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Teacher Education and Supporting Immigrant Students in the Standards-Based Education Era

TED HAMANN



I often teach a course titled “Teaching ELLs in the Content Areas,” including this past summer (2012). Acknowledging that education of English-language learners (ELLs) and immigrant education are overlapping rather than fully synonymous, students in a recent rendering of this class raised a number of interesting issues that connect to the question of what imperatives immigration creates for teacher education. One persistent theme was their sense that teachers faced a choice of being biographically responsive to students (i.e., building on students’ background knowledge and paying attention to the context in which they lived) versus teaching to the standards. The working assumption was that these possibilities were dichotomous: One did one, or one did the other. A second persistent concern related to Lucas and Villegas’s (2010, p. 302) contention that teachers should learn (and teacher education programs should teach) how to advocate for ELLs. My students said that they did not personally disagree with this injunction but thought that it would be a difficult perspective to convince their fellow teachers to pursue. I find both these perspectives instructive but troubling.

Describing my students in this course, I would tell of a blend of practicing educator/graduate students and preservice teacher/undergraduates. I would also acknowledge that all of them would be identified as White and all but two grew up in households where English was the first language. Furthermore, I would say that they are conscientious, sincere, and talented—Nebraska differs from much of the country in that its preservice teachers are more likely to come from the top quarter of their high school classes. So why do capable, sincere educators and educators-to-be see a separation between teaching to content standards and being responsive to newcomers? Why do they claim so little agency in increasing the likelihood that their colleagues will prioritize newcomers? And most important, how might teacher education (both preservice and in-service) interrupt these dispositions and help teacher praxis better assist immigrant newcomer students to succeed in U.S. schools?


To take on the first of these likely requires two steps (if not more). Both preservice and in-service teacher education needs to actively illustrate how teaching to content standards *can* and *should* be pursued with overt tie-ins to

learner biography and background knowledge. For example, national science standards (Center for Science, Math, and Engineering Education, 1996) use “science as inquiry” as an overarching framework for a number of content standards to build “skills necessary to become independent inquirers about the natural world [and] the dispositions to use the skills, abilities, and attitudes associated with science” (p. 105). It is hard to imagine how a teacher can change/develop a student’s dispositions without reference to what interests and engages that learner. Teaching to standards and teaching to biography are not separate. Accepting the first challenge should mean also accepting the second.

My students’ skepticism of whether they could effectively encourage their colleagues to advocate for ELLs makes me think of a superintendent in a rural district that is now approximately half Latino and half White in terms of student enrollments. That administrator, Kyle McGowan, presides over a school district (Crete, Nebraska) that has been celebrated for its comparatively warm response to its recent Latino enrollment. His district has also been comparatively more successful graduating Latino newcomers and supporting their in-school success. In a documentary called *When We Stop Counting* (Meier & Reinkordt, 2010), McGowan concedes that he has encountered resistance about his district’s responsiveness in some quarters, but he explains that being welcoming to immigrants is nonnegotiable. Paraphrasing his words, “Every parent sends their child to our schools expecting that we will do our best for that child.” To not meet that expectation is to be unprofessional. Not being an advocate is not an option.

Dentler and Hafner (1997), among others, have long recognized that the school districts where immigrant children do well are those where there is away-from-the-classroom expertise related to meeting the needs of ELLs and other newcomers. In their explanation, such expertise both complements and helps build the in-classroom expertise—for example, ensuring that professional development is coherent and helps teachers better respond to newcomers. Administrators do not teach, but they do create the climates where good teaching does or does not happen. McGowan’s efforts illustrate another dimension of this responsiveness—the unanxious expectation that these students will be counted.

As we consider how teacher education should respond to immigration (and, by implication, how it should respond in particular to those categories of immigrant students who currently fare less well at school), we should be guided by several principles. First, teaching to the standards does not mean teaching against or in obliviousness to student biography. Immigrant students bring understandings and background knowledge to school. The way they are going to most readily and surpassingly succeed in classrooms is if that knowledge is accessed and used by skilled teachers to help learners construct new, more advanced understandings. Additionally, it is *not* OK to *not* advocate for newcomer students. All students count. If some struggle more than others,

then perhaps we should return to one of John Dewey's dictums: If some need more support than others, then some should get more support than others. Democracy has more of a need to assist those currently faring poorly than those who are doing just fine. Of course, successful education of immigrants entails more than just these two points, but these seem like an important place to start. 

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