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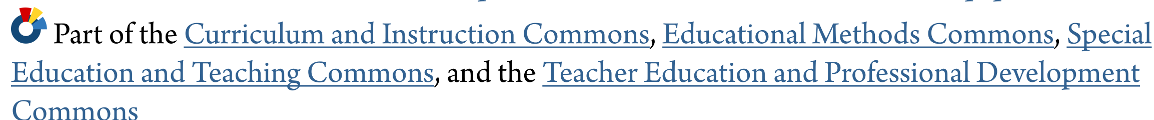
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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS: A FOCUS ON THOUGHTFULLY ADAPTIVE TEACHING

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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,[1] 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. After the read aloud, to illuminate the links between the students' lives and the text and to

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[1] All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

strengthen the reading-writing connection, the students were 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, & Mazzoni, 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 institutions 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, because of their own experiences, were not similarly affected. She thus quickly learned 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 instructional mandates (Cummins, 2007).

The current demands for school accountability have had a significant impact, particularly on high-needs schools serving diverse populations (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Watanabe, 2008). Facing 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 professionals who use considerable knowledge in educating the diverse students they teach.

To prepare teachers for the realities of high-needs schools, teacher educators must instill in teacher candidates the resolve to do what is best for students, regardless of instructional context and corresponding mandates. Researchers have suggested that teachers who thrive in the difficult job of teaching—an even more challenging task in high-needs schools—have a *vision* for their teaching. Ideally, teacher educators should continue to support new teachers in their induction years to help them 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 their 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 their diverse 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 diverse 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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