

Living in the Tension – Living with the Heat

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Sometimes stories from our educational lives capture tensions in our chosen profession. As teacher educators we certainly live amidst plenty of tensions. Here are three such stories that seem to capture what we believe is a prominent and current educational dilemma: How do we prepare future teachers for our urban centers, in schools serving predominantly poor children of color with a history of low educational achievement? We begin with the stories.

Three Stories

One of us recently gave a talk at a small Midwestern liberal arts college on the role of the foundations in teacher education. In this particular small college town, public school teachers were needed who could address the longstanding division between affluent, white, college bound students and poor, African-American kids. For two or three generations the white kids have excelled academically while the black students have not. College faculty, undergraduates, and public school teachers attended the event. The talk depicted the varieties of curricular and pedagogical stances available to teachers today. The ideas of Deborah Meier, E. D. Hirsch, Paulo Freire, Vivian Gussin Paley, Michael Oakeshott, Jane Roland Martin and Lisa Delpit were all introduced. But it was the last – Lisa Delpit – who seemed to cause quite a stir. After the talk, the local teachers approached the speaker to register their heated and vehement rejection of any teacher education program that would support the direct instructional strategies advocated by Delpit. No, no they argued – good schooling is progressive, integrates various subject matters, engages students in meaningful, active inquiry. When they heard the response that in our analysis, Delpit was simply asking teachers and teacher educators to listen to “her” children’s

needs and to voices in urban communities, they rejected her proposals as simply and plainly bad instruction. The exchange went nowhere; lines had seemingly been drawn that somehow could not be crossed.

At a recent farewell dinner with a group of young urban elementary teachers, two of whom were moving to the West Coast, the table discussion returned again and again to the difficulties these teachers encountered in their urban setting. This group of teachers were well intentioned, fully certified, culturally sensitive, and frustrated. They had tried informal small group instruction, they had worked at integrating their curriculum, and they had attempted to be loving and approachable. According to them it didn't seem to work. When KIPP schoolsⁱⁱ were mentioned as an alternative model, another guest – a professional development facilitator with expertise in the Critical Friends model – initially reacted with emotional heat and resistance. Those models, she said, do not follow what we know about good learning; were much too direct, did not focus on the child, and were too rigid in their instructional approach. In short, they weren't very constructivist. The exchange in this second setting was more productive than the earlier interaction. But we left not really knowing what to make of the tension or the heated reactions. We all knew, though, that in ten more weeks, after summer break, those teachers would have to find a way to deal with the tension and instruct their students in a distinctly different kind of heat.

And then there was the graduate student, a math teacher of 10 years, who was intrigued by the KIPP and Amistad Academy/Achievement First models for middle school instruction.ⁱⁱⁱ She had explored the possibilities in numerous class paper assignments and found the response by her colleagues and some faculty curious. They asked: Why was she pursuing these examples? Didn't she know that they expected way too much of the students (going to school for long hours

each day and homework to boot)? Didn't she know that the teachers in some of those schools were "on call" in the evening? Didn't she know that they didn't support constructivist learning? For her, these elements were not "obstacles" and exploring these school models further was a worthy pursuit.

These three stories, based on experiences in the academy, our public schools, and our dinner tables seem to indicate a marked reluctance, a resolute hesitancy, and a distinct distrust of these highly structured charter alternatives to public schooling and student learning. In our reading of Delpit, we don't think she was calling for a charter school movement, rather she was pressing teachers and teacher educators to listen, really listen, to brown and black urban students, their families, and their communities. KIPP and Achievement First Schools are part of the charter school movement, a movement that has tended to be criticized by the educational establishment. Given that these two charter school efforts have shown they can enhance the educational achievement of our poor urban youth, it's time, we think, to examine the arguments for and against preparing teachers for these highly structured settings. It's time, we think, to examine seriously the assumptions we carry to this terrain. Teacher educators tend view themselves as part of the movement for a more socially just world. But if rumor, public political critique, and some scholarly assessments are correct, we teacher educators may wear some ideological blinders that curtail rather than enhance options for today's students. Below we try to capture some of the debate that might occur if we were to take this challenge seriously. First we present briefly, and only in an outline form, the arguments for preparing teachers for schools like Amistad and KIPP, and then the arguments against such a move. Finally, we offer a proposal and challenge to today's teacher educators.

Arguments in Support: Preparing Teachers for All Urban School Reform Models

Serving Urban Students Well and Addressing Social and Educational Injustice

It is clear from the Achievement First and KIPP promotional materials that these highly structured school models aim for substantial and significant school reform. As the Achievement First supporters argue, the achievement gap between our poor, brown-toned, and well-off, white-skinned youth is the “civil rights” issue of our era. In a documentary on Amistad, scholars Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips maintain that:

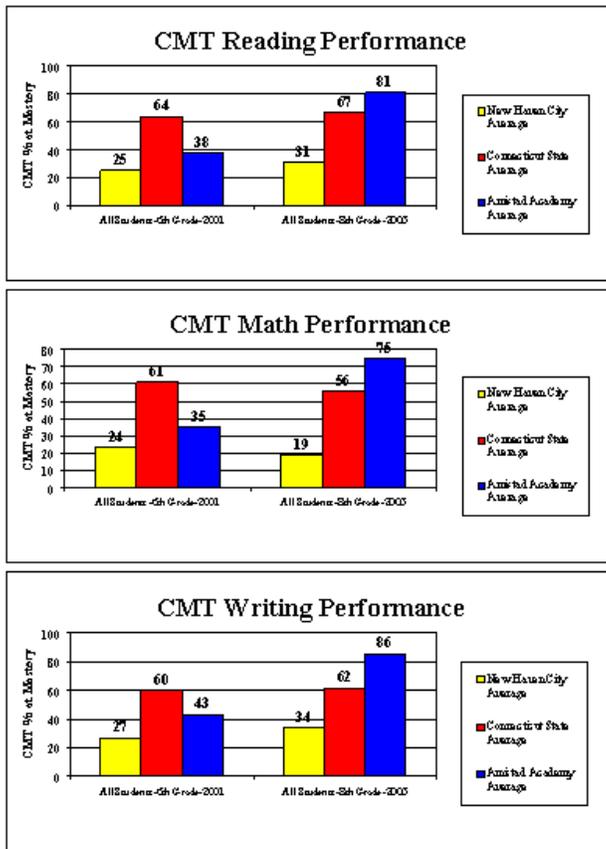
Closing the black-white test score gap would probably do more to promote racial equality in the United States than any other strategy now under serious consideration. Eliminating the test score gap would sharply increase black college graduate rates. It would also reduce racial disparities in men's earnings and would probably eliminate racial disparities in women's earnings. Eliminating the test score gap would also allow selective colleges, professional schools, and employers to phase out the racial preferences that have caused so much political trouble over the past generation.

(http://www.pbs.org/closingtheachievementgap/debate_minding.html)

While there is much to engage in Jencks and Phillips’ provocative argument about civil rights and racial preferences, a quick glance at the student outcomes produced by Amistad Academy and KIPP schools shows that these reform models produce student outcomes that substantially diminish this achievement gap. In effect, these schools are addressing this civil rights issue in a way that few have met successfully.

Even a cursory examination of the data below illustrates Amistad’s academic achievements for cohorts of students (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.results1.html>).

CMT Results: Class of 2004



Amistad Academy and its eighth grade students have outperformed the average Connecticut eighth grade student in reading, writing, and math performance. These are dramatic gains, as the Amistad students' performances in sixth grade were well below the Connecticut state average in all three subject areas. Based on published data by the organizations, these are not uncommon results for the other Achievement First reform-based schools or the KIPP Academies (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/career.teacher.html> and <http://www.kipp.org/>). In short, these schools work. Schools of education need to attend to what serves well our minority, poor, urban youth. If schools of education are serious about their commitment to social justice, then this reform model appears to be a viable path for closing the achievement gap. Schools of education

need minimally to inform their candidates about these models and more substantially to prepare future teachers so that they too can participate in efforts such as these.

Providing the Skills for Success

For many years urban teachers have offered the same (now sad, tired, and tried) refrain: Their kids lack the organizational and academic skills of the more well-off suburban youth. Urban youth aren't motivated or adequately supported to achieve in standard school settings and lack the skills to do so. Tracy Kidder richly documented the plight of one fifth grade teacher and her students to address this skill issue; Samuel Freedman powerfully underscored the efforts of another in lower Manhattan (Freedman, 1990; Kidder, 1989). These journalistic narratives of skills left underdeveloped and academic outcomes not achieved are supported again and again by recent past and present urban standardized test results. Educational programs like KIPP and Achievement First address these student organizational and skill needs in clear and direct ways. The school days are delineated and highly structured; students' organizational needs are supported through a schedule of daily expectations, explicit instructional scaffolding, and structured homework assignments.

Attending to Community Needs

Many inner city African American parents have long argued that city schools and their staff historically have inadequately served their children. In New Haven, Connecticut, parents pushed for a second Amistad Academy. KIPP Academies have continued to expand in recent years; there are now 52 KIPP schools serving over 11,000 students in 16 states and the District of Columbia (<http://www.kipp.org/aboutkipp.cfm?pageid=nav6>). Clearly these schools are satisfying a need that exists – a need for their children's educational program to hold high standards of academic achievement and character excellence. Both KIPP and Achievement First

staff maintain that academic achievement cannot be had without attending to a culture of personal responsibility and parental buy-in. It is not unusual for these schools to have students and parents sign and abide by contractual commitments outlining each party's responsibilities. School rituals celebrate individual student successes and underscore the cost of their failure.

Offering a Coherent Educational Vision for Staff and Students

Much recent educational research indicates that school culture matters, and a consistent, coherent, and fully articulated educational vision and practice matters most. Materials on KIPP and Achievement First suggest that they provide this coherence for both their students and teachers. The school day, and in fact each lesson, is highly structured. The format is predictable. Students know what is expected of them; teachers learn to teach within delineated parameters that provide instructional guidance and support. A community of learners among students and among teachers appears to exist.

Given the effective and proven track record of KIPP and Achievement First, teacher educators need to consider seriously the kind of preparation that would serve those schools and their youth. For much too long, schools of education have waved the banners of social justice, meaningful and engaged learning, and educational achievement. These charter academies meet and exceed the baseline criteria in all three of these domains. To ignore these accomplishments is to ignore these kids.

Arguments Against: Training Teachers to Train Kids

Technical Rather Than Professional Education

The idea that schools of education should prepare their candidates for such regimented and prescriptive approaches sounds more like a proposal for technical teacher training rather than professional preparation. KIPP Schools and the Amistad Academy may produce positive

outcomes for some minority, poor, urban youth, but that doesn't mean schools of education should produce teachers for those schools. Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1999) discuss what is required of teachers if the gap in student achievement is to be closed, and the preparation that is needed to meet these requirements. A vision of teacher as professional is central to their arguments:

The new mission for education requires substantially more knowledge and radically different skills for teachers... In order to create bridges between common, challenging curriculum goals and individual learners' experiences and needs, teachers must understand cognition and the many different pathways to learning. They must understand child development and pedagogy as well as the structure of subject areas and a variety of alternatives for assessing learning... teachers must be prepared to address the substantial diversity in the experiences children bring with them to school – the wide range of languages, cultures, exceptionalities, learning styles, talents and intelligences that in turn [require] an equally rich and varied repertoire of teaching strategies. (p. 2)

It is difficult to tell from the programs' websites whether hiring and professional development practices are consistent with this argument. For example, while each KIPP School has its own criteria, hiring certified teachers is a general aim (<http://www.kipp.org/faqteachers.cfm?pageid=nav3b>). Achievement First's teacher recruiting materials emphasize training and coaching and workplace resources such as copying and internet access (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/career.html>).

A professional preparation entails at least three components: social and psychological foundations; methods preparation; and reflective and engaged practice. Preparing teachers for contexts such as KIPP or the Amistad Academy might constrain prospective teachers' education

in each of these areas. The social foundations, for example, press teacher candidates to examine critically the purposes of education in a democratic society; we wonder whether such analyses will likely raise hard questions regarding the narrowly-defined aim of achievement, at least as stated, in models like KIPP or Amistad. The methods and practicum components might need to focus on the particular curriculum selected by the organization (e.g., <http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.program.curriculum.html>). It's as if candidates would have to accept a fairly narrow party line about what constitutes sound instruction, substantial learning, and coherence in a school's program.

To illustrate the potentially narrow or technical approach to teacher preparation, consider the issue of "social justice." Social justice does not simply entail equalizing a portion of student academic outcomes regardless of race, gender and class. An education for social justice entails engaging students in a critical examination of the ways in which injustice is fostered and perpetuated, both structurally and culturally. Social justice is not about leveling the educational playing field so that students can play the game, it entails a serious examination of the schooling-societal contest. Preparing teachers for social justice means more than training candidates to follow a particular model that appears to promise students higher achievement, and by extension, a bigger slice of the economic pie. Education for social justice entails: an education meaningful to each child; a critical examination of the teacher's own beliefs and prejudices, as well as the dynamics that harm poor urban students. To be ready to teach in a KIPP or Achievement First context, the broader mission and aims of professional teacher preparation might not be necessary, or desirable. It appears that we are being offered a quick fix for what in reality is a complex social and political problem. To buy into these programs entails a political framing that societal structures are not at fault in this diminished achievement game; it is the families and

students who are to blame. It is only through students' and teachers' extraordinary efforts in a narrowly circumscribed schooling contest – that “justice” can be achieved. It is a cheap solution for a very real and vexing problem.

All Students Need Meaningful Skills for a Meaningful Life

Many schools of education introduce candidates to the best-practices grounded in the research on how people learn (National Research Council, 2000). The explicit focus on achievement, as measured on state performance tests, raises questions about whether the curricular and pedagogical vision found in schools implementing reform models like KIPP and Amistad is fully consistent with that research base. The ruckus that the mere mention of Lisa Delpit's name stirred in the first story is a sad commentary on the state of our educational affairs. We don't have to pose a forced choice between direct instruction and meaningful learning. The choice Delpit delineates is not between rote or meaningful learning – rather she calls for a commitment to meaningful learning that takes into account students' needs, interests, and abilities. Middle class white parents want more than rote learning and regurgitation for their kids – most parents want their kids to find a measure of understanding in their learning and schooling. A good teacher will find ways to combine explicit instruction in skills and content with a meaningful exploration that will appeal to the child. A good teacher education program should help prepare teachers to do this by providing skillful, artful and competent paths for candidates to combine their instruction in skill enhancement, content acquisition and understanding, and meaningful inquiry.

Who defines the community's needs?

It seems that the KIPP and Achievement First define and then require parents and students to sign off on their perceived needs. Both schools state that schools and families must

work together to ensure the best possible education for their children. As the Achievement First website claims: “The school commits to a partnership between parents, students, teachers, and staff to provide the best possible education for our students. In order to achieve our ambitious goals, we must work together” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org>). At the same time, however, both schools require a great deal of parental commitment and time. The Achievement First program acknowledges: “The requirements of Achievement First parents are also significant, including a longer school day, nightly reading logs, support for homework, near-perfect attendance, and a high-expectations discipline policy” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.culture.html>).

Similarly, KIPP schools expect parents to “fully commit to KIPP” by signing a Commitment to Excellence that promises they will conform to a number of regulations including ensuring that their children arrive at KIPP every day by 7:15 am and remain until 5:00 pm, attend school on some Saturdays, and attend summer school; and that they check the child’s homework every night and try to read to their children every night (<http://www.kipp.org/commitment.cfm?pageid=nav1b>) . Both approaches also demand that students sign a contract delimiting how they will act and proceed in these settings.

True communities are not defined by one party; a true community engages all of the participants – teachers, students and parents – in a collaborative effort. Not only do these schools place high demands on families, many of the demands are of the sort that make it difficult, if not impossible, for the target population of students to attend. Preparing teachers for these pre-defined communities amounts to a cultural and educational imposition of the most pernicious sort. To prepare candidates for these settings would entail a significant loss of professional autonomy and an implicit endorsement of the assumption that the Academy program knows

what's best for these parents and their children. We don't do that to white middle class parents and we shouldn't do that to urban, minority, and poor families and students.

A Proposal and Challenge to Today's Teacher Educators

The three of us – Hilda, Dan and Jennie – don't share a vision, understanding, or approach to the problems addressed by these two opposing views. We all find merits to both sides. Within the teacher education community, some of us may be more willing to concede the failure of how we currently prepare teachers for our urban settings while others believe that our present practices require attention and improvement but certainly should not be discarded. But for us as editors, this articulation and delineation has encouraged a further and extended scrutiny of our current practices and assumptions. What we would like to propose is that teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators listen more carefully to their own and other voices, sentiments, and views – without reacting with the heat of our passions and educational identities – at least not so quickly. We need, as Parker Palmer and others would say – to live with and amidst these tensions – these countervailing forces and claims. Doing so might, just might enable us to find a way through – a viable third route. And if truth be told, we are neither naïve nor without our own prejudice. For we ask, if possible, for all to respect Lisa Delpit's request in her essay "The Silenced Dialogue" when she writes that to come to a viable synthesis of competing perspectives entails

... a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in

the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (1995, p. 46)

We can't think of a better way to start living with these very real and pressing tensions.

References

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ⁱ As an editorial team, we write editorials collaboratively. To reflect the nature of this joint work, we rotate order of authors with each journal issue.

ⁱⁱ According to their website, “KIPP is a network of free open-enrollment college-preparatory public schools in under-resourced communities throughout the United States.” (<http://www.kipp.org/>)

ⁱⁱⁱ According to their website, “Achievement First is a non-profit charter school management organization started in July 2003 by the leaders of Amistad Academy, a high-performing charter school in New Haven, CT. We aim to bring to scale a system of charter schools in New York and Connecticut.” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.html>)