

## **Pedagogy Versus Politics**

**By Ronald W. Solórzano**

I would like to respond to one specific topic which is I believe nested in the "Quality Versus Quantity" dichotomy, and then propose a new topic which runs through several of the remaining "Points of Debate" but that I feel deserves its own stage—"Pedagogy Versus Politics."

### **Quality Versus Quantity**

Improving student achievement continues to be a crucial area of educational reform. Specifically, poor students and second-language learners remain well behind in all academic areas. Demands for accountability have led to several reform efforts from school-based management local empowerment models to total school "reconstitution" efforts where wholesale staff replacement (transfers) has been seen as the only vehicle to an improved education for students. In the end, it's clear that teachers are at the academic helm for students. The quality of their preparation and delivery of instruction clearly impacts students' learning. However, it's precisely teacher quality that is at issue when we discuss "Quality Versus Quantity," and how the implications of this dilemma affect students.

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The demand for new teachers is at a crisis stage. This in and of itself is no longer a bulletin, but reality. However, rather than getting better, this situation is getting worse, for several reasons. For example, in California, the demand for teachers has been exacerbated by "good-willed" yet poorly planned policies

for reducing class size to 20:1 student/teacher ratios in grades K-3. Nationally, President Bill Clinton is proposing a similar initiative that would necessitate 100,000 new teachers. Teacher retirements also add to the need for replenishment as do the growing student enrollments in urban school districts. This "new teacher" crisis is exploding while at the same time student achievement remains dismal and cries for accountability for teachers as well as superintendents to improve student test scores get louder and louder.

Again, in response to the need for more teachers, district personnel directors remind us of the reality that "...classrooms need to be filled!" True, but this raises several questions about the quality of teaching and learning. For example, who will "fill" these classrooms? What qualifications must these new teachers have? And, what support will these new teachers receive from the state, school district, or local school, and for how long? Many states have developed teaching standards to guide the training efforts of new teachers entering the profession. How successful have these efforts been? On the other side of the coin, how does this situation affect students?—and, which students?

I believe that, unfortunately, the very students who desperately need a quality education to improve their dismal achievement levels are the ones being negatively impacted by the surge of new, unprepared, and unqualified teachers. Most of these new teachers end up in classrooms where students are considerably behind grade level expectations and where students are learning the English language as part of their schooling. It is this latter point that current teaching standards and beginning teacher assessment systems need to address more directly—especially since these second-language students make up the majority in many classrooms and will continue to do so into the next millennium. If teaching standards are to pave the road to a quality education for *all* students, then these standards need to provide explicit guidance to beginning teachers on how to teach second-language learners and not hide this responsibility in verbiage that gets loosely translated as "simply good teaching."

Teacher quality has taken a terrible beating as school districts hire individuals who in many cases have no prior experience teaching, have no idea as to what should be taught, have taken no methods courses on *how* to teach, don't speak the language of the students, and finally (which is why many of these new teachers ultimately leave the profession) have no idea how to manage the classroom. Yet we must address the dilemma of "Quality Versus Quantity." And even though classrooms "need to be filled," student achievement desperately needs to be improved.

So, what can be done to address the issue of Quality and Quantity? Although state and school district level support programs are valuable and should continue, beginning teacher support has to be strongest at the school site. Incentives for involvement of more experienced teachers, coordinators, administrators, college and university teacher educators, and community-based individuals to support beginning teachers at the school site need to be initiated. Beginning teachers need

regular support, monitoring, coaching, and assessing in order to improve their own and their students' performance. Experienced teachers and other support personnel can be compensated for helping beginning teachers in organizing and managing their classrooms, getting materials, observing lessons, and coaching. Weekly scheduled meetings at the school site, organized by administrators, can be held to provide lesson demonstrations, assistance with classroom record keeping, and curriculum and classroom management support. The adage, "it takes a village..." is relevant here. In this case, it takes a school-based village of educators and a community mentoring new teachers into the profession to ultimately make an impact on student learning.

But how will educational reform be realized? Who will make the decisions as to which programs get implemented or which get terminated? One would hope that a careful thoughtful process will be used to determine these important pedagogical issues. Now I turn to the next dilemma: "Pedagogy Versus Politics."

### **Pedagogy Versus Politics**

Across America instructional decisions are being made by legislative mandate, by politicians, through statewide initiatives, and at local Boards of Education—but not by educators. Too often, what research has suggested might work in classrooms has been set aside in favor of policies driven by—in many cases—politics, and usually ultra-conservative politics.

Consider the following educational policies and initiatives of late (mostly in California):

*Language Restriction:* Proposition 227 in California requiring English-only teaching in schools for second language learners, even though several studies have shown native language instruction can hasten the English learning process. Further, Proposition 227 makes it illegal for teachers to teach in any other language than English or be susceptible to legal action.

*Censorship:* The removal of African American authored books by Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou in two Maryland public school districts (Anne Arundel County and St. Mary's County) because they were considered "trash" and "anti-White." (*Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1998)

*Teaching Methods:* The phonics versus whole language debate, which seems to have subsided somewhat as a result of a recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development recommending a "balance" of the two approaches. Interestingly, conservatives have clamped down on whole language to the point that state-approved educational reading consultants working under the provisions of Assembly Bill 1086 in

California have to sign a “statement of assurance” that they will not include whole language-related methods such as the use of contextual clues and inventive spelling in their training sessions, and state-adopted textbooks are not approved if they are considered to contain a “whole-language” philosophy. So much for balance.

*Testing:* All students in California are required to be tested in English—whether they speak or understand that language or not! What instructional value will one gain from English test scores acquired from non-English speakers?

*Teacher Roles:* California Proposition 187 requires teachers and administrators to “turn in” suspected “illegal alien” students to the authorities! Fortunately, most of the provisions in this proposition have been found to be unconstitutional.

*Access:* And finally, as if the previously mentioned educational policies didn’t provide students with enough of a challenge as they seek to further their post-high school education, along comes Proposition 209—the anti-affirmative action proposition in California. This law is particularly crucial to students of color because it affects them further along the educational pipeline—in college—where they are beginning to prepare for their future careers. This proposition has resulted in over 800 Latino and African-American high school students being denied admission to the University of California Berkeley even though they had SAT scores of 1200 or more and GPAs of 4.0, and as a consequence the admission rate of students of color at that campus, as well as at other campuses in California, has decreased radically since passage of Proposition 209.

I believe that these initiatives are all very conservative, shortsighted, and border on racism. They certainly are not based on educational pedagogy. What learning theory would recommend that the best way to teach students is in a language they don’t yet comprehend, read, or speak? What psychometrician would validate a test administered to students in a language they don’t understand? What learning theory states that literature written by authors of color is inappropriate and irrelevant to students’ educational development, not to mention students’ self-esteem? What pedagogy would call upon government to make it illegal and punishable to teach in any other language than English, or train teachers in any other method than phonics? Or require its teachers to turn in their students suspected of being in the country illegally? And finally, to deny otherwise qualified students of color admission to college? Pedagogy or politics?

It is probably true that all education is political, but perhaps I’m talking about a balance. Who controls education? Who controls content? Who controls standards? What should be taught—and learned? Who should decide? Answers to these

questions have traditionally been decided exclusively by those in positions of power. And since those most commonly affected adversely by these "educational" policies are minority, poor, and/or immigrants, it is clear that politics and not pedagogy prevails in the end.

Thus, as we approach the new century, I believe that the challenge for teacher education programs is to educate and train quality teacher candidates to enter and succeed in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. In order to do this, we must empower teacher candidates with knowledge of educational research and pedagogy, and a conviction to advocate on behalf of students of color in order to balance the scales of educational policymaking to ensure a quality and equal education for all students.