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Show me what you know: Pre-service city teachers and social justice in action

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Abstract

Few current definitions and assessments of teacher "quality" have considered the social justice-oriented characteristics the authors consider most important in their work with future city teachers. This paper describes the masters licensure program with which the authors are involved, the portfolio assessment system this program utilizes to determine future urban teachers' integration of this social justice concept, and examples of the evidence both pre-service teachers and graduates of this program have shared as evidence of their proficiency with this social justice-oriented notion.

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Introduction

The United States will require better than a million new teachers over the next ten years, with urban districts needing particularly well-prepared and resilient classroom educators (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). As in many urban districts across the nation, the schools in our major Midwestern city already face a shortage of qualified, appropriately licensed teachers across subject areas who are trained for and will remain in these settings (Levin & Quinn, 2003). City schools encounter not only the challenge of considering how to train and retain teachers, but also larger structural challenges, including extremely diverse populations, excessively bureaucratic traditions, and poverty-bound and under-resourced communities (Shakespear, Beardsley, & Newton, 2003).

While the need for specially-prepared urban teachers is great, heightened requirements borne of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" legislation are focusing our districts and universities on an increasingly narrow notion of teacher "quality" (Darling-Hammond, 2003). We believe that urban school districts and institutions committed to preparing teachers for diverse and challenging settings should consider a concept of "quality" beyond what current policies recommend—one that includes social justice criteria and might be evaluated via holistic portfolio assessment systems. In this paper we define the explicitly progressive outcomes upon which urban teacher preparation might be founded and describe the nine year old social justice-focused masters licensure program with which we are involved as the program's coordinators, one of its recent graduates, and one of its current students. We then detail the portfolio assessment system we've utilized to determine future urban teachers' consideration of this concept, as well as examples of the evidence both pre-service teachers and graduates of this program have selected as demonstrations of their efforts to integrate social justice into their teaching practices. With this account of our program, we illustrate how our urban teacher licensure effort is rooted in these high ideals and how we are attempting to develop formal assessments of teacher candidates' and early career teachers' abilities to address social justice issues.

Contexts

We are concerned about the narrow notions of "quality" associated with many current teacher licensure options (Hess, 2005). Most of these enable school districts to license as "qualified" individuals with minimal records of subject area competence and limited teaching experience or coursework in pedagogy. Such licensure options are not only inadequate for meeting requirements

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of “highly qualified” teachers outlined by federal legislation, but also for preparing teachers for typically more demanding urban contexts like our own, where issues of equity and justice are urgent concerns (Selwyn, 2007). In our city settings, teachers require not only subject area proficiency, but also the ability to consider how their practices impact the oppressive historical conditions of our political, economic, social, and educational institutions (Leland & Harste, 2004). Urban education professionals must work to make a difference outside of the classroom, to consider the structures in which classrooms are embedded, and to take into account forms of achievement that demonstrate consideration of evidence beyond classroom-level activities (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

As well, the assessment methods currently utilized to determine teacher quality have ranged from high stakes paper-and-pencil tools to holistic portfolio assessment practices (NBPTS, 2002). Bodies such as the Education Testing Service have developed standardized assessments (e.g., the Praxis model) for training and evaluating pre-service and entry year teachers. We believe only when city teachers are evaluated using performance-based instruments which integrate social justice-oriented notions will they achieve the measures of quality that urban schools and communities require (Gelfer, Xu & Perkins, 2004).

In addition to a description of the masters licensure program with which we are involved—as well as details about its social justice-oriented goals and portfolio assessment system—below we also discuss examples of artifacts both current students and graduates of our program have identified as relevant to this social justice-focused definition. We have gathered this evidence via initial analyses of our portfolio assessment system and a web-based follow-up survey of 40 program graduates (from the 200 graduates who are now 1st through 7th year teachers) that explores the relevance of the social justice outcome to their current practices. We hope that these reveal the nature of the community-, school-, and classroom-based practices upon which others committed to a social justice-oriented notion of teacher quality might build. This evidence provides some insights into the complexity of training and supporting pre-service and in-service teachers who adopt such an orientation.

The Master of Urban Secondary Teaching (MUST) program

The Master of Urban Secondary Teaching (MUST) program at Cleveland State University is a graduate licensure option developed to train teachers who will be prepared for and remain in urban settings. MUST is a selective, field-based graduate teacher education program, focusing on the training of secondary teachers in English, social studies, math, science, Spanish, and art. MUST operates with a critical theory framework (Kincheloe, 2004) and a “professional development school” model (Reynolds, Ross & Rakow, 2002), with two full-time university-based faculty collaborating with school-based site coordinators and mentor teachers at five Cleveland-area high schools to license approximately twenty-five new teachers per year. Students in the program enter as a cohort, take most classes together over a four-semester sequence, and work with one mentor teacher at a partner high school during a 9-month, unpaid internship. In addition to an Ohio teaching license, graduates earn a Master of Education degree based on culminating teacher research projects and professional portfolios.

MUST has made responding to the challenge of working in intensified and under-resourced urban classrooms explicit in its definition of urban teaching and teacher education. Its founders recognized that any successful urban licensure option must continually shift the professions of both urban teacher educators and teachers so that they require these educators to take responsibility for addressing intense conditions found in these settings. The MUST program founders fashioned a unique set of four teacher licensure outcomes upon which its students (or “interns”) are evaluated through individual portfolio reviews. The primary outcome of the program—“social justice”—is defined in the following way: “The MUST intern is a reflective, responsive teacher-leader who successfully addresses the effects of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation on student achievement.”

This standard has been gradually but consistently revised through ongoing discussions amongst program faculty, interns, and mentor teachers. Its evolution has enhanced the extent to which this objective is responsive to the needs and conditions of the program’s urban community. A rubric defines what this program outcome requires in school and classroom practices, requiring each program intern to demonstrate how she/he is able to:

- recognize and respect their own and their students’ personal, social, and cultural uniqueness and understand how these attributes affect teaching and learning;
- reflect on and address effects of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation on their own and their students’ achievement;

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- use this information to engage their students, to promote intrinsic motivation, and to encourage personal and professional risk-taking;
- promote their own and their students' development of personal, school, and community literacies by using effective, culturally relevant classroom practices;
- consider their own and their students' experiences with issues of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation in their classroom practices.

This rubric is rooted in concepts of cultural "responsiveness" and "literacies" (Ben-Yosef, 2003), appeals to studies of socially responsible teaching (Oakes & Lipton, 2007), and relies on research into urban teachers' abilities to promote student motivation and to engage in personal and professional risk-taking (Murrell, 2006). Each semester the program's portfolio assessment also calls upon students to develop their own principles related to the outcome and to share artifacts demonstrating their proficiency with these additional criteria.

This ongoing performance assessment system—which culminates in a professional teaching portfolio—is the only holistic assessment model consistent with the brevity of such a program (Reis & Vilaume, 2002). While program interns complete a variety of both traditional and non-traditional assessments throughout their program coursework, it is expected that these pre-service teachers will collect portfolio artifacts from all classes and field experiences. The construction of an intern's portfolio begins in introductory summer courses including "Content Area Literacy" and "Teaching and Assessment in the Secondary School." It continues in the fall semester's "Practicum in the Secondary School" (which includes half-day mentored teaching experiences in urban classrooms) and concludes during the spring semester's "Student Teaching in the Secondary School" (which includes full-day mentored teaching experiences in the same city classroom).

During each of these three semesters interns gather artifacts representative of their experiences and assess these artifacts as evidence of their proficiency with the MUST outcomes. While interns are completing initial community fieldwork and exploring their schools' neighborhoods during the first summer semester, they are required to gather artifacts that focus on their definitional understandings of the outcomes. During the fall semester, while interns are observing in a variety of school settings and veteran teachers' classrooms, they are called on to collect primary artifacts from their mentor teachers' and other teachers' implementation of these outcomes. Finally, during the spring semester, when each intern is completing a full-time student teaching experience in one mentor teacher's classroom, they are obligated to gather artifacts from their own classroom contexts and their implementation of these outcomes in their own teaching.

During each semester interns engage in a formative assessment process around the artifacts they've chosen to address the outcomes. This process includes completion of an "Artifact Conference Review" (conducted by a constituent of an intern's choosing) for each item an intern selects to consider as evidence of their proficiency with an outcome. As well, through bi-weekly seminars, interns participate in informal conversations with their cohort mates about the artifacts they have tentatively chosen as evidence of their proficiency. These formative assessment activities prepare interns for the final, 45-minute summative assessment review with a MUST university coordinator at the end of each semester. At the conclusion of each of these three summative coordinator reviews each intern must be assessed as "proficient" with each of the four MUST outcomes; if an intern is assessed at any point as not proficient with any of the outcomes, she or he is not allowed to continue the following semester or to finish the program.

Evidence of social justice

We have begun to review artifacts and reflections gathered from the portfolio reviews we've conducted with program interns over the past three years. As well, we have started to examine the responses we've received from program graduates to a web-based survey exploring the relevance of the social justice outcome to their current teaching. Here we highlight some of the examples our students and graduates consider as proof of their proficiency with this ideal, as well as some of the themes we've noted in our initial consideration of this data. We have organized these descriptions and discussions into categories related to pre-service and in-service teachers' evidence.

Pre-service teachers' understandings across settings

One of the consistent characteristics of the range of artifact/reflection pairs from the three most recent cohorts is the extent to which these require extended interactions with *actual* students, teachers, and constituents of schools and communities. The form that these interactions have taken and interns' comfort with these relationship-based processes have evolved, but the focus on engaging with individual community, school, and student constituents has remained consistent. For example, Amy, one of the program's future math teachers, looked to her involvement with individuals across her three semesters of evidence, with each succeeding portfolio assessment

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focusing on an increasingly formal version of these interactions. She became aware of the cultural differences between herself and her extremely diverse students by interviewing youth during the summer semester, then devised a survey to learn about students' backgrounds during her student teaching, the results of which she used to have her students write math history papers describing individuals from each student's country of origin and their contributions to a math-related field.

Consistent across these artifacts have been interns' efforts to *get to know* individuals and particularly individual *students*. Through his range of artifacts, Carlos, a future English teacher, revealed how all of his social justice-oriented practices began with these daily efforts, rather than more grand, "save the world" types of activities. Across his three artifacts, Carlos detailed how he worked to get to know even one individual student, and then tried to use this new knowledge to move beyond his own prejudices and to engage individual students with the content of his lessons. He chose Langston Hughes as a relevant curricular focus for the English classes he would be teaching in a school that was entirely African American. Using Carlos' model, we understand that such personalized efforts might become new core practices for teachers committed to this social justice notion.

Many interns have concentrated on a general definition of "cultural relevance" in selecting artifacts. Joshua, a future social studies teacher, identified simple structures like naming specific behavioral and academic expectations, being persistent in expecting that these would be followed, and using performances and visual tools as relevant to his students' community and school experiences. He articulated how he would attempt to compare the expectations his students' community members held for youth with the hopes he had for them in his classroom, in order to allow students to appreciate these guidelines.

Linda, a science intern, revealed in her summer artifact reflection that teaching to social justice is not merely about curricula and activities that address the oppression of minority populations in our nation's history, but may be primarily about having and expressing high academic expectations for students, making space for all students to participate in class each day, and building that amorphous "community" in the classroom. She used her review of research literature (completed as part of her masters teacher research paper) to explain that motivating students to achieve in the classroom is equivalent to challenging the injustices of schools where diverse urban students have not been encouraged even to attend. She explained that she intended to increase student motivation by simply asking youth about the conditions of their lives, rather than assuming that they were willfully rejecting school by not engaging in class, completing homework, or even showing up for school. Numerous other interns identified as "culturally relevant" the straightforward process of giving students options in the classroom (even to choose their own groups for collaborative activities) as related to community members' desires for freedom and political power. A future science teacher, Nada, appealed to discovery-based instructional models as tied to her disenfranchised students' and community members' needs for structured opportunities for school and political engagement.

Interns regularly selected artifacts that revealed how they recognized that they needed to remain aware of the information they had gathered during earlier semesters (e.g., about students' lives and communities) and use this information when an appropriate "teachable moment" arose. Or, in the words of Janice (a future English teacher), to "stay angry" enough to incorporate this information even when it seemed to detract from the content at hand. During her first portfolio review, Janice shared her astonishment at the fact that some of her students had sought the services of a "back alley" abortionist due to a lack of health care. In her final review, she described how she returned to this information when issues of women's health and rights arose in the literature her class was reading.

Mark, a future social studies teacher, described in his initial review his awareness of the generational poverty prevalent in his school's community. For his second review he chose as a primary artifact a newspaper article he used to teach his students a lesson on the complexity of such poverty, relating this issue to the upcoming election on raising the Ohio minimum wage, students' roles in this election, and the impact that an increase would have on these youths' current paychecks (the majority of students worked more than twenty hours per week), their families' incomes, and their future earning potential.

Evolutions of pre-service teachers' understandings

Many interns' artifacts and reflective essays revealed the ways that their understandings of social justice both evolved from and extended the notion of this ideal with which they'd begun their program year. Based on Anne's reflections, it was clear that her understanding of this notion of justice had taken root. Like many of the interns working at our diverse partner schools, Anne (a

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math intern) selected for her primary summer portfolio artifact a survey that she intended to use with her students the coming fall to begin to learn about their lives. She described how this inquiry process was a foundational element in her definition of social justice. In the fall, Anne chose an article from the local newspaper about the importance of math to a range of careers as a community tool that she might bring into her classroom to engage students. Finally, during the spring semester she identified a professionally-produced learning styles survey as the best evidence of her ability to integrate social justice into her teaching. She moved from appreciating her students for their diverse races, ethnicities, and languages, to needing to know about *individual* students and their achievement so that she could teach them. In her words, "The set of questions [on the spring survey] asked were first about school and then about students' learning styles. My students were enthusiastic and passionate about all their answers. This may have been the first time in their lives where their voices were being heard....I got more student participation than if I would have lectured to them."

Suzanne (an English intern) and the range of artifacts she selected across her three portfolio reviews provided another illustration of how interns' understandings of and abilities to integrate social justice evolved. Like many of our program's students, Suzanne chose a project that explored students' perceptions of the purposes of school as her primary summer artifact, describing how this assignment enabled her to appreciate many of the diverse qualities of her students. For her second review Suzanne identified a handout from a university special education class that summarized the range of special needs she would encounter in her classroom. She described how she and her mentor—a MUST program graduate—had attempted to consider students' abilities and challenges in their collaborative teaching. For her final portfolio review, Suzanne illustrated how she had *extended* the program's definition of social justice: while the portfolio assessment system called on all interns to choose their own social justice criteria each semester, few students decided to focus on these characteristics for their reviews. She concentrated on the concept of teaching to controversial issues as one of the qualities of her definition of social justice; she implemented this tenet into her teaching by exploring the history of contentious couples in literature and society while reading *Romeo and Juliet*. She explained how the controversial couples activity "encouraged students to take risks to participate in the conversation and analyze/debate their own and other students' views. The activity and discussion encouraged students to analyze what makes people and couples unique and how we respect or disrespect people's relationships in society." We count Suzanne's commitment to integrating this self-selected element into her teaching as an example of the social justice quality towards which our program and its portfolio assessment system are directed.

"Social justice" concepts in graduates' efforts

In our initial review of the survey responses we've received from program graduates we have concentrated on the teaching practices these graduates are using to orient their teaching towards this social justice ideal, with a focus on their consideration of race, gender, class, linguistic differences, and sexual orientation. These responses suggest that these teachers have maintained a significant commitment to learning about their students' lives, cultures, and communities, and to integrating what they learn into their classroom practices.

While several respondents noted that race issues were not a concern in their classrooms because their buildings were not very diverse (e.g., either 90% plus African American or white), those teachers who had made a commitment to a consideration of race issues concentrated on the use of a variety of grouping strategies as evidence of this integration. One third year English teacher described how she made sure to have her students read a variety of authors of different races, to ensure that her mostly white students would see different perspectives on the world. A first year math teacher illustrated his consideration of race issues with a description of his weekly math history lessons, which included a focus on racial groups who were traditionally excluded amongst math's founding "fathers" and "mothers."

The most common teaching practice these teachers identified as illustrating their consideration of gender issues was a focus on providing students with a variety of opportunities to participate in class. Numerous respondents—across a variety of years of teaching experience, settings, and subject areas—described how females were more willing to participate in class and to ask for assistance. One third year science teacher recognized a need to "chase down the boys" when it was apparent that they did not understand the material at hand. One math teacher focused on simple structures like including both girls' and boys' names in sample problems. An English teacher had integrated more project-oriented activities into her teaching, as she was aware that traditional lectures appeared to be more engaging for young women than men.

Amongst the strategies that these teachers identified as evidence of their consideration of class issues were efforts to provide students with materials that neither the school nor these youths'

families were able to supply. Science and math teachers described how they provided necessary paper and writing utensils for class activities. These teachers recognized that they had to be cautious with assigning homework to students, as these youths' lives were so often filled with financial and family obligations that made completion of these tasks unreasonable. Finally, a number of graduates recognized that they needed to work to counteract the fact that a financially struggling family's limited relationship to school might be the cause for students to fail even to show up for school. A third year science teacher explained, "I make it a practice to buy my own supplies for my students and lend them for use in the classroom; if I can get my students to come to school, I can teach them."

These entry year and early career teachers' survey responses have also revealed important insights about teaching practices they use to address language difference factors. Several noted that their schools served populations with a high percentage of first generation citizens, most of whom were from non-English speaking homes. These teachers were searching for means of communicating with homes filled with multiple generations of families who not only fail to "get" English, but also do not "get" many US community or school traditions. A second year English teacher related how she had to "try to make [what seems to my students] frivolous content valid and important to youth who already have the weight and responsibility of the family on them." Finally, one first year English teacher related how she focused more on helping students to appreciate "formal" and "informal" registers so that they could understand why and how to speak in a particular manner in specific settings, including school.

A primary teaching strategy that numerous young teachers identified as effective in addressing sexual orientation issues was modeling the acceptance of youth, authors, community members, and newsmakers who were or were perceived to be homosexual. Many teachers related how they had to repeatedly remind their students that it was not "right" to talk about other students' personal lives in a critical manner. A fifth year English teacher worked to include a range of controversial literature in her classes, so that students would discuss their perceptions, beliefs, and biases. A first year science teacher posted a lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgendered "safe zone" sign in her classroom, and a fourth year science teacher addressed the murdering of homosexuals during the Holocaust during her unit on bioethics.

Supports for and impediments to graduates' social justice teaching

Our graduates consistently identified their high school students' lack of interest in diverse perspectives as a primary impediment to their consideration of race issues. Several graduates noted that being a racial minority themselves enabled them to more readily address these issues with their students. They were supported by diverse literature and challenged by curricula that they recognized—and their students often perceived—as assuming a white perspective. Primary amongst the impediments to the consideration of gender that these new teachers perceived were schools' traditions of curricula and teachers' and students' roles. Respondents to the survey noted that many of their male students tended to avoid participation and displays of academic excellence—a tendency that too few teachers were willing to challenge. Time and the intensification of teachers' jobs were also chief obstacles: one teacher noted in response to why she does not address gender issues that the "demand to get through so much material makes me forget kids need time to *experience* the content and not just *listen* to it." These graduates' personal beliefs and small pockets of supportive teachers were amongst the major factors that affirmed their integration of gender issues into the curriculum. Finally, a number of teachers employed in intense urban settings noted that one of the primary impediments to their consideration of gender issues was the simple fact that many of their students—boys, in particular—were consistently absent from or tardy to school.

These young teachers identified their own generally middle class upbringings as the major impediment to their consideration of class issues in their classrooms. They recognized that their socialization and language habits often served as obstacles to them getting to know and reaching their students. Our graduates' students were generally very cautious about sharing their socio-economic realities, preferring to feign indifference towards an assignment or school itself, rather than admit that they couldn't afford to pay for activities: "Sometimes students will not tell you that they are having a difficult time coming up with money for supplies or a field trip—rather, they pretend that they do not care or are not interested." Families' lack of engagement with school was the overarching theme in responses to this question of the supports for and impediments to graduates' consideration of class issues: because these families of lower socio-economic status often had a less positive relationship to school, they were generally less willing to attend its events and to share their concerns.

When responding to the question of the supports for and impediments to their consideration of language differences in the classroom, graduates again identified home and family issues as

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primary. They described how their students were very pragmatic about school and its curricula: anything that did not have immediately recognizable relevance—particularly for life and employment skills—was generally rejected. These young teachers also recognized that their veteran colleagues' lack of experience with differentiated instruction was a significant obstacle to the shifting of their school culture towards an environment that would be supportive of such responsive practices.

Finally, our graduates identified their own commitment to reminding their students to be sensitive to sexual orientation as one of the primary supports for their ability to consider these issues. The impediments to these teachers' consideration of these issues appeared in the form of a general fear that parents might perceive issues of homosexuality as outside the purview of teachers' curricula, at least one administrator's insistence that a "safe zone" sign be removed from a teacher's classroom, and other teachers who fail to respond to youths' negative use of everyday words associated with homosexuality. One second year English teacher expressed her caution in this way: "I think my own fear of how to handle parents who may not think this is an appropriate issue for teachers to deal with [gets in the way]."

Conclusions

Perhaps not surprisingly, the pre-service teachers in our program began with and for the most part continued to rely on the social justice definition provided by the MUST program outcome. While the high stakes nature of the program's portfolio assessment system required that they focus *first* on this notion of social justice, the system also made the development of their own criteria a formal activity each semester, by requiring them to choose and demonstrate proficiency with an "intern-selected" criteria. We consider this adherence to the rubric and assessment system as rudimentary proof that there can exist a science of social justice in teacher education.

High school and teacher education practices that appeal to a concept of social justice require that future teachers begin not only with inquiries into their students' lives, but also with expectations that they will formally study their students and these students' communities, and use this information in their teaching practices on a regular basis. Interest in urban students' lives is more than an attractive "extra" for teachers committed to social justice; it is a required element of their curricula and pedagogies. If this notion of social justice is to become relevant to our urban teaching and teacher education practices, then we must have specific structures and curricula through which pre-service and in-service teachers can implement and document their integration efforts. Teacher education that explicitly challenges future teachers to engage in practices that are not commonplace in their sites of learning must be supported by school- and university-based educators and mentors across at least the early career lifespan of these new teachers. Until a social justice concept of teacher quality is foundational for all pre-service and in-service teachers and teacher educators, it is unreasonable that the potential of such a notion or assessment systems oriented around it will be realized. Urban school districts demand a unique population of classroom educators who we believe should be required to concentrate on a broader, social justice-oriented notion of "quality"—both in their professional roles and their curricular objectives.

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