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# If Not You, Who? Preparing All Teachers for All Learners

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**If Not You, Who?**  
**Preparing All Teachers for All Learners**

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**Abstract**

*This paper was adapted from a speech presented at the Annual Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education in Chicago, Illinois, during the spring 2004 conference. Dr. Pearson articulates the status of education, best teaching practices, teacher preparation, educational reform and instructional change for educating diverse learners in the new millennium. Strategies are offered for increasing awareness of academic achievement among minorities and methods for preparing all preservice teachers to teach all learners.*

“Who stole the cookie out the cookie jar? You stole the cookie out the cookie jar! Who me? Yes, you! Couldn’t be. Then who?” This nursery rhyme, chanted to a beat by many in the neighborhood while I was growing up in the inner city, is still relevant today. Who is responsible for educating all learners? We continue to shift the blame, asking, “Who, me? Yes, you! Couldn’t be. Then who?” Are we achieving the goal of raising academic achievement in education or are we still shifting the blame? For decades, the educational playing field

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has been uneven for various races of people. Equity and diversity rank among the most critical issues facing our teachers today (Voltz, 2000). Although all racial/ethnic subgroups have shown improvement since 1990, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that white students and Asian/Pacific Islander students continue to outperform black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaskan native students at every grade level (NCES, 1999; 2003b). The United States has made a commitment to ensure that each child receives an equitable, quality education and that no child is left behind. This motto expresses an attempt to bridge the academic achievement gap and level the playing field. How can this mission be successful without considering whether teachers are left behind in preparation to teach all learners? Research suggests that teachers who are well prepared not only remain in the classroom, but have the largest impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000b; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).

### **Educational Reform: Why Not You?**

The United States educational system and teacher education programs have not adjusted to demographic changes in the student population, including a growing number of language-minority students. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that the Hispanic population accounted for 40% of the total population growth in the United States between 1990 and 2000, increasing from 22 million to 35 million (Lane, 2001). Novice and veteran teachers alike are expected to teach all students to meet high standards, but they are frequently not given the necessary skills to teach students whose language and culture is different from their own. According to a national staffing survey by the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES), 54% of all teachers said they taught culturally diverse students, but only 20% felt very well prepared to meet their needs (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Whose responsibility is it to prepare preservice teachers to teach diverse groups of learners? Is it the state departments of education, the local school districts or higher education academies? As academicians, we are vested with the responsibility of educating the nation's youth and preparing teachers for tomorrow's students. Not only is the diversity of the school-age student population increasing (Educational Research Service, 1995; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000), but the diversity of teachers is decreasing (Simpson, Whelan, & Zabel, 1993; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank & Leal, 1999). Therefore, the need to prepare all teachers to teach all learners is urgent (Sobel, Taylor, Kalisher, & Weddle-Steinberg, 2002; Taylor & Sobel, 2001; Zeichner, 1993). Jawanza Kunjufu (2002) contends that within two decades, America's three million teachers will need to be replaced, primarily due to retirement. By the year of 2035, children of color will be the majority; and since *Brown vs. Topeka* (1954) and the integration of schools, there has been a 66% decline in African Americans pursuing the role of teaching. Does it matter what leaders do to prepare preservice teachers? Are preservice teachers prepared to teach cultures different from their own, using multiple teaching modalities? Will preservice teachers accept the challenge facing them of becoming diverse themselves? Questions like this can go on and on and on and should continue if we desire to meet the needs of all learners. It is critical for leaders to realize the need to prepare all teachers to teach all learners, and if not you, who?

### **Teacher Sensitivity and Awareness: Who Me?**

While preparing, nurturing and developing teacher educa-

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tors, we must value, understand and address issues that impact academic achievement, including factors like culture differences, ethnicity, race, ability, gender, socioeconomic level and sexual orientation. Despite the many internal and external factors that may contribute to academic failure, there are three key elements for raising awareness of academic achievement among minorities and preparing tomorrow's teachers.

The first key element is to optimize opportunities and maximize every moment. How do we optimize opportunities and maximize every moment with the preservice teachers we serve? How do we raise teacher sensitivity and awareness for those they will serve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom? We begin by recognizing that learning begins with the self and the curriculum. Each teacher brings into the classroom—personal experiences, knowledge and instructional strategies or methodologies to be enacted for the benefit of the students through the curriculum. Therefore, we must utilize every moment as a teachable moment. For example, the first day of class can be a time of mere introduction or a time for establishing the road to production. The word *maximizes* means to obtain the most. . . , realize the greatest. . . , and achieve the highest. As educators, we learn that schooling is not the end, but the means to acquire productive lives and progressive relationships, and to exert positive influences on those we serve.

Optimize opportunities—like Madam C. J. Walker. She was an orphan at seven, married at 14 and a widow by the age of 20. Her husband thought she should be satisfied with earning ten dollars a day from her black hair products. She resisted that notion and later became the first African American woman millionaire. She did not allow herself to be restricted or limited by narrow stereotypes and concepts of what ought to satisfy women in a sexist society during the early twentieth century (Potter & Claytor, 1997; Smith, 1994; 2003). She optimized her opportunities and maximized her every moment.

## *If Not You, Who?*

The second key element in raising awareness of academic achievement among minorities and preparing tomorrow's teachers is to recognize that often ordinary people do extraordinary things. How do you connect with preservice teachers in your teacher education program? You can make the connection by recognizing that often ordinary people do extraordinary things. Ordinary people are passionate, empathetic, caring and nurturing; they are very good listeners and make themselves available for the students they serve. What should we be doing to emphasize the vital and most salient components of an effective teacher education program? It is critical for those in higher education institutions to share books and narratives of the many ordinary individuals who demonstrate dedication, persistence and resiliency. Remember to introduce preservice teachers to books that will stimulate their interest and increase their awareness of diverse educational settings, books such as Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1993) and *Amazing Grace* (1996); Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2001); Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* (1995); Gary Howard's *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (1999); and Gloria Ladson-Billing's *Dreamkeepers* (1994). Who are the ordinary? According to the Johari Window, ordinary people are "The open, the blind, the hidden, and the unknown." The open is that which is recognized by individuals and those with whom they interact. The blind is that which is not seen by the individual, but observable to others. The hidden is that which is known by the individual, but hidden from others, and the unknown is that which is known neither to the individual nor to others with whom they interact. It is there—where contend that although it is unknown, it is through the learning process that excellence is discoverable (Luft, 1969). Therefore, it is critical that we allow students in teacher education programs across the nation to plan, explore, construct and discover. . . ordinary people like Oprah Winfrey, who lived a very transitory life,

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raised by her grandmother until the age of 6 in Mississippi, raised by her mother at the age of 7 in Milwaukee, and raised by her father during her early teens in Nashville, later being sent back to Milwaukee where she was raped at 14, a promiscuous teenager headed for trouble. She loved to read and speak in front of audiences and later became an icon in the entertainment industry and the world's highest paid entertainer (Smith, 1994; 2003). Oprah was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things.

The third key element in raising awareness of academic achievement among minorities and preparing tomorrow's teachers is to be onward for others and others-centered. Education is part of the service sector, as opposed to the product sector, within our society. You may ask: What does that mean? We as academicians must provide service to our students or be "student-centered" and not "subject-centered." It is imperative that we merge theory with practice, which is praxis. We should have the desire to turn our data into *capata* which, according to Lanigan (1998), is that which is experienced. In other words, learning should be experienced as well as exposed for all learners. Each of us enters into schooling or the academy—as a stranger. It is at this juncture that we as educators have the opportunity to become onward for others or others-centered: others-centered like Susan B. Anthony. She believed in women's capabilities of being able to transform society. Her bold actions inspired millions of women to fight for women's suffrage. She compared the condition of women to the enslavement of African Americans before the Civil War. Finally, in 1920 the nineteenth amendment of the constitution was approved, granting women the right to vote. She had others in mind, the European American woman, the Asian American woman, the African American woman, the Hispanic American woman and the Native American woman. Susan B. Anthony was onward for others and others-centered.

## **Teacher Preparation: All for All**

What are best practices for ALL pedagogy? Best practices for all pedagogy are in effect when you optimize opportunities and maximize every moment. How do we keep the teachers we prepare when teacher turnover rate is 50% higher in high poverty areas (Ingersoll, 2001)? How do we recruit, encourage and maintain teachers, especially African Americans students, to re-enter the field of teaching—a field they once knew? We must provide strong teacher support, superb teacher mentors and safe teacher environments.

We must improve diversity, by becoming culturally responsive! Ana Maria Villegas and Tamora Lucas (2002) in *Educating Culturally Responsive Teachers* recommend six strategies: (1) Gain social cultural consciousness; (2) develop an attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds; (3) develop the commitment and skills to act as agents of change; (4) understand the transformist foundation of culturally responsive teaching; (5) learn about students and their communities; and (6) cultivate culturally responsive teaching practices. These practices will lead to setting high expectations, integrating curriculum and teaching to multiple intelligences and varied learning styles, using multiple modalities and differentiated instruction.

Differentiated instruction is an increasingly important factor in student success as schools deal with all the challenges facing them today (Tomlinson, 1999). Meeting the individual needs of all teachers, whereby they learn to meet the needs of every student, may be more challenging than ever before, but it is of vital importance if we truly want each one to learn to his or her potential. James Banks (2001) asserts that we no longer should see the world from one perspective, but instead place the event (teacher education) in the center; and from that center we should strive to meet the needs of Native Americans,

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Hispanic/Latinos, Asians, Europeans and African Americans. I raise the question: If Not You, Who? How do we connect with the preservice teachers we serve? How do Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU) with only 16% of the total African American college student population produce almost 30% of African American college graduates? What explains their success? Almost 75% of African Americans who go on to earn a master's or doctoral degree graduated from a Historically Black College or University (Kunjufu, 2002). Their success can be explained by teachers knowing the importance of role modeling, nurturing, bonding and making connections with their students. In order to raise academic awareness about minorities in teacher education programs, we must recognize others, their lived world experiences, the frame of reference which they draw upon and their basic needs. Abraham Maslow (1968) developed a classical framework for understanding human motivation. He suggested a hierarchy of human needs and arranged these needs into a series of different levels in order of importance: physiological needs, safety, and a sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization.

Visualize a teacher utopia: a program that would allow ALL students to achieve and reach the level of self-actualization. Of American students, 6% are referred to special education, 92% of that number are tested and 73% of that number are placed (Kunjufu, 2002). Four million children receive Ritalin, one million before third grade. We must move from labeling students to defining students' needs, from broadened definitions and new acronyms to broadened assessments and new teaching strategies and from sorting services to providing an assortment of services. It is up to teacher education programs across the nation to prepare ALL preservice teachers to teach ALL learners.

## **Conclusion**

If your teacher education program is optimizing opportunities and maximizing every moment, if you recognize that ordinary people do extraordinary things, if you are onward for others and other-centered, let not your enthusiasm for the optimum. . . end with the activities of today. Keep raising your own awareness and strive to bridge the gap in education. Keep nurturing, bonding and connecting with those you serve. If not you, who? Teach teachers with passion, like the teachers who taught Madeline Albright, the first female Secretary of State and the highest ranking woman in the U.S. Government; Elizabeth Dole, the first woman to hold positions as Secretary of Transportation under Reagan and Secretary of Labor for President George Bush; and Mary McCleod Bethune, a woman who started a school for girls with \$1.50 in her pocket and had so much passion that even boys had a desire to attend. Teach teachers with passion like the teachers who taught Ben Carson, a teenager headed for trouble, almost taking the life of a classmate, but who later began saving lives, becoming the neurosurgeon to separate the first Siamese Twins; Chen Wu, the nuclear scientist whose pioneer work altered modern physical theory and changed the accepted view of the structure of the universe; Bill Gates, a spatially intelligent child who became a multi-billionaire. Teach teachers with passion like Walter Dean Meyers, a special education student with a speech impediment, who was encouraged by his teacher to write his thoughts on paper, and who became one of the most prolific adolescent authors hooking adolescents on reading.

In order to become a successful academician you must possess several ingredients. You must have a self to live with, a cause to live for and a faith to live by. "Success is inevitable. It is for those energetic enough to work hard for it, patient enough to wait for it, courageous enough to seize it, and strong

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enough to hold on to it” (Zuch, 1997, p. 364). So I charge you, you, you, and you, and I say: If not you, who? Who will prepare ALL teachers to teach ALL learners?

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A public school teacher for over 17 years in the Oklahoma City Public Schools, Dr. Pearson captivates others through her own research and lived experiences. Her audience is motivated, inspired, stimulated and propelled to strive for excellence as she speaks and writes with passion about topics so dear to her heart.