The evidence of social justice: New notions of "quality" for urban teachers

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This article presents a new notion of teacher "quality" and defines the progressive outcomes upon which urban teacher preparation might be founded. The paper includes a description of the masters licensure program with which the authors are involved and the program's portfolio system that assesses future urban teachers' integration of this social justice concept. Findings are based on graduates' responses to a follow-up survey, which document early career teachers' abilities to concentrate on this notion of social justice and examples of their efforts to integrate social justice into their teaching practices.

Introduction

Recent analyses of employment trends suggest that the United States will require better than a million new teachers over the next ten years, with urban districts needing a special population of well-prepared and resilient educators (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). While the need for teachers in urban settings suggests that city universities should be generating new teachers as quickly as possible, heightened requirements borne of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" legislation are focusing districts and universities on an increasingly narrow notion of teacher "quality" (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). City schools also encounter larger structural challenges, including extremely diverse populations, excessively bureaucratic traditions, poverty-bound and under-resourced communities, and higher turnover rates amongst new teachers (Shakespear, Beardsley, & Newton, 2003).

This paper suggests that urban school districts and institutions committed to preparing teachers for these settings should consider a concept of "quality" beyond what current policies recommend (Howey, 2000)—one that includes social justice criteria and is evaluated via

holistic portfolio assessment systems. Today's urban teacher educators should focus on preparing city teachers who are equipped to promote urban students' academic achievement, will remain in city locales, and will endeavor to improve the conditions of urban students' lives and communities. In this article we describe a study of the masters licensure program with which we are involved (as the program's coordinators and a current student), which has been oriented towards this social justice-oriented notion of "quality" since its inception a decade ago. Findings are drawn from our consideration of graduates' responses to a follow-up survey, framed by two research questions:

1) What are the types of social justice concepts to which graduates of this urban social justice-focused program are teaching?
2) What are the teaching practices graduates are using to focus their teaching on this social justice idea?

The results of this study reveal how a broader, more progressive concept of teacher quality might impact this nation's debates around who should be teaching our city students.

Contex and contextual framework

Responses to ongoing shortages of "qualified" urban teachers have concentrated on the development of now commonplace alternative licensure avenues, including numerous condensed masters endorsement and "emergency" avenues (Hess, 2005). Such licensure options are not only inadequate for meeting requirements of "highly qualified" teachers outlined by recent federal legislation, but also for preparing teachers for typically more demanding urban settings, where issues of equity and justice are urgent concerns (Birkeland & Johnson, 2002; Liu & Meyer, 2005). As well, while seminal studies have confirmed what common sense has long suggested—that the classroom teacher is the most easily influenced and important factor in any classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2003)—insufficient attention has been given to the characteristics of teachers beyond their subject area knowledge. Already susceptible to increased accountability pressures, under-resourced and under-staffed urban districts (which more frequently hire underqualified and inexperienced teachers) are further burdened by licensure requirements for new and veteran teachers (Oakes, Franke, Quartz & Rogers, 2002).

While recent discussions of "cultural competence" have called upon teacher education programs to consider ways in which knowledge of students' and communities' histories and conditions might influence teaching practices (Irvine, 2003), few of these definitions of teacher quality have considered the activist-oriented qualities that *urban* teachers must possess (Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2007; Zeichner, 2003). In our city settings, teachers also require the ability to consider how their practices impact the oppressive historical conditions of our political, economic, social, and educational institutions (Leland & Harste, 2004; Villegas, 2007). As well, the evaluation methods utilized to determine teacher quality have ranged from high stakes paper-and-pencil tools to holistic portfolio assessment practices (NBPTS, 2002). We believe that only if city teachers are evaluated using performance-based instruments will they achieve the measures of quality that urban schools and communities require (Peterman, 2005).

The Master of Urban Secondary Teaching (MUST) program is a field-based masters licensure option developed in the late 1990s to train secondary English, social studies, math, and science and K-12 art and foreign language teachers who would be prepared for and remain in urban settings. 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 six city high schools to license twenty-five new teachers per year. Students enter as a cohort, take most classes together over a four-semester sequence, work exclusively with one mentor teacher at a partner high school during a 9-month internship, and earn an Ohio teaching license and a Master of Education degree based on a professional portfolio.

The MUST founders recognized that any successful urban licensure option must require city teachers to take responsibility for addressing the conditions found in these settings. Program faculty fashioned a set of urban and social justice-oriented teacher licensure outcomes upon which students are evaluated through individual portfolio reviews and public exhibitions:

- Social Justice: MUST interns are reflective, responsive teacher-leaders who successfully address the effects of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation on student achievement.

- Urban Teaching: MUST interns promote students' learning by utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Urban Schooling and Communities: MUST interns demonstrate a strong commitment to urban schooling and community activism.
- Resilience, Resistance, and Persistence: MUST interns address the complexities and demands of urban settings by responding appropriately with resilience, resistance, and persistence.

Rubrics define what should occur in pre-service teachers' community, school, and classroom practices. For the research on which we report in this essay we focus on the "social justice" outcome, which calls upon each program intern to demonstrate that she/he is able to:

1. recognize and respect their own and their students' personal, social, and cultural uniqueness and understand how these attributes affect teaching and learning
2. reflect on and address effects of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation on their own and their students' achievement
3. use this information to engage their students, to promote intrinsic motivation, and to encourage personal, professional risk-taking
4. promote their own and their students' development of personal, school, and community literacies by using effective, culturally relevant classroom practices

This outcome and its rubric are rooted in concepts of cultural "responsiveness" (Ladson-Billings, 1994), "congruence," and "competence" (Villegas & Lucas, 2003). It appeals to studies of "critical pedagogy" and socially responsible teaching (Ayers, 2004), and has foundations in broader concepts of "literacy" (Alvermann, 2004).

MUST operates with the assumption that only if city teachers are consciously assessed against these higher principles using performance-based instruments will they achieve the measures of quality that urban schools and communities require (Reis & Villaume, 2002). During each program semester interns engage in a formative assessment process that leads to a 45-minute summative assessment conference with a university coordinator. At the conclusion of each of these reviews interns must be assessed as "proficient" with the outcomes to be allowed to finish the program.

Methods

In an effort to determine the relevance of the program's concept of social justice to program graduates and their teaching practices for the past three years we have administered an annual 30-item web-based survey to more than 200 program graduates. Data on which the findings of this paper are based were drawn from the May 2007 administration of the survey. Respondents include a wide range of program participants, from 1st through 7th year teachers, across subject areas. The majority (22 of the 40 respondents) were teaching in city settings, and the most of these in the urban districts where they completed their training. Respondents were representative of program graduates as a whole, who are generally 20% teachers of color, with an average age of 27, and approximately 55% female.

Survey items included demographic questions, Likert-scale based items (aligned to a 1-5 scale and answers from "not at all" to "frequently"), and open-ended questions addressing graduates' perceptions of the relevance of the social justice outcome to their current teaching practices. We have content analyzed these 40 graduates' responses to the survey (Creswell, 1998) and considered their responses through the lenses of our research questions. While these findings are based on a first review of this limited data, they reveal much about the nature of our efforts to teach to this expanded concept of "quality."

Results and discussion

We concentrate here on two categories of findings from our review of survey responses: 1) the types of social justice concepts to which graduates are teaching; 2) descriptions of the teaching practices these graduates are using to focus their teaching on this social justice ideal, with a concentration on their consideration of race, gender, class, linguistic difference, and sexual orientation. We have selected example survey responses to illustrate these categories.

Key types of social justice concepts

One of our primary goals in following up with program graduates via the survey was to determine the extent to which they were able to take into account the tenets of social justice upon which they'd been assessed during their MUST year. Table 1 provides a summary of the mean scores related to relevant survey questions:

Table 1
Summary of scores related to survey questions

Rubric point	Survey item	Mean scores	Frequency of consideration
1	Two questions related to graduates' abilities to consider their own and students' cultural uniqueness in their teaching	4.32 4.04	Frequently Frequently
4	Two questions related to graduates' use of culturally relevant practices	3.75 2.57	Somewhat frequently Occasionally
3	One question related to graduates' engagement in personal or professional risk-taking	3.11	Occasionally
2	One question related to graduates' consideration of effects of sexual orientation on students' achievement	2.18	Infrequently
2	One question related to graduates' consideration of effects of class/ socio-economic issues on students' achievement	3.96	Somewhat frequently
2	One question related to graduates' consideration of effects of gender issues on students' achievement	3.29	Occasionally
2	One question related to graduates' consideration of effects of race issues on students' achievement	3.04	Occasionally
2	One question related to graduates' consideration of effects of linguistic difference issues on students' achievement	2.79	Occasionally

Two survey questions addressed the first rubric point, through which graduates were asked to consider how via their teaching they "recognize and respect their own and their students' personal, social, and cultural uniqueness and understand how these attributes affect teaching and learning." These questions proved to be amongst those most relevant to graduates' practices, with mean scores of 4.32 and 4.04. Such responses suggest that these early career teachers maintain a significant commitment to learning about their students' lives, cultures, and communities, and to integrating what they learn into their classroom practices.

In response to two survey questions that inquired about graduates' use of culturally relevant practices (rubric point #4), these teachers' answers reveal somewhat conflicting findings, with mean scores of 3.75 (suggesting that these practices are a "somewhat frequent" consideration) and 2.57 (illustrating that graduates bear these practices in mind only on an "occasional" or "infrequent" basis). As well, based on these initial data points (and a mean score of 3.11 on a relevant survey question), our graduates only occasionally engage in what they would characterize as personal or professional "risk-taking." While we recognize that we cannot draw generalizable conclusions based on these incomplete data sets, our initial analyses offer glimpses of the elements of social justice with which our graduates are comfortable once they enter the teaching profession.

Five survey questions focused on the second social justice rubric criteria, which asked graduates about the frequency with which they "reflect on and address" the effects of race, class, gender, linguistic difference, ability, and sexual orientation on students' achievement. Mean scores ranged from 2.18 or "infrequently" (on the question of the extent to which graduates consider sexual orientation in their teaching) to 3.96 or "somewhat frequently" (on the extent to which they take into account class and socio-economic issues). As well, graduates consider issues of gender (3.29), race (3.04), and linguistic difference (2.79) only on an "occasional" basis. These findings suggest that sexual orientation is the issue with which our program graduates are least comfortable or that they believe is the least relevant to their teaching contexts. These results also divulge the K-12 student characteristics on which we might concentrate in our teacher preparation practices, if we are to move future teachers towards the social justice concept of "quality" that is our program's objective.

Social justice-oriented teaching practices

To illustrate these teachers' abilities to consider students' experiences with race, class, gender, linguistic differences, and sexual orientation, in this section we offer depictions of practices these early career teachers have described in their responses to relevant survey questions. 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 white or African American), those teachers who had made a commitment to a consideration of race issues concentrated on the use of a variety of grouping strategies in their classrooms 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 perspectives on the world that were different than their own. A first year science teacher described how she made sure to broach issues that are race-related in an "everyday" manner—for example, noting the prevalence of sickle cell anemia amongst people of African descent.

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. Many of these young teachers worked to stay conscious of which gender was participating most, and then established structures to ensure that equal participation occurred. Several described how they explicitly discussed gender roles with their students and endeavored to make their classrooms safe spaces for all to engage. Numerous respondents—across a variety of years of teaching experience, school settings, and subject areas—described how female youths 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. Others acknowledged that they had been working to notice female students' roles in maintaining an on-task classroom environment, as they were aware that many teachers focused on male young adults as disruptive forces.

Amongst the strategies that these teachers identified as evidence of their consideration of class issues were numerous efforts to supply students with materials that neither the school nor these youths' families were able to provide. Both science and math teachers described how they provided all necessary paper and writing utensils for class activities. Across years of experience and subject areas, 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 wholly unreasonable. Finally, a number of respondents to this survey recognized that they needed to work to counteract the fact that often 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, "If I can get my students to come to school I can teach them."

While language differences were not perceived as issues of primary importance to these teachers, their qualitative responses to survey questions revealed important insights about teaching practices they used to address these 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 language differences resulted not only in communication challenges, but also in cultural conflicts. These teachers considered alternate means of communicating with homes filled with multiple generations of families who not only don't yet "get" English, but also don't "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." One first year English teacher described 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.

Finally, we reviewed these respondents' considerations of sexual orientation issues for evidence of what they believe are practices that are effective in addressing these concerns in their classroom. A primary though amorphous teaching strategy that numerous young teachers identified was the modeling of acceptance of youth, authors, community members, and newsmakers who were or were perceived to be homosexual. A fifth year English teacher worked to include a range of controversial topics and literature in her classes, so that students would discuss their perceptions, beliefs, and biases; during discussions she instructed them in how to balance their emotional contributions with considerations of the credibility of the sources of their opinions. A math teacher made sure to note the sexual orientation of the historical figures to which he introduced students via brief math history lessons. Finally,

a fourth year science teacher addressed the murdering of homosexuals during the Holocaust during her unit on bioethics.

Implications and conclusions

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. In this paper we have introduced such a definition of teacher "quality" and described the explicitly progressive outcomes upon which our masters licensure program is founded. We have provided an overview of a model of a social justice-oriented portfolio assessment system for pre-service urban teachers. With the survey findings we have shared here, we have introduced evidence that this principle matters to these new educators' practices beyond their MUST year, although the initial findings we've shared suggest that some elements of this social justice ideal become less relevant to these teachers once they enter the profession.

Much additional data collection and analysis remains to be done, if we are to best understand how to guide future and veteran teachers towards this social justice concept of quality. But the results of this study support our contention that a responsive notion of teacher quality rooted in these high ideals must have a place in this nation's ongoing discussions of who should be teaching our increasingly diverse and disenfranchised city students. Any wholesale shift in this definition must be integrated not only into teachers' pre-service training, but also their induction years, ongoing professional development, and tenure and retention criteria.

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