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Deconstructing Oppressor Ideology in Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

At a time when the dropout rate of teachers rivals the push out rate of students, critical pedagogy can serve to name the elitist and undemocratic practices of teachers in the public school realm. This can serve to inform a new cadre of educators coming from university-based teacher preparation programs who are now facing increased competition from non-education-based certification programs. Pre-service teachers encounter a pedagogy of deconstruction as they take their teacher preparation courses. They begin to view the same schooling system in which they were apparently successful in new and critical ways. Professors use transformative pedagogies to move students to examine the oppressor ideology that informs traditional schooling. The purpose of schooling comes into question and students resist identifying and engaging issues that serve to domesticate and socialize them into the dominant paradigm. As problematic as this can be for tenure-track professors, it is essential that this dynamic be included in the discourse of teacher preparation. This presentation will provide evidence that this problem exists and then highlight those spaces where teachers may focus their pedagogical repertoire. This can serve to break the perpetuation of the monolithic view of curriculum and pedagogy that has long been in practice. Rather than continuing to work within a paradigm of elitism and ethnocentrism, teachers can prepare K-16 students to become critical and participating citizens rather than part of the “bewildered herd.”

Keywords: Teacher preparation, Resistance, Critical Pedagogy

Prelude to the Problem

This article will critique the United States' educational system as a form of social engineering through its K-16 public school system and the implications it has for the preparation of teachers. University students who wish to become teachers encounter alternative views of the schooling and show considerable resistance to academic encounters that can serve to broaden the purpose of schooling.

Too many students come to the university after a lived educational experience that has formalized a monolithic view of public schooling. They have experienced a teacher-centered behaviorist curriculum that has socialized them into obedient compliant patriotic citizens who see any alternative educational view as threatening. They have learned to take what is transmitted in the classroom as truth and have not been given the opportunity to question and think critically about the issues that ultimately will become the context within which they will pursue their lives and live out a profession that has been devalued and made so technocratic that they are immobilized as agents of change. This stifles their ability to create spaces for social reconstruction with their students.

It is easy to see that education, as a discipline, holds little capital given the submissive nature attributed to teaching as a feminine pursuit. The other disciplines are held in higher esteem and many times students default into education as an easier way to get a degree. They have unwittingly

submitted to the pressures and “rigors” of science, engineering and technology. Even when partnerships between education and science are called for in large National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, it is easy to see that education is included only for the purposes of obtaining the grants. Content specialists devalue education as a discipline and relegate it as a pedagogical space that has little value when compared to the specialized content found in other disciplines.

This has all produced a pool of pre-service teachers who “succeeded” within an indoctrinating and domesticating educational system who serve to perpetuate the status quo. They come unprepared to deal with issues of equity and social justice for the students they will have under their tutelage. These students have come to us thinking of teacher preparation as a mere formality to getting a degree and obtaining certification. The situation is exacerbated by moves from states like Texas that recently passed legislation where “teachers” are not required to get university teacher preparation. Now, all that is required to be placed in the classroom is simply having a bachelor's degree.

The Problem

The hegemony of the disciplines has impacted students entering our teacher education program in their final year of college. Early in the pursuit of a bachelor's, students encounter professors in the sciences who expect less from them if they identify themselves as potential teachers versus those who



would like to major in science (Licona, 1999). These same education students come to the teacher preparation program skeptical of education as a discipline, expect not to have to put deep thought into curriculum and pedagogy, are incredulous of education as rigorous, and they expect formalized recipe type lessons in order to know how to teach. They also want to know how to control students and want to know classroom management from that perspective.

The present model of education has produced two significant outcomes. Current data indicate that nearly fifty percent of new teachers drop out within the first five years of teaching (EPISD, 2000). This has the College of Education pushing to increase the numbers of pre-service teachers while not looking to question and transform our classroom ecologies. The other problem is student dropout rates. While the districts often claim a one percent dropout rate, it is easy to find U.S. Census Bureau data that can show that thirty-five percent or more of freshman high school students do not finish the twelfth grade. Many others drop out prior to ninth grade. This becomes a vicious self-selection cycle where students who make it through the system will eventually teach students just like them, not able to address issues of equity and social justice.

Contemporary learning theory has not been institutionalised to a large degree in schools. Although learning theory research occurs in schools of education and, to some degree, in other disciplines, it has not informed pedagogical training on a large scale. It is during the final two years that pre-service teachers encounter constructivist and student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. However, a conflict emerges with their lived educational experiences. Learning to become a teacher from a critical pedagogical perspective is even more remote. Social reconstruction clashes with social engineering as foundations for development of philosophies that translate teacher actions.

Also, the standards movements have reduced teaching to a technocratic model based on obedience, compliance and good test scores (Caine & Caine, 2001; Kohn, 2001). Teacher Education departments have resorted to teaching to the test just like their K-12 counterparts.

Evolution of Teacher Preparation

At one university, the secondary teacher preparation program moved education professors to have greater contact, hence, greater impact, with secondary pre-service teachers. Until recently, these students would come to their teacher preparation in the first semester of their senior year where they would take all the courses needed to become teachers. They would finish the year by doing their student teaching in the final semester. During this semester, they had little to no contact with education professors. We, as

innovative education professors, moved to teach courses spread over their last two semesters while they do fulfil their internship in the public schools. In this way, they take courses and attempt teaching while still in contact with their professors. This “model” still needs restructuring in order to provide time to process, question and modify teaching and learning beliefs that can serve to drive new pedagogies. Presently, secondary students must take courses in curriculum (including lesson plan design), special education and human development, literacy in the content areas, and multicultural education. They are introduced to profound issues and concepts that can lay the groundwork for self-actualization as they proceed on a journey of teaching or it can serve to confuse students who come to us with fixed expectations and encounter a problematic threshold they are not prepared to overcome.

Although our university students say what is being “taught” sounds good, it conflicts with their incoming mental model of teaching. This manifests itself into a form of resistance as they process and develop a teaching repertoire that conflicts with what they experienced in their prior fifteen years of education.

Students voice reasons for not accepting current teacher preparation practices. Some say that their principals will not support it. Others say that it will interfere with test score production, which they feel is their schools’ main purpose. They include that they cannot adapt to “modern” education in such a short time. The net result is that they resort to teaching the way that they were taught. During the teacher preparation courses, students show evidence of “force fitting” constructivist ideas into traditional lessons. They have difficulty identifying why the high school students in their internships do not respond well and feel that it must be the “new” way of doing things. They depend on behavioral control of students to have “good” classrooms and “engaged” students.

Other Forms of Resistance

The frustration levels reach the point where the most vociferous resisters write letters and petitions to the dean about all of the reading, incongruent assignments and “soft” teacher preparation. Other students complain that we, as education professors, do not provide the tools and methods that show them exactly what to do. They do not realize that they must develop their own curriculum and pedagogical repertoire after they have identified and questioned their beliefs and assumptions while reading about and processing research and scholarly-based theory.

There is high absenteeism and tardiness to university classes and some students do not read the texts nor fully participate in the preparation activities. They complain that we do not practice what we preach and wonder why we critique the practice lessons they submit to us. A student once

said, "If you want us to develop constructivist lessons, then you should accept anything we submit." This resistance emerges from their naiveté and lack of understanding about constructivism. Finally, professors who teach within the secondary teacher preparation program receive noticeably lower student evaluations than from courses taught outside of the program. This impacts faculty participation and can have implications on obtaining tenure.

Making Sense of the Issues

I believe it is oppressive for our pre-service teachers to perpetuate the outdated status quo model of teaching. Their students will continue to emerge "educated" by completing the twelfth grade, yet they do not show evidence that they can deal with their world in a meaningful and democratic way. Many of our university students come ill prepared to read for meaning, consider alternative views, and lack many of the skills needed to make sense of their world. Because their schooling was based on obedience and compliance and memorization, they resist challenges to think critically and turn to blame others without self-examination.

They remain unable to question the educational crisis in the United States, making it unlikely that they will be able to teach toward equity and social justice for all students, not just those who hold similar values as their teachers. Students must have access and be able to participate in their education, but if each student does not derive benefit from the experience, then, as Chomsky asserts, we maintain the great divide between the educated elite and the bewildered herd (in Macedo, 2000). He sees schools as institutions for indoctrination and imposing obedience from an historical perspective. Pre-service teachers find it difficult to read a Chomsky chapter due to his strong language of critique. He identifies the inability of schools to create independent thinkers because they are so involved in control and coercion and he continues with "once you are well educated, you have already been socialized in ways that support the power structure" (p. 16).

Schooling can support student development in ways that liberate them to pursue a good life based on personal goals, not by those imposed by others. The obedience and compliance methods of old must be replaced with transformative pedagogies lest we continue to fail a great majority of our students. We

know from child development research that students should emerge autonomous as a way of self-governance (Kamii, & DeVries, 1978). If we continue in the opposite vein of heteronomous student governance, students will develop under punishment and rewards. This can lead to students who calculate risks in order to avoid being caught doing something wrong, blind conformity, which can result in the inability to make decisions and hence rely on simply obeying, or revolt, which is generally rooted in anger directed at repression, real or imagined (p. 42).

Consider the Alternative

Elementary teachers often complain and lay blame on parents for their students' shortcomings, middle school teachers blame the elementary teachers, high school teachers follow suit against the middle school teachers and we at the university can blame the high schools. This vicious cycle of blame and ignorance interferes with our ability to advance a democratic form of education or to educate pre-service teachers in ways that can break the chain of ineffective teaching.

Questioning the obedience and compliance model of education, teachers can overcome the resistance to "retool" while embracing education from a more student-centered approach (Gross, 1997; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Research in the decades prior to the turn of the century has provided much insight and basis for learning theory development. The outdated, but necessary stepping stone, psychology-heavy model can now be replaced with knowledge and understanding of how the human learns based on actual observations of the body in the processes of learning thanks to the neurosciences, MRI and other scanning technologies (NRC, 2000).

As we proceed into the new millennium, we must realize the nature of students has changed just like the knowledge of teaching and learning has changed. Curriculum has been broadened and re-defined and socio-transformative pedagogies are informing teacher practices. Extant belief systems must be questioned and scholarly research-based methods must replace the teaching practices that serve to marginalize so many (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). In this pluralistic society, we must value and affirm diversity and oppose the efforts to homogenize it while giving every child every opportunity.

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About the Author

Dr. Licona has twenty-five years of secondary science teaching experience in Texas and New Mexico. He earned his doctorate, retired from public school teaching and presently works with undergraduate and graduate students in College of Education.