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The Service of Democratic Education

Linda Darling-Hammond | May 21, 2011

At the commencement ceremony for Columbia University's Teachers College on May 18, Stanford education professor Linda Darling-Hammond—a nationally renowned leader in education reform and former education adviser to Barack Obama's presidential campaign—was awarded the Teachers College medal for distinguished service. Professor Darling-Hammond marked the occasion by delivering the following address:

I could not be more honored than to be awarded this recognition from Teachers College, one of the places of all those I know in the world that holds the tightest grip on my heart and best represents my values and beliefs. Thank you for this recognition—and, more important, thank you, Teachers College faculty, trustees, students and graduates, for who and what you are.

My first real glimpse of what Teachers College is and does occurred not in New York City but in a school in Washington, DC, where one of my children had transferred into a first grade classroom to avoid the truly terrible teaching that was literally undermining her health in another school. In her new school, Elena's teacher, Miss Leslie, had created a wonderland of stimulating opportunities for learning: children experimenting and investigating in the classroom and the community, designing and conducting projects, writing and publishing their own little stories (one that my daughter wrote after the birth of her little brother was entitled "Send Him Back"). This teacher—who was in her very first year of practice—not only had created a classroom that any mother would want to send her child to, but she also had the skillful eye and knowledge base to figure out within weeks that Elena was severely dyslexic, to teach her to read without her ever being labeled or stigmatized, and to instill in my daughter a lifelong love of books and learning that has led to her being a literacy teacher working with special needs students today.

One day, I asked Miss Leslie how she had learned to do this miraculous work as a brand-new teacher. And she told me that she had learned to be this kind of teacher at Teachers College, Columbia University. She listed the courses she took in the Curriculum and Teaching department and the Special Education program that built her knowledge base and described what she learned with intensive supervision in a carefully designed clinical placement. It was then that I knew that a profession of teaching was possible, and I learned much more about what is possible in building a profession from my colleagues here and in our partner schools when I later came to teach at TC. I became persuaded that policy-makers needed to understand how to enable all educators to acquire

the knowledge and skills that could truly allow all children to learn—rather than to try, as so many have, to manage teaching through mind-numbing, and ultimately futile, prescriptions for practice.

Teachers College has, for more than a century, represented the heartbeat of the education profession in the United States and our deepest aspirations for a democratic system of education. When TC was founded by Grace Dodge in 1887 as the New York School for the Training of Teachers, it was intended to provide a new kind of schooling for the teachers of the poor in New York City, one that combined a humanitarian concern for helping others with a scientific approach to human development and learning. At that time, when most teachers had little more than a high school education (and were frequently taught primarily to follow scripted textbooks that were popular at the time), TC teachers—a group of extraordinary women and men of all races, who came from all parts of the country—were earning masters degrees and were prepared for a research-based practice that was informed by the educational research also planted in the college: in psychology and sociology, in the content areas and in pedagogy. They, along with administrators and researchers in training, were also expected to develop a deep understanding of the history, philosophy and purposes of education and to be grounded in a set of strong values and ethics that guide all professionals.

Then, as now, the creation of truly professional educators was subversive business. As scientific managers were looking to make schools “efficient” in the early twentieth century—to manage schools with more tightly prescribed curriculum, more teacher-proof texts, more extensive testing, and more rules and regulations—they consciously sought to hire less well-educated teachers who would work for low wages and would go along with the new regime of prescribed lessons and pacing schedules without protest. In a book widely used for teacher training at that time, the need for “unquestioned obedience” was stressed as the “first rule of efficient service” for teachers.

No wonder that obedience was prized, when the scientific managers’ time and motion studies resulted in findings like the fact that some eighth grade classes did addition “at the rate of 35 combinations per minute” while others could “add at an average rate of 105 combinations per minute”—thus schools were to set the standard at 65 combinations per minute at 94 percent accuracy. One speaker at an NEA meeting in 1914 observed that there were “so many efficiency engineers running hand cars through the school houses in most large cities that the grade school teachers can hardly turn around in their rooms without butting into two or three of them.”

During that decade, precisely 100 years ago, nationally distributed tests of arithmetic, handwriting and English were put into use. Their results were used to compare students, teachers and schools; to report to the public; and even to award merit pay—a short-lived innovation due to the many problems it caused.

Does any of this sound familiar?

In the view of these brilliant managerial engineers, professionally trained teachers were considered troublesome, because they had their own ideas about education and frequently didn’t go along meekly with the plan.

As one such teacher wrote in *The American Teacher* in 1912:

We have yielded to the arrogance of "big business men" and have accepted their criteria of efficiency at their own valuation, without question. We have consented to measure the results of educational efforts in terms of price and product—the terms that prevail in the factory and the department store. But education, since it deals in the first place with human organisms, and in the second place with individualities, is not analogous to a standardizable manufacturing process. Education must measure its efficiency not in terms of so many promotions per dollar of expenditure, nor even in terms of so many student-hours per dollar of salary; it must measure its efficiency in terms of increased humanism, increased power to do, increased capacity to appreciate.

Sounds suspiciously like John Dewey and Maxine Greene, doesn't it?

While the scientific managers' foolishness was creating a stranglehold on schools under the banner of education reform, TC teachers, school leaders and professors (ranging from John Dewey to William Heard Kilpatrick to George Counts and more) were creating progressive schools in which students engaged in intellectual inquiry, hands-on projects and activity-based curriculum—guided by an understanding of child development, the new sciences of learning and emerging practices of pedagogy. These schools practiced democracy in action and provided a counterpoint to the factory model schooling that Dewey called “mechanical, dull, uninteresting, and hardly educative in any meaningful sense.”

Then as now, TC graduates set the standard. Highly educated and deeply committed, you and your colleagues have gone out to plant the ideals of democratic, progressive education as leaders in schools, colleges and governments all around the world. TC has always represented what a profession is meant to foster: 1) a strong ethical commitment to serve clients well—in the case of education, to make decisions based on what is best for students, not what is cheapest, easiest or most expedient; 2) mastery of a common body of knowledge and skills—and a commitment to always seek more and better knowledge to meet students' needs (and oh, how I love that magical moment at TC when the doors fly open at around 4 pm and thousands of dedicated educators from all over New York, and even New Jersey and Connecticut, swarm into the building with such a thirst for professional knowledge to serve their students more fully); and 3) a commitment to define, transmit and enforce standards of practice—a community that pledges to work together to “do the right thing,” as Spike Lee put it.

That commitment is more important now than ever before. We live in a nation that is on the verge of forgetting its children. The United States now has a far higher poverty rate for children than any other industrialized country (25 percent, nearly double what it was thirty years ago); a more tattered safety net—more who are homeless, without healthcare and without food security; a more segregated and inequitable system of public education (a 10:1 ratio in spending across the country); a larger and more costly system of incarceration than any country in the world, including China (5 percent of the world's population and 25 percent of its inmates), one that is now directly cutting into the money we should be spending on education; a defense budget larger than that of the next twenty countries combined; and greater disparities in wealth than any other leading country (the wealthiest 1 percent of individuals control 25 percent of the resources in the country; in New York City, the wealthiest 1 percent control 46 percent of the wealth and are taxed at a lower level than in the last sixty years). Our leaders do not talk about these things. They simply say of poor children,

“Let them eat tests.”

And while there is lots of talk of international test score comparisons, there is too little talk about what high-performing countries actually do: fund schools equitably; invest in high-quality preparation, mentoring and professional development for teachers and leaders, completely at government expense; organize a curriculum around problem-solving and critical-thinking skills; and test students rarely — and never with multiple-choice tests. (Indeed, the top-performing nations increasingly rely on school-based assessments of learning that include challenging projects, investigations and performances, much like what leading educators have created here in the many innovative New York public schools.)

Meanwhile, the profession of teaching and our system of public education are under siege from another wave of scientific managers, who have forgotten that education is about opening minds to inquiry and imagination, not stuffing them like so many dead turkeys — that teaching is about enabling students to make sense of their experience, to use knowledge for their own ends, and to learn to learn, rather than to spend their childhoods bubbling in Scantron sheets to feed the voracious data banks that govern ever more decisions from the bowels of the bureaucracy.

These new scientific managers, like those of a century ago, prefer teachers with little training — who will come and go quickly, without costing much money, without vesting in the pension system and without raising many questions about an increasingly prescriptive system of testing and teaching that lines the pockets of private entrepreneurs (who provide teacher-proofed materials deemed necessary, by the way, in part because there are so many underprepared novices who leave before they learn to teach). Curriculum mandates and pacing guides that would “choke a horse,” as one teacher put it, threaten to replace the opportunities for teachable moments that expert teachers know how to create with their students.

The new scientific managers, like the Franklin Bobbitts before them, like to rank and sort students, teachers and schools — rewarding those at the top and punishing those at the bottom, something that the highest-achieving countries not only don’t do but often forbid. The present-day Bobbitts would create “efficiencies” by firing teachers and closing schools, while issuing multimillion-dollar contracts for testing and data systems to create more graphs, charts and report cards on which to rank and sort... well, just about everything.

And the new scientific managers cleverly construct systems that solve the problem of the poor by blaming the teachers and schools that seek to serve them, calling the deepening levels of severe poverty an “excuse,” rewarding schools that keep out and push out the highest-need students, and threatening those who work with new immigrant students still learning English and the growing number of those who are homeless, without healthcare or food security. Are there lower scores in under-resourced schools with high-need students? Fire the teachers and the principals. Close the schools. Don’t look for supports for their families and communities, equitable funding for public schools or investments in professional learning. Don’t worry about the fact that the next schools are — as researchers have documented — likely to do no better. This is the equivalent of deciding that if the banks are failing, we should fire the tellers. (And whatever you do, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.)

But public education has a secret weapon—a Trojan horse, if you will: the members of the profession like yourselves who have mastered a strong body of professional knowledge, who hold a strong ethic of care and who are determined to transmit this knowledge and this commitment to others throughout the education system.

At Teachers College are those who are leading the fight for more equitable funding for public schools (and who won a major victory in New York state); there are those who are leading the efforts to create more thoughtful and creative curriculum and instructional strategies; and who are developing more effective teacher and leadership education and professional development.

Among those of you who are graduating are many who have created and will create more exciting and empowering schools for children; more useful and appropriate assessments of learning; and more just and humane policies to guide a system focused on learning, not selecting and sorting, rewarding and punishing. You will do this in the strong professional communities you have created here at TC and in your work in the field. You will carry on the work of building a profession that serves democratic education—one that provides for all children what the best and wisest parent wants for his or her child, as John Dewey put it.

Many of you have arrived here today with significant debt and at considerable personal sacrifice. But you are here because of the work to which you have committed your lives, and because you know that it is the right thing to do.

And doing the right thing—meeting that professional commitment—is not easy. Whether it is standing up for a child who is mistreated, or finding the energy to go that extra mile to reach out to a troubled parent, or taking up a challenging issue in the research, or taking on a difficult concern in the public discourse, doing the right thing is often hard. As King reminded us:

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

Take heart in knowing that the arc of history is long, as King noted, but it bends toward justice. Take courage in knowing that where a community of hands comes together to work toward justice, a freedom seed will grow. And take pride in knowing, when the work is challenging and setbacks come—as they must when anything important is happening—that you are building a better future for every child and family and community you touch. And remember, as Robert F. Kennedy observed:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.

Thank you for each and every time you do what is right for our children and for each ripple of hope you create. Thank you for your courage and your commitment. And thank you for spreading the spirit of Teachers College. Keep your hand on the plow.... Hold on!

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