Initial Level: Caring, Professional Educators for a Diverse and Democratic Society

Advanced Level: Inquiry, Advocacy, and Leadership in Education for a Diverse and Democratic Society

The overriding goal of all of our education programs at Eastern Michigan University is to help candidates become caring, knowledgeable, and reflective professionals who support the twin goals of diversity and democracy in schools and society. Because we expect candidates at the advanced level to exceed the expectations we have for candidates at the initial level, we developed the following theme for our advanced programs: Inquiry, Advocacy, and Leadership for a Diverse and Democratic Society.

We believe these two interconnected themes resonate well with the mission of our education unit, which is to create an exemplary educational environment to develop the intellectual curiosity, creativity, critical and reflective thinking and problem-solving abilities of our students so that they may become ethical, productive and contributing participants and leaders in a democratic and diverse society.

In the following three sections, we define key concepts and advance our interpretations of the underlying philosophy, informing theories, and critical research that form the knowledge base for our conceptual framework. These sections are as follows.

Part I. Caring Educators: The Moral Context of Education

Part II. Professional Educators: Reflective and Knowledgeable Decision-Makers

Part III. Diversity and Democracy: The Social Context of Education
Part I. Caring Educators: The Moral Context of Education

Caring is more than a desirable personality trait. Along with Noddings (2005), we believe that caring is the cornerstone of ethics and moral education as well as the preeminent disposition for all professional educators. A caring relation is "a connection or encounter between two human beings" (Noddings, 2001, p. 16). It begins with a recognition of the need of another and leads to motivational displacement, and finally to signals that the care has been received. Caring teachers listen and respond to students in different ways; they create, maintain, and enhance positive relations with students and help students develop the capacity to care. No wonder, then, that Noddings (2005) claims the main aim of education is “to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (p. 174).

Other scholars also highlight the ethical context of education. Cox (1982) states, "the fact that a person is engaged in education implies that he has accepted certain moral values. Inherent in education are such things as a liberal respect for differing opinions honestly held, accuracy in thought and expression, logical thinking, genuine feeling, and a sense of truth to be sought for and eventually found. To these things an educator is committed by the very fact of being an educator" (pp. 79-80). Strike and Soltis (2004) call attention to the ethical dimensions of teaching and emphasize that ethical thinking is not just following the rules. Hansen (2001) notes that teaching embodies both intellectual and moral dimensions, and the claim that teaching is a moral activity calls attention to teachers' conduct, character, perception, judgment, understanding, and more: "teaching is undertaken by persons, each bringing to bear a particular understanding of what education, students, and learning are all about and each bringing into the classroom an individual character as a human being" (p. 841). Teaching, like education more broadly conceived, is saturated with moral significance.

Initial Level

At the initial level, our teacher education programs are predicated on the belief that teachers must be caring individuals who act in the best interest of students. This means that teachers are student-centered; they make students’ needs the focus of their decision-making and professional activities (Noddings, 2001). Delpit (2006) agrees that teachers must be caring individuals by noting that the development of a strong bond or affiliation with the teacher is a key motivational factor in achievement for many students. In a 1989 interview, Comer similarly emphasizes the importance of caring interactions among students and teachers by observing that "positive relationships are at the heart of the learning process" (National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development, p. 43).

What are the characteristics of caring teachers? They are distinguished by their high performance expectations, advocacy, and empowerment of students, as well as by their use of pedagogical practices that facilitate success. They reflect a humanistic orientation to students and other members of the school community. They are child-centered and nurture each student’s growth. They have emotional integrity that includes dealing with student needs and validating student feelings. They show compassion and respect for students. They are honest in communication and considerate of student needs, wants, desires, and fears. Lastly, their teaching is culturally responsive because they connect with students regardless of racial, ethnic, social, or behavioral characteristics. Culturally responsive caring places teachers “in an ethical, emotional,
and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence.” (Glasser, 1998; Larrivee, 2000; Gay, 2000, pp. 52, 109)

Researchers report that teachers view themselves as moral role models and that teachers feel compelled to enact certain qualities: confidence, poise, fairness, commitment, hopefulness, consistency, being knowledgeable, and being organized (Hansen et al., 1994). Teacher education candidates, in turn, believe that teachers should be role models who do the right thing while in school and out of school (Bergem, 1990). All this helps foster the most important goal of education, namely, to produce competent, caring, and lovable people who contribute to the social good at home and in the world (Noddings, 2001).

At Eastern Michigan University, we seek to create environments that foster the development of professional dispositions and that address the moral dimensions of teaching. We believe that prospective teachers must appreciate and practice the principles, ethics, and legal responsibilities of the teaching profession (Fullan, 1993). Our assessments reflect established criteria for the professional conduct of teachers found in the National Education Association’s Code of Ethics and the standards developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (1992). We further believe that teachers are change agents in the schools and communities in which they work and that teachers must demonstrate effective communication skills in collaborative partnerships with students, colleagues, parents, and the broad community.

Advanced Level

At the advanced level, our goal is to help students exceed the expectations we have for students in our initial programs. We expect students in our advanced programs not only to be caring professionals but also to be advocates for children and young adults in our society. Advocacy, after all, is an extension of caring. As public support for education diminishes, as poverty continues to jeopardize the well being and academic achievement of urban students, and as the very notion of “public” in public education is threatened, it becomes increasingly important for caring educators to actively lobby for policies and practices that benefit youth. The stakes are too high for educators and allied professionals to ignore the need to engage in advocacy effort (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003).

What does advocacy entail? It begins with awareness, and it involves the ongoing establishment of respectful relationships as the foundation for change. Advocacy is about removing barriers, providing support and education, and supporting families. We believe that advocates must: (1) support children, adolescents, and their families so that they may experience freedom, responsibility, and belonging, along with educational success; (2) facilitate access to learning and living in an inclusive and normalized environment for students with disabilities; and (3) recognize that all people share a common set of basic needs including the need to be independent, the need to be treated with dignity and respect, the need to exercise basic human rights, and the need to be accepted by the community in which they live and learn. (Advocacy Center, 2003; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003)

Finally, we concur with researchers who insist that educators need to be particularly sensitive to the needs of the dispossessed in our society such as the very poor, most of whom live in
our central cities, who are often unable to advocate for themselves or their children (Anyon, 2005; Polakow, 1993, 2007; Polite & Davis, 1999).

In summary, our goal is to help all our candidates become caring professionals who are sensitive to the moral dimensions of teaching, who are student-focused, and who are persistent in pursuing high yet appropriate expectations for all students. In addition, at the advanced level, our goal is to help students become advocates who—regardless of title or role—protect and support children and adolescents.

**Part II. Professional Educators: Reflective and Knowledgeable Decision-Makers**

Our conception of a professional educator is that of a knowledgeable and reflective decision-maker. Dewey (1933) defines reflection as the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and future conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). At the same time, Dewey (1938) emphasizes the critical role experience plays in education. These two concepts—reflection and experience—come together in reflective thinking processes and successful methods of instruction. As applied to the classroom, this means that students: (1) have experiences that actively engage them; (2) encounter genuine problems as a stimulus to thought; (3) make informed observations to deal with the problems; (4) suggest solutions that are developed in an orderly way; and (5) test their ideas by application to make their meaning clear and to discover their validity (Dewey, 1916, p. 163).

Today, it is the constructivists who, more than any other group of researchers, most fully carry forward Dewey’s notion of reflectivity to the educational enterprise. Like Dewey, constructivists emphasize the role of direct experience and the role of teachers as facilitators of learning who assist students as they explore and investigate concepts (Brooks, 1999; Fosnot, 1996). Of particular importance is Schon’s (1983, 1990) conception of “reflection-in-action,” which provides a fruitful way of interpreting professional decision-making across the spectrum of professional roles in education.

**Initial Level**

Our goal is to ground all of our teacher preparation programs in research, theory, and the wisdom of practice. We believe that good teachers progress through stages of development from novice to proficient to expert to teacher leader (Odell, Huling, & Sweeney, 2000). Candidates observe models of exemplary practice, tap the wisdom of experienced professionals, and continually redefine their professional knowledge. They develop an awareness of initial and changing knowledge about pupils and classrooms, reconstruct ideas about themselves as teachers, develop a repertoire of effective teaching practices, and grow in reflection and problem-solving.

Reflective professionals think about their behaviors and experiences in the context of the educational environment. They recognize the role reflection plays in helping them reframe, reinterpret, and articulate their understandings and beliefs in light of new experiences. They process and organize new information in their planning and decision making, a critical element that considers their experiences, goals, and values within a social context and their personal
interpretation of events situated within particular contexts (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Langer, Colton, & Goff, 2003).

We also know that reflection is a source of personal and professional growth (Black, Sileo, & Prater, 2000). Reflective activities help preservice teachers "interrogate deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning and frequently replace beginning teachers' prior beliefs with more productive and equitable conceptions of instruction" (Webb, 2000, p. 2). Reflective teaching attempts to move teachers toward greater awareness of the reasons, motives, values, and pressures that direct and influence their pedagogy. Most important, when teachers engage in reflective teaching, there are specific benefits for student learning, including improved classroom management, student organization, teacher confidence, expanded teaching repertoire, and professional reflection (Chase, Germundsen, & Brownstein, 2001).

It goes without saying that students in our initial programs need to become “teachers of substance,” as Shulman puts it; that is, they need to become professionals who are knowledgeable about the content they teach. While subject matter should occupy a central place in teacher education, candidates also must know how to transform subject matter knowledge. This requires that they have knowledge of the substance and syntax of their discipline, knowledge of learners and learning, knowledge of curriculum and context, knowledge of aims and objectives, and knowledge of pedagogy. Exemplary teaching clearly requires both pedagogical and content knowledge. (Shulman, 1987; Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Murray, 1996; Thornton, 2000).

To become truly empowered professionals, perspective teachers need a solid background in psychological and social foundations of education. As Dewey (1904/1977) notes, it is not enough for teachers to be subject matter specialists and pedagogical experts, they also must be lifelong students of “mind activity.” In other words, they need a working knowledge of educational psychology to explore the instructional potency of the content they teach. By the same token, educators need a working knowledge of social foundations to fully appreciate the cultural, political, and moral dimensions of school life: “If they are ignorant of these contextual realities, such as the need for multicultural education, the impact of poverty on learning, and the unequal distribution of goods and services within education, they will be less sensitive to issues of social justice” (Pietig, 1998, p. 105).

At Eastern Michigan University, then, we believe that prospective teachers must be compassionate individuals who are attuned to the social circumstances of their students and who have a thorough understanding of child development. At the same time, we believe that perspective teachers need to be skilled in instructional design, classroom management, and alternative forms of assessment in order to provide meaningful learning opportunities (Henson, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2004; Airisian, 2000). Finally, we believe that prospective teachers need to be adept at using emerging information technologies in order to increase student engagement, motivation, and achievement (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Johanssen et al., 2003).

Advanced Level

Like students at the initial level, students at the advanced level are expected to be knowledgeable and reflective decision-makers. In addition, we expect them to refine their skills and understand the importance of inquiry in their roles as professional educators. Inquiry may be into
their own practice, the practice of others, the conditions in the educational environment, or the larger society and its impact on education. Inquiry may be formal or informal, formative or summative, personal or impersonal. Students may carry out original research of various types, including action or teacher research, scientific research, both quantitative and qualitative, or secondary research, reviewing and analyzing the findings of others. Only by reflecting on their practice can advanced program students note its effects, ensure its appropriateness, provide for diverse perspectives, and examine moral and ethical issues. Through reflection, students recognize their biases, prejudices, and assumptions, and create environments that maximize student learning and achievement (Richardson & Placier, 2001).

Reflective inquiry also means that students in our various graduate programs must understand the research of others. They need to read, comprehend, and implement relevant findings in order to make decisions that improve their practice, the conditions of learning, and the efficacy of the educational programs in which they are involved. Advanced program students should be prepared, in many cases, to carry out their own original research studies. They should learn the basic structures of traditional quantitative research, as well as qualitative and ethnographic processes. By adopting an analytical and reflective framework, they become more objective and less biased. They can validate or refute their own intuitions and base future practice on actual data and evidence. In the long term, graduates of advanced programs should have the skills to add to the literature on best practices in education and to effect actual, long-term, constructive change in the educational institutions in the nations and around the world. (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2005)

In summary, in both our initial and advanced programs, students refine their professional knowledge, reconstruct ideas about themselves as educators, and develop a repertoire of effective professional practices. As reflective and knowledgeable decision-makers, they increase their sense of efficacy—the belief that they can provide a positive change in professional practice. In addition, at the advanced level, students learn that systematic inquiry and reflection about practice can have positive and transforming effects across the entire range of professional roles.

**Part III. Diversity and Democracy: The Social Context of Education**

Diversity in the United States is increasing across a broad spectrum of categories: socioeconomic status (with greater numbers in poverty), language, religion, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age, and exceptionalities. Banks (2008) believes this trend constitutes a "demographic imperative" that educators must hear and respond to. He argues that it is our challenge, as educators in a democratic society, to value diversity and foster equity (Banks, 2000).

And democracy, Dewey (1916) reminds us, is much more than a form of government; democracy is “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience” (p. 87). Apple and Beane (2007) concur and describe some of the conditions that must be present in order for democracies to thrive. These include an open flow of ideas; the use of critical reflection to evaluate policies; faith in the collective capacity of people to resolve problems; concern for the common good; concern for the rights of all individuals, especially minorities; and structuring social institutions to promote the democratic way of life (pp. 6-7).
This conception of democracy has many potent implications for education. For one thing, in democratic schools, diversity is not simply tolerated; it is prized, appreciated, and celebrated. For another, educators who are committed to the democratic way of life encourage a diversity of viewpoints in the classroom, teach students to think critically, and promote democratic planning at all levels in education. They also work collaboratively with others to lessen the harshness of social inequities in schools and society (Apple & Beane, 2007, pp. 9-11).

Initial Level

At the initial level, our programs emphasize the need for prospective teachers to understand the differences and similarities that exist across social, cultural, and linguistic groups of students (Banks, 1997). Knowing the social and cultural backgrounds of students, as well as their individual needs and interests, is essential for effective teaching (Salisbury & Strieker, 2004). Armour and Fernandez-Balboa (2001) note that professional educators must understand teaching as the process of making a myriad of meaningful connections among disciplines, methods, and persons. Loewenberg (2000) emphasizes the need for teachers to integrate subject matter knowledge and pedagogy in the context of their work. Teachers must reach all students, teach in multicultural settings, and work in environments where they must represent ideas in multiple ways. The ultimate goal is to help all students learn.

We agree with Zeichner et al. (1998) that multicultural perspectives should permeate teacher preparation programs and guide decisions about future program development. In brief, multicultural perspectives help prospective teachers

1. understand that teaching and learning occur in socio-political contexts based on relations of power and privilege.

2. rethink concepts of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, and ability.

3. learn about students, families, and communities, and how to use this knowledge in planning, delivering and evaluating instruction.

4. foster high expectations for all groups of students.

5. develop the commitment to be change agents who work to promote greater equity and social justice in schools and society.

We agree with Banks (2001) that prospective teachers need to acquire reflective “cultural, national, and global identifications.” They need to participate in discussions and activities that contribute to an understanding of what Banks (2008) describes as “multicultural citizenship education.”

Educating for diversity and educating for democracy are mutually reinforcing. And what, exactly, constitutes a democratic education? Cunat (1996) describes it as a curriculum integrated with “social development and social conscience: a sense that individuals can have a reflective and dynamic impact on the society around them and that individuals carry a responsibility to effect necessary social and political change” (p. 130). We want prospective teachers to develop skills that
will help them teach their students how to effectively participate in a democratic society by thinking critically, by posing creative solutions, and by problem solving. We also want prospective teachers to be skilled in cooperative learning methods where students learn the power of working together collaboratively to achieve common ends (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).

Finally, we want to assist prospective teachers identify, reflect upon, and alter any biased or undemocratic dispositions or behaviors. Candidates do this, in part, by developing informed and thoughtful positions on the role of schools in a culturally diverse democratic society and by reading, discussing, and writing about texts that promote anti-oppressive education. These materials help candidates reframe, reinterpret, and redefine their roles as teachers in a democratic society.

**Advanced Level**

At the advanced level, our purpose is to create educational leaders who--regardless of role--work with parents, students, and communities to support schooling and who work collaboratively to create practices that allow schools to function more fully as democracies. Our goal is to develop educational leaders who

1. advocate for quality teaching and learning by articulating and working to achieve a school-community's shared educational commitments (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

2. critique the way things are, explore the way life should be in moral and just communities, and stimulate action directed toward achieving the latter (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Lambert et al., 2002; Schmoker, 1999).

3. mobilize economic, political, social, and personal resources to assure that a school community achieves its shared educational commitments (Murphy, 2002).

4. appreciate the joy of learning in their lives, delight in the growth of self and others, and create practices in schools that promote the love of learning for all students (Lambert, 1998; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997).

We recognize the importance of the principal and other administrators in nurturing good teaching and improving the well-being and achievement of all students. Successful leadership is the hallmark of successful schools. We also recognize the importance of collaboration among teachers, parents, students, and others interested in school improvement. According to the National Network of Community Collaboration (1995), the fundamental purpose of collaboration is “to bring individuals and members of communities, agencies and organizations together in an atmosphere of support to systematically solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by one group alone.” While a principal or other designated leader may be ultimately responsible for a school, leadership emerges as most vibrant when responsibility is shared across the broad array of stakeholders.

In summary, what unites both our initial and advanced programs is a commitment to the twin goals of diversity and democracy in education. Our aim is to prepare educators who not only believe that diversity enriches our nation but who also assume leadership positions in tackling the stubborn inequalities in education that persist today (Nieto & Bode, 2008. p. 10). Additionally, our
aim is to help educators prepare students for active participation in democracy by nurturing critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving. We side with Banks (2008), who argues “schools should be reformed so that they can implement a transformative and critical conception of citizenship education that will enhance educational equality for all students” (p. 6).

References


Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), www.ascd.org.


