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▲ Home

◀ Contents

### **Raising the Bar of Teacher Quality: Accountability, Collaboration, and Social Justice**

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Historically, reform efforts to address poor student achievement have focused on a variety of issues other than teacher quality. Movements such as TQM (Total Quality Management), class size reduction (CSR), school leadership, parental involvement, and multicultural curriculum have not directly addressed the power or influence of the individual classroom teacher.

However, research shows us that individual teachers can profoundly impact the academic achievement of their students (Brophy & Good, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). In fact, Brophy and Good's meta analysis (1986) indicates that hundreds of studies refute the myths perpetuated by earlier research (namely Coleman, 1966; Jencks, Smith, Ackland, Bane, Cohen, & Grintlis, 1972), which held that student variables like natural ability, aptitude, socioeconomic status, and home environment are the foremost predictors of student achievement. In short, current research indicates that teacher quality is a significant, if not dominant, variable in achievement outcomes.

Teacher educators, however, often find it difficult to agree upon a common definition of teacher quality. To develop exemplary teachers, Claremont Graduate University's Teacher Education Internship Program (CGU's TEIP) addresses the techniques, attitudes, skills, and experiences necessary to become a quality teacher by embracing the ideals of three key concepts: Accountability, Collaboration, and Social Justice.

#### **Accountability**

Teacher quality is indelibly linked to accountability. To create awareness of this, we work with teachers to internalize the belief that they have the power to impact student achievement. We repeatedly expose our teachers to the message that Good Teaching Matters (Haycock, 1998) so that they leave our program understanding that it is what each of them does (and, in turn, doesn't do) that determines their students' success. CGU's teachers work with Just For the Kids-California to unearth data that show there are teachers cultivating stellar academic success among poor, non-white, non-native speakers of English. Such data speak to hope and discredits the idea that certain kids "can't do it" (Education Trust; Reeves, 2003).

When teachers are empowered by the knowledge that students

can and will learn when under the guidance of quality teachers, we find they become intensely motivated to master the strategies and techniques known to bring about academic success. That is, developing one's craft as a teacher takes on greater meaning and significance as it becomes a means for teachers to uphold their responsibility to their students. Thus, our teachers are internally driven to understanding how Spencer Kagan's cooperative learning techniques can facilitate academic language proficiency in English learners, and they are willing to work in demanding five-hour workshops with Larry Ainsworth to make sense of and effectively utilize the California Content Standards. Their thirst to become skilled pedagogues reflects the degree to which they understand the correlation between teacher quality and student academic success. Furthermore, our teachers come to acknowledge that variables like poverty and language fluency are challenges, but not barriers that legitimize a student's failure or that justify teachers lowering their expectations. They realize that such variables can and need to be addressed via well-informed, explicit, and purposeful instruction (Delpit, 1995).

TEIP's commitment to accountability extends beyond our efforts to foster responsibility in our teachers; it also involves holding ourselves accountable. Accordingly, to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by today's educators, students, and schools, we routinely speak with our teachers and their school personnel, visit school sites, and attend various conferences. With insights gleaned through such dialogue, our program's curriculum is continually updated and revitalized. We utilize new information to challenge our assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors as they relate to today's schools. As of late, our learning has revolved around sharpening the program's curriculum to more adequately address English learners and students with special needs.

As leaders, we also hold ourselves accountable by seeking better ways of critiquing our program. School personnel and colleagues in the field tell us our teachers are exceptionally well-prepared and this is why districts like to hire our teachers; why our alumni rapidly advance to leadership roles in their school districts; and why our alumni remain in the field when an average of 50% of all new teachers in California leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Lambert, 2006). Such stories provide qualitative evidence that suggests our program is fulfilling its mission. Although reassuring, as program leaders, we are not satisfied. In order to be accountable, quantitative data are needed to triangulate these findings (Senge, 1990). With this aim in mind, we teamed up with other teacher preparation programs and became part of an executive planning committee for the (AICCU's) Accountability in Teacher Education Conference held in February, 2006. The conference initiated a statewide discussion to address three central questions: 1) How do we assess the competency of our teacher candidates? 2) What makes a quality teacher? and 3) How do we create a fair and effective system of accountability? As well, as of

Spring 2006, we have contracted with the California Institute for Education Reform to independently administer surveys to our graduates and their supervisors so that we can compare our alumni's competency in a variety of critical standard areas to that of other first-year teachers. This kind of quantitative investigation will provide us with the data needed to determine if our alumni are indeed interrupting cycles of academic failure in their respective K-12 classrooms.

### **Collaboration**

In addition to instilling in our teachers the belief that their performance is the single most important factor to their students' success, we also teach them vital collaboration skills. Respect for the knowledge of others is a cornerstone to learning; however, the individualistic Euro-centric model embraced in our country often runs contrary to the collaboration required for success in various aspects of life. Institutions – whether families, schools, communities, or businesses – are healthier and more productive when members work cooperatively toward common goals while simultaneously respecting individual needs, strengths and differences (Senge, 1990; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). This kind of cooperation doesn't happen by chance. It must be a deliberately sought out goal, and it necessitates strong leadership and interpersonal skills. Good leadership begins with true respect and love for others, is strengthened with a clear understanding of who we are as individuals, and becomes synergistic when we build in the room necessary for individuals to come together, learn from one another, and proceed collectively as a group.

Rosenholtz (1991) makes the case for collaboration's role in successful schools. She notes that one of the main differences between high- and low-performing schools is the degree to which stakeholders collaborate. However, she argues that collaboration in and of itself is not the end goal; it's the kind and focus of the collaboration that matters. Rosenholtz found that in low-performing schools, the focus of teacher sharing often revolved around students' failings and resulted in teachers distancing themselves from the notion that they can impact student success (1991, p. 53). In contrast, according to Rosenholtz, teacher sharing in high-performing schools often revolved around shared goals, beliefs and values, leading and binding the teachers to a "ennobling vision that placed teaching issues and children's interests in the forefront" (Rosenholtz, 1991, p. 39). Such collaboration brings "new ideas, fresh ways of looking at things, and a stock of collective knowledge that is more fruitful than any one person's working alone" (Rosenholtz, 1991, p. 41).

We agree with Rosenholtz that teacher-to-teacher collaboration is a foundation for successful schools. We also see, however, the importance of collaboration among all school stakeholders. The ethnographic project that our teachers work on throughout their program is designed to cultivate in them the skills necessary to engage in effective collaboration with their students and their families,

colleagues, and community. The project begins with an examination of themselves; moves outward to learn about several students in their classroom; expands again as they learn about their students' families through home visits and interviews; looks further into the school and community to uncover assets; and finally ends with an analysis of how they and their schools fit into and can successfully engage the larger socio-economic and political context.

This project is a powerful tool that has been developed and refined over twenty years across a variety of TEIP leaders and visions. Our own continued learning sustains critical revisions that further bind student learning, relational intelligence, the value of individual differences and the power of collaboration to student achievement. Learning such skills while under the tutelage of a teacher preparation program is ideal because teachers benefit from the on-going and supportive coaching of their faculty. Additionally, in the case of CGU, the program's cohort structure supports the teachers' learning by allowing them to collectively reflect and learn from each other's experiences.

Rebecca Gimarse, an alumna from the 2003/2004 cohort who is currently a first grade teacher at Philadelphia Elementary School in Pomona, cites the ethnography project as a transformational exercise that was a vital part of her teacher preparation program. "CGU's ethnography project enabled me to learn to engage in truly effective collaboration. It pushed me to challenge my assumptions of students and their families, colleagues, and the community. It helped me understand what it means to be a quality teacher and set the tone for exemplary classroom teaching, effective school leadership, and models of excellence."

Just as collaboration nurtures the development of exemplary K-12 schools, it can also foster growth in any organizational structure. CGU's TEIP utilizes collaboration to enhance its own growth and learning. The program is led collectively by three directors. The structural model we have developed promotes flexibility, innovation, and learning while still providing for the clear authoritative structure necessary for any effective organization. This structure is predicated upon the individual strengths and differences amongst the leadership, its staff, and faculty and encourages the greater good as we draw upon these strengths, learn from them, and collaboratively define and work towards common goals and values. Organizational prerequisites include respect, comparable work ethics, high expectations, transparent and frequent communication, regular recognition of accomplishments, and a common commitment to long-term goals but open-mindedness regarding the means to that end.

### **Social Justice**

The lenses of critical theorists have made us keenly aware that schools have historically been a mechanism for perpetuating class inequities and structures (Anyon, 1980; Freide, 2002; McLaren, 2003).

Jeffrey Howard of Boston's Efficacy Institute has described the model of education employed in many American schools as one based on the innate abilities that are passed from parent to child. Borrowing from the earlier works of researchers like Hunter and Schmidt (1990) and Rosenthal (1991), Howard (1991) describes this innate ability model as one that is constructed for three groups of students: the "very smart" (VS), the "sorta smart" (SS), and the "kinda dumb" (KD). In this construct, the VS students get the rigorous curriculum; the SS students get the standard curriculum, and the KD students receive the dummed down curriculum. Some (namely Rist, 1970) argue this kind of sorting begins during the second week of kindergarten and is most damaging to those pegged as "sorta smart" or "kinda dumb" because the curriculum they receive in their "tracked" classrooms limits their ability to access what Howard calls "get smart instruction." In such a system, Howard argues, there is not much "value added" instruction in schools. After thirteen years of schooling, the original designations are largely unchanged: The "sorta smart" students are still often SS, the "kinda dumb" students are still often KD. This process creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that stratifies our society into "haves" and "have-nots."

As researchers and policymakers ignore research that shows teachers can interrupt this cycle, it is common for today's students and their families to be blamed for academic failure (Flores, Tefft-Cousin & Diaz, 1991; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Thompson, 2002, 2003, 2004; Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004). Echoing in too many teacher lunchrooms: She's not motivated. His parents just don't care. She doesn't have what it takes. He should be in special education classes. She's definitely not college-bound. In these same schools, though, there are star teachers who have success with these same "incapable" students, leading them to make at least a year's worth of progress if not more (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Haberman, 1995; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Reeves, 2003). High school students may choose to ditch every class with the exception of these star teachers, under whose guidance they thrive (Haberman, 1995). The challenge for teacher preparation programs is to produce enough star teachers to create a "tipping point" (Gladwell, 2000) within schools.

CGU is committed to preparing teachers able and eager to break the cycles of academic failure that have traditionally plagued poor, non-white, and linguistically-diverse students, often relegating them to permanent underclass status. To fulfill our mission, investment must be made in teacher candidates who share this goal. Accordingly, CGU's recruitment efforts focus upon individuals who have an understanding of societal inequities. Ultimately, the candidates we admit share our vision and are willing to sacrifice in order to become the type of teacher who is prepared to make a difference in high-needs schools. Many of our teachers have personally overcome the societal inequities associated with being poor, non-white, and/or linguistically diverse (e.g., 59% of the 2005/2006 cohort are non-white, 73% are fluently bilingual). In other

cases, our teachers have not personally come from disenfranchised communities but share our mission to right inequities. By reflecting the cultures and languages of the student populations in area K-12 schools and by caring about issues of social justice, CGU's teachers are role models to their students in a variety of ways.

We work diligently with our teachers to continually develop their capacity to meaningfully engage issues of social justice with their K-12 students. For example, in a large-group assembly this Spring, our teachers debriefed with each other what was happening on their respective campuses in terms of student-led "walkouts" protesting national immigration legislation. They discussed how they used the opportunity to advance the conversation of social (in)justice in their classrooms and to contextualize current events for students. Many reported being inspired by their students and engaging them in dialogue about the specifics of immigration legislation, how power and politics influence lawmaking, how their families and communities might be impacted, and the role of civil disobedience in promoting social change. Discussions focused on the historical importance of thoughtfully planned and well-informed acts of protest (such of those organized by Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez) and how technology (such as phone-based text messages and My Space websites) was being utilized to organize this current movement. These teachers were able to create an environment where their students spoke openly and emotionally about the proposed laws. Such instances of proactively engaging issues of social justice are not uncommon; our teachers relish and seek "teachable moments" where they can address social justice as it relates to their students' lives.

CGU's TEIP also looks for opportunities to advance social justice. For the past three years, we have been involved in a targeted effort to increase the number, quality and diversity of credentialed teachers adept at working with students with special needs. This effort reflects our understanding that K-12 special education (SPED) classrooms are often under-staffed by under-qualified teachers [i.e., according to the Council for Exceptional Children (2002), there are over 30,000 unqualified special education teachers working in our nation's schools]. It also reflects our understanding that the preparation traditionally provided to Education Specialists lacks a focus upon cultural proficiency (Ruiz, Vargas, and Beltran, 2002). The need for qualified Education Specialists is particularly great in California. Consider the following data:

- Between 1993 and 2000, there was a 41% increase in the number of students in California identified with special needs (Evans, Eliot, Hood, Driggs, Mori, & Johnson, 2005);
- In 1998, California had to issue 5,000 emergency credentials to cover this increase (Evans et. al, 2005); and
- One third of the nation's 30,000 unqualified special education teachers work in California (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002).

Dousing hopes that the near future will have an adequate supply of SPED teachers to work with our students with special needs is the gross shortage along the educational pipeline: California has one of the greatest SPED faculty shortages in the country and produces the least number of SPED-related doctoral graduates in the region (Smith, 2002; Smith, Pion, Tyler, & Gilmore, 2003). These data beg the question: How will we have the teachers to support our students with special needs when there are not enough university faculty to prepare these K-12 teachers?

The primary goal of our PULSE (Preparing Urban Leaders in Special Education) Pipeline Project is to increase the number and diversity of quality educators who serve students with special needs. For this project, we embrace a K-Ph.D. perspective. Using a career ladder model, we steward Education Specialists through their credential programs (Levels I and II), MAs in Education, and (eventually) doctoral programs. Committed to bolstering the supply of quality SPED teachers working in elementary, secondary, and university settings, we provide extensive personalized instruction, on-site coaching, and fellowships. Additionally, in July 2006, Deb Smith will be joining CGU's School of Educational Studies' faculty. Smith's extensive background in special education will help to further actualize our goal of preparing quality SPED educators across the K-Ph.D. pipeline.

### **Conclusion**

Reform efforts to address poor student achievement have historically focused on a variety of issues other than teacher quality. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is somewhat unusual in the sense that it holds as a presupposition that a teacher's competency is linked to student achievement. It recognizes that teacher variables are some of the foremost predictors of student success. These variables include the teacher's level of experience, level of pedagogical competency, and expertise in content knowledge. NCLB has basically made emergency credentials obsolete. Poor and hard-to-serve schools have benefited the most from this change, as these schools have traditionally been filled with the highest number of non-credentialed teachers, thus perpetuating the likelihood for cycles of academic failure among the students who need the highest quality public education our nation can provide (Ed Trust).

Although we acknowledge the problematic way NCLB mandates have been implemented by states (i.e., Are scripted programs really the path to educational equity?) and regularly debate the pros and cons of parts of the NCLB doctrine, we endorse the way NCLB links student achievement to teacher quality. We applaud the bi-partisan spirit that acknowledged that data need to be disaggregated to expose the effectiveness of schools in meeting the needs of poor, non-white, and non-native speakers of English. We applaud NCLB's definition of a good school as one that acts upon the belief that all children can and should reach academic proficiency. And, likewise,

we agree with the Act's definition of a good teacher as one who is able to cultivate such success in all of his/her students.

Future educational reform efforts should also embrace these tenets and, accordingly, focus upon teacher quality. Yet, there is a caveat: teacher quality needs to encompass issues of accountability, collaboration, and social justice. When these principles are taken into account, teacher quality is framed in ways beyond what is revealed by scores on standardized tests and accrued degrees. Teachers who embrace the ideals of accountability, collaboration, and social justice have a developed sense of ownership and hold themselves responsible. They work to cultivate their craft, build subject-matter competency, and use data to improve their practice and outlooks. They understand that scaffolded support can enable all their students to reach the highest of expectations and goals. They build authentic and sustainable relationships with their students and colleagues. This type of internal motivation raises the bar far above any other external measure and really is at the core of what it means to be a quality teacher. Given the significance of this internal calling, we ask: How can policy highlight the importance of understanding teacher preparation and quality in terms of accountability, collaboration, and social justice?

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◀ Contents

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