Teaching by the Rules, Changing the Rules in Teacher Education

By Ava L. McCall

As a seasoned educator but a relatively new teacher educator, I have come to view teaching as a form of social activism. I hope to help create a more caring, fair world through my work as a teacher educator. My teaching reflects aspects of a multicultural, social reconstructionist orientation (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Significant components of this approach which I incorporate in social studies methods courses are: (1) to include the experiences and perspectives of women and men from different races and socioeconomic classes; (2) to address issues of racism, sexism, and/or class oppression; (3) to think critically about different views; and (4) to encourage social action as a way of moving toward equality. Because I hope to make a difference in the world through my teaching, I invest considerable time encouraging preservice teachers to think more deeply and critically about teaching and consider infusing aspects of a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach within their own teaching.

I also continue to discover the significant price of the choices I have made. At the end of each semester I experience various amounts of exhaustion, frustration, discouragement, and depression as a consequence of dealing with 14 weeks of students' apathy,

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anger, and resistance. Just as classroom teachers are often penalized for "teaching against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1993), so are teacher educators. Teacher educators who choose to "teach against the grain" employing a multicultural, social reconstructionist orientation are less likely to win teaching awards or be viewed by colleagues, students, and administrators as among the best teachers within the institution. As a European-American, working-class turned middle-class woman who grew up in the rural Midwest, I have also internalized the need for external validation. My choice of a teaching approach brings little affirmation, especially from students with whom I spend most of my time. I also recognize that "teaching against the grain" conflicts with the rules for success at my institution as I understand them. The purpose of this article is to portray my interpretation of the rules for becoming a successful teacher educator at my institution and offer new rules which would support "teaching against the grain."

Old Rules

Rule #1: Teach to Satisfy Our Students, the "Customers"

Within the past five years, my institution has imported ideas from Total Quality Management (TQM) as a model for improving our organization. One aspect of this model of particular concern to me and other teacher educators who may choose to teach from a more critical orientation is the idea that our students are "consumers" who pay tuition in exchange for receiving the "services" of the necessary preparation program to entitle them to an education degree, a teaching license, and eventually, a teaching position. This model privileges those aspects of teacher preparation which directly provide students with marketable skills, such as classroom computer appli-cations and classroom management strategies. It minimizes those which encourage critical reflection on existing practices, such as whose interests are represented and served by a given curriculum or which encourage teachers to transform existing practices such as the curriculum they teach to include the experiences and perspectives of women and men from different races and socioeconomic classes. The "student as customer" model discourages attention to ways K-12 schools have not provided equal educational experiences for girls, poor or working class students, and children and adolescents of color. Critically reflecting on and considering ways to change existing practices offer possibilities to improve schools to meet the needs of all students in K-12 schools. Such approaches, however, often place preservice teachers in conflict with practicing teachers and administrators and do not necessarily help them gain teaching positions.

Another problem with the model of students as "customers" is that it assumes students enter teacher preparation with a full understanding of what they need in order to become good teachers. In order to maintain "customer satisfaction," teacher educators experience some pressure to provide what students expect to receive from teacher preparation. Unfortunately, students at my institution, as most teacher

education students, are largely White American women from rural areas, small towns, or suburban communities with little experience or knowledge of diverse cultures and with a preference to teach children similar to themselves (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). They often see little need for knowing about multicultural education and examining the ways schools perpetuate racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Preservice teachers, like most people, strongly resist rethinking their views on discrimination and oppression due to gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. Raising these issues often diminishes "customer satisfaction" in teacher education.

Rule #2: The Most Qualified Group to Evaluate Teaching is the Students

The primary mission of my institution is teaching and most education faculty have 12-credit-unit teaching loads each semester. Although administrators are increasingly expecting faculty—especially the newer, untenured faculty—to engage in scholarship, we are evaluated primarily by our teaching. In fact, 50 percent of our evaluation as faculty members comes from our teaching, with 25 percent each stemming from scholarship and service. For approximately 20 years, faculty teaching has principally been evaluated through student evaluations, although faculty are encouraged to invite colleagues to observe their classes and write evaluations as well. In practice, observations from colleagues do not have the same weight as student evaluations. Students provide their evaluations by responding to a survey with a Likert scale from 1 to 5 to represent "strongly disagree," "disagree," "in between," "agree," to "strongly agree." The survey items which students respond to and are used for renewal, tenure, merit pay, and promotion purposes include such items as: "The instructor appears to have a thorough understanding of the subject," "The instructor gives clear answers to students' questions," "The instructor treats students with respect," "The instructor grades fairly," "The instructor's attitude is enthusiastic," and "Overall, this instructor is a good teacher." The university office which administers student evaluations each semester distributes explanatory material along with the faculty's copy of student evaluation results. These materials explain that when students "agree" with a statement, we should interpret this as an indication of effective teaching; whereas, when students "disagree" with a statement, we should interpret this as an indicator of ineffective teaching.

The problem with this system is that it is connected to the view that students are "customers" who should be pleased with the "services" they receive. It is based on the assumption that since students are the most frequent observers of a teacher educator's teaching, they are more qualified than others to evaluate teaching. For those teacher educators who raise difficult issues of sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism in the curriculum and schools and encourage a critical view of teaching, students' resistance and anger often come out as they respond anonymously to the survey. Preservice teachers frequently view such issues as superfluous to good teaching and diversions from more practical teaching concerns. It is difficult for students to consider teacher educators as good teachers who treat them,

the students, with respect when students' values and assumptions about the purposes of education, curriculum, and teaching are being challenged. For example, students regularly comment that I am "biased against males," "racist against my own race," "too political," "too opinionated," "trying to make us biased," and "stress multicultural education too much." These observations help them conclude that I am not a good teacher.

Rule #3: Colleagues and Administrators Evaluate Teacher Educators Fairly

During the renewal, tenure, merit pay, and promotion processes, teacher educators at my institution are evaluated by colleagues serving on personnel committees as well as by administrators. They review the files teacher educators submit to show evidence of achievements in teaching, scholarship, and service, and then arrive at a rating for each of the three areas: "greatly exceeds expectations," "somewhat exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," "does not quite meet expectations," and "definitely does not meet expectations." Usually each committee has at least three members, while administrators work alone but review the comments and ratings submitted by the committees. This evaluation process assumes all participants are open-minded, unbiased, fair people who can understand and value different conceptions of what knowledge should be taught, appropriate pedagogy to use, significant teacher education scholarship, and suitable service. For those teaching from a more critical approach, they assume their colleagues and administrators will find merit in examining curriculum and teaching practices critically and considering transformative approaches.

If one examines who it is that frequently has greater evaluative power in teacher education, their backgrounds and views, the assumption that all teacher educators receive unbiased, fair evaluations must be questioned. Over 65 percent of teacher educators are European-American males who currently hold 85 percent of the full professorships in teacher education (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). According to Banks (1994), those in the majority of decision-making positions in colleges are mainstream, Western traditionalists who believe the purpose of education is to assimilate the various cultures into the majority Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Most teacher education programs focus limited or no attention on racial or ethnic diversity, disparities among socioeconomic classes, and gender discrimination (Grant, 1993). As a group, teacher educators are generally politically conservative and are more likely to shape their programs to fit within the social efficiency reform tradition which builds the teacher education curriculum from the scientific study of teaching (Liston & Zeichner, 1990). Few teacher education faculty view teachers as potential change agents in schools (Edmundson, 1990). Social reconstructionist courses and programs are in the minority because teacher educators are often conservative, fear alienating their students who frequently support the status quo, fear alienating K-12 school personnel with whom they must work, and fear tensions that arise from an approach which criticizes existing institutions and society (Liston & Zeichner, 1990).

During the first few years at my institution, administrators and colleagues encouraged me during the evaluation process to minimize, modify, and eliminate some of the multicultural, social reconstructionist messages I infused within my course. They used the critical comments made by students on my formal evaluations when students complained that I was "biased" against European-American men because I encourage students to critique the male, Eurocentric focus in the curriculum and the privileging of European-American male voices in the classroom to undermine my advocacy of "teaching against the grain." Administrators and colleagues have told me in my annual evaluation discussions that I should spend less time teaching about women in the curriculum, guard against imposing my views on multicultural education on the students, and diminish the focus on multicultural curriculum when the focus of the course should be **social studies methods**.

Rule #4: Develop Good Relationships with Area Classroom Teachers

Because my institution has approximately 1,000 education students within a local community of 55,000, finding enough classroom placements to fulfill the program requirements for school observations, clinical teaching, and student teaching is often a challenge. For teacher educators who supervise preservice teachers in schools, we come to understand that we fill an important role in maintaining good relationships between the university and area schools. When teacher educators embrace a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach to education, they often face conflicts with the views and practices of classroom teachers. The majority of classroom teachers, mostly women, whom I have worked with during the past few years had little multicultural background knowledge, incorporated limited attention to diversity, or taught units on different cultures from more of a "tourist" (Derman-Sparks, 1989) approach. The tourist curriculum often means teaching about diverse cultures through celebrations, food, clothing, and household implements, an approach which emphasizes exotic differences between cultures and focuses on surface aspects of cultures (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Classroom teachers who choose to "teach against the grain" within this community, as with most communities, are in the minority (Cochran-Smith, 1993). Teachers often avoid controversial issues such as sexism or racism in the curriculum because they fear complaints from parents.

On the one hand, teachers' fear of parental criticisms has some basis. The community itself is politically conservative and largely European-American working-class with a growing Hmong population and a small number of African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos. There seems to be no grass roots demand for multicultural education within the public schools, although there are a few organizations concerned about diversity within the community. For the most part, school district administrators also provide little encouragement for and leadership in multicultural education. Elementary schools with significant numbers of Hmong children seem to have a slightly greater emphasis on diversity.

The conflict between cooperating teachers and me has arisen during my

supervision of student teachers when I observe and question the physical arrangement of a classroom which segregates the children by gender, a student teacher focusing on Columbus' views and perspectives on the "discovery" of the Americas and ignoring Native Americans' experiences, or a student teacher posing math problems focusing on boys' experiences and activities and neglecting those of girls. Conflicts have also arisen during conferences with clinical students and classroom teachers to select topics for social studies curriculum units that clinical students develop and teach in their classroom placements. Most teachers expect clinicians to teach a traditional social studies unit, whereas I encourage a more multicultural, social reconstructionist approach. Despite the differences in views and practices I and other critical teacher educators encounter when we work with area classroom teachers, I am also committed to respecting the teachers. Most teachers, especially elementary teachers, are women, near the bottom of the hierarchy in educational institutions, do most of the work, and receive most of the blame for any weaknesses in the educational system. While women have limited power within patriarchal institutions such as schools, they are more likely to be listened to when they support the existing power structures. Classroom teachers have the power to refuse to work with me and university students. Women teachers' criticisms of my critical, multicultural views can be communicated to my department chair and included as part of my evaluation.

New Directions Must Replace "Old" Rules

The "old" rules are based on assumptions that teacher education is a value-free, functional endeavour designed to prepare students to begin teaching using accepted educational practices in schools. The rules create structures which support teacher educators whose philosophies and teaching practices match the expectations of their students, colleagues, and area classroom teachers and discourage those who embrace critical educational views and practices. In order to support teacher educators who are devoted to "teaching against the grain" and moving toward making educational institutions more hospitable for **all** students, "new" rules must be created. By starting with the old rules and turning them to face new directions, we can begin to make teacher education institutions places where critical educators can flourish.

New Rules

Rule #1: Give Students More than They Expect

When aspiring teachers enter teacher education programs, they expect to have opportunities to learn the background knowledge and best teaching practices in order to help all of their future students learn. As teacher educators we have the moral obligation to provide these opportunities; however, we also must encourage critical reflection on the effects of policies, curricula, teaching strategies, classroom management plans, assessment methods, and grouping practices on all children in

schools. Preservice teachers must learn about the history of unequal educational experiences for girls, poor or working-class students, and children and adolescents of color. We should consider **what** to teach and **why** as well as **how** to teach. Teacher educators and preservice teachers must deal with the difficult issues of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, and uncover and face our own biases and prejudices as they affect our teaching and interactions with students, their families, colleagues, and administrators. These are often painful, unsettling processes. As we propose and consider more progressive policies, curricula, teaching strategies, classroom management plans, assessment methods, and grouping practices, we must encourage the same critical reflection on possible and existing effects on children often less successful in schools.

Such critical reflection and inclusion of difficult issues provide more than students expect to gain from teacher education. As teacher educators we should anticipate and explain to our students that signs of growth often include confusion, uncertainty, resistance, anger, and pain. We must communicate to preservice teachers that they should expect to experience some of these emotions in order to gain the most from their preparation. As teacher educators, however, our role is to create a caring environment to support students' growth, even in directions they did not anticipate.

Rule #2: Add More Voices to the Chorus

Although the inclusion of students' voices in evaluations of teacher educators should continue, their voices should no longer remain privileged among all other voices. The faculty evaluation process in higher education should include the voices of colleagues at one's own institution and other institutions, administrators, area classroom teachers, leaders in professional organizations, educational consultants, and/or members of local community educational organizations. Teacher educators should strive to build connections with such educators in order to acquaint them with one's teaching, scholarship, and service. Although colleagues in higher education would need institutional support and encouragement to do so, it is important for those teacher educators "teaching against the grain" to have understanding and support from other educators who can contribute their voices to the evaluation process.

Critical educators may engage in conversations with their colleagues to share teaching materials, resources, assignments, syllabi, and bibliographies. They could ask colleagues to observe their classes, ask for feedback on their teaching, and share their reflections and evaluations of their own teaching. They might engage in study groups with colleagues locally or through the internet to explore curricular and pedagogical concerns or conduct collaborative research or service. Teacher educators who "teach against the grain" may develop such relationships and collaborations with colleagues from different institutions, members of professional organizations, area classroom teachers, and those from community organizations with whom they work who value more critical approaches to teaching. When different

educators know about teacher educators' teaching, scholarship, and service, their voices can contribute meaningfully to the evaluation process.

Rule #3: Mix the Biases Among Colleagues and Administrators

Higher education needs to acknowledge and explicate the inherent assumptions, biases, and values which guide the faculty evaluation process. Evaluation processes are often based on some conceptions of knowledge and pedagogy more than others, and when teacher educators use pedagogy and definitions of knowledge which are valued less, their teaching is more likely to be evaluated negatively. For example, the view that knowledge is objective, unbiased, value-free, and apolitical is frequently privileged in the evaluation process, whereas the conception of knowledge as connected to the knower, the knower's values, and supportive of the power of some groups while disrupting the power of others is assumed to be problematic. The faculty evaluation process similarly embraces some kinds of scholarship and service over others and may evaluate faculty engaging in "accepted" forms of scholarship and service more positively than those who do not.

All faculty and administrators who participate in the evaluation process should acknowledge their biases, values, and political and philosophical orientations toward education, and endeavor to have different perspectives, biases, and values reflected on personnel committees. Although teacher education faculty tend to be somewhat homogeneous by gender, race, political orientation, and philosophical approach toward education (Liston & Zeichner, 1990), some differences among faculty may exist within any educational institution. Those faculty with diverse backgrounds who hold more progressive political and philosophical orientations and support "teaching against the grain" should become part of personnel committees, serve on search committees for new faculty and administrators, and/or become department chairs or deans. Teacher educators who teach from a critical approach are more likely to receive a balanced evaluation from colleagues who hold different perspectives and values than from those who primarily embrace traditional views of knowledge and pedagogy and support maintaining the status quo in educational institutions.

Rule #4: Talk and Work with Your Sisters and Brothers

For those teacher educators who are engaged in and committed to "teaching against the grain," we should search for area classroom teachers (often women in elementary schools) who show some openness to such approaches. As we supervise teacher education students in schools, we must make deliberate efforts to engage in dialogue with preservice teachers as well as their experienced cooperating teachers about our views on curriculum, effects of different teaching strategies and grouping practices on students' learning, inclusion of all students' voices in classrooms, and various avenues for students with different abilities to show what they have learned. During such dialogues, we ought to focus on understanding classroom teachers'

views, affirm those views and practices which appear to lead to a multicultural curriculum and equal educational opportunities for students, and question respectfully those which seem to lead to a narrow curriculum and unequal educational opportunities for students. We must model our own reflections on our teaching as we explain our goals, ways our practices meet them and fail to do so, and possibilities for improving our teaching.

Our observations and discussions might also lead to the discovery of classroom teachers who are engaged in more critical approaches to teaching. We may choose to develop "collaborative resonance" (Cochran-Smith, 1993) with classroomteachers who employ aspects of a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach to teaching or are engaged in other forms of "teaching against the grain." Not only would creating closer relationships with such teachers provide mutual support for one another's work, but they might lead to collaborative research projects. Such projects would allow both teacher educators and classroom teachers to understand more deeply the effects of "teaching against the grain" on students, the successes and challenges of these efforts, and provide portrayals for other educators interested in similar endeavours.

Still another potential outcome as documented by Cochran-Smith (1993) is the powerful effects on preservice teachers when they experience "collaborative resonance" between the university and school. Preservice teachers are more likely to view themselves as change agents able to "teach against the grain" in schools when closer relationships between the university and classroom placements are built and teacher educators, classroom teachers, and preservice teachers collaborate in criticizing traditional curricula and teaching practices and creating alternatives. When novice teachers observe and participate in improving schools for all students, they may be more likely to continue "teaching against the grain" when they begin teaching in their own classrooms.

A Conclusion

Teacher educators who hold a critical perspective toward education and engage in various forms of "teaching against the grain" still face the realities of surviving in higher education. They need to discover what the written and unwritten rules for renewal, tenure, and promotion are at their institutions and collaborate with others in changing those rules which discourage or prevent more critical approaches to teaching. Fortunately, at my institution, the rules are beginning to change to support those "teaching against the grain." Although I still struggle with students' apathy, resistance, and anger over my multicultural, social reconstructionist teaching, the number of supportive colleagues and administrators has grown. Such support offers hope for new teacher educators also committed to teaching to create a more caring, just world.

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