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Gender Based Violence: A Challenge to North American Teacher Preparation

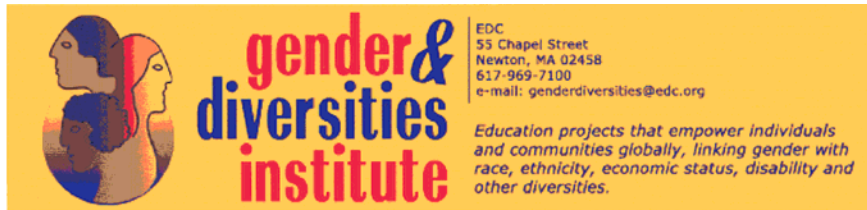
James W. Fraser
Dean
School of Education, Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Last week I attended a day-long meeting of North American teacher educators. It was one of the most thoughtful conversations I have experienced by people deeply committed to the field. Not surprisingly, of course, the issue of gender based violence was never mentioned. After the meeting, in the taxi driving to the airport, one of the leaders of the group told the rest of us that her fourth grade/nine-year-old daughter had just been elected as the class representative to her school's student council. She had asked her daughter, "What is the first issue you want to raise with the council?" The response had been "sexual harassment." My colleague rolled her eyes in disappointment . . . it all starts so young! And teachers are so unprepared to deal with the issue.

I am here as a North American teacher educator, who is also a European-American male. And the focus of my remarks has to do with my own field of endeavor. It involves asking the question What should teacher preparation programs be doing to attend to the issue of gender based violence? How can we be sure that my friend's daughter will have teachers who can support her and who can help change the school atmosphere so that "sexual harassment" is not number one on the agenda of fourth graders' worries?

I start my own think about this question, as I start my thinking about many questions with the statement by John Dewey. In 1899, Dewey wrote

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him [or her] with the spirit of service, and providing him [or her] with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (p. 29)



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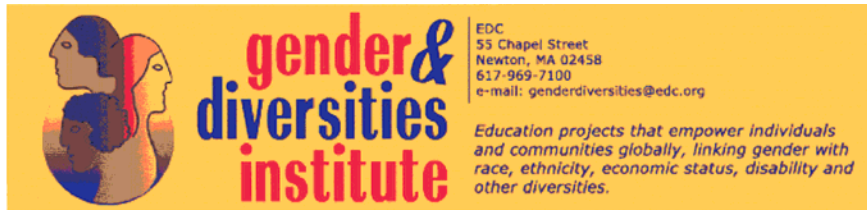
The progressive education movement, as defined by Dewey, was always a means of community building. So the goal of school reform was not merely student achievement, though student success was valuable, and it was not merely the preparation of individual democratic citizens, though preparation for citizenship was important. But ultimately the goal of progressive education, for people like Dewey, was the cultivation of a larger society that was very different from the unjust and violent industrial order of his day. He and others aimed for a society that was truly “worthy, lovely, and harmonious.” We have not gotten there yet, but we are richer for the ideal.

It seems relatively obvious to anyone who is paying attention, that a society that tolerates gendered based violence, a society in which, at any given time, half the population is in danger of attack from the other half is not, to put it mildly, a society that is “worthy, lovely, and harmonious.” And so the next conclusions are also obvious:

If we are going to get serious about gendered based violence, one of the places to do it is in the schools. This is not just a matter of teaching young people not to be violent, it is a matter of creating a school culture that is explicitly anti-violent and anti-sexist, in which the notion that boys can lash out at girls with impunity is abhorrent to the participants in the culture, i.e., the children, not just against the rules as set by the teachers.

And it is also obvious that if we are going to create those kinds of classrooms and that kind of school culture, then we are going to have to change the nature of teacher preparation to give teachers tools that, for the most part they do not currently have, to build these very different classrooms.

But now, having stated the obvious, we get to the problem. How are we going to reshape teacher preparation to give teachers the tools they need to create the classrooms that we say we want? The late Lawrence Cremin once said, “In other countries at times of great social upheaval, they have a revolution. In the United States, they add a new course to the curriculum.” As a representative of the United States at this conference, I am wary of being true to form. I do not think our solution is to add another course to the teacher preparation curriculum. There are too many courses for prospective teachers already. We are not going to add more. And yet we need to be honest. I, for one, do not know of a single teacher preparation program anywhere in the United States that gives meaningful attention to this issue.

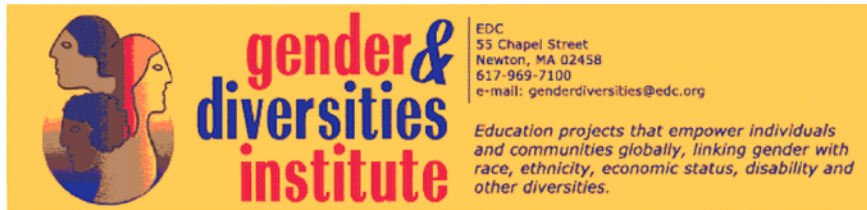


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So the question is, as another philosopher said, “what is to be done?” And the answer, I will argue, is not a new course, but rather a fundamental rethinking of the teacher preparation process. We cannot solve the problem of violence of boys against girls in the classroom or men against women in the larger society by adding a course to the teacher preparation curriculum even if there was a chance of doing so. Indeed, we cannot even begin to address this issue by tinkering with the current teacher preparation curriculum. On the contrary, the difficulty of addressing this issue in the current context, in fact, points to a basic flaw in the teacher education enterprise. We are not preparing the kinds of teachers our children need. We are not helping novice teachers prepare themselves to address this or many other critical social issues. And for the most part we do not have a model that will help us get where we need to be.

We need to rethink teacher preparation so that we move from what Paulo Freire called the “banking model” in which we make a number of deposits into the minds of future teachers—depositing a course in child development and another course in curriculum development, perhaps even a course in ethics—and when the bank account is rich enough, certifying the future teacher and sending them on their way. Instead we need to be creating a rich array of experiences—experiences in college classrooms, in schools, and in community settings—that will add up to what we at my university have come to call a “community dedicated teacher.” A “community dedicated teacher” is not one who has been through a standard program with a major in “community dedication.” It is rather one who has had a range of experiences in community settings—and the opportunity to reflect and interrogate those experiences in a university setting—as well as the opportunity to gain understanding and skills related to the job and to the values that a future teacher might bring to teaching.

In such a radically revised teacher preparation endeavor, the issue of violence—gender-based violence and other forms of violence—would easily and quickly be on the agenda, for we live in violent societies. You cannot spend time in communities and not see violence—verbal violence, physical lashing out, and, yes, violence by men against women. You cannot spend time in classrooms and not see violence—the violence of bullying, the deeper and more subtle, but also more dangerous, violence of an educational system that sorts and selects some—often males—for success and others—far too often females, but also the children of the poor and the children of the non-white—for marginalization in the school and in their future role in society. And also quite specifically, one cannot miss the bullying of boys focused on girls that becomes part of

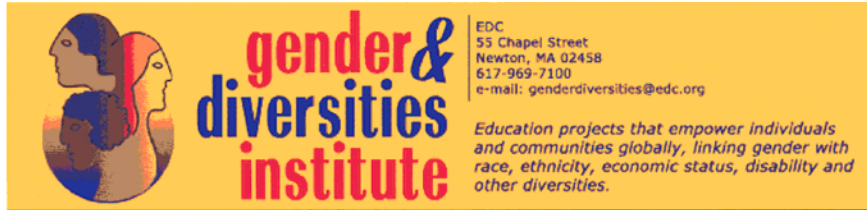


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the battle for power, prestige, and academic success at the very earliest grade levels. It does not take a new course; it does not take a special topic within an existing course for this issue to come to the surface. All it takes is for one to open one's eyes. And so, step one in the new kind of curriculum for which I want to advocate is really quite simple—we need a program for future teachers in which they are placed in communities and schools and encouraged to open their eyes, look around them, and reflect honestly on what they see. And if we do that, we have placed violence in many forms front and center on the agenda.

The next part, however, is more difficult. How do we help our students reflect on what they have seen in ways that will help them gain the values and the skills to begin to change the situation? How do we help our students move from preparing for schools as they are to envisioning and preparing for a kind of schooling in which sorting and selecting is replaced by a more democratic commitment to the success of every student regardless of gender, or race, class, or culture? How do we prepare our students to be change agents in an institution and ultimately in a larger society desperately in need of change? How do we remind them of Dewey's century-old vision of a school that sees its primary role as preparing students to be citizens of "a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious"?

There are no easy answers for these questions. But there are some obvious first steps. We need to place these questions front and center in the reflections of our students as they return from their field experiences, as they move back and forth between the campus and the school, as they think about the classrooms where they currently work and where they will someday soon be teachers. Even as we seek a more far-reaching transformation of teacher education, we should start with the field placements that offer the most promising opportunity for developing the kind of action-reflection model that we need. Asking the questions, in supervisory sessions and in reflection seminars, will not guarantee answers. Placing these issues at the forefront of the curriculum will not transform our schools and our society tomorrow. But one thing is absolutely certain: we have a much better chance of beginning the long and slow process of bringing about change—in teachers, in classrooms, and in society—if we ask the questions, and if we make engaging with these questions the center of the teacher preparation curriculum, than if we simply put the whole matter aside either as one topic too many or as something we will attend to for a few hours or a few days in a long and tiring curriculum. The questions are not the end—but they certainly are an essential beginning. And I cannot



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think of a better one if we are truly going to address the issue that my colleague's daughter put before us so eloquently.

Reference

Dewey, J. (1899). *The School and Society*, second edition (1915). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.