

## **Living in the Tension – Living with the Heat**

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Sometimes stories from our educational lives capture tensions in our chosen profession. As teacher educators we certainly live amidst plenty of tensions. Here are three such stories that seem to capture what we believe is a prominent and current educational dilemma: How do we prepare future teachers for our urban centers, in schools serving predominantly poor children of color with a history of low educational achievement? We begin with the stories.

### **Tisctowtories**

needs and to voices in urban communities, they rejected her proposals as simply and plainly bad instruction. The exchange went nowhere; lines had seemingly been drawn that somehow could not be crossed.

At a recent farewell dinner with a group of young urban elementary teachers, two of whom were moving to the West Coast, the table discussion returned again and again to the difficulties these teachers encountered in their urban setting. This group of teachers were well intentioned, fully certified, culturally sensitive, and frustrated. They had tried informal small group instruction, they had worked at integrating their curriculum, and they had attempted to be loving and approachable. According to them it didn't seem to work. When KIPP schools<sup>ii</sup> were mentioned as an alternative model, another guest – a professional development facilitator with expertise in the Critical Friends model – initially reacted with emotional heat and resistance. Those models, she said, do not follow what we know about good learning; were much too direct, did not focus on the child, and were too rigid in their instructional approach. In short, they weren't very constructivist. The exchange in this second setting was more productive than the earlier interaction. But we left not really knowing what to make of the tension or the heated reactions. We all knew, though, that in ten more weeks, after summer break, those teachers would have to find a way to deal with the tension and instruct their students in a distinctly different kind of heat.

And then there was the graduate student, a math teacher of 10 years, who was intrigued by the KIPP and Amistad Academy/Achievement First models for middle school instruction.<sup>iii</sup> She had explored the possibilities in numerous class paper assignments and found the response by her colleagues and some faculty curious. They asked: Why was she pursuing these examples? Didn't she know that they expected way too much of the students (going to school for long hours

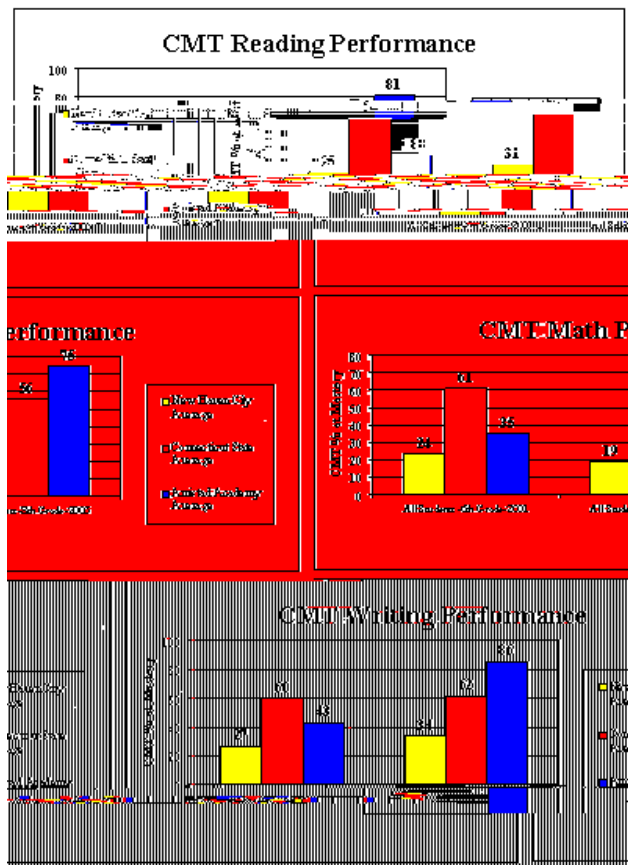
each day and homework to boot)? Didn't she know that the teachers in some of those schools were "on call" in the evening? Didn't she know

*Serving Urban Students Well and Addressing Social and Educational Injustice*

It is clear from the Achievement First and KIPP promotional materials that these highly structured school models aim for substantial and significant school reform. As the Achievement First supporters argue, the achievement gap between our poor, brown-toned, and well-off, white-skinned youth is the “civil rights” issue of our era. In a documentary on Amistad, scholars Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips maintain that:

Closing the black-white test score gap would probably do more to promote racial equality in the United States than any other strategy now under serious consideration. Eliminating the test score gap would sharply increase black college graduate rates. It would also reduce racial disparities in men's earnings and would probably eliminate racial disparities in women's earnings. Eliminating the test score gap would also allow selective colleges,

## CMT Results: Class of 2004



Amistad Academy and its eighth grade students have outperformed the average Connecticut eighth grade student in reading, writing, and math performance. These are dramatic gains, as the Amistad students' performances in sixth grade were well below the Connecticut state average in all three subject areas. Based on published data by the organizations, these are not uncommon results for the other Achievement First reform-based schools or the KIPP Academies (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/career.teacher.html> and <http://www.kipp.org/>). In short, these schools work. Schools of education need to attend to what serves well our minority, poor, urban youth. If schools of education are serious about their commitment to social justice, then this reform model appears to be a viable path for closing the achievement gap. Schools of education

need minimally to inform their candidates about these models and more substantially to prepare future teachers so that they too can participate in efforts such as these.

### *Providing the Skills for Success*

For many years urban teachers have offered the same (now sad, tired, and tried) refrain: Their kids lack the organizational and academic skills of the more well-off suburban youth. Urban youth aren't motivated or adequately supported to achieve in standard school settings and lack the skills to do so. Tracy Kidder richly documented the plight of one fifth grade teacher and her students to address this skill issue; Samuel Freedman powerfully underscored the efforts of another in lower Manhattan (Freedman, 1990; Kidder, 1989). These journalistic narratives of skills left underdeveloped and academic outcomes not achieved are supported again and again by recent past and present urban standardized test results. Educational programs like KIPP and Achievement First address these student organizational and skill needs in clear and direct ways. The school days are delineated and highly structured; students' organizational needs are supported through a schedule of daily expectations, explicit instructional scaffolding, and structured homework assignments.

### *Attending to Community Needs*

Many inner city African American parents have long argued that city schools and their staff historically have inadequately served their children. In New Haven, Connecticut, parents pushed for a second Amistad Academy. KIPP Academies have continued to expand in recent years; there are now 52 KIPP schools serving over 11,000 students in 16 states and the District of Columbia (<http://www.kipp.org/aboutkipp.cfm?pageid=nav6>). Clearly these schools are satisfying a need that exists – a need for their children's educational program to hold high standards of academic achievement and character

staff maintain that academic achievement cannot be had without attending to a culture of personal responsibility and parental buy-in. It is not unusual for these schools to have students and parents sign and abide by contractual commitments outlining each party's responsibilities. School rituals celebrate individual student successes and underscore the cost of their failure.

### *Offering a Coherent Educational Vision for Staff and Students*

Much recent educational research indicates that school culture matters, and a consistent, coherent, and fully articulated educational vision and practice matters most. Materials on KIPP and Achievement First suggest that they provide this coherence for both their students and teachers. The school day, and in fact each lesson, is highly structured. The format is predictable. Students know what is expected of them; teachers learn to teach within delineated parameters that provide instructional guidance and support. A community of learners among students and among teachers appears to exist.

Given the effective and proven track record of KIPP and Achievement First, teacher educators need to consider seriously the kind of preparation that would serve those schools and their youth. For much too long, schools of education have waved the banners of social justice, meaningful and engaged learning, and educational achievement. These charter academies meet and exceed the baseline criteria in all three of these domains. To ignore these accomplishments is to ignore these kids.

### **Arguments Against: Training Teachers to Train Kids**

#### *Technical Rather Than Professional Education*

The idea that schools of education should prepare their candidates for such regimented and prescriptive approaches sounds more like a proposal for technical teacher training rather than professional preparation. KIPP Schools and the Amistad Academy may produce positive

outcomes for some minority, poor, urban youth, but that doesn't mean schools of education should produce teachers for those schools. Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1999) discuss



in each of these areas. The social foundations, for example, press teacher candidates to examine critically the purposes of education in a democratic society; we wonder whether such analyses will likely raise hard questions regarding the narrowly-defined aim of achievement, at least as stated, in models like KIPP or Amistad. The methods and practicum components might need to focus on the particular curriculum selected by the organization (e.g., <http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.program.curriculum.html>). It's as if candidates would have to accept a fairly narrow party line about what constitutes sound instruction, substantial learning, and coherence in a school's program.

To illustrate the potentially narrow or technical approach to teacher preparation, consider the issue of "social justice." Social justice does

students who are to blame. It is only through students' and teachers' extraordinary efforts in a narrowly circumscribed schooling contest – that “justice” can be achieved. It is a cheap solution for a very real and vexing problem.

### *All Students Need Meaningful Skills for a Meaningful Life*

Many schools of education introduce candidates to the best-practices grounded in the research on how people learn (National Research Council, 2000). The explicit focus on achievement, as measured on state performance tests, raises questions about whether the curricular and pedagogical vision found in schools implementing reform models like KIPP and Amistad is fully consistent with that research base. The ruckus that the mere mention of Lisa Delpit's name stirred in the first story is a sad commentary on the state of our educational affairs. We don't have to pose a forced choice between direct instruction and meaningful learning. The choice Delpit delineates is not between rote or meaningful learning – rather she calls for a commitment to meaningful learning that takes into account students' needs, interests, and abilities. Middle class white parents want more than rote learning and regurgitation for their kids – most parents want their kids to find a measure of understanding in their learning and schooling. A good teacher will find ways to combine explicit instruction in skills and content with a meaningful exploration that will appeal to the child. A good teacher education program should help prepare teachers to do this by providing skillful, artful and competent paths for candidates to combine their instruction in skill enhancement, content acquisition and understanding, and meaningful inquiry.

### *Who defines the community's needs?*

It seems that the KIPP and Achievement First define and then require parents and students to sign off on their perceived needs. Both schools state that schools and families must

work together to ensure the best possible education for their children. As the Achievement First website claims: “The school commits to a partnership between parents, students, teachers, and staff to provide the best possible education for our students. In order to achieve our ambitious goals, we must work together” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org>). At the same time, however, both schools require a great deal of parental commitment and time. The Achievement First program acknowledges: “The requirements of Achievement First parents are also significant, including a longer school day, nightly reading logs, support for homework, near-perfect attendance, and a high-expectations discipline policy” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.culture.html>).

Similarly, KIPP schools expect parents to “fully commit to KIPP” by signing a Commitment to Excellence that promises they will conform to a number of regulations including ensuring that their children arrive at KIPP every day by 7:15 am and remain until 5:00 pm, attend school on some Saturdays, and attend summer school; and that they check the child’s homework every night and try to read to their children every night (<http://www.kipp.org/commitment.cfm?pageid=nav1b>) . Both approaches also demand that students sign a contract delimiting how they will act and proceed in these settings.

True communities are not defined by one party; a true community engages all of the participants – teachers, students and parents – in a collaborative effort. Not only do these schools place high demands on families, many of the demands are of the sort that make it difficult, if not impossible, for the target population of students to attend. Preparing teachers for these pre-defined communities amounts to a cultural and educational imposition of the most pernicious sort. To prepare candidates for these settings would entail a significant loss of professional autonomy and an implicit endorsement of the assumption that the Academy program knows

what's best for these parents and their children. We don't do that to white middle class parents and we shouldn't do that to urban, minority, and poor families and students.

### **A Proposal and Challenge to Today's Teacher Educators**

The three of us – Hilda, Dan and Jennie – don't share a vision, understanding, or approach to the problems addressed by these two opposing views. We all find merits to both sides. Within the teacher education community, some of us may be more willing to concede the failure of how we currently prepare teachers for our urban settings while others believe that our present practices require attention and improvement but certainly should not be discarded. But for us as editors, this articulation and delineation has encouraged a further and extended scrutiny of our current practices and assumptions. What we would like to propose is that teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators listen more carefully to their own and other voices, sentiments, and views – without reacting with the heat of our passions and educational identities – at least not so quickly. We need, as Parker Palmer and others would say – to live with and amidst these tensions – these countervailing forces and claims. Doing so might, just might enable us to find a way through – a viable third route. And if truth be told, we are neither naïve nor without our own prejudice. For we ask, if possible, for all to respect Lisa Delpit's request in her essay “The Silenced Dialogue” when she writes that to come to a viable synthesis of competing perspectives entails

... a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in

the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (1995, p. 46)

We can't think of a better way to start living with these very real and pressing tensions.

## **References**

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<sup>i</sup> As an editorial team, we write editorials collaboratively. To reflect the nature of this joint work, we rotate order of authors with each journal issue.

<sup>ii</sup> According to their website, “KIPP is a network of free open-enrollment college-preparatory public schools in under-resourced communities throughout the United States.” (<http://www.kipp.org/>)

<sup>iii</sup> According to their website, “Achievement First is a non-profit charter school management organization started in July 2003 by the leaders of Amistad Academy, a high-performing charter school in New Haven, CT. We aim to bring to scale a system of charter schools in New York and Connecticut.” (<http://www.achievementfirst.org/about.html>)