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# Developing Justice-Oriented Teachers: Personal Transformation through Relationships

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### Abstract

The teacher preparation program in a Jesuit liberal arts college prepares future teachers to identify and actively confront inequities in society. Empowering teachers to carry justice-oriented teaching into schools rests on strong relationships among peers and professors on campus, and with students and families from diverse communities in university neighborhoods. The rationale and approach to fostering relationships focuses this first of three essays in *Jesuit Higher Education*. Future essays will provide practical examples of action in service and reflection in preparing justice-oriented teachers.

### Introduction

Students are at the heart of our efforts to prepare the next generation of justice-oriented teachers. As faculty members in a department of education

in a small Jesuit liberal arts college, we draw upon Pedro Arrupe's call to "form men-and-women-for others"<sup>1</sup> who promote just educational opportunities for their own students, particularly "those deprived of basic human rights, those

relegated by the powerful and prosperous to the margins of human society.”<sup>2</sup> Both students and faculty members have opportunities at our college to better understand, teach, and learn from those living at the margins. We seek to develop a social justice perspective, which we define here as perceiving and actively addressing societal contradictions in political, economic, and social arenas.<sup>3</sup> While students may select our university because of service-learning opportunities, few arrive with well-developed understandings of why and how to perceive and confront contradictory inequities in many schools and their surrounding communities.

Our purpose in this series of three articles is to explain our aims as teacher educators, rationale for selecting those aims, and strategies we implement to guide our students toward a more just perception and practice. We aim, first, to guide teacher candidates in our undergraduate program and practicing teachers in our graduate program to observe themselves in relationship with peers and professors on campus and, off campus, with teachers, children, administrators, and families. Relationship-building in communities is also crucial. Why and how we focus on that relationship is the topic of this article for the inaugural issue of *Jesuit Higher Education*. A second aim is to facilitate undergraduates’ and graduates’ critique of institutionalized inequities and actively engage them, our central point in the October issue. We zero in on our third aim of stimulating undergraduates’ and graduates’ analytical reflection upon their perspectives, practices, successes, and challenges in the April, 2013, issue.

The overarching aim guiding our work is that the transformations we witness when students build relationships, perceive and actively confront inequities, and analytically reflect on who they are as teachers forge sturdy paths to a just education for every child. Eventually, in the company of like-minded colleagues, it is our hope that graduates maintain the motivation and skills to confront and shift institutional inequities so essential to long-term change.<sup>4</sup>

## **Contextualizing Education in Local and National Settings**

The inequities in America’s educational system, such as disparities in school funding and resources based on degrees of wealth in neighborhoods, most negatively impact children from poor and marginalized groups.<sup>5</sup> In our own university neighborhood schools, most children living at or below the poverty level, and many area schools have up to 90 percent culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, reflecting the nationwide demographic shifts in K-12 student populations.<sup>6</sup> Our teacher candidates, who often express commitments to teach in these schools, also reflect the paradoxical nationwide trend; 90 percent of undergraduates in our department are white, middle- to upper-class females, who speak only English.<sup>7</sup> Not only must we develop teachers committed to just schooling, but to effectively teach today’s diverse children and youth, our undergraduate and graduate education students must know themselves and contemporary children and youth well enough to acquire the cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and reflective practices that meet educational expectations of diverse families. We recognize that “there is no work more complex, and there is no work more important, than this.”<sup>8</sup>

To these ends, we collaborate with our undergraduate and graduate students to gain authentic information about diverse people in our local communities, injustices they face, and how we can learn from and teach them as we promote a more just education. To cultivate a justice-orientation to education in our students and ourselves, we focus on three aims as mentioned above: strong relationships, action in service to others through various classes and experiential programs, and reflection that leads to personal transformation (see fig. 1). In this essay, we focus on our approach to relationship-building and its significance to furthering just education.

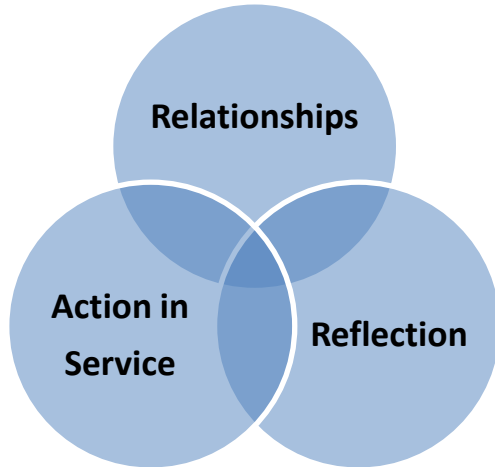


Figure 1. Developing Justice-oriented Teachers

**Relationships**

*Jackie arrives at my office door several minutes late for the third meeting this semester I have asked her to attend. Her class attendance has been poor, and most of her assignments have either been late or missing. When we called the local middle school where Jackie is completing internship hours, the principal praised Jackie’s work there. Jackie was making great connections with students and seemed to really enjoy teaching lessons in the classroom; unfortunately, her attendance was sporadic. Her potential as a teacher was promising, but the conversation I had to have with Jackie was a tough one—she was not going to make it to her culminating student teaching experience if she didn’t begin to show us that she could carry the responsibility of being the teacher she had the potential to be. How could she be a teacher and impact student lives if she didn’t know her content, her pedagogy, and demonstrate the dispositions of professionalism that it takes to change kids’ lives?*

*When I invite her to share with me what is happening, she tells me more about her brother’s illness and that she is responsible for taking on her mother’s role in the family business. Financial issues have become a concern for her as well. The bigger issues of life beyond grades, assignments, and placement teaching have taken precedence in Jackie’s life.*

In any of our offices at some point in the semester, a student as described in the above vignette comes with what might be interpreted as “an excuse”—a student whose job interferes with

finishing an assignment, whose illness prevents attendance at a school placement, whose complicated life issues relegate coursework to secondary status, or who lacks maturity to take on a teacher’s responsibilities. As a teacher education licensure program, we operate under specific and multiple performance standards set by the state that include content, pedagogy, and professional dispositions such as honoring diverse viewpoints and people in the college classroom and in schools. As a department in a Jesuit institution, we examine how well we model for our students the need to consider the whole person; to guide them to be teachers who can “perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed”<sup>9</sup>—in this case, their future students. To examine our roles as guides, some of us, for example, attend university-supported retreats or conferences such as Collegium attended by faculty members from Jesuit colleges.

Forging solid student-faculty relationships is essential to all students’ success and has been central to Jesuit education since the mid-sixteenth century. In his early teachings, Ignatius of Loyola stipulated that educators must take a personal interest in students and their progress – not only academic, but character and moral development as well.<sup>10</sup> Care and concern for each student continue to be essential amidst the complexities of contemporary students’ lives. Our awareness of students’ histories, strengths, and struggles enables us to guide students through their undergraduate or graduate program.

In our advising, we find ourselves grappling with how to balance these issues. We must hold our students accountable for performance standards set by the state, but we must also try to support them as they face and balance the gritty realities of life while becoming learners in the service of others. Guiding students through this tangled web of growing up as well as growing aware requires our awareness of the challenges they face. We agree that strong faculty-student relationships are at the heart of Ignatian pedagogy.<sup>11</sup>

**Establishing Student-Faculty Relationships**

Ours is a small program located within a relatively small college. The student-faculty ratio of

approximately 20:1 allows faculty members to create meaningful relationships with students, and these relationships sustain students in difficult times. Relationships enable faculty members to know students well before admission to the Education program, and by the culminating student teaching experience, a familial connection solidifies. Students drawn to teaching arrive with the false understanding that teaching is viewed as neither well-paid nor prestigious —, a topic of in-class and after-class student-faculty conversations as students attempt to align their fledgling personalities with a vision of their lives in schools. As faculty members, we act as sounding boards and advisors inviting students to explore the perceptions of teaching among the students and community members they will teach. Most families in our community perceive teachers as highly prestigious and these families hold high expectations for the teachers of their children. Families expect teachers to not only attend to academics, but to nurture the whole child, attending to strengths and challenges within each child. As faculty, we recognize that a commitment to teaching demands a significant investment of time, energy, money, effort, and enthusiasm. Is this the path for every one of our students?

Advising—formal and informal—is key to developing relationships that will bolster students through the trials and triumphs of student teaching and entry into the profession. As faculty, our doors are open to any student, regardless of that student’s formal advisor. Our strengths across the department are quite different, including bilingualism, urban farming, music, politics, students with special needs, outdoor leadership. Students seek us out according to their interests or needs to talk about studies, families, difficulties, or goals. In this way, we mold our strengths and expertise to students’ needs. We begin every department meeting with proactive problem-solving discussions about students’ academic, financial, or other challenges. Recently, one of us was struggling with a student from El Salvador. With mutual agreement, a second faculty member who had lived abroad and spoke Spanish made a connection with the student, expressing solidarity with her during regular and lengthy office visits. The faculty member provided space and time for the student to weep freely, disclose her fears, and articulate her confusions.

That support enabled her to graduate successfully. As described in the opening vignette, time that faculty members spend at the beginning of each semester to establish and maintain relationships with students, opens doors to core issues they face — issues which could deter their academic and personal success.

### **Relating to Peers and the Community**

Korth speaks of “context,”<sup>12</sup> a community of learners in which all are interconnected by a web of relationships. In college classrooms, we build on our knowledge of students to encourage supportive peer-to-peer relationships. This may involve out-of-class collaborative projects or pairs of students participating in text discussions and demonstration teaching. Simulations using Nonviolent Communication, for example, provide students with tools to communicate effectively.<sup>13</sup> Such simulations begin with demonstrations of this communication process that involve: a) stating an observation of another person’s problematic behavior and/or words; b) stating a feeling that the behavior or words stimulate; c) stating a need; and d) stating a request that would resolve the problem in a mutually beneficial way. Moving from simulated situations arising in students’ lives, such as disagreements in dormitories, to potential situations in schools offers a framework for effective communication that solidifies relationships.

In the community, we also have developed connections with local public and Catholic schools in which our students complete fieldwork. We begin by building relationships with administrators and the teachers who mentor our students in classrooms, which extends the network supporting our teacher candidates. As faculty members, we make frequent visits to our local schools not only to observe students’ teaching but to teach a class or course onsite and to plan and troubleshoot with our students and their mentor teachers. By seeing students and mentors in the contexts in which they work with children and adolescents, we can better understand issues they bring up in class, in written reflections, and in conversations as they grapple with what it means to be a teacher.

Working closely with families and communities in the local schools, a topic which will be explored more in-depth in the next issue, requires our students to come face-to-face with many stereotypes and biases they hold around critical issues facing education, such as immigration and poverty. We often do not know the belief systems our students bring to our classrooms, but we know they have developed their beliefs based on media influences, their families' opinions, and discussions with peers – not necessarily through strong relationships with people who are different from them. We feel it is important that our students examine their own beliefs, biases and stereotypes before they enter the classroom. As a department, we encourage open-conversations in and out of class sessions, and it is during these discussions that we work with students to help them resolve the differences between their former beliefs and their newfound learning. These can be difficult discussions and often continue over a whole semester, but we recognize that building relationships involves being open to the hard issues, and being open to opinions different from our own. We encourage students to examine these issues with us as we learn from each other in our attempts to tackle the injustices we witness in our schools and communities.

### **Beyond the College: Community Mentors during Teacher Induction**

Teaching is a stressful job, and new federal mandates requiring more out of teachers every year means that too many teachers leave the field after three to five years. Yet we hope that our graduates will become veteran teachers and persist in the profession they have chosen. In order to encourage students, we feel that mentoring has to extend at a minimum to the first year of a teacher's professional life. We therefore collaborate with college alumni, who are retired teachers, principals, and superintendents, to mentor our teachers during their first year in the profession. These community mentors provide our new teachers with expertise and a sympathetic ear that does not have a "high stakes" impact on job performance ratings. Our new teachers speak frankly and honestly with their mentors, discussing classroom management dilemmas, political pitfalls in hierarchical institutions, and the daily emotional and psychological stresses of being

a teacher. Our aim is that such ongoing mentoring will contribute to new teachers' successful problem-solving and sense of efficacy with their own students.

### **Administrators**

University administrators are essential to forming relationships with schools and local communities. To support the mission-based contributions we make to nearby schools, administrators provide small grants for the professional development we conduct for teachers, educational materials, stipends for teachers who mentor our students, and additional stipends for families who open their homes to our students for authentic learning and teaching experiences. A second level of administrative support exists within the tenure process. Our service-based research receives institutional support for exploring and applying university mission goals such as service to those in need, care of the whole person, and interdisciplinary teaching and learning. A third level of support funds our attendance at mission-related conferences as well as conferences in our disciplinary fields where we build our own professional and personal relationships. Without administrative support, our department would be unable to establish and sustain long-term relationships that nourish our students,' our communities,' and our own lives.

### **Identifying Complexities of Relationship-building**


Building these relationships takes time, energy, and a willingness to trust. It is demanding and sometimes fails to produce desired outcomes at one point or another during students' education. The path to becoming a teacher occurs simultaneously with students' completion of requirements in college core courses and declared majors. Entry into the education program begins with an Introduction to Education course, and about 75 students per year take this first important step with many selecting education and others pursuing other areas of study.

State requirements demand that students acquire 800 hours of field experience for initial teacher licensure, and all students have mandatory clinical classroom assignments in local public or Catholic schools beginning in the first education courses.

These assignments are vital as they begin to see classrooms through the eyes of teachers, and for some, the sobering realities of the classroom encourage a career outside of teaching. By the third semester of the teacher licensure program, students make formal application to the program and must be accepted by the department and by an inter-departmental committee comprised of faculty members from across the college. At this point and at subsequent points, students who are not succeeding in all aspects of the program, including experiences in schools and in university classrooms, are invited to have a difficult faculty-student conversation. This conversation reflects our commitment to preparing teachers who are dedicated to the hard work of educating all children justly. If the commitment, reflection, and growth that the journey of becoming a teacher entails are absent, we place students on probation in the program, or counsel them to take another path. We encourage students to engage in discernment to gain self-knowledge about “what causes true inner peace and what causes distress . . . the key to discovering what kind of service one is being called to offer.”<sup>14</sup> This network of support for each student evolves throughout the program across specialties within our department, throughout the college, and into the community.

Such a network is crucial to our students’ ability to identify what distinctive service they can best offer the world, whether in teaching or other capacities. Our challenge is allocating sufficient time to establish relationships across multiple constituencies.

### Final Thoughts

As we survey the severity of contemporary challenges throughout the world, it is with a sense of urgency that we prepare teachers who dedicate their intellectual, physical, and moral capabilities to confronting causes of suffering. By promoting courageous relationships on campus and beyond, we envision a strong network that supports future teachers’ capacities to transform the worlds they inhabit. 

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Arrupe, S.J., *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings. Selected, with an Introduction by Kevin Burke, S.J.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> L. Darling-Hammond, J. French, and S. P. García-Lopez. 2002. *Learning to Teach for Social Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); J. A. Banks, J. A. “Multicultural Education: Historical Development, Dimensions, and Practice” in *Review of Research in Education*, No. 19, ed. L. Darling-Hammond (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1993), 3-50.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> M. Cochran-Smith and C. Power, “New Directions for Teacher Preparation,” *Educational Leadership* 67, no. 8 (2010): 7-13.

<sup>7</sup> G. R. Howard, *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2006); National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006. U.S. Department of Education. *Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals, and School Libraries in the United States, 2003–2004, Schools and Staffing Survey*. Report 2006-313, Table 18 & Table 19 (Publication No. NCES 2006313). Accessed September 25, 2008, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006313>.

<sup>8</sup> G. R. Howard, *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. “The service of faith and the promotion of justice in American Jesuit higher education,” address presented at the conference, “Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education,” October 2000, at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (October, 2000), unpublished manuscript, 9.

<sup>10</sup> G. E. Gans, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991); Ronald E. Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Sharon J. Korth, “Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach” in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, ed. G. Traub (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 280-284.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>13</sup> M. Rosenberg, *Life-enriching Education* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Modras, p. 48.



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