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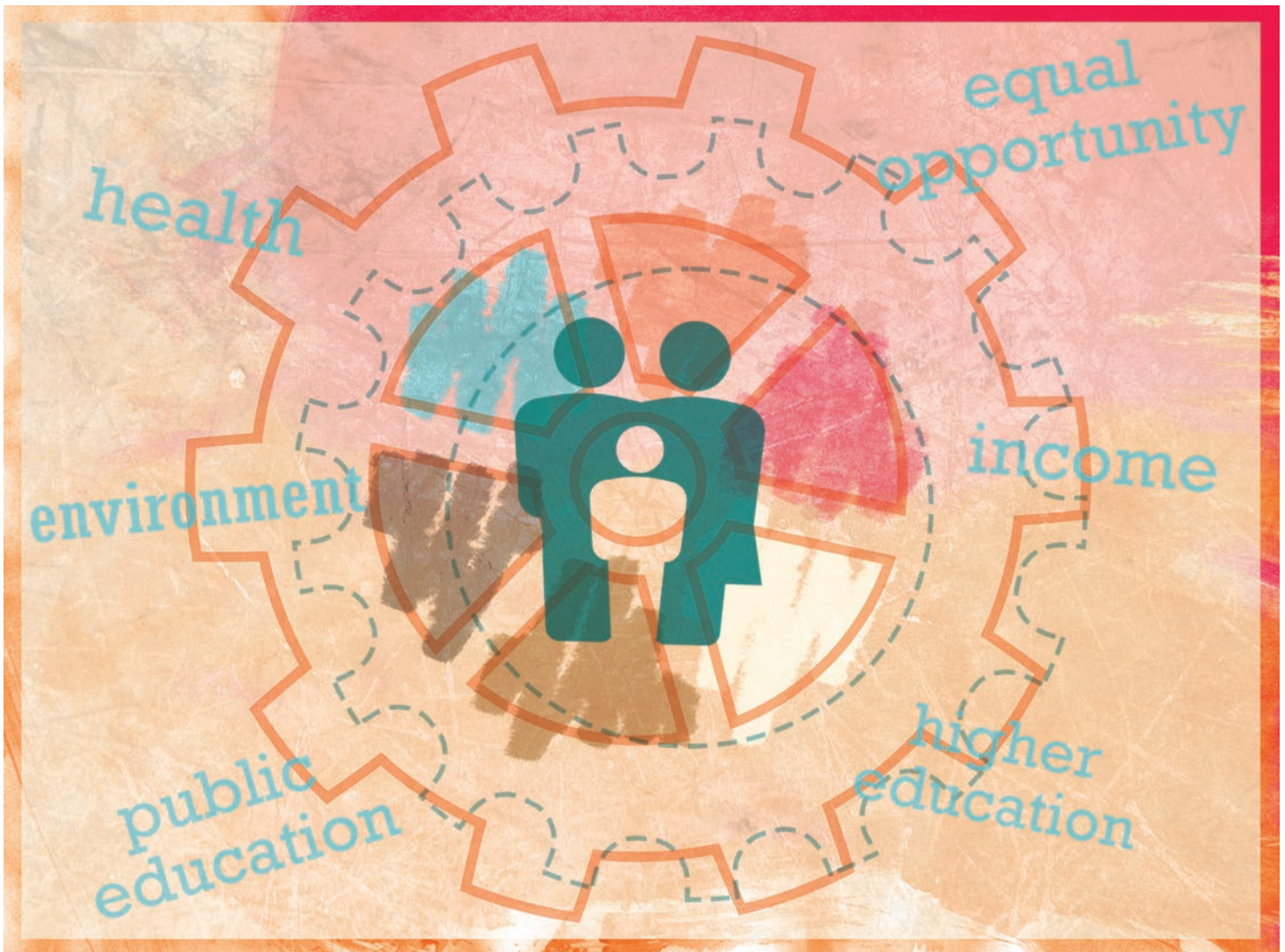
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Teaching and Teacher Preparation as Equity Work

By Paula Lancaster, GVSU Faculty

Introduction

The title of Dr. Jennifer King Rice’s 2015 education policy brief, “Investing in Equal Opportunity: What Would it Take to Build the Balance Wheel” is a direct reference to Horace Mann’s famous quote, “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great

equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann & Mann, 1868, p. 669). While Mann was suggesting access to public education as a lever for income equality, Rice’s piece actually focuses on growing income *inequality* and other social and economic factors that diminish the role of education as a potential equalizer for society. Rice builds a strong case suggesting

that the economic gap in the U.S. threatens to obliterate the equalizing effects of education. As she points out, poor families live in communities where schools have few resources thus limiting children's opportunities and achievements and perpetuating the cycle of inequity. Stanford sociologist Sean

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Reardon's (2011) work shows that the achievement gap between high and low-income students has grown by approximately 40% since the 1960s. Researchers from the University of Michigan corroborate those data showing that the difference between the college completion rate of high and low-income students has grown by nearly 50% since the 1980s (Pfeffer, 2018).

Rice provides four recommendations for addressing the consequences of income inequality, suggesting that policy makers should:

- "... recognize the broad goals of education including civic responsibility, democratic values, economic self-sufficiency, cultural competency and awareness, and social and economic opportunity."
- "...ensure that all schools have the fundamental school resources they need to promote student success: effective teachers and principals, appropriate class size, challenging and culturally relevant curriculum and supportive instructional resources, sufficient quality time for learning and development, and up-to-date facilities and a safe environment."
- "...expand the scope of schools in high-poverty neighborhoods to provide wrap around services including nutritional supports, health clinics, parental education, extended learning time, recreational programs, and other services needed to meet the social, physical, cognitive, and economic needs of both students and families."

- "...promote a policy context that is supportive of equal opportunity: use achievement testing for formative rather than high-stakes purposes, avoid policies that allow for school resegregation, and renew the public commitment to public education." (p. iv)

In keeping with what is known about the power of proximal variables in education (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990), Rice wisely focuses the majority of her brief on the second suggestion—that schools must have fundamental educational resources in order to even begin to close the opportunity gap. While Rice is able to show a significant return on investment for the changes she recommends, the likelihood of current policymakers acting on these recommendations is unknown. Without question, policy, economic, structural, and systemic changes are needed. However, children and youth are in schools now, and they can't wait for common-sense legislation and policies to be developed and take effect.

In the meantime, teachers, teacher leaders, and teacher educators—a workforce approximately four million strong—have considerable power in addressing equity at the child, classroom, and building level. We are fortunate to be working in a time when so many educators are focusing their life work on the disruption of systemic inequities (see Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; and many more). Dr. Sonia Nieto recently authored a piece on lessons learned from her own career as an educator committed to equity and social justice work, which serves as a frame for this discussion. She suggested that educators must *Learn about Ourselves, Learn about Our Students, and Develop Allies* (2012).

The following section describes work underway in the Grand Valley State University College of Education (COE) focused on moving our own preparation practice, supporting beginner teachers as they engage in equity work, and partnering with our colleagues who teach and lead in classrooms and buildings in our surrounding area.

Learn About Ourselves

Human beings are complex creatures. Educators possess a range of very human qualities, knowledge, skills, beliefs, life experiences, and influences. This positions them well to work with children and youth; but a healthy level of self-awareness is needed to keep in check our very human tendencies toward assumptions, bias, and quick judgments.

To that end, the COE provides specific in-depth training and facilitated self-exploration with a professional consultant who works with our faculty and teacher candidates as we address issues of race, class, privilege, and systemic inequities that pervade our world and our very human nature. We follow up with opportunities for further discussion and readings that move us forward, as well as additional experiences and speakers that remind us of the importance of this focus.

Nieto suggests this process should include,

...looking at oneself honestly and asking hard questions about one's privilege and power, and about how one uses these in the teaching and learning context. It means asking about one's biases, hidden or overt, and how they influence one's relationships with students. And it means taking into account one's true feelings about particular students, and asking whether one thinks that all students are capable and worthy. The answers to these questions will determine whether one cares or not for one's students. (p. 29-30)

Faculty in the COE agree with this statement and take this process very seriously. At multiple points throughout our program, students are asked to consider their own thinking and beliefs about the purpose of schooling and the role of the teacher and learner. They also have several opportunities to consider and develop their own culture competence. However, cultural competence is only the beginning. Placing equity/inequity and justice/injustice at the center of discussions about culture forces us to move beyond

surface-level cultural understandings and toward working on solutions to the conditions that cause the inequities faced by children, youth, and families (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). The journey is one of personal growth and professional necessity.

Learn About Our Students

Educators have understood for decades that healthy relationships with students and families foster increased learning. In our preparation programs, learning about students and families begins with tasks such as asking students to complete inventories that provide insights into their interests, preferences, strengths, hopes, and expectations; interviewing individual students about books they enjoy reading; or touring communities surrounding placement schools.

In the COE, we are investigating ways to work more closely with families and welcome support and partnerships in this endeavor.

While developing healthy relationships with students that promote learning in the classroom depends on a

commitment to knowing them as people, it also depends on a belief that what children and youth think, say, and do is important and worthy of respect and recognition. Across our teacher preparation program, we are working very hard to minimize teacher telling and maximize student thinking. A deep focus on such high-leverage teaching practices as eliciting and interpreting student thinking and leading classroom discussions (TeachingWorks.org, 2018), project-based learning (PBL), and inquiry-based learning has moved our pedagogies and approaches in different directions.

The practices and approaches mentioned above have existed for years. The difference for us now is that we are consciously considering our teaching and implementing

“The difference for us now is that we are consciously considering our teaching and implementing of these practices through an equity lens.”



of these practices through an equity lens. For example, Cohen and Lotan (1997) point out the role status can play in a classroom and that too often only certain children and youth in classrooms get to be seen as “smart” by others. Those students generally possess the strongest vocabularies, most confidence, or deepest background knowledge. They are often called on frequently and dominate discussions, and as such have even more opportunities to hone their skills and be seen as competent by the rest of the class. But teachers have considerable control over whose voice is heard or who gets to be seen as capable on any given day. Ideally, we want beginner teachers to be less focused on seeking right answers from some students and more interested in surfacing the thinking, understanding, and contributions of all students. This shift means deliberately considering how we are ensuring that all students are adequately equipped and thus have the opportunity to display their thinking during discussions and PBL and inquiry-based lessons.

Develop Allies

Teaching is complex, challenging, at times exhausting, and far too often feels like a solitary endeavor. Professional collaboration is critical to our success. At the state level, I have the privilege of working with many individuals whose own work is centered on issues of equity. I am thankful

that GVSU is part of the Michigan Program Network, a group of nine teacher preparation institutions, and TeachingWorks at the University of Michigan. Through these initiatives, faculty from across the state convene to work on teacher preparation practices that might better prepare beginner teachers to teach with equity in mind. We also participate on the Michigan CEEDAR team, a group of four teacher preparation institutions and representatives from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), which is working on comprehensive literacy instruction. (CEEDAR stands for “Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform” and the state partnership teams are organized through the CEEDAR Center based out of the University of Florida.) In each of these cases, our convening provides opportunities for continuous improvement but also comradery and support.

Locally, many, many faculty in both the College of Education and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences study, write, and teach about these issues. They are committed to ensuring that education continues to be a lever of opportunity for all students and to moving the field forward through their research and teaching efforts.

Some of the most gratifying collaborative work COE faculty have done recently has been alongside teachers,

instructional coaches, and principals who are providing equitable education to the children and young people in their classrooms and buildings every day. Every single cooperating teacher who hosts one of our students is a partner in this work. In some buildings, we have experimented with particular collaborative models.

We are in the fifth year of a partnership with Alpine Elementary School in the Kenowa Hills Public Schools district in the Grand Rapids region. Our teacher candidates are placed with Alpine teachers for a full year and engage in a co-teaching model. We have been collecting data on this model, and during the 2017-2018 school year we spent multiple half-day professional development sessions together unpacking teaching practices, developing shared language and understanding of the practices, and shoring up our mentoring skills.

In a slightly different model, a group of COE faculty and field coordinators, several elementary teachers, instructional coaches, and principals from the Grand Rapids Public Schools district are part of a professional learning community facilitated by staff from TeachingWorks in which we grapple with the same topics as the Alpine group. Gatherings are hosted at Stocking Elementary School, a building where we have had the honor of working with faculty and staff since its re-opening.

These experiences and many more remind us that our work should not be solitary and separate. Rather, they affirm the notion that collaboration across every part of the educational enterprise is critical for our success as a profession and especially for the equitable success of the children and youth whom we ultimately serve.

A couple of years ago, Dr. Na'ilah Suad Nasir was speaking as part of a panel at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education focused on addressing justice and equity through teaching. As part of her talk she said, "Schools will inherently either reproduce or disrupt inequality. They are either doing one of the other. There is no neutral space..." (Nasir, 2017). I have been haunted by that statement since hearing it and have since concluded that the same can be said for teachers and teacher educators. Nothing we do is equity neutral. As we work to

learn about ourselves, learn about our students, and work together to provide all students with a quality education, we need to constantly remind ourselves that we are always making a choice to either reproduce the inherent inequality that exists in our world or move in the direction of living up to our potential as the great equalizer.

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