

## EDITORIAL

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# Mathematics Teacher Educators as Cultural Workers: A Dare to Those Who Dare to Teach (Urban?) Teachers

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Recently, there has been a stormy whirlwind of disparaging rhetoric blowing—about regarding the preparation of teachers, and the work that colleges and schools of education do—work that, I believe, is the most vital work any institution of higher learning might undertake. Being relatively new to the profession of teacher education, I thought that the current assault on colleges and schools of education was a new phenomenon, somehow a means of surveillance and discipline (Foucault, 1975/1995), similar to the solidifying surveillance and discipline that is occurring in K–12 schools. William “Bill” McDiarmid (2009), Dean of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, however, informed me: a new phenomenon—it is not.

Dean McDiarmid (2009), responding, in part, to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s (2009a) October 9th speech delivered at the Rotunda at the University of Virginia and, in part, in anticipation of a forthcoming similar, highly critical speech, claimed that ever since colleges and schools of education were established within universities over a century ago they “have been the frequent whipping boy of politicians, commentators, liberal arts faculty and others” (McDiarmid, 2009, ¶ 1). To substantiate his claim, McDiarmid provided a 1928 quote from H. L. Mencken, the noted American journalist and essayist:

The great majority of American colleges [of education] are so incompetent and vicious that, in any really civilized country, they would be closed by the police. ...In the typical American State they are staffed by quacks and hag-ridden by fanatics. ... The profession mainly attracts...flabby, feeble fellows who yearn for easy jobs. (as cited in McDiarmid, 2009, ¶ 1)

But even with this enlightened history regarding the “status” of colleges and schools of education, I waited (and I suppose like many other teacher education professionals) with hopeful anticipation for Secretary Duncan’s (2009b) follow-

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up speech that he was to deliver on October 22nd at Teachers College, Columbia University. The 23 days between the two speeches, I believed, provided Secretary Duncan ample time to re-reflect, re-think, and re-engage with several teacher educators and education scholars who hold different and divergent perspectives on colleges and schools of education, and the work that they (we) do—or could do. After all, didn't President Obama win the presidency, in part, on a platform that emphasized the crucial need to bring different and divergent voices to the table when discussing grave national concerns? And isn't developing a more complex—perhaps, even a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987)—understanding of how the nation might provide all its children with a humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1994) equal to any other current national concern? Therefore, I imagined that Secretary Duncan, as an agent at the highest level of the Obama Administration, would bring different and divergent voices to the table in those intervening days.<sup>1</sup> I, however, was sadly disappointed.

When Secretary Duncan (2009b), during his speech at Teachers College, referred to E. D. Hirsch as the “father of the acclaimed, content-rich Core Knowledge Program” (§ 29), I knew then that Secretary Duncan and I have very different understandings of knowledge (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972), and therefore, (most likely?) very different visions for “effective” teacher education programs and colleges and schools of education. As he applauded E. D. Hirsch's (1988) book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, I wondered what he might think in regards to how I use Hirsch's text, and other similar text (see, e.g., Schlesinger, 1998), in my mathematics teacher education courses. Along with scholars such as Joel Spring (2008) and others, I do use Hirsch's text as an extraordinary exemplar, an exemplar of the delimiting and debilitating hegemony that structures U.S. public schools and society in general—a hegemony that, on the whole, continues to reify and privilege “only one universal subject of human history—the white, Anglo, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege” (P. McLaren as cited in Torres, 1998, p. 178).

I also wondered why Secretary Duncan, in either speech, failed to mention any one of the three books that have become the foundation in which the learning-teaching-teaching-learning experience is built upon in my mathematics teacher education courses: John Dewey's (1938/1998) *Experience and Education*, Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1994) *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. My

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Giroux (2009) noted, “Just as his economic advisory team and his security council include not one progressive or antiwar advocate, Obama's education team is divorced from liberal and Left-liberal perspectives” (p. 259), and claimed that President Obama's “call for education reform in many ways embraces many of the same arguments made by George W. Bush” (p. 264).

hope—and yes, I am still hopeful<sup>2</sup>—is that many of the scholars whose work has informed not only my scholarship but also, and most important, my pedagogy will be asked to the table (and soon) to provide their different and divergent perspectives on the national concern of teaching all of the nation’s children and, in turn, the teacher educators who teach (and learn with) the teachers<sup>3</sup> (see *Harvard Educational Review*, Volume 79, Number 2: “Education and the Obama Presidency” for perspectives from many of these scholars).

Although I was disappointed by Secretary Duncan’s remarks at both the Roundtable and Teachers College, the whirlwind that his remarks blew up did give me pause to think and reflect, and begin to examine more precisely what I—as an *urban* mathematics teacher educator—do in my courses, and how and why I do the things I do. In other words, his remarks made me think: What if I was asked to the table? Just how might I precisely articulate my vision for an effective urban mathematics teacher education program or urban teacher education program in general? But then again, why do I even use the word “urban” as a descriptor? Is an urban mathematics teacher educator, urban mathematics teacher educator program, or, for that matter, an urban college or school of education different from say, a “non-urban” mathematics teacher educator? Should they be different? Or should they be the same? Is an urban mathematics teacher educator one who establishes issues such as diversity, equity, democracy, freedom, and social justice as primary and reoccurring themes in her or his mathematics education courses? But shouldn’t such issues be primary and reoccurring themes in every mathematics teacher educators’ courses? Or, for that matter, in every teacher educators’ courses? Even in non-urban (mathematics) teacher educators’ courses? I could go on ad infinitum posing questions that Secretary Duncan’s remarks motivated for me as I began to examine more precisely the what, how, and why I do the things I do in my courses, and how the things I do might or might not be compatible or

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<sup>2</sup> My hope is derived, in part, by comments made by Linda Darling-Hammond (2009) who headed President Obama’s education policy transition team; she stated:

What attracted me to [Obama’s] campaign...were his early pronouncements of education. I sensed a sincerity and a depth of commitment to education, a genuine concern for improving the quality of teaching and learning, an intolerance of a status quo that promotes inequality, and a drive to move our education system into the twenty-first century—not only in math, science, and technology but also in developing creativity, critical thinking skills, and the capacity to innovate—a much-needed change from the narrow views of the last eight years. (pp. 210–211)

<sup>3</sup> For a bit of speculative storytelling on the probable outcomes of Secretary Duncan’s current “corporate model” strategy, see Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009). And although I do not claim that Dr. Ladson-Billings possesses some mystical powers of predicting the future (nor does she); I have discussed with students that her speculative storytelling or predictions regarding New Orleans after Katrina have been and continue to become frighteningly accurate (see Ladson-Billings, 2006), an acknowledgment that she makes note of as well (2009).

consistent with Secretary Duncan's vision for effective teacher education programs and colleges and schools of education in general.

Nonetheless, so that I might "scientifically" respond to Secretary Duncan if I am asked to the table, I have begun doing science on the what, how, and why I do the things I do in my mathematics education courses (and yes, the work that a critical postmodernist does *is* science). As I began this new science project, I turned to the grand master of transformative, empowering pedagogy: Paulo Freire. It is Freire's (1998b) posthumously published book *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* that inspired the title of this editorial. (I recommend this book as a starting point for any [mathematics] teacher educator, urban and non-urban alike, who might choose to begin a similar such project.) Although Freire wrote his 10 letters to Brazilian teachers, I thought that I might use his letters to begin organizing—in a more precise, scientific fashion—the what, how, and why I do the things I do as a teacher (and learner) of (with) urban mathematics teachers in the United States. I did not turn to his letters to provide me with prescriptive answers to what I should do; Freire, throughout his prolific scholarship (see, e.g., 1970/2000, 1985, 1994, 1997, 1998a, 1998b), was adamant that his work is not to be duplicated but reinvented. Rather, I turned to Freire's letters to remind me that, as in all of his scholarship, he asks teachers, teacher educators, and, in turn, colleges and schools of education to dare to think differently, to dare to act differently, to dare to dream differently:

We must dare to learn how to dare in order to say no to the bureaucratization of the mind to which we are exposed everyday. We must dare so that we can continue to do so even when it is so much more materially advantageous to stop daring. (1998a, p. 3)

As teachers of (urban?) mathematics teachers, I want to challenge—no, I dare—each of us to institute as the primary goal for the community of mathematics educators the cultural transformation of the discipline of mathematics from the psychologically brutalizing discipline of stratification (Bourdieu, 1989/1998) into the psychologically humanizing discipline of freedom. We have, I believe, an ethical responsibility to do so. And for me, this dare is how I plan to begin the discussion if (when?) I am asked to the table. How might you begin the discussion?

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