
Urban Teacher Education through a Lasallian Lens: Community Partners, Dispositions, and Answering the Call

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Introduction

In his introduction to the inaugural issue of *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Superior General Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echevarría, FSC, called upon Lasallian higher education as a whole to consider the tensions present in developing programs with educational excellence alongside our heritage of service to the poor, and to find pathways forward which allow rich crossover between the two, dimming neither in service to its counterpart. Brother Álvaro particularly tasked departments of education at Lasallian colleges and universities as key players in this pathfinding, naming a responsibility of

contributing to the dignification and professionalization of the teaching profession, and that not just for the teachers of our Lasallian works but of the systems of the public schools . . . We ought to be recognized as those who best promote and defend the teaching profession and the pastoral apostolate for youth that is not disconnected from social reality. This recognition should bring us to cooperation with the dioceses, the unions, the political parties, and other groups that promote education and youth ministry, especially for the poor, for displaced persons and the marginalized (2009).

Brother Álvaro herein issued a direct call to action for departments of education to draw upon their resources, to take the programs of study that they have carefully built up to academic excellence, and to seek local partners in youth education with whom to enact Lasallian principles in service to those most in need, thereby resolving to some degree the tensions between whether to prioritize excellence in education or service to the poor and social justice advocacy.

Internal discussions of the department of education at Manhattan College, a Lasallian institution of higher education, in the spring of 2018 were circling around just the types of issues Brother Álvaro called upon his audience to consider. Our program of undergraduate teacher preparation had a long history of successfully developing P-12 teachers who left Manhattan College and parlayed their strong academic foundations into teaching careers, but we wondered if we couldn't lean harder into our Lasallian traditions in greater service to the vibrant, diverse, and in many cases high needs, educational communities surrounding our campus in the Bronx section of the city of New York.

The Bronx is New York City's northernmost borough and while it has experienced steady growth in recent years in real estate value and number of businesses, it still lags behind other New York City boroughs in terms of the economic realities of its residents. Bronx residents in 2015 reported the lowest median income of the five boroughs (US Census Bureau, 2015)² with household poverty rates and child poverty rates far exceeding citywide averages. Between 1980

and 2017, the Bronx's population increased by 26%, driven by an increase in immigrants who now make up 37% of the total borough population ("An Economic Snapshot of the Bronx," 2018). Additional internal migration of city residents to the Bronx has been spurred by both a ubiquitous sense of the Bronx being New York City's last remaining affordable borough coupled with building gentrification in historically depressed communities. As a result of these and other factors, population density within the borough is growing, with children under 18 years of age making up $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total number of Bronx residents, a larger share than any other borough, necessitating Bronx public schools to operate at 105% of capacity ("An Economic Snapshot of the Bronx," 2018).

To begin exploring opportunities for our department to be of greater service within the evolving diversity and unique needs of our local community, the department of education at Manhattan College reached out to the leadership of Bronx Community School District 10 (CSD 10) and requested a meeting. One of six school districts in the Bronx, CSD 10 serves the northwest section of the borough in which Manhattan College's campus is situated. In our exploratory conversations, superintendents from the district expressed interest in a partnership that would allow their schools to host our preservice teachers in capacities as tutors, observers, assistants, and student teachers. For our part, we were enthusiastic about the myriad opportunities such a partnership would offer in terms of giving our students access to a diverse array of settings and classroom experiences, allowing formative practice in the reality of modern urban education, and building solid preparation for urban employment.

CSD 10 in the 2017-2018 school year serviced 52,462 students across 87 total schools ("NYC GEOG DIST #10: Bronx at a Glance," 2019). CSD 10 is a microcosm of New York City in its diversity. Boasting some of the highest performing public schools in the entire Bronx County, if not New York City as a whole, CSD 10 also ranks #5 out of 32 New York City school districts in the highest percentage of students experiencing homelessness, with 8,557 students in CSD 10 identified as experiencing homelessness during the 2014-2015 school year, according to the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. Additionally, in 2018, 22% of the district's students were classified as English Language Learners while 85% met criteria for economic disadvantage ("NYC GEOG DIST #10: Bronx Enrollment, 2017-2018). All of these factors make District 10 a prime site for future educators to explore best practices for addressing issues of equity in education.

Sending Manhattan College teacher education students to District 10 schools was not a novel concept, as our students had been observing and student teaching in CSD 10 schools for years. The different approach we were moving toward was minimizing non-public school placements and expanding our radius within the public school district, assigning our students to schools farther from our campus, which by and large meant to schools serving higher needs Bronx students, which drew from households earning significantly less in average household income, and in some cases, schools which were shown through New York City school report card data to have far greater numbers of first generation and English Language Learner students and lower proficiency scores on state Math and ELA tests.

In seeking to move our program in this direction, we were undertaking the challenge that Brother Álvaro laid out in his 2009 remarks, considering

tensions between a neutral posture in our educational endeavors and another posture that would take definite political positions. Between shared mission and “our” mission . . . between teaching as a profession and teaching as a vocation . . . between serving poor families by preference and serving more well-to-do families (2009).

Considering the pride we felt in the academic knowledge our preservice teachers were acquiring, we believed that our Lasallian mission called upon us to use that burgeoning knowledge to serve not just the educational community, but in fact the educational community that was most in need of a pipeline of committed and informed, engaged educators. Indeed, Brother Álvaro asked that

professors and students, as well as researchers, do not live their faith in a bubble. They grow toward an adult faith, one that makes commitments, that strives to understand its peoples, the mentalities and the economic, social and political structures of the country and of the world

and reminded us that

we look for authentic solutions for structural problems, collaborating whenever possible with other groups and institutions that are pursuing the same ends (2009).

To this end, moving to see ourselves as a departmental whole, as being potentially of service to the local and diverse communities surrounding us, we turned to the scholarship on best practices of community based learning (CBL), sometimes referred to as academic service learning (ASL), for insight into how to proceed with humility and confidence. Pairing teacher education programming with the theoretical groundwork of CBL helps to move the focus from

solely transmitting knowledge to creating dynamic learning opportunities for students to experience real-world situations so they can develop the skills and competencies necessary to navigate a changing and unpredictable world (Tietjen, 2016).

CBL practice also emphasizes reciprocity and cultural humility, two cornerstones upon which our department wanted to build our relationship with CSD 10.

“Service-learning advocates . . . a need for knowledge to be co-created with (rather than for) the community” (d’Arlach, Sanchez, Feuer, 2009). With this basic tenet in mind, the department of education at Manhattan College hosted a needs assessment meeting and listening session for the leadership of CSD 10, welcoming 31 principals and assistant principals as well as three superintendents to campus for the express purpose of finding out what their self-defined needs were at the school level, what initiatives for which we might offer support, and their overarching goals in terms of not only curriculum but school climate, culture, and future hiring. In this way, we were cognizant that

the sustainability of community partnerships with higher education institutions requires attention to their motivations and perceptions of the benefits of the partners from their own perspective (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Rather than simply putting out a request to send our students into district classrooms with the blind belief that their presence on its own would be helpful, we sought to understand the local landscape and tailor any welcome placements to the context of each particular school. With recognition of the unique designs present in each possible community partner, we tried to avoid a circumstance warned about by Bingle, Games, and Malloy (1999) when they noted that academics generally view knowledge “as residing in specialized experts”; we framed our presentation to the district leadership around our belief that our students had strong theoretical foundations in the practice of teaching but also a tremendous amount to learn from the school communities and that we wanted guidance in determining the best means of reciprocally offering benefits to those communities.

In 1989, The Johnson Foundation, after consultation with more than 70 organizations interested in service and learning, released their document entitled “Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning” in which they emphasized effective service learning programs as being those who “allow for those with needs to define those needs” and “commit to program participation by and with diverse populations” (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989). In our planning for partnership with CSD 10, we referred to their work and tempered eagerness with circumspection so as to develop programming that was respectful of all stakeholders and that was continuously informed by all as well.

Many local schools, as expressed by their principals and assistant principals, stood to benefit from the additional hands on deck that our preservice teachers would offer, ready to put them to use in facilitating small groups, providing one-to-one attention, and helping to keep instruction moving by improving the student-to-adult ratio in the classroom. In addition to this anticipated level of interaction, principals also informed us about the need for our educators in training to be versed in the theory and practice of Social and Emotional Learning as well as best practices for Culturally Responsive Teaching, with nearly 75% of respondents on our needs assessment noting these as areas of interest. This widespread interest tied in to CRT and SEL being defined as key priorities district-wide for the 2018-2019 school year (“Our District Priorities,” 2018). As we learned more about district priorities and future plans, we took notes for departmental discussion of how and if we could best meet these community-defined needs.

Internal conversations between Manhattan College education colleagues after initial meetings with CSD 10 centered around what practices and funds of knowledge we already possessed which we could leverage for the benefit of local schools and what areas we could feasibly adapt to better suit community-expressed needs. We pored over our undergraduate course listings and tagged particular courses that offered “best fits” for local schools, such as an undergraduate elementary literacy course whose students could be placed in a district school making a concerted push toward raising literacy scores within its population as well as an undergraduate adolescent literacy course which focused on emergent bilingualism and whose students could be placed in a district high school with a newcomer program servicing exclusively immigrant students with less than one year in the country. To our way of thinking, such placements would not only bring needed human resources to the classrooms, but would, significantly for our academic and teacher preparation purposes, offer our students

opportunities to apply learning to “real world” situations, to develop a sophisticated understanding of community goals, processes, and current issues, and to grow as individuals (Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003).

In seeking to pay attention to what Brother Luke Salm, FSC, reiterated as the key characteristics of Lasallian education, including an emphasis on the practical and a sensitivity to social needs (2017), we also examined our course content in light of the feedback received about the needs of local P-12 students and we found areas where gaps in our teacher preparation program could be filled. One example of this was a targeted attention to social and emotional learning which the district had named a key pillar of their faculty and staff professional development. In their own way, the district was seeking to employ what the Jesuit tradition names “cura personalis” or an attention to the whole person. Research suggests that poorly developed social-emotional skills are related to

undesirable outcomes such as dropping out of school and the development of mental health problems as adults . . . [while] well developed social-emotional skills are associated with positive outcomes such as academic competence and self-confidence (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006).

Accepting this, it becomes eminently practical to tackle instruction in these skills as a means of improving outcomes for all students. We have begun to adjust course curriculum to include training in explicit social-emotional instruction for our undergraduate students. Similarly, with an understanding of the rising local emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, and its explicit focus on “building underserved students’ cognitive resources as a strategy [for] closing the achievement gap” (Hammond, 2015), we sought inroads to expanding coverage of such frameworks in our methods courses for preservice teachers. These adjustments and additions to our teacher education program content were not made only to benefit the students of our local district, but in keeping with the Lasallian focus on practicality, they also better position graduates of our teacher education program to be job ready which will benefit them when their professional credentials are in hand and they leave campus life for full time positions as educators.

Brother Álvaro posited that Lasallian education

should be recognized for knowing how to combine academic excellence with the social and political reality in which we live, in ways that permit our students to better understand the problems of structure and to know how to find solutions for the same. All the academic courses, or at least a significant core of the curriculum, should be characterized by that connection, including a component of direct service to the poor, in such a way that the students may not only grasp the key concepts of those courses but also understand their implications in urban, national and international life (2009).

With this in mind, we are seeking outcomes for our preservice students that do more than just facilitate reciprocal service and improve graduates’ job placement statistics. We are also mindfully taking programmatic steps that are designed to build in our undergraduate student teacher dispositions that include the embrace of culturally responsive pedagogy, respect for all

students, and acknowledgement that racial and cultural diversity create funds of knowledge rather than deficits.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2001) provides the following explanation of dispositions: dispositions are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities that affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions, according to the NCATE, are steered by attitudes and beliefs related to values like caring, honesty, fairness, empathy, respectfulness, responsibility, and thoughtfulness (Almerico, et al., 2011). It is the responsibility of all teacher education programs to pay attention to the dispositions of preservice educators, ensuring that cultural competence is taught and that dignity for all students and families is emphasized. At the same time, our additional calling as Lasallians makes it incumbent upon our program to cultivate dispositions which not only claim but exhibit empathy for and solidarity with the least advantaged students. We are operating with the belief that "preparing teachers who are responsive to the student populations that schools have historically left behind is imperative" (Villegas, 2007). To this end, we agree with the argument that "dispositions are tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs" (Villegas, 2007) and our expanded fieldwork model will give our students more opportunities to work with a greater diversity of P-12 students and in a wider range of settings. Additionally, our faculty will have opportunities to assess preservice teachers' dispositions with regard to issues of equity and cultural awareness. This opportunity is significant because although we attend to issues of social justice and sensitivity in our coursework, research shows that many

prospective teachers enter teacher education believing cultural diversity is a problem to be overcome and that students of color are deficient in some fundamental way (Villegas, 2007).

Problematic as this position is, it can only be mediated if faced head on in a concerted, program-wide effort to give preservice teachers robust opportunities to work with diverse populations under careful mentorship, supported by coursework and field debriefs in which supervising instructors and practitioners can emphasize not only the best practices of culturally responsive teaching but also the thoughtful confrontation of personal racial and ethnic biases when they surface.

The academic year 2018-2019 was the first test for our new fieldwork model at Manhattan College. Throughout this year we will be collecting data not only from our community partners to assess their satisfaction with our efforts to work together with their students and staff but also from our own undergraduate faculty and staff to understand whether these initiatives are moving the dial for stakeholders and of course to make adjustments where needed in order to keep moving towards meeting the call that has been set for us as Lasallian educators in the modern age.

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Endnotes

1. Kerri Mulqueen, who is an assistant professor of education at Manhattan College, earned her doctorate degree at Saint John's University in New York City.

2. Although this journal usually requires that all citations use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) format, an exception has been made in this issue to allow citations to be made using the American Psychological Association (APA) format.