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Resisting the Binaries: Student Achievement and Social Justice as Complementary Discourses in Teacher Education


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Abstract

This article discusses two teacher education discourses which are often framed as oppositional. It suggests that student achievement and social justice discourses represent complementary, not opposing, outcomes of teacher education.

Introduction

Teacher education has increasingly come under attack (Ballou & Podursky, 1997, 1999, 2000; Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999a & b). Criticisms have focused upon inadequate curricula, graduation standards and admission criteria, poor quality control and faculty who are disconnected from the real-world of teaching (Levine, 2006; Farkas & Duffet, 2010). Recently, policy makers have promoted the notion that teachers and teacher educators should be held accountable for the achievement outcomes of their students (Noell & Burns, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; First to the Top, 2010). Yet, many teacher educators appear to hold philosophically divergent goals to accountability, preferring the progressive outcomes of social justice to student achievement (Farkas & Duffet, 2010). This
article examines this new discourse of student achievement for teachers and suggests that the discourse of student achievement and accountability is complementary, rather than oppositional, to the discourse of social justice in teacher education.

The Discourse of Student Achievement and Accountability

Teacher effectiveness as defined by the measure of student achievement is fast becoming a dominant discourse in education. According to this new discourse of teacher effectiveness, a major outcome for teachers should include measures of student achievement (Rockoff, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2005; Harris & Sass, 2008). Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001), school districts have used student assessment scores to track and report areas of strength and weakness to the public. In March 2010, The U.S. Department of Education announced that two states, Tennessee and Delaware, won the first round of Race-to-the-Top grant money, an award based partially on the states’ proposed use of student achievement data in school reform. Both of these states had recently passed state legislation requiring student achievement data to be used in teacher and principal evaluations.

Tennessee and Delaware are not the only states to enact legislation aimed at changing the ways in which teachers are evaluated. In fact, Race to the Top defined “effective teachers” to mean “teachers whose students achieve acceptable rates (at least one level of an academic year) of student growth” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 12). Several states appear to have adopted that definition of the effective teacher as well. California, Maine, Nevada, Illinois, Michigan, Connecticut, Arizona, Colorado, Louisiana, and Oklahoma all passed legislation in 2010 requiring or allowing optional uses of student achievement data in future teacher evaluations (Zinth, 2010; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010).
The U.S. Department of Education and state legislators are not alone in promoting student achievement as a measurable outcome for teachers. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) proposed new goals for teacher education in 2010, including increased accountability and suggested using measures of student achievement data to assess teacher candidates and teacher education programs. Eight states comprise the NCATE Alliance for Clinical Teacher Preparation: California, Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Tennessee. Each of the states will be implementing massive reform in teacher education. NCATE’s 2010 call to action, *Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice*, promotes fostering collaborative relationships with school districts, longer residency programs for teacher educators, and “implementing accountability systems based on assessment measures of graduates’ and programs’ performance through value-added and other measures in state and district longitudinal data systems” (p. 25). The value added outcomes of teachers will be traced back to the teacher education institution which trained them in two states, Louisiana and Tennessee (Noell & Burns, 2006; First to the Top, 2010). The student achievement outcomes of teacher graduates will soon comprise a significant measure of teacher education institutions in those states. The accountability push is also coming from private citizens. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supports the notion of raising student achievement by supporting good teachers and firing those who are not. The Gates’ initiative will be spending $290 million in Tampa, Pittsburgh, Memphis, and Los Angeles to support policies to judge teachers based upon student achievement (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2010).

**Views of Education Professors and Policy Makers: A Mismatch of Discourses?**

The discourse of student achievement and accountability as a valid outcome of teachers and teacher education institutions is
helping to mold a new definition of teacher and teacher education effectiveness. But, do teacher educators agree with policy makers or with the public, in general? A recent study of 716 teacher educators at four-year colleges in the United States titled *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Views of Education Professors Circa 2010* (Farkas & Duffet, 2010) suggested that professors of education do not value the accountability goals of school districts and choose social justice as the most valued outcome of teacher education. Are the social justice goals of professors of education and the accountability needs of the school district at odds with each other? Is the major philosophical discourse of the majority of education professors nationwide unaligned with the accountability discourse of school districts as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT) in states that won that competition in 2010?

According to Farkas and Duffet (2010) who investigated the policy views of education professors nationwide, “only 24 percent [of professors of education] believe it absolutely essential to produce teachers who understand how to work with the state’s standards, tests and accountability systems” (p. 4). Only 30% of university professors support financial incentives for “teachers whose students routinely score higher than other students on standardized tests” (p. 10). The authors suggested that while professors of education instill a love of learning and value student engagement with their students, they fail to address the realities of accountability in the K-12 arena with the very people who will be held accountable in those systems. Only 24% of education professors who took the survey felt it was absolutely essential to produce “teachers who understand how to work with the state’s standards, tests and accountability systems” (p. 14). Teacher education professors tend not to support No Child Left Behind and only 10% would renew the current law “as is” or “with minimal changes” (p. 41).

When identifying the philosophies that drove their instruction, 68% of education professors chose “being a change agent who
will reshape education by bringing new ideas and approaches to the public schools” (Farkas & Duffet, 2010, p. 22). Only 26% of professors chose “work effectively with the realities of today’s public schools—e.g. state mandates, limited budgets, beleaguered administrators” (Farkas & Duffet, 2010, p.22) as a philosophy that drove their work. Eighty four percent of teacher educators believe that the correct role of teachers is to be “a facilitator of learning” not a “conveyor of knowledge” (Farkas & Duffet, 2010, p. 9).

With such a disconnect between education professor views about their guiding philosophies and a new discourse aimed at student achievement measures, it appears that the goals of policy makers and teacher educators are at odds. What are legitimate outcomes for teacher education programs? The question of outcomes attempts to define the performance goals of teacher education—what should teacher candidates be able to know and do (Cochran-Smith, 2001)? While the “outcomes question” is important, it appears to be framed as oppositional—one discourse must win while the other is made invalid.

Linguist George Lakoff popularized the notion of using frames to think about political issues. He suggested that people come to understand issues by applying a conceptual frame, often without consciously being aware of the process (Lakoff, 2004; 2003). Lakoff suggested that frames are often unexamined and are part of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways we think about particular issues. For example, love relationships are often framed in two ways: as a business partnership or as two complementary parts creating one whole. Whether the relationship is working, or is seen as unsuccessful, will depend upon the frame that is applied, usually without conscious acknowledgement of the frame used as the metric (Lakoff & Grady, 1998). Each time a frame is used, it reinforces various views we have about an issue and, perhaps, reduces the issue to that particular frame being presented (Scheufele, 2004). Frames are mental structures used to think about words. For example, the
Discourses tend to be presented within frames. Discourses are attempts at framing truth by shaping how we think about issues. Discourse refers to the regulative and productive ways in which power is connected with “truths” in society. Foucault (1988) used a regime of truth to suggest that truth could never be found outside of power relations. Societies determine regimes of truth by determining which discourses are allowed to name truth and which are not. Discourses are attempts at these truths. They are often framed in opposition to another discourse, such that there is a struggle to truths (Gore, 1993). A discourse,

is a system of rules regulating the flow of power (both positive and juridical) which serves a function of promoting interests in a battle of power and desires . . . imagine a series of circles each of which constitutes a discourse. One could name them psychoanalytic discourse, discourse of sexuality, incarceration discourse, prisoner’s discourse, university discourse, and so on. No discourse stands alone and no discourse is complete. (Brown, 2000, p. 34)

The way that discourses are framed impacts how we perceive them and how we view them in relation to other notions of truth. The discourses of student achievement and social justice in teacher education have been framed in opposition to each other. But, where is the power in this frame? Who benefits from this framing of teacher educators? The Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s website (n.d.) describes Farkas and Duffet’s (2010) research in the following way:

The Fordham Institute’s new national survey of education school professors finds that, even as the U.S. grows more
practical and demanding when it comes to K-12 education, most of the professoriate simply isn’t there. They see themselves more as philosophers and agents of social change, not as master craftsmen sharing tradecraft. They also resist some promising reforms such as tying teacher pay to student test scores. Still, education

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professors are reform-minded in some areas, including tougher policies for awarding tenure to teachers and final incentives for those who teach in tough neighborhoods. (para. 1)

In this synopsis of the research, we begin to see the framing of the discourses of teacher educators as polarized groups, a frame which is more fully developed within the analysis of the data. This frame suggests that one discourse promotes valid educational reform and the other resists it. Farkas and Duffet (2010) found that professors of teachers tend to value social justice and are “often at odds with today’s dominant policy trends and educational practices” (p. 14). They suggest that there are two types of teacher educators and that they have competing world views: the Reformers and the Defenders. The Reformers agree with the statement, “that the teacher education system needs fundamental overhaul of many changes (i.e. rejecting the view that the U.S. system of university-based teacher education works very well and needs only minor tinkering” (p. 46). The Defenders are “mostly content with traditional teacher training and schools of education as they are” (p. 46). The use of the frame “Reformers” suggests a group of professors who are discontented with teacher education and the status quo. These professors strongly favor “holding teacher education programs more accountable for the quality of the teachers they graduate” (p. 48) The use of the frame “Defenders” suggests a larger group of professors happy with the status quo in teacher education. These professors believe that “teacher education programs are often unfairly blamed for the problems facing public education (p. 48). Using these frames reinforces the view that Reformer professors value accountability and Defender professors view
more traditional notions of teacher education, including views on social justice, at the exclusion of the other discourse.

Are the Reformers the heroes and the Defenders the villains in this Lakoffian frame? It appears they have been framed as such. Research on both sides of the political spectrum may be framed in this way, appearing neutral and value free. Taken-for-granted assumptions about the values inherent in the frame are implicit, but unclaimed. Teacher educators are framed within one of two discourses and in doing so, the frame itself becomes regulative and tacit. The dichotomous frame Reformer or Defender becomes understood as the truth so obviously that it need not be stated explicitly (Brookfield, 1995).

Resisting the Binaries Between Discourses
The discourse of student achievement and the discourse of social justice appear to be framed in opposition to each other in the question of what represents a valid outcome of teacher education. Yet, this outcomes question, “which truth is true,” is unproductive in that both of the discourses are aimed at valid outcomes of teacher education. The privileging of one discourse over another furthers a hierarchical model in which one discourse must contend with denouncing the other discourse in order to be dominant (Foucault, 1980). Is the Reformer/Defender frame accurate or does it create a false binary, one that creates an unnatural chasm between the two discourses?

Creating a binary between those teacher educators who value social justice and those who value accountability as outcomes of their work furthers the notion of a singular solution to the goals of teacher education by villainizing the other discourse. Social justice and student achievement outcomes are not mutually exclusive. Both social justice and student achievement are desired outcomes of teacher education and each outcome goal is complementary to the other, rather than competing. Is the outcome of teacher education student achievement OR social
justice? A better question concerning outcome goals might be, can teacher education be framed to support BOTH discourses? By resisting the tendency to frame the discourses of teacher education outcomes as binaries—one discourse may prevail only at the expense of the other—it becomes apparent that the two goals are both valid and may even validate the other.

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Viewed this way, student achievement and social justice are not oppositional discourses in teacher education. In fact, social justice is a logical outcome of student achievement. Teachers may be the single most important factor in student achievement (Rivkin, et al., 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Bransford, Darling-Hammond & LePage, 2005). New value added measures being used to evaluate educators suggest that teachers may affect the achievement outcomes of their students regardless of the students’ socio-economic or cultural backgrounds (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). According to Rivkin, Hanuschek and Kain (2005) effective teachers are the most important school-based factor influencing school achievement—more important than class size, school size, afterschool program quality, or which school a student attends. And, according to Haycock and Hanuschek (2010),

An analysis of data from Los Angeles found that the impact of individual teachers is so great that providing top-quartile teachers rather than bottom quartile teachers for four years in a row would be enough to completely close the achievement gap between white and African American students. (p. 49)

Clearly, social justice outcomes are directly tied to student achievement outcomes. The goal of social justice in teacher education is to promote the learning of basic skills, complex thinking and reasoning skills, as well as critical thinking and inquiry for all students (Cochran-Smith, et al, 2009). The goal of student achievement as a discourse of teacher education is synonymous. Both discourses promote student learning. The discourse of student achievement elevates the discourse of social justice.
This analysis is not meant to suggest that there are no differences between the discourses of teacher education. Yet, those differences need not be viewed in an either/or continuum of choice. While teacher educators may be leery of student achievement measures being used for teacher outcomes for various reasons (McCaffrey, D. Koretz, D. Lockwood, J. & Piro

Hamilton, L., 2004; Braun, H. 2005; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2005) this reticence does not constitute an outright dismissal of the discourse and to frame it as so is disingenuous. Can teacher educators value both student achievement and social justice as outcomes of their work? The answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

**Conclusion**

A complementary framework of teacher education outcomes which includes both discourses represents a more productive and unified way to frame teacher education outcomes. The discourses may be viewed as interdependent, not oppositional, outcomes for teacher education. There is more common ground between the student achievement/accountability discourse and the social justice discourses than is acknowledged because the frame itself serves to govern how we think about them. It is improbable to believe that the Defenders do not support student achievement. It is equally inconceivable to assume that the Reformers who promote the use of student achievement as a goal necessarily discount social justice as a legitimate outcome for teachers. The problem is in the way the discourses are framed, as singular outcomes, with one surviving only at the expense of the other. They are framed as binaries when, in fact, these frames of discourses complement and promote the existence of the other discourse—they interrelate. To understand both discourses as such, it is necessary to reframe them.

Frame transformation involves a process of redefinition (Snow, et al., 1986) Teacher education discourses may be reframed as interrelated and complementary, rather than as competing.
Consider teacher educators saying, “I value social justice, which is why I also support student achievement as an outcome for teachers.” Or, “Student achievement is central to teacher education, which is why social justice is so important.” Reformers and Defenders professors of teacher education programs may have more common outcome goals than have been suggested in the framework of binary discourses. Theorizing them as interdependent discourses in a new frame of teacher education requires a more complex way of thinking, one that promotes inquiry as a necessary process of making meaning, and the ability to think about issues in a non-dualistic way. The framing of competing discourses for teacher education can be replaced and transformed into a frame that represents the interrelatedness and complementary value of both discourses. Teacher education can pair both student achievement and social justice discourses as desirable outcomes. Resisting the binaries requires the courage to step out of the either/or continuum and into the spaces between.

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References


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