while still maintaining control as group leader and facilitator. It also changes the class dynamic from a test-based exercise to a more authentic real-world experience, introducing the possibility of moral agency with such questions as: "What issues or problems are of greatest concern to you?" and "How might the community be helped?"

Interviews

Once the main subject for their inquiry has been chosen, the teachers generate ideas regarding who would be the best interview subjects and what questions

they need to ask them. For their students, the process of finding interview subjects will create “real world” teachable moments of immense value. As a ninth-grade student video class learned when they invited experts to be interviewed for their documentary on teenage sexuality, using proper spelling, grammar, and professional discourse could all make a difference in the responses they received. For the student who explained that he had never “written messages to companies before,” the outcome was tangible, immediate, and tremendously rewarding. He sent an e-mail request to a professor of family health, who responded within minutes, agreeing to the interview. As a result, two new worlds of information opened for him: the virtual world of e-mail as a source of professional communication and the social world of science, housed in the cloistered university hospital, only a few blocks from their Washington Heights school, where the students later conducted their interview.

Most teachers will already know the basic elements of interviewing—such as understanding the differences between open-ended and closed-ended questions, playing devil’s advocate, and asking clarifying questions—that they will teach their students. However, since teachers will not necessarily have had the actual experience of interviewing someone, it is useful for them to role-play an interview, generate a list of interview do’s and don’ts, and discuss basic strategies—such as asking general questions before moving to more specific ones, taking background context into account, dealing with problems that arise, and considering possible solutions to them.

After the teachers conduct interviews, the facilitators model using journals and group discussions to reflect on their experience. Invariably, participants write about the energy and excitement they felt going “out on a shoot”; the team building that took place; the mistakes that were made; the engaging stories they heard; the information they gathered; the new questions that arose; and the unpredictable process of following an authentic inquiry where everyone has questions but no one has the answers. As one teacher described it, “There is a plan, but not a script.... This curriculum does not have an answer key in the back” (Fauntleroy, 2009, p. 2)

Preparing to Edit

Reviewing the footage that has been gathered, the teachers learn both the technical and the compositional process of editing. They make notes on which images, sounds, and sound bites are most usable for their project. This requires critical viewing, listening, and analyzing skills. In searching for the best nugget from an interview, they first need to agree on what makes a strong quote. They may decide

that such a quote supports a claim with convincing evidence, teaches the audience something new about the topic, makes the viewer think, is as concise as possible, connects with other parts of the documentary, and/or is visually interesting. The critical thinking that this process requires of students as producers can also help them, as readers, to identify the main ideas in articles and other print-based sources of information.

Once the footage is logged and the best quotes are highlighted, the group develops an edit plan to arrange the scenes in order along with other material they have or still need to gather, such as narration, photos, graphics, and music. Coming to consensus on a collaborative vision for their project develops a stronger documentary because the end product includes multiple voices and perspectives. Such a process also requires strong group facilitation. As one summer institute participant reflected:

The thing that I learned this week about myself is that collaboration is a real challenge for me...it made me feel more empathetic to my students about how hard that can be...And so I really struggled when we were collaborating to figure out when it was time to speak up...and when it was time to elicit other people's thoughts. I think it's the same when you're working with students and when you're in the role of facilitating. (Fauntleroy, 2009, p. 1)

Promising Practices

Facilitating student documentary projects requires that teachers develop a range of technical, artistic, critical literacy, and group-building skills. Teacher rubrics of promising practice include ensuring that all students contribute to discussions and decision making; use the community as a source of knowledge and information; connect personal experiences to social concerns; use multiple modes of literacy in their daily work; develop critical questions to guide their inquiry; revise their work and reflect on their learning; and use their video to inspire community dialogue and action.

Teachers can surely develop and refine such practices with time and experience. The overarching values are what matter most: a belief that democratizing teacher-student relations of power in the classroom will inspire students to become active constructors of knowledge; a trust in students' collective capacity to use their new skills and knowledge as moral agents of community change and well-being; and a conviction that providing students the social space and purpose to develop multiple literacies makes it possible for them to combine documentary image, sound, and

text to speak to audiences with power and eloquence. New teachers in high-needs schools can most effectively inspire their students not by spending class time on more test preparation in search of the narrowly defined easy answers, but by creating a “space of action” for them to pose their own questions and collectively, critically, and creatively search for the hard answers.

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NO SHORTCUTS ON THE JOURNEY TO LEARNING FOR STUDENTS OR TEACHERS

alison coviello & susan stires

Despite the focus of the No Child Left Behind Act, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress still indicate an achievement gap that has not significantly changed since desegregation (Dillon, 2009). Although most members of the public view students who attend low-performing, underserved schools in terms of (perceived) deficits, many teachers who staff these schools see their students very differently. They believe that their students are capable of learning; that they have a foundation of knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making tools; and that they can succeed in all of areas in schooling— and beyond. Teacher educators must therefore be prepared to provide the background information and knowledge about instruction that teacher candidates need to be able to see and support the strengths of students in underserved schools, enabling them both to succeed.

There are various ways schools of education can accomplish this. These include designing new courses and revising existing offerings—for example, by adding readings that reflect the demographic changes and instructional challenges in contemporary high-needs schools. The other major component of teacher preparation that needs to be reexamined and modified is supervision of teacher candidates in the classroom. Fieldwork may be extended so that education students have more time to engage in instruction and implement curriculum; it should also include a placement in a public high-needs setting with sufficient, high-level supervision.

We also believe that as part of their program, teacher candidates should engage in site-based research, with teacher educators who mentor them and/or collaborate with them. The benefits of this practice are many, but most salient is that when teachers or teacher candidates participate in research, they look at teaching as inquiry and as an open learning experience in which they are constantly engaged. Added to this are the benefits of broadening their own knowledge base and contributing to others' knowledge through sharing what they have learned (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Site-based studies also highlight the importance of understanding context, which, in turn, is critical to understanding high-needs, traditionally underserved schools.

In order to demonstrate the value of site-based studies, we describe a teacher research study; a parallel teacher educator study; the implications of the findings of both; and the value of this experience. Alison's teacher research study led to her master's thesis under my (Susan's) guidance. Although I was Alison's mentor for the project and thesis, I also conducted my own connected study, and we collaborated on considering the implications of our investigations.

Alison was a master's candidate in education and a relatively new teacher in the South Bronx when we met. She designed an integrated social studies and literacy curriculum on U. S. Westward Expansion (a topic of study required by the New York State Department of Education) for her fourth-grade class. In high-needs urban schools, this social studies unit is typically covered in a few weeks through textbook readings and test-like exercises in high needs urban schools. Alison, however, wanted a more interesting, engaging, and substantive experience for her students. She also wanted them to learn in an enriched, democratic environment, and she wanted to study their learning. As Alison's mentor, I was interested in her project and in studying her teaching and her own learning.

The Long Trail: Alison Describes Her Classroom-Based Research

High-stakes standardized assessments are currently at the forefront of most public school agendas (Freeland Walker, 2000). Such tests are intended to improve the quality of teaching. However, McNeil (2000) notes that, in focusing on improving test scores, schools serving students who historically perform below level on standardized tests are, in fact, often forced to narrow their curricula to a few basic skills and scattered bits of content knowledge. In many settings, social studies and science are taught only cursorily or even omitted entirely. Unsettled by the possibility that this might happen in my own classroom, I sought a way to support my fourth-grade students' long-term understanding of content while authentically engaging them as readers, writers, and speakers (Gardner & Boix-Mansilla, 1994). To that end, I developed a content-based literacy curriculum that combined literacy instruction with social studies content (see Appendix A, www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers).

To analyze the teaching and learning that occurred during our class's study of this integrated unit, I utilized five tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy: (1) supporting student agency; (2) developing an inclusive classroom community; (3) making deliberate connections between new content and students' own identities; (4) expanding student perspectives; and (5) increasing students' world knowledge.

As I looked at the work that my students and I did together, I wondered, first, how this integrated unit of study on Westward Expansion supported the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and, second, how this work contributed to students' knowledge, understanding, and thinking. During the unit, I acted as a participant observer. First, I observed and recorded the comments, questions, attitudes, and actions of my 21 students, and then I analyzed their writings, illustrations, and projects. In the following subsections, I offer just a few examples of the ways that this unit addressed the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and of the deep knowledge that my students ultimately developed.

Student Agency

Throughout the unit, my students consistently asked content-related questions, looked for resources on their own, connected new content knowledge with independent reading or whole-class mini-lessons, and engaged in unprompted, independent projects. For example, Jeff (all student names are pseudonyms) both inquired about the cost of the Louisiana Purchase territory and then questioned why Sacagawea was willing to accompany men who carried guns. Notably, these concerns about money and personal safety relate directly to Jeff's own experience of growing up in an inner city. On another occasion, Cristina asked: "Did anyone die while they (the Lewis and Clark crew) were carrying the boats over the huge mountains?" And as he learned about an unfamiliar, yet intriguing, way of life, Tony considered: "Did they like getting dirty?" and "How come they wore the same clothes?"

For the students, armed with curiosity and some information, what began as simple inquiry turned into a purposeful, independent answer-seeking project. This was evident in the way that they avidly searched for and used various resources. Knowing about the Lewis and Clark journey prompted Tony to ask if he could take Sacagawea's biography home. In another situation, Kasaan asked for permission to go to the school library and returned shortly afterward showing off his book about Westward Expansion to the rest of the class. His enthusiasm persisted as he later exchanged this first book for one specifically about pioneer schools. While these anecdotes may not, at first, appear significant, it was not typical for my students to enthusiastically seek books to read outside of school, openly share them with peers, or show them off proudly. These events were truly noteworthy.

Several students also began content-related projects independently. After finding directions in a library book on how to construct a model wagon, Leo built

one of his own. On another day, Jeff arrived at school with two pioneer toys that he had made himself. Just a week before the unit ended, he brought in a diorama depicting Pawnee Indian life. Later that day, his mother described the tiring night her family had endured as Jeff insisted on staying up until 1:15 a.m. to complete the project. “He’s not usually into things like this,” she explained, “so I had to let him do it.” Thus, during this integrated, content-centered unit, an often distracted student became an enthusiastic and independent learner. Without a doubt, the authenticity of the curriculum sparked my students’ motivation and supported a commitment to learning. Had our lessons focused solely on literacy skills and used fragmented, disconnected readings, my students probably would not have found compelling, real-life material to connect with. In turn, the fervent curiosity, fierce independence, and extreme pride that they displayed during this unit likely would not have emerged.

Classroom Community

Nieto (2000) points out that many students who might not fit the educator’s image of able learners are often left out of classroom learning communities. During the unit on Westward Expansion, all of the students in our class were members of imaginary pioneer families and had specific tasks to accomplish. In this way, everyone had opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. On one day, while packing supplies for their journey west, one family engaged in a lively debate over pack weight. After Valerie suggested loading five or six barrels of water into her family’s wagon, the following conversation ensued:

Leo: That’s like 1000 pounds. Are you buggin’?

Valerie: Do you want to survive or die from dehydration?

Leo: All right, I’ll survive. So Jon and I can ride on horses.

Valerie: Do we have dishes? And where are we going to eat? On the ground?

It was, then, this unit’s content that provided opportunities for my students to have authentic conversations with one another. As they exchanged ideas, a meaningful and inclusive community of learners emerged.

Connecting New Content to Prior Experiences

Nieto (2000) observes that all students come to school with a store of knowledge gained from past experiences. While she acknowledges that the experi-

ences of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds are likely to differ greatly from those of students from the dominant culture, Nieto stresses that these experiences are no less valuable. Thus, one primary goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is to enable students to connect their own experiences with new learning. The content of the Westward Expansion unit allowed students to do this. The following example illustrates how powerful some of these associations were. In a letter to me, Angel expressed his personal link to Sarah, a character in Patricia MacLachlan's *Sarah, Plain and Tall*: "I read Chapter 7. On page 40 Sarah was with tears and Annie (Anna) and me have the same thing because I put things in my mind too like Annie." In this case, Angel's personal experiences as a foster child in multiple families scaffolded his understanding of Anna's desire for Sarah to be her new mother. Hence, the unit's content offered Angel an opportunity to build upon his own experiences and develop new knowledge as well.

Bridging Contexts to Expand Student Identities

Sociocultural theory (Nieto, 2000) maintains that the contexts of students' lives greatly influence school success. Accordingly, culturally relevant pedagogy calls for educators to recognize the political, social, and economic hurdles that students like mine regularly confront, while also providing students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in diverse contexts. Thus, while not discounting students' identities, curriculum should act as a bridge to new experiences, situations, and contexts.

Because my students acquired a deep knowledge of Westward Expansion, they were able to think, speak, and act as pioneers and Native Americans. Student conversations, writing, speech, dress, and actions all reveal the bridges across which my students made their way back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Jerome brought a Native American bow to our unit's concluding celebration. When asked by a visiting third grader where he had gotten this artifact, Jerome answered in full pioneer character, telling an elaborate story about his trade with a group of Native Americans. Surely, Jerome's new familiarity with the time period enabled him to imagine and behave as if he lived in this historical period.

Increasing Student Knowledge

To ensure that this integrated unit of study led to student learning, a critical review of my students' acquisition of knowledge was necessary. As evidenced by

the responses I received to the oral evaluation that I administered at the conclusion of the unit (see Appendix B, www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers) my students developed historical understandings of the Westward Expansion, accurate knowledge of geographic landforms and ecosystems, and an appreciation of our country's broad transformation over time. Perhaps most significantly, this content-focused literacy unit introduced students to multiple points of view and encouraged them to think critically about these diverse perspectives. For example, various students noted the political problems that Westward Expansion in the United States caused for the Native Americans already living on the land. Jeff insightfully explained the dilemma from both the pioneer and Native American perspectives:

The West was small to the Indians to have both of them there. But the pioneers thought for the both of them...it wasn't. [After], the East got a little calmer and the West got a little complicated because the Indians didn't like the pioneers living on their land without permission.

Thus, in addition to gaining valuable knowledge and understandings of another time period, this content-focused literacy unit also afforded students unique opportunities to think critically about very real dilemmas.

Continuing the Journey: Susan Provides an Outside Perspective

Visiting Alison's school for several months, I was struck by the order that prevailed inside, which contrasted with the audible traffic on the street outside. In this industrial section of the city, there is always a high volume of traffic from a nearby expressway ramp. Trucks rumble and exhaust abounds in front of the school and adjacent housing project, where students and their families live.

Inside Alison's fourth-grade classroom, I was further struck by the intellectual rigor, excitement, and rich environment there, which in turn contrasted with the decorated, but stark, hallways of the school. Along with the usual reference charts and materials in Alison's classroom, there were displays of the class's various studies—animals and their habitats; the author, Gary Soto; and the current unit on Westward Expansion. There was also evidence that 21 individual children and their teacher spent time learning together in this classroom.

Alison's 16 boys and 5 girls came from a rich variety of cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Some were from families that had lived in this northern city for generations; others were from families that had migrated from the American South; and still others were from families that had immigrated from the

Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. A few children lived in families with both of their parents and siblings. However, most lived in less conventional family structures, including single parents and siblings; grandparents and other relatives, such as aunts; and foster families. Except for street noises, the classroom was a calm but busy environment, with students engaged in meaningful activities and projects.

I came to Alison's classroom by way of self-invitation. I admired her as a student and was interested in her thesis topic and her rejection of a deficit model to describe students who come from economically disadvantaged families. Further, Alison's class afforded me an opportunity to pursue a new research setting. My previous research had been in Chinatown with first grade English Language Learners, and I wanted the challenge of exploring a similarly economically disadvantaged population in a culturally different setting. I also decided that I wanted to examine the nexus between teaching and learning for older elementary students. My question became: Given opportunities to study interesting content presented through language- and literature-rich experiences, to what extent would the students be successful, and if they were, what did the teacher know and do that influenced that success?

I observed in Alison's classroom twice a week for half a day in February, March, and April during the eight weeks of the study. I found that the students were successful overall, both as a group in which they supported one another and in individual, unique ways. As a result of my research, I was able to identify three equally important major themes in Alison's teaching. I describe them below, providing an example of each.

Teacher as Authority and Respected Fellow Learner

Alison's complex role, ranging from authority to learner, coupled with her students' regard for her knowledge, is the first salient theme that emerged from my observational notes, interviews, and document collection. In this example from a combination literature circle/guided reading group, Alison fulfilled a dual role. She was both the expert reader who had introduced the book and then provided guidance to her students as they read, and a member of the discussion that followed as they made sense of their reading and learned from one another.

Yonley, Liza, Valerie, Leo, and Marcus were reading *Bound for Oregon* by Jean Van Leeuwen. Alison asked the students to bring Leo up to date since he had been absent, providing an authentic reason for the students to collaboratively retell the major events of the chapter while Leo listened.

Yonley: Mariellen's two younger sisters got sick with cholera. The father took a mirror to see if they were still breathing. It was a looking glass.

Marcus: Both of them got better, but one was bad.

Valerie: He saw fog (moisture from her breath). He gave her milk and soda. She got better.

(There is a brief side discussion of baking soda.)

Marcus: They were in a separate tent because cholera is contagious.

Liza: Germs travel and other people wouldn't catch it.

Marcus: I don't get why the father didn't get it.

Alison: He probably had a stronger immune system.

Here, after Yonley gives a brief summary of the chapter, each of the students provides a major event and/or revealing detail from it. The students' inferences and speculation provide evidence of deep involvement with the text.

Structures for Successful Learning

The second theme I identified was Alison's establishment of structures for successful learning. These include planning, expectations, collaboration, and support for practice and independence. Alison helped her students work in various small group structures as well as in the whole group; she assisted them with establishing places to work; and she differentiated instruction according to her students' needs. Also, she connected present ideas with previous ones; gave clear directions; made specific assignments; and prepared, explained, and modeled instructional organizers, such as the Peer Conference Sheet for Pioneer Journals (see Appendix C, www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers). This myriad of structures provided a safety net for some of the students and a springboard for others, depending on who they were as learners.

Mutual Trust and Respect

Finally, Alison displayed her belief in the students and their families—in their capabilities, intelligence, and life experiences (including those they imagined)—with consistency and caring (Noddings, 1984). In turn, they responded by trusting and respecting her. The most significant example of Alison's stance came at the end of the study when she took seriously the students' suggestion that she include more material about Black pioneers. However, there are many other examples, from every day of the study, of her respect for her students. Alison asked for

their suggestions about where and how to display information they gathered; she allowed them to make choices about what they read and wrote about; and she asked for their ideas about what to present during the celebration of their learning on Pioneer Day. Perhaps this mutual trust and respect was most obvious during the final minutes of this celebration when the students gathered before an audience of parents and guardians, two visiting classes, and teachers.

After the students had finished their group presentations, they all got together and sang “Paper of Pins.” When Alison first taught them this pioneer song, the students had identified it as a white person’s song, but they understood its meaning across cultures. They remarked, “Oh, she played him.” Next, they had a lengthy question-and-answer session with students and teachers from other classes that demonstrated how much knowledge they had gained through doing research and reading historical fiction (see Appendix D, www.bankstreet.edu/gsoccasionalpapers). Their confidence and enthusiasm for the material and for one another in their roles as fellow pioneers in the westward journey was also evident. Implicit in the celebration was the students’ trust in Alison and their capacity to learn with—as well as from—her.

Although each of the themes has been described individually, most of the activities and experiences of the Westward Expansion unit involved all three at once. For example, when Alison had the students write their responses in their pioneer family journals, she demonstrated her knowledge of the material; of the uses and process of journal writing; and of collaborative learning. She took into account her understanding of the students’ capacities and interests as she planned and organized each activity. She provided the students with opportunities to use what they were learning in playful, imaginative ways, and she responded to their efforts with careful attention. The students in turn knew that Alison was interested in their work and that they would receive help if they needed it. As a result their trust and respect, along with their sense of responsibility, grew stronger.

Arrival at Planned Destinations: We Discuss Implications

We believe that the findings of our studies have crucial implications for the lives of America’s urban, economically underprivileged youth, and their teachers. The need for educators to give careful attention to the specific circumstances of such students demands a reallocation of priorities. First and foremost, it is obvious that large-scale curricular redesign is necessary. Currently, students from underserved communities are viewed primarily through a deficit-based ideological lens—one that results in fragmented curriculum and uses basal texts, formatted

workbooks, and textbooks to promote skills needed to pass tests. Encouraging educators, including school leaders, to view their students through an ability-anchored philosophical lens, such as sociocultural theory—and, in turn, to practice culturally relevant pedagogy in which content acquisition and developed thinking processes are educational priorities—is critical to successful curricular and instructional design. This change, which begins with validating the experiences of economically underprivileged children, will require professional development for teachers in designing curriculum based on a broader range of children’s literature and primary sources. Further, support will be necessary for teachers to implement integrated curriculum in which student interest, understanding, and knowledge are the most valued learning outcomes.

Second, valuing the students is essential for conducting teacher research in inner-city classrooms. Teachers can learn about their own practice through research and also contribute to the wider body of knowledge about teaching and learning in urban schools. If schools can become centers of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) they can also increase the momentum for educational change. More classroom-based studies will mean that more teachers will contribute to that change. Studies like ours, which give voice to the students and teachers who are most affected by under-resourced schools, need to reach educators and the general public alike.

Third, the outcomes of this study also point to the necessity for critical analysis of accountability measures. Meaningful summative assessments, like Alison’s oral interview, should focus attention on students’ thinking processes (such as inquiry, analysis, and synthesis), as well as on their attainment of meaningful content knowledge. Informal, ongoing assessments of how students are learning are as necessary as final assessments of their knowledge of content and acquisition of specific skills. Ongoing assessment, for example, Alison’s conference notes, can and should lead to meaningful endpoint evaluations such as narrative assessments. *Accountability lies in our responsibility to our students and their learning.* Alison’s accountability was evident in her planning, based on continuous assessments; her scaffolding of learning experiences; her daily instruction through whole class mini-lessons, small group discussions, and individual conferences; her high expectations of students; and her utter belief in them. Teacher research, with its rich data and analyses, can lead to documented assessment that extends far beyond the narrow standardized measures currently in use.

Finally, there is a need to promote greater care of students’ intellectual and

emotional needs. If teaching and learning is a joint project determined primarily by the relationship between teacher and student (Nieto, 2000, Stires & Genishi, 2008), then we believe that it is imperative to understand what makes that relationship work. Alison is conscious that her view of students and their learning, which includes how she promotes relationships among them, directly affects what and how she teaches. Her students come to understand that they too bear responsibility for their relationship with her and with their classmates, and, by extension, for all their relationships—in other words, that it matters both how they treat others and that they learn. Alison knows that creating this twofold understanding cannot be taken for granted with her students, as it might be with some other student populations. She must invest in it, and she must help her students do so as well. Qualitative teacher research captures nuances of behavior that provide evidence, including incidents that are unique and telling, of the value of such investments for students and teachers alike.

Final Thoughts: Settling In

Alison's content-based literacy unit proved enormously successful at motivating student inquiry and exploration; encouraging participation in group discussions and analysis; promoting understanding through connection to prior experiences; and developing a knowledge base for future reading, writing, and learning. In turn, rather than emerging from the unit of study having acquired isolated skills and disconnected facts that are unlikely to promote success outside of highly specific academic circumstances, students acquired valuable, integrated knowledge and developed their thinking processes. Because Alison documented her work, she knows what took place and why.

Teacher educators have an important role to play in developing teacher research. Susan has continued to promote teacher research at her college and to work with graduate students on individual projects. Classroom teachers can promote teacher research as well. Teaching fifth grade at her school, Alison has conducted research on new questions that have evolved over time. She also supports colleagues in developing integrated curricula, encouraging democratic participation in classrooms, and researching answers to questions of their own. Through teacher research our work is generative and life-long.

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BEYOND THE LONE HERO: PROVIDING SUPPORTS FOR NEW TEACHERS IN HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

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In this essay we discuss the activities and challenges encountered in a partnership between a faculty of education at a university in southern Ontario and a local school board. The focus of the partnership was increasing student achievement in high-needs schools. We suspect that many teacher educators harbor the idea that the students in high-needs schools will be effectively served if those schools are gradually populated with new teachers who have the skills to engage with school communities and school administrators in a politically savvy way. The belief is that these appropriately skilled lone heroes will initiate programs in every classroom that will eventually lead to increased student engagement and achievement. The graduates of our faculty of education are specifically expected to be those lone heroes. Yet, as teacher educators, we are aware that they will be faced with a system that appears to be at cross-purposes with their good intentions. Perhaps this is the reason why many new teachers in high-needs schools get burned out and leave either a particular school or the school system altogether. However, teacher burnout is a structural problem, not an individual one (Apple, 1990). Thus, effective and sustained change at the classroom level requires support at the systemic level. We will be describing our experiences in providing this systemic support at one school. After describing the context of our research project, we will outline its original aims and some of the lessons learned—namely, that building relationships is the key to a successful school-university partnership.

We come to this research from three related but different experiences. Sarah is a retired high school teacher who is now an assistant professor in the faculty of education. Donna is an elementary school principal, currently on leave from that position while on a three-year teaching assignment with our faculty. Carl is a long time professor at the faculty. We are all of African-Caribbean backgrounds. We approach our research recognizing that society is inequitable and unjust, and that this can only be changed through active, conscientious transformative strategies (Freire, 1998). We also assume that a democratic classroom envi-

ronment cannot function as it should without an education system that prioritizes equality of outcomes through equitable accessibility and social justice practices at all levels of the educational system (Niesz, 2008). Our assumptions are framed by critical theory which proposes that: (1) it is important to acknowledge individuals' everyday experiences and practices and the interlocking relationships of socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, racial, and other factors in their lives; and (2) perceptions of physical appearance and roles contribute to individuals' life circumstances, perspectives and outcomes (Hinchey, 2008; Yosso, 2005). We recognize that schools, as part of an inequitable society, are sites of power and struggle and accordingly influence the ways in which different teachers and students are able to fully participate in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, all stakeholders in the educational system need to be consulted about their experiences, and alternative strategies for addressing issues must be carefully considered (Mitra, 2008; Portelli, Solomon, Barrett & Mujawamariya, 2005).

The study we will be describing arises out of concerns about the 40% dropout rate of Black¹ students in the Toronto District School Board's attempt to put in place an educational program that contributes to improving students' academic performance and achievements. We focus on students who live in a working class, racially diverse immigrant community where the largest proportion of the residents are people of color. It is a densely populated neighborhood with high-rise apartment buildings and town houses that were built in the 1960s. It remains a "reception area" for the increasing number of immigrants and refugees arriving in the city. Under other circumstances, the area would be considered a suburb of Toronto, but given its characteristics, it is referred to as an inner-city neighborhood with urban schools. This collaborative research project also emerges from the 17 years we have spent working in the neighborhood's schools to improve student academic performance, as well as from concerns about how few of the area residents attend our nearby university (James, 2005). In addition, to support efforts to improve those schools, we wanted to do more than just place our candidates in them as student teachers. (These opportunities to work in urban schools [Solomon, Levine-Rasky & Singer, 2003] were also intended to enhance the candidates' training and professional development [Lefever-Davis, Johnson & Pearman, 2007].)

1 In Toronto, this population is largely made up two distinct groups: African-Caribbean immigrants and their descendents, and African immigrants and their descendents.

Envisaging a participatory action research approach, our team included school teachers and principals on temporary assignment at the faculty of education, graduate students (as research assistants), and the classroom teachers who participated in the project, as well as children in the schools, parents, and other community members. The study reported here is part of an ongoing multilayered program of qualitative research in four schools. This article focuses on our activities in one school over the first year of the project. We wanted the research to address program, curriculum, and pedagogical issues as they arose and developed over time. We specifically looked for ways to build and maintain links with the community in an effort to counter the high dropout rates and student disengagement in the schools with which we worked; parent and community engagement is key to improving student outcomes in high-needs schools (Warren, 2005).

Our aim in the project was to: (1) document the development of a neighborhood-centered curriculum designed to increase student and community engagement; and (2) produce a model of university-school collaboration that could then be used in high-needs schools in other communities. We believed that through our partnership we would be able to establish a relationship based on reciprocity and engage with teachers in research that was specific and relevant to the school and community (Crawford, Roberts, & Hickman, 2008; Geiselman, 2008). We began with the assumption that the teachers already had the necessary skills and that the community already had the necessary knowledge, and that all we had to do was facilitate their coming together and pooling their talents.

We were naïve.

The project soon became bogged down in political and cultural differences between the theory-based world of the university and the pragmatic environment of schools (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2008). We believe those differences result from the university faculty's commitment to reflexivity and evidentiary approaches to teaching, on the one hand; and the teachers' and administrators' understanding of their situation in an Ontario school system²; on the other. This system demands that teachers develop individualized approaches to students based on their needs, while imposing standardized testing³ in grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The result for

2 Each publicly funded school in Ontario is managed by a District School Board which receives 100% of its funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Ministry also dictates curriculum expectations and mandates various initiatives such as standardized testing in literacy and numeracy.

3 Standardized test scores are published on the Ontario Ministry of Education Web site for each grade and school in order to make this information accessible to parents and any other interested person.

teachers and administrators is a sense of surveillance and constraint (Barrett & Pedretti 2006) that outsiders, such as university faculty members, may fail to recognize and accommodate.

The Project

In order to illustrate the effect of those different perspectives, we will be describing the experiences of the research team and participants at Cedarbrook Middle School⁴; chosen because it best exemplified the ways our methodology evolved in response to the school community's particular context. Cedarbrook has 659 students (53% female and 47% male) of the following backgrounds: 30% Caribbean, 30% Southeast Asian, 15% South American, and 25% a variety of others. Fifty-three percent of them are English Language Learners; however, 89% of the students have been living in Canada for more than five years. The students at Cedarbrook Middle School do poorly on standardized tests; less than half perform at grade level.

The school board had allowed the principals to decide which teachers would participate in the project. In order to minimize the disruption that the study might cause, the principal of Cedarbrook had chosen the seventh-grade teachers because (unlike the sixth grade) the seventh grade is not subject to standardized testing, nor (unlike the eighth grade) is it the crucial year before high school. Donna was given primary responsibility for working with the school's administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. She elected to attend the seventh-grade team's weekly meetings, which took place during the instructional day and represented the school's attempt to establish job-embedded professional development for the teaching staff. We saw this as a golden opportunity to both facilitate a discussion about student needs and ways to address them and to create opportunities for the university to assist in those endeavors.

The grade-level team had ten members: the teacher-librarian; the literacy coach for the team; the team leader; and teachers of literacy, mathematics, French language, social science, science, arts, and physical education and health. The school leader attended the meetings intermittently. Five females and four males had taught for from a minimum of three to more than fifteen years. The ethno-racial backgrounds of the teachers (five of African-Caribbean descent, two of Italian descent, and one each of Ghanaian, Russian, and South Asian descent)

4 All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms.

reflected the diversity of the student population.

In addition to attending the weekly meetings, members of the seventh-grade team also participated in three professional development institutes on the university campus—two each for a full day during the school year, and one for three days in the summer. During these institutes, the team (which came to be known as the professional learning community) participated in focus groups. During the three-day summer institute, parents and community members were also part of the focus group. A graduate assistant, assigned to work at Cedarbrook with Donna, kept records of all of the meetings and focus groups. She also took field notes while observing activities in the library, hallways, and classrooms.

The research team met periodically to discuss the progress of the project and to compare and contrast emerging themes from audio tapes and classroom observations.⁵ The quotes that follow come from the analysis of field notes from school visits and two focus groups that occurred at the summer institute. The first focus group involved two Cedarbrook teachers in conversation with teachers from another middle school. All the members of the second focus group—three teachers, two community members, the principal, and a vice principal—were from Cedarbrook.

Findings: Silos of Experiences and Meanings

The objective of this school-university partnership was to work with teachers to develop inclusive practices. At Cedarbrook, we had assumed that the seventh-grade team meeting would become a site for critical discussion and analysis of the underlying causes for the student disengagement that had been the impetus for creating the partnership. Through these discussions, this emerging professional learning community could then identify priorities and implement a plan of action. At the meetings, the seventh-grade team discussed student progress, reviewing students' report cards, classroom assessments, and other data sources. However, the conversations often strayed to other topics, such as field trips, the lack of time to complete tasks, and student conduct.

As a result, Donna did not feel that she was making progress with respect to the project's objectives. Our analysis of the situation seemed to show that the

5 We used a constant comparative method of analysis done in four stages: first, themes were identified independently by the graduate assistant assigned to each school; second, themes were shared with the rest of the research team for discussion; third, the original graduate assistant reexamined the transcripts in light of the discussion; and fourth, a second researcher verified and/or critiqued the analysis.

problem was rooted in our failure to account for three aspects of the systems in which we all worked and for our roles within them: (1) time for reflection, (2) competing demands, and (3) isolated and isolating work.

Time for Reflection

The project was designed to give teachers in the school a chance to identify areas of concern and to use university resources to investigate and improve their work with students (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2002). We believed that teachers would accordingly develop theoretical knowledge of education in high-needs schools and urban environments to supplement their practical experience. As researchers have done in other studies (for example, Copeland, 2003; Hawley & Sykes, 2007), we assumed that teachers already possessed a great deal of knowledge and expertise. The university's role was to support their work rather than to provide expert advice and ready-made solutions. However, we failed to take into account the effects that day-to-day concerns could have on the teachers' thinking (Firestone & Louis, 1999).

The weekly meetings at Cedarbrook served as an opportunity to develop a professional learning community (Dufour, 2004). However, there was tension between staff and administrators about approaches to student discipline. As a result, teachers focused on dealing with students' disruptive behavior, leaving very little time for discussion of other issues, such as creating a unified approach to curriculum that addressed the student disengagement that was leading to their disruptive behavior. In other words, the meetings focused on reactions to student behavior rather than discussion of underlying causes and development of proactive solutions.

In discussions about these weekly meetings, we came to realize that, in our enthusiasm to acknowledge the expertise and skills of teachers, parents, and other community members, we had ignored the ways in which the school environment elicited behaviors and habits of mind that had more to do with managing day-to-day than critically examining the bigger picture (Firestone & Louis, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). As one participant said:

Just being a teacher and the way our job is structured, just having to be somewhere at x time or y time is difficult and everything we do extra has to be in our own personal times but, like, other jobs, like business jobs, companies, people go off for months at a time to be workshopped and refreshed...so that they can sustain their profession. There needs to be some room for that in teaching as well. [Aisha]

This teacher recognized that the ways the system was structured undermined her ability to think and reflect on her work.

It is easy for those of us in the university to assume that teachers are unable to understand the underlying causes of problems because of their lack of theoretical background. However the school system is designed more for efficiency than for contemplation or reflection. In the university environment we enjoy privileges—the freedom to plan our own schedules, learning environments, and areas of intellectual focus—which are not readily available to classroom teachers. Further, classroom management and discipline issues are not significant problems in our work with our students. In contrast, the immediacy of such concerns significantly shaped working relationships between teachers and administrators and within the seventh-grade team.

Competing Demands

At the seventh-grade team meetings, Donna immediately became aware of the tension between teachers and administrators with respect to student discipline. The principal, a veteran of over 25 years, adhered strictly to legislation governing school safety, thus limiting opportunities for the investigation of mitigating circumstances surrounding behavior problems.⁶ Even when vice principals said that they were inclined to take such factors into account, they also noted that the sheer number of incidents limited the time available to do so. Theirs was a strategy of reacting swiftly and consistently rather than proactively and conscientiously. They also said that they often simply didn't have time to inform teachers of what disciplinary action had been taken with a given student. As a result, teachers were frustrated and felt that they were not being taken seriously. As we became more familiar with the dynamic between the school administrators and the staff, we also noticed contradictions related to the project itself.

On the one hand, the administrators understood the value and necessity of the project. On the other, they had developed a model of school management in which maintaining order was the highest priority. In this context, there was the opportunity neither to look at underlying causes of student underachievement nor to be innovative in working together to help increase students' academic success. In other words, classroom teachers and administrators struggled to understand the

6 Ontario legislation pertaining to school safety is explicit but does allow for the principal's and vice principal's discretion when disciplining students.

impact of the discourses of race and poverty on their students because these sorts of considerations were not a priority in the school context.

In Donna's attempts to get school leaders to identify and support inclusive practices responsive to the school-community culture, it became evident that there was no ideological alignment between the school and the project mandate. For example, Cedarbrook administrators seemed to view the project as an intrusion. With regard to members of his staff attending the institutes at the university during school time, one administrator noted:

But the threat of [professional development] is instability in the school. Looking at Cedarbrook this past year and the amount of PD that was allowed by the Ministry and [the university] and this and that created instability for the school...two schools that I worked at where there was a lot of PD [it] created a lot of chaos.

This comment is remarkable for two reasons. First, it describes the university's work in the school with the teachers not just as an inconvenience but as a "threat"—a threat to stability and order. The focus is not on the purpose (student engagement) of these PD sessions (Reeves, 2005) but rather on the (perceived) effect they have on the administrator's ability to maintain order within the school. The administrator faced the problem of having to replace absent teachers with substitute teachers which, in turn, might prove disruptive to (classroom) program consistency. The relationship between substitute teachers and students could indeed be challenging at times. With the homeroom teacher absent from class and involved in PD, student conduct often deteriorated, leading to more disruptive behaviour that he then had to manage. He continued:

We're talking about the threat of PD that is introduced into the school from outside of the school, outside of the principal's management. Where the Ministry is saying it is mandated literacy. [The university] program is mandated.

This administrator was concerned with the programs that were "outside the principal's management" and took teachers away from the classroom, while the school still had to meet the Ministry of Education's expectations for higher literacy scores, which he felt required less disruption to the school day. As much as he wanted to encourage his staff to engage in the professional development in this school board-university project, he also needed to be mindful of pressure from the

school board to live up to the Ministry of Education's projects⁷. The school administrator's struggle to balance competing demands is understandable. As the role of the school leader shifts from principal as instructional leader to principal as manager—responsible for student conduct, filing teacher performance appraisals, organizing classrooms, and monitoring the teaching and nonteaching staff—maintaining order within the school becomes a major preoccupation. In order to cope, the staff and administrative team at Cedarbrook tended to focus on the areas which they felt they could control. This led to the administrative team addressing discipline issues without consulting the teachers, and to teachers simply closing their classroom doors and doing their best.

Isolated and Isolating Work

Why can't teachers step up? Why are you waiting for administration to say, "Do you want to do this?" [Aisha]

Aisha functioned both as an informal leader within the staff and as the official seventh-grade team chair. She was effective in implementing responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy in her classroom. However, her leadership style often sabotaged her efforts to encourage colleagues to follow her example and to reconsider their instructional approaches. For example, at one meeting, once it was clear that the team was reaching consensus regarding the integration of Afrocentric content in history and English, she raised objections about the fact that mathematics was not to receive the same treatment. While her concerns may have been valid, insistence on this matter stalled the team for weeks.

We focus on Aisha not only because she was very vocal about her concerns but also because she was typical in her orientation to teaching. Like many teachers, she did the best she could with her students but teaching can be isolating (LaBoskey, 2006), with few opportunities for teachers to see what their colleagues are doing. Such sharing would be particularly helpful in environments where students live in poverty and resources are scarce. However, in the absence of these opportunities, teachers may wonder if they are the only ones coping. As Aisha put it:

What I find demotivating is the fact that there are a lot of people who

7 The District School Board is responsible for ensuring that the school administrators implement the Ministry's priorities. While school boards have the right to implement locally developed initiatives, because the funding comes from the province, there is always pressure to give provincial initiatives the priority.

should be here who are not here... There needs to be a way that all staff, especially [those] that are attached to [the project], [are] getting this same kind of PD. Because, for me, in order for a school to move forward, in order for a school to be strong, we have to be on the same page... You can't just take the grade 7 team and say, "This is it." It has to be from grade 6, grade 7, grade 8, so that when these kids leave grade 7 for grade 8, it's the same thing...

Aisha was clearly looking for a community of like-minded teachers, but she also wanted more than that. She wanted a systemic shift in focus that recognized the ways in which all parts of the system were interconnected.

She was also impatient:

I think I'm still stuck because after a year with [the university], you come in, you're listening, that's great. But kids are failing right now... I feel a sense of urgency to action... When are we going to implement some hard things to get this moving? It's a frustrating place to be and I guess I am at that place, right now, this morning.

Aisha's concerns about what others were apparently not doing became a barrier to working cooperatively with colleagues and to fully participate in the project. She grew disheartened with the lack of progress and seemed to have come to the conclusion that greater participation and the inclusion of more teachers was the solution. While this was a logical assumption, it ultimately meant that she resisted participating fully in the project herself.

By the end of the first year, Aisha left Cedarbrook to pursue leadership endeavors. We felt that we may have missed an opportunity to collaborate with a teacher who was already working effectively with her own students as she learned to lead her colleagues more productively. The irony is that, in the absence of systemic supports, the strong-willed and independent style that thwarted Aisha's ability to lead may have been necessary to sustain her efforts at serving the needs of her students.

Clearly, the postsecondary and K-12 systems in which the research team and participants functioned had influenced us in ways that needed to be acknowledged if we were to build relationships and realize the objectives of the school-university partnership.

Conclusions

We began the project with the intention of supporting teachers as they developed programs to address the underachievement of their students. We anticipated that given the stated needs and interests of teachers to respond to the expectations of the parents and students, the school would have welcomed us and willingly entered into a collaboration.

Evidently, we had not paid enough attention to the perspective that we, as university faculty, were bringing to the process—a perspective shaped by cultural differences such as our collegial relationships, commitment to research, and attitudes toward pedagogy, the change process, and rewards (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2008). We had failed to recognize the ways in which the lack of time for reflection, competing demands, and isolated and isolating work shaped the day-to-day lives of teachers. To move forward, we have had to accept that, at its core, this project needed to be about relationship building. We now understand that promoting reform within a school means, as Murphy and Hallinger (1993) note, “a growing recognition that change is a process, a quest for improvement rather than a search for a final resting place” (p. 255).

Once relationship and communication became central to our thinking, we changed our strategies. First, we made sure that our priorities shifted from research to providing opportunities for dialogue. Given that the larger project had always been about improving teaching practice, this was a subtle shift, but an important one because it meant that our conception of what constituted success could grow more naturally out of the particular circumstances at each school. For example, at some of the project schools, improving test scores might be a focus. However, at Cedarbrook, parents, community members, and staff agreed that better communication between stakeholders should be the primary goal.

Second, we brought parents and community members into the mix by hosting the summer institute mentioned above. Teachers, students, parents, and community members ate, worked, and chatted together for three days, occasionally breaking into small groups divided by role and school. In response to the teachers' desire to access the university's theoretical expertise, we developed a format whereby a researcher, school board consultant, student group, or community leader would address the whole group, followed by smaller group discussions. At other times, participants would watch a movie produced by community members and/or students, again followed by discussion. In all cases, group members identified which areas to focus on and developed a plan of action. This format provided safe

spaces for both dialogue and community building. Indeed, the small groups offered much of the insight about what needed to be done next in the project. For instance, after the summer institute the school decided to set up an equity committee to collect and identify different inclusive teaching strategies so that the staff would have a common language about best practices. It also decided to develop opportunities for parents to visit the school and created a parent resource center to help families learn how to navigate the school system.

Thus, our focus in the second year of the project continues to be on community building among teachers, parents, and others in the school's neighborhood. We are continuously modifying the plans developed in the summer institute. We have also introduced learning-community sessions every other month, which have dealt with topics such as student resilience, the province's equity policy, and the impact of poverty on health and, by extension, on student engagement. With each learning-community session, more people join the project. The next step is to incorporate students' voices into the project to further enrich the change process.

In the beginning the university faculty had a particular view of the ways in which various aspects of the project might unfold. Having teachers and school administrators as members of the project team provided the range of experiences necessary to respond effectively to the realities of school life. The project mandate evolved over time as the research team adjusted to the issues confronting students, families, teachers, and school leaders working on their own ideas for reform. Thus, although school and university differences complicated our work, we see these complications as contact points for change both within the school and in the project as it responds to and supports the work of change (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2002).

We end this paper recognizing the lone heroes who currently work in high-needs schools under difficult circumstances. We do not seek to dismiss their efforts out of hand; there is no doubt that students benefit from their work. However, as instructors at a faculty of education, we are not only in a position to prepare our graduates to navigate the school system but are also able to begin to address the systemic problems that undermine student achievement. This means developing relationships with schools and school boards, institution to institution, to provide the necessary supports for teachers' inclusive practices. In our view, this two-pronged approach has the potential to increase student engagement and achievement in high-needs schools. Further, it can help prevent those talented teachers who are already doing so much on their own from eventually giving up

and leaving the system. The goal of all the stakeholders in our project is to improve student engagement and achievement in high needs schools. What we have learned, however, is that getting beyond the lone hero scenario requires not only systemic interventions but also acknowledgement of different participants' positions within the system, and respect for the perspectives that they bring to our collective efforts.

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