Teacher Education for Social Challenge: Transforming A Content Methods Course Block

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Abstract: This article analyzes data from a qualitative practitioner-research case study in which four university faculty members attempted to disrupt the hegemonic domestication of candidates enrolled in an undergraduate teacher education program. During the semester prior to their student teaching, 16 candidates at a large public university in the southeastern U.S. enrolled in four content methods courses. Taught by the authors of this article, the curriculum of these courses emphasized social justice dimensions of teaching rather than just focusing on skills and strategies. Drawing from the multiple data sources, the authors highlight the possibilities and limitations of teacher education for social change and argue that greater resources are needed for teacher education to effect true social change.

I. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative practitioner-research case study examines how four university faculty members attempted to "flip" the classroom during the candidates' methods block. As instructors of these courses, the authors sought to place equity and justice at the center of the curriculum rather than in the margins. If P-12 public schools are to serve more than a domesticating function or paternalistic view toward students that reproduces status quo inequities (Freire, 1985, 1998), teacher educators in university settings must disrupt the hegemonic domestication of candidates enrolled in teacher education programs. That is, teacher educators must heed Irvine's (2004) call to prepare teacher education candidates to be activists and social justice advocates.

II. A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHER EDUCATION

The term "social justice," when applied to teacher education, has been appropriated in so many ways that the term has become diluted, often synonymous with offering a multicultural education course or placing candidates in schools with students of color (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). While different educators and scholars take up different positions on social justice education, such as redistributing resources, developing student agency, or recognizing and affirming all social groups, especially those that have been marginalized, and ensuring their success (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zeichner, 2009), we argue, following Bell (2007).

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live. The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in their institutions and communities of which they are a part.

III. EXISTING SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A comparative case-study of two social justice-based elementary teacher education programs: the Teachers for Tomorrow's Schools Program at Mills College and the Teacher Education Intern Program at San Jose State University. She found that, while there were differences, the two programs demonstrated a commitment to SJTE in their mission statements, course syllabi, accreditation reports, and student handbooks. Teaching practices and assignments were grouped into four categories: attending to individual students, attending to students identified by specific educational needs, attending to students identified by their affiliations with an oppressed group, and attending to the sociopolitical conditions of schooling.

UCLA's Center X Teacher Education Program serves as an example of a systematic, well-planned, and collaborative SJTE program involving over 20 faculty and over 350 students as of 2003 (Cooper, 2006). With a mission to "level the playing field" for low-income students of color in Los Angeles schools (Montaño, et al., 2008, p. 1), faculty divided themselves into four committees to plan and develop the program: Student Development, Curriculum, Faculty Development, and Community. Faculty then used collaborative inquiry to develop cases that addressed their programmatic concerns. TEP committee members, as well as outside university researchers, used a range of data collection measures to document and analyze the ongoing collaborative inquiry process. They conducted faculty professional development geared toward facilitating difficult conversations about race, class, and social justice topics in the classroom; investigated ways to help candidates from a range of backgrounds and experience levels become critical and committed.

There are certainly other examples of teacher education faculty, collaborations among faculty, and entire programs based on social justice teacher educators (e.g., Evergreen State, see McDonald & Zeichner, 2009), and we don't mean to exclude any others or to pretend this is an exhaustive list. However, looking at the nature of existing approaches can inform others interested in a more radical transformation of teacher education for social change and critical praxis. In spite of this great body of work, however, as Zeichner (2009) argued, such efforts do little to effect the systemic, structural changes required to produce social

justice educators capable of transforming their classrooms and communities toward greater justice: "Most of this work on social justice teacher education in the U.S. thus far seems to focus on the actions of individual teacher educators in their college and university classrooms and has not included proposals for structural changes in teaching as an occupation and teacher education.

IV. FROM OPENING EYES TO TAKING ACTION: DEVELOPING AGENCY AS SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATORS

One of the overarching themes across all of our data is the agency candidates developed in the process of becoming social justice educators. In previous semesters in our individual courses, we noted some shifts in candidates' feelings of self-efficacy and commitment to equity and justice. However, in this particular cohort our candidates showed much deeper and comprehensive agentic shifts than those before them. While it is important to note that not all candidates had the same "aha" moments or made the same break-troughs, there were three ways in which these candidates showed more profound, agent identities: taking new perspectives, negotiating the realities of today's schools, and becoming agents for social change.

V. NEW PERSPECTIVES: MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Despite already having taken two courses addressing diversity, as well as having taken courses that were "infused" with multicultural education (our institution's prior approach, an additive model), these teacher candidates indicated overwhelmingly that the social justice emphasis of their four methods courses gave them a new perspective on the world. For instance, they communicated this in their reflective discussion posts: "I have a whole new lens through which I see the world. Now that my eyes have been opened, I cannot go back to the old ways of thinking or say that I am not aware." "So now it has turned my whole thought on my pedagogy and curriculum upside down."

VI. NEGOTIATING THE REALITIES OF TODAY'S SCHOOLS

Initially our candidates expressed much fear about how education for social justice might fit within some of the realities of today's elementary classrooms. Many candidates feared "losing their job or offending parents" by teaching controversial material that might not be considered age-appropriate in P-5 classrooms. For some candidates, this fear showed up indirectly. For example: "My first thought was that these are second and third graders. Our [curriculum standards] for Civil Rights are found in fifth grade." or "I wondered if the children at the younger age are developmentally ready to process and articulate the emotional and independent thinking that would be required.

VII. BECOMING AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

As with most social justice teacher educators, we encountered concerns from our candidates. For instance, several candidates remarked in their discussion boards about how they perceived social justice education to require more work, including being student-centered, as one candidate's post suggests: "After reading the article on equality, I believe educators have their work cut out for them. We not only must teach the content areas

effectively, but now we have to focus on creating a safe, equitable environment for all students.

- "I thought I was doing enough by being tolerant and accepting of those different than myself. Now, I see that tolerance does not move this society forward. I need to be active in creating an equitable world for others."
- "I need to step outside my comfort zone to teach complex issues present in our society so that I can help create a generation of thinkers and doers that will make the world a better place for us all."
- "By not intervening we let the dominant voice and ideas of what is "normal" get louder and louder."

VIII. SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATORS OFFER STUDENTS BOTH A MIRROR AND A WINDOW

As candidates developed their own sense of agency for social change during the semester, they also began identifying pedagogical practices for social justice that were most meaningful to them. They saw their role as social justice educators as both a mirror, building curriculum around their particular students each year, and a window, not just reflecting the perspectives and experiences of the kids in the room but also bringing in other voices and perspectives, so students could become change agents for the common good.

IX. SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION AS A MIRROR

Candidates offered various conceptions of putting children at the center of the curriculum, including culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, making use of students' virtual school bags, funds of knowledge, children's assets, and the personal resources students bring to their learning. As candidates wrote in their online discussion posts: "My eyes have been opened continuously throughout this semester to the importance of utilizing the students' knowledge in your classroom." "Every student brings life experiences into the classroom, good and bad. These experiences are all the students have to make connections with, so teachers need to work to encourage those connections."

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, institutional support needs to go toward matching candidates with collaborating teachers who themselves practice social justice teaching. Candidates' field placements may fail to support or may even negate the social justice concepts and practices being taught in teacher education. We need to match candidates with teachers who enact social justice education, even if it means increasing the candidate to teacher ratio. We also need better professional development for collaborating teachers so they and increasing numbers of their colleagues understand the social justice lens our candidates are bringing to their classrooms. Additionally, candidates need supervisors who understand what to look for when making observations during their methods courses-related field experiences, not to mention student teaching assignments.

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