Teaching and Teacher Education 26 (2010) 1077–1087

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Is this what we want them to say? Examining the tensions in what U.S. preservice teachers say about risk and academic achievement

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 April 2008
Received in revised form
29 September 2009
Accepted 4 November 2009

Keywords:
Preservice teachers
Multicultural education
Teacher beliefs and knowledge
Academic achievement
At-risk students

ABSTRACT

Questions abound in the U.S. based teacher education literature about the kind of knowledge teachers should possess about learning and academic achievement that will enable them to provide all students with an equitable, effective schooling experience. This article examines how a group of preservice teachers—enrolled in a teacher education program that challenges deficit thinking—understand and talk about academic achievement, paying particular attention to the extent to which the candidates account for academic achievement and recognize potential academic risk. Based on the paradoxical stability and tentativeness of teacher candidates' talk about risk, academic achievement and the deployment of the "at-risk" category, I suggest the need to illuminate the complex body of knowledge that informs teacher candidates' understanding, particularly the knowledge deployed in teacher education curriculum.

1. Introduction

One of the burning and on-going questions in U.S. based teacher education is how to best prepare teachers to teach all students effectively and equitably (Banks, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Gay, 2000; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; U.S. Department of Education. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). To reach this goal, teacher educators and schools of education faculty introduce their students to approaches on schooling and teaching that fall under a myriad of descriptors including: critical pedagogy (Bartolomé, 2004; Milner, 2003), multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Sleeter & Grant, 2006[1986]), teaching for social justice (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998), equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995), and culturally relevant/responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2001).

While these perspectives differ in some respects, what is common to each of them is the assumption that teachers must believe that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, are capable learners who can achieve at high levels. As well, there is an assumption that teachers should not draw from perspectives rooted in, nor engage in deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) about students that places blame for low academic achievement on students or their families. Given this concern, one might ask: What kind of knowledge do teachers need to possess about learning and academic achievement that will make it possible for them to provide all students with an effective and equitable schooling experience? And perhaps more importantly, how would teachers talk about the knowledge they hold concerning these issues?

It is not uncommon across different education settings to hear people discuss and to some extent, even feel confident in their ability to decide what makes one student less or more likely than another to perform well academically. I have found this a curious undertaking because, often, the idea of risk—or the assumption that some students face the possible *loss* of academic learning is fundamental to these discussions. In this paper I present the findings from a study that explored how preservice teachers in the final stages of their certification program talk about, understand, and use the signifier of risk and the category of the "at-risk" student.[1] This exploration took seriously the idea that knowledge and discourse frame how education stakeholders, or those individuals who possess a vested interest in education concerns, make sense of and act in response to academic achievement. Indeed, based on the expressed paradoxical stability and tentativeness of teacher candidates' talk about risk, academic achievement and the deployment of the "at-risk" category, I later argue for the necessity to investigate and illuminate the complex body of knowledge that stands to inform teacher candidates' thinking on these issues—particularly the knowledge deployed in teacher education curriculum.

[1] When using the term signifier, I am acknowledging the perspective that risk—as a viable perspective—may shift with regards to how individuals use and understand its meaning over different temporal and spatial contexts (Derrida, 1976).

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doi:10.1016/j.tate.2009.11.003

2. What is risk and what makes it possible?

While authors generally acknowledge that the specific etymology of the word risk is unknown (Luhmann, 1993), there is agreement that during the middle ages in Europe, the term risk had significant application in the navigation and trade fields. The concept of risk, then, in a historical sense as well as in a contemporary context, evokes the ideas of uncertainty, potential damage and loss of something of value (Kelly, 2000). Yet, it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that modern European and Northern American societies viewed risk as something to be actively avoided or at a minimum managed. Prior to this time, concerns with uncertainty and hazard in nature were often understood as uncontrollable, as acts of a wrathful or a benevolent God. However, with the advent and use of new scientific laws of probability, the notions of normalcy and deviance introduced a particular way to understand and intervene on humans and the social world (Hacking, 1990). This system of reason made it possible to assume that certain people, behaviour, and experiences were normal and deviant on the basis of "scientific calculations" of probability. Hacking (1990) states:

> Such social and personal laws were to be a matter of probabilities, of chances. Statistical in nature, these laws were nonetheless inexorable; they could even be self-regulating. People are normal if they conform to the central tendency of such laws, while those at the extremes are pathological. Few of us fancy being pathological, so 'most of us' try to make ourselves normal, which in turn affects what is normal. (p. 2)

In this sense, normalcy was (and continues to be) based upon certain socially and scientifically acceptable beliefs about probability that prior to the nineteenth century, Western European scholars did not acknowledge as rational or useful. What is normal (or deviant) emerges not from some inherently static or deterministic category of people, behaviours, or things —since prior to the nineteenth century, Western European scholars did not acknowledge beliefs about probability as useful or rational. Rather, the ideas of normality and risk reflect specific practices and beliefs that are culturally sanctioned as both scientific and necessary (Foucault, 1980; Hacking, 1990, 2002; Rose, 1999).

2.1. Concerns about focusing on risk and teaching in the US

Concerns about potential student academic risk and academic achievement are not novel in the U.S. or abroad. At the level of public policy and in teacher education, authors working in the U.S. context, as well as across the globe (e.g., Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, UK) have acknowledged the way society and schools position certain students as in need of targeted, special treatment and intervention (Bessant, Hil, & Watts, 2003; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Gobbo, 2006; Gordon, 2006; Kelly, 2000; Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich, & Chapman, 2009; Stringfield & Land, 2002; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Umar, 2006; Wishart, Taylor, & Shultz, 2006). In the case of the U.S., educators and school systems have faced the challenge of effectively educating all students within the public school context. Whether these discussions targeted "city," "urban," "suburban" or "rural" schools, this discourse has sought to remedy the problems related to ineffective schooling for learners who too often and problematically become positioned in mainstream societal and school discourse as somehow different from the "average" student.

The primary method used to meet such students' needs is situated in what I term a *risk discourse* that tries to identify and intervene on specific students perceived as more likely than their peers to experience problems within the school environment. Historians Barry Franklin and Larry Cuban suggest that since the early twentieth century discourses of "risk" lead to the creation and use of categories to help education stakeholders first clearly identify and later intervene on students believed to have special academic needs.

Over this time period numerous categories have emerged to define and name potentially low achieving students including "backward children" (Richman, 1906), "educationally retarded" (Perry, 1914), "culturally deprived" (Riessman, 1962), "educationally deprived" (Clark et al., 1972), "educationally disadvantaged" (Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1965), and after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the term "at-risk" has served as the most recent category of use. Interestingly, however, while it is important to point out that the specific use of the category and term "at-risk" became a popular way to describe students assumed likely to experience low academic achievement after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the fundamental signifier of risk informing this term, as well as the methods used to categorize students as such has existed since the earliest stages of compulsory public schooling in the U.S.

When addressing the idea of risk as it relates specifically to students and their academic achievement, there is no absolute or definitive agreement across the educational literature or popular discourse as to what causes risk, where risk originates, or if and how educators and policy makers should attempt to address students in danger of academic risk (Stringfield & Land, 2002). However, it is clear that prior to the use of the term "at-risk" to describe potentially low achieving students in schools, "risk" as a construct emerged in the fields of psychopathology, psychiatry, and the newly emerging, developmental psychopathology (Rutter, 1987). "Risk" in this context was a statistical term used to help identify children who were presumed more likely than their peers to develop illness (Musick, Scott, Goldman, & Cohler, 1987). Some authors suggest that with its transmission into the education field, "at-risk" technically refers to and should be used to identify populations of students who possess a higher likelihood than other students of experiencing low academic achievement (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Vacha & McLaughlin, 1992). Here, the focus is on identifying those factors seemingly related to low academic achievement, as well as the population of students who come in closest proximity to those risk factors.

Not surprisingly then, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, it has become common (Land & Legters, 2002; Placier, 1996) and controversial for educational sites to refer to some students as "at-risk". In the case of the latter, authors suggest this term draws from earlier categories used by educators to mark low achieving students as deficient and incapable of learning at high levels (Cuban, 1989; Swadener, 1995; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Valencia, 1997).

The extant literature in teaching and teacher education highlight two specific problems associated with the practice of categorizing students in education. The first is that when engaging in this process (either formally or informally) education stakeholders often hold lower learning expectations for those students categorized as "at-risk" (or any other moniker that denotes special need and/or intervention—e.g., culturally disadvantaged) for low academic achievement (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2003; Ferguson, 2003; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Winfield, 1986). The second is that it is common that both preservice and inservice teachers to presume that students categorized as "at-risk" experience low achievement because of deficits found in the students, or their families and communities (Bryan & Atwater, 2002; Olmedo, 1997). In this instance, there is often little recognition of the ways that institutional practices and inequities—at the level of the society, schools, curricula and/or teaching practices play a vital role in the student learning and achievement processes. In the case of the latter concern, critiques additionally point to the larger cultural