

Introduction: Caring about Social Justice Issues in Teacher Education

I begin this Fall 2011 issue with a simple question I ask myself when I look over the themes and topics of the many manuscripts we receive at *Teacher Education Quarterly*: “Why do teacher educators care so much about social justice in teacher education?” I ask the question because there is a menacing black cloud over the field of teacher education; multiple fronts are questioning what we do in teacher education. Some are threatening to impose assessment systems that tie student learning to teacher education programs in ways that minimize the complexity of school and community contexts and policies in which newly credentialed teachers work. What these new attacks on teacher education mean for the role and place of social justice is not entirely clear, but I would like to make the argument, as do several of the authors in this issue, that focusing on social justice, on inquiry into practices, and on the ethical dilemmas teachers face in teacher education is essential in preparing teachers for the complexities of teaching in today’s diverse classrooms and communities.

What is clear to me is that while the composition and complexities of schools have changed in the past 50 years, the pattern of disparities in learning and school completion between dominant and non-dominant students has not changed significantly. Who benefits from schooling hasn’t changed much since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) or *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), two major court cases seeking to correct social injustices by making them illegal. Maybe this is why so many teacher education researchers focus their efforts on the complexities of learning to teach with a social justice perspective. We are advocates for social change, and social justice is forever in our sights.

Introduction

Social justice work in teacher education is based on the conviction and evidence that children and youth who are different (speak a different language; belong to non-mainstream society; are gay; are poor; have exceptional learning needs, etc.) are treated unjustly in schools, and that is unacceptable. As teacher educators, one of our missions is to prepare teachers to interrupt persistent social and cultural inequities we have experienced in our own lifetimes, have read about in the research literature, and have learned about through our work on the ground with teachers in coursework and in fieldwork.

Teacher educators have learned that one way to interrupt the persistent social inequities in schools is to provide pre-service teachers with multiple experiences across coursework and fieldwork and to pose questions through inquiry about equity, learning, and actions to take (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Inquiry into issues of equity has to do with to what extent to which children have access to, participation in, and benefit from schooling (DeVillar, 1994; DeVillar & Jiang, 2011). Thinking deeply about equity from this perspective leads to research questions about equitable access to learning, democratic participation, and attention to who is benefitting from the kinds of teaching that happen in classrooms. These research questions, by their very nature, encourage teachers to take action in the service of students and communities, with the goal of making the world a more socially just place for students and families.

In this collection of research articles, the authors of the first two articles tackle social justice issues through inquiry and action research, respectively. In the lead article, Bree Picower shares her experiences from designing a Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project. This project was organized to encourage multiple student perspectives about social justice, to allow for tensions within discussions, and to encourage student talk about “taboo” topics. Using phenomenological data, Picower shows how teachers in the first years of teaching used inquiry into social justice topics as a way to understand and address the complex needs of students of diverse language and cultural backgrounds in their urban school settings. By engaging in this kind of deep inquiry, the teachers not only learned about issues of equity, but also to question their own dispositions and address tensions relative to equity and social justice.

Aria Razfar examines the Action Research projects of seven urban teachers who, over a two-year period, focused their work on the themes of empowerment and transformation. The teachers in Razfar’s study engaged in teacher research that was a collaborative effort, between teachers and students and among teacher researchers, in order to raise consciousness about social justice issues and to disrupt the status quo by transforming the educational experiences of teachers and students alike. Razfar found that action research addressing empowerment and transformation issues helped teacher researchers ensure that problem-posing efforts included students’ concerns, and ultimately led to the collaborative development of solutions. One of the important take-aways from this study is that when students’ voices are included in both the problem-posing and problem-solving collaborative work, students feel more empowered and there is a greater chance for fundamental changes in schooling.

The next article in this issue examines the link between service learning and civic education for creating opportunities for teacher and students to engage in problem solving in real work contexts. Researchers Jennifer Ponder, Michelle Vander Veldt, and Gennell Lewis-Ferrell argue that teacher educators need to prepare teachers in ways that they will then prepare their students to be civic-minded and creative and to act locally in the communities they serve. Service-learning is a way for teacher educators to involve pre-service teachers with unfamiliar communities, to think broadly about citizenship, and to serve the needs of a wide range of communities and families. Participants, in-service teachers, in this two-phase study engaged in a service-learning project in which they involved their own students in a service-learning experience. The authors noted that the topics explored were relatively non-controversial and suggest that engaging students in service-learning projects that involve issues of power and diversity may require additional work and attention. Nonetheless, they found that participants in service-learning activities noticed that their students gained a new sense of agency, collaborated more effectively, built new partnerships beyond the classroom, and gained a new appreciation for civics education.

Researchers Mary P. Truxaw, Tutita M. Casa, and Jill L. Adelson conducted their research on what pre-service teachers learned from participating in inquiry research over a two-semester inquiry. This research study asked about the confidence these students gained by conducting inquiry research and how they viewed the purpose of inquiry research within their professional identity as teachers. The researchers found that two-thirds of their participants reported that they learned how to do inquiry research, but few said that it had an impact on their instructional practices. Many students did develop what the researchers referred to as a “stance toward inquiry,” but the researchers noted there was little evidence that the inquiry stance had an impact on changing instructional practices.

The research study by M. Shaun Murphy, Eliza Pinnegar, and Stefinee Pinnegar relied on narrative inquiry to examine their own understandings of ethical obligations to their students who are becoming teachers. Drawing on the work of Jean Clandinin (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and John Dewey (1997), the authors discussed through their stories the ethical and moral dilemmas they faced in being teacher educators who work in a field where complex questions about teaching and learning are often reduced to simple ideas and the rhetoric of best practices.

Ian Call and Jason O’Brien took up the issue of what pre-service secondary teachers understand about First Amendment rights. Free speech is legendary in the United States, and it is important that teachers feel confident about their knowledge of the First Amendment and how to address First Amendment issues in their classroom. Call and O’Brien found that the participants in his study were confused about what kinds of expressions are permissible in schools. Most participants identified school policy as the main source for decision-making and mistakenly believed that school policy was the same across the nation.

The research study by Erica D. McCray and Patricia Alvarez McHatton exam-

Introduction

ined pre-service teachers' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities prior to and after taking a course on integrating students with exceptional needs. The authors found that while the pre-service teachers generally had positive comments about working with students with disabilities, many of the comments referred to such students as the "other" and "difficult to work with" due to their deficits. Given that most pre-service teachers in general education tracks take only one course on teaching students with disabilities, the authors suggest that more needs to be done to ensure that teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities who are likely to be in today's classrooms.

This issue concludes with a research article by Mary Christianakis, who examines 15 inner-city teachers' perceptions of parental involvement by working class parents. Christianakis found that teachers who taught in the inner-city school where she conducted her research tended to view parents as "the helpers" at school as well as in the home, in contrast to characterization offered in the literature about parental involvement in mainstream, middle-class schools. In Christianakis' school setting, which was sorely under-resourced, the teachers viewed parents as "help labor." Most of the teachers did not have teacher's aides or paraprofessionals to help with teaching and managing daily work. Accordingly, much of the help that parents provided was in the role of classroom instructional assistants, working with and for the teacher to get things done. Parents who were bilingual also assisted with translating written materials and interpreting during parent conferences. Many parents also provided help at home, with homework and by supporting school-based behaviors.

This issue offers much to think about with respect to what matters in teacher education. I remain optimistic that teacher educators will continue to focus attention on issues of social justice and the ethical and moral dimensions of being a teacher, thus serving multiple communities, children, and youth.

—Christian J. Faltis, Editor

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