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The National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum: Developing Teachers as Sources of Systemic Inquiry & Transformation

Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style

People who wonder whether students are fairly treated and challenged in school may take heart from a program which helps teachers to welcome and respond to all children in class and to deal with students sensitively with regard to complex identity matters such as race and gender. The National S.E.E.D. Project on Inclusive Curriculum (Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity) prepares teachers to lead year-long seminars in their own schools, reflecting on their own practices.

How can teachers become more attentive, in an astute and informed way, to students of all races and both sexes? In monthly seminar meetings held throughout a school year, teachers create a space to reflect on what they are doing, or can do better, to deal fairly and openly with students in all their diversity. But this is far easier said than done.

Teachers require a stretch of adult development themselves in order to deal complexly with diversity. Before we became co-directors of the SEED Project, we taught in Grades 6 - 12 as well as in college and university. We ourselves had very debilitating schooling in matters of gender, race, culture, manners, money, power, and belonging and not-belonging. To better understand what we learned, or didn't learn, we, with other teachers, have needed to do serious self-searching. Therefore, one key idea in the SEED Project, which we founded twelve years ago, is: **Unless we as teachers re-open our own backgrounds to look anew at how we were schooled to deal with diversity and connection, we will be unable to create school climates and curriculum which more adequately do this for and with students.**

For this reason, teachers bring their own lives into the SEED Project. During the summer week in which we prepare teachers to lead seminars in their own school settings, we model over 50 "interactivities" which make teachers' own life texts one of the key resources for their own adult development. Our process of eliciting teachers' own stories is designed to help teachers take seriously the "textbooks" of all lives, most particularly those of their students as well as their own. This process takes time.

A SEED seminar lasts for nine months. One meeting may seed a new recognition or connection; by the next month, that recognition or connection may be joined by others. By the third month, a too-easy formulation may be unpacked and a more nuanced way of thinking takes shape. By the fourth month, a teacher may find that she or he is seeing

many children in her or his class/es differently. By the fifth month, the teacher may have new versions of (his or her own) stories to tell, and new recognition of how seldom students or teachers are enabled, engaged, and deeply encouraged in the educational setting of the school. Questions come forth from a deeper and wider place within the SEED seminar participant. What can be done differently to address, engage, and elicit the core learning centers of each teacher and each student? How can the mind/heart be challenged in school, and balanced attention be given to one's own experiences and the experiences of others?

Therefore, we state as a second key idea of the SEED Project: **Intellectual and personal faculty development, supported over time, is needed if today's schools are to enable students and teachers to develop a balance of self-esteem and respect for the cultural realities of others.**

We designed the SEED seminar model to be school-based and led by teachers themselves because we think that too often the classroom teacher is treated in professional development as passive, in need of being acted upon (fixed) by outside forces. If teachers are to take students seriously, then the teachers themselves need to experience firsthand and learn what it feels like to be taken seriously. And for many, strange as it may seem, this has seldom happened. Despite educators' quoting of Socrates' phrase "Know Thyself," most schooling does not encourage deep self-knowledge. At best, Socrates' phrase translates into "Develop some personal opinions" or "Realize that you are a citizen of the democratic United States," but not "Develop informed awareness how you are situated in the worlds of power, knowledge-making, agency, possibility, creativity, resources, people, places, and things."

We observe that both teachers and students have a lot of unarticulated knowledge which they do not know as "knowledge" . And though teachers can sometimes enable competence which they themselves do not have, it is good to confirm their sense of personal authority before asking that they do this for students. So a third key idea of the SEED Project is: **Teachers and other school personnel are the authorities on their own experience. Only if teachers are put at the center of the process of growth and development can they, in turn, put students' growth and development at the center of their classrooms.** What we call "faculty-centered faculty development" parallels student-centered learning. And the development of either requires discipline of kinds that most of us were never taught, such as understanding what is "playing out" in the power divisions of classrooms and learning to exercise a degree of constructive control which fosters and insists that there be a balanced learning environment for all.

For the monthly meetings of a SEED seminar, many and varied materials are selected. Though we give all leaders a small library of resources, we leave it up to each leader to match the year's discussions to the school's context and the group of teachers who enroll. No two seminars are alike in the readings, activities, videos, meals, and discussions. But

some conceptual frameworks are needed to help participants see systemically. We offer some of our own writings and many by others for seminar leaders to consider using.

Some questions we ask are: What would curriculum and pedagogy look like if all the diverse lives of women and girls were seen as co-central with all the diverse lives of men and boys? And how can curriculum and teaching methods provide, in the metaphors of Emily Style, both windows into others' experiences and mirrors of each student's own reality and validity?

A fourth key SEED idea is: **Group discussion of interlocking systems of over-advantage and oppression, and of the research on "separated knowing" and "connected knowing," can support teachers and administrators in shaping the school curriculum to become more gender-fair and multiculturally equitable.**

The use of conceptual frames which address power inequities in the society is necessary to compensate for the scattered and incoherent state of much teacher training. Within the disconnected rhetoric of "best practice" there is little recognition that most teachers are themselves trained NOT to see most patterns of inequity in their own schooling, their own school practices, and in society in general. Faced with mountains of conceptually new, more inclusive scholarship, many teachers can be overwhelmed by the question of how to accommodate it or use it in class on a daily basis.

This is where the group conversations of the SEED seminar come in. The seminar, existing outside the usual "reporting systems" of the school as an organization, fosters deep and candid conversations, often on fraught subjects. Teachers study and compare notes on what they do (inside the organization called the school) and how it relates to what was done to them, pedagogically and with regard to subject matter. As they discuss putting teaching on a wider basis of knowledge and practice, they usually experience in the seminar itself a sense of what education might be: less isolating, anxiety-ridden, and dull; more welcoming, engaging, and inclusive with respect for all the embodied humanity of the actual people in the room or class.

Trying "to include all those who have been left out" can produce incoherent chaos in terms of curriculum coverage. We think it is important to see systemically before making changes so changes made get to the heart of narrow constructions of education. Therefore, a fifth key idea we articulate in the SEED Project is: **Without systemic understanding of gender, race, and class relations, educators who try to transform the curriculum will lack creative flexibility and coherence when dealing with the scholarship of the last twenty-five years in specific disciplines and across disciplines.**

Learning to ask systemic questions is a conceptual skill which has not usually been taught to youngsters or adults in the highly individualistic frameworks for seeing which are prevalent in dominant United States culture. The SEED Project transforms teachers and classrooms through the development of this aspect of teachers' ability. The "aha's" are

many and frequent since, whether we know it or not, we all participate in many systemic patterns.

SEED seminar process makes teachers more coherent and sensitive, aware of their own "politics of location" (Rich) and able to carry on steady enabling work for children of all backgrounds, while perceiving the systemic tendencies of schooling to disable many children's willingness and ability to learn. Formerly insensitive teachers, perfectly "nice" perhaps but mostly oblivious to systemic "stuff," take on new, smarter, better-informed ways of being. When educators have done some searching homework on themselves and on the society, this shows in our behavior. It shows when we make more conscious choices of curriculum, diversify our teaching styles, and validate the varied ways of being and knowing which exist in each classroom in students' lives as well as in the teacher's life.

Across a decade of receiving documentation about SEED seminar work in public and private schools and colleges of diverse shapes and sizes, we have witnessed the strengthening of teaching across the United States and in English-speaking international schools. Because of SEED work, instructors learn better how to become students again and how to help students become instructors. SEED process is one of development and reciprocity; it engages, encourages, and respects all. When such mutuality exists, both teachers and students welcome and embrace the daily encounters of school. And, in this way, the institution of schooling is fundamentally transformed.