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## Integrating Faith and Learning: Preparing Teacher Candidates to Serve Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

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## **Integrating Faith and Learning: Preparing Teacher Candidates to Serve Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students**

### **Abstract**

This essay examines how liberation theology and critical pedagogy inform the integration of faith and learning of a teacher educator who felt called to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States. The essay provides a brief cultural background of the educator's journey from instructional assistant in an English learner program to teacher educator at a Christian University. The essay explains how liberation theology and critical pedagogy provide a coherent framework for preparing teacher candidates to work with English learners in public schools.

### **Keywords**

Faith and Learning Integration, English Learners, Teacher Preparation

## Integrating Faith and Learning as Teacher Educator

Tatiana Cevallos

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### Introduction

As the United States continues to see an increase in the number of diverse students entering PK-12 schools, it is imperative that new teachers be effectively prepared to work with these students. Teacher candidates need to be equipped to provide equitable and meaningful education to diverse students, including those whose first language is not English and need additional linguistic, academic, and cultural classroom supports to be successful in school (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Gallo, 2017). As a teacher educator in a Christian university, I articulate in this essay my personal faith and how liberation theology and critical pedagogy provide a coherent framework for how I prepare teacher candidates to work with English learners (ELs) in public schools.

### My Personal Faith

The majority of Ecuadorians are Roman Catholic and I was raised Catholic by my mother, who became an evangelical later in life, followed by my father. I have learned much about commitment to Christian ideals from my parents. My mother is a family therapist and counsels terminally ill cancer patients in a hospital. My father works long hours at his law firm to provide for his extended family. I learned from both how integrity, responsibility, and compassion are integral to our professional lives. I also learned to be thankful for the blessings we receive and to serve others (Philippians 2:3-4). I have seen my parents serve their clients with commitment, compassion, and love. I strive to do the same with my students.

I attended a private secular K-12 school that offered catechism classes. My parents did not allow me to take First Communion in second

grade with the rest of my classmates because they wanted me to accept Christ as my Savior with conviction and a better understanding of what that meant. I took First Communion at age 12 and I was confirmed at 23, feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit during the sacrament (John 1:12). I have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit on a number of occasions since that time, each experience intensely personal and revelatory. My personal relationship with God provides the foundation for my life and my daily praxis reflects my responsibility to follow Jesus' teachings. I pray and study the Bible on a daily basis, grounding me in the humble awareness of my human limitations (Romans 3:23). I am a parishioner and attend a Catholic church.

I do not fear my imperfection because "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). This gift of grace and love clarifies my faith and my actions as an individual and as a professional as I strive to honor God and love and serve my brothers unconditionally (Matthew 25:35-40). As I integrate faith and learning in my courses, I try to extend grace while keeping rigor in the learning opportunities I create for my students. Over the years I have become more flexible and understanding when students struggle to balance work, life, and school. I now include a one-time free pass to submit late work without penalty. This provides students room to breathe without having to compromise the quality expected in the work they submit.

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## Significant Influences on the Development and Actualization of my Christian Faith

My evolution as a Christian is rooted and inseparable from my upbringing in a Third World Latin American country. Christianity – specifically Catholicism – in South America started with conquest and, as a result, my experience has been infused with poverty, power relationships, and liberation theology. This heritage has had a profound impact on my faith and my understanding of “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). We are here to serve others and to share God’s blessings and love with everyone. In a world where geography and socioeconomic status determine the opportunities that students will have from birth, I aim at preparing teachers who understand systems of oppression and can promote social justice in public schools. Our neighbors, in a school setting, include those who we serve as educators, namely, mainstream and minoritized students and families.

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**Liberation theology.** Liberation theology, in my context as a Third World resident and university faculty, focused my efforts to do God’s work for the benefit of the disadvantaged. As noted above, Christianity – Catholicism in particular – in Ecuador and Latin America in general cannot be completely separated from the history of conquest in the region. Structural inequities continue to be exploited by successive powerbrokers to this day. During my freshman year at the Catholic University in Quito, I took a Christian Formation class from a Cilician priest who shocked me with the following lyrics from the Argentine folk

musician Atahualpa Yupanqui: “Hay cosas en la vida más importantes que Dios, que un hombre no escupa sangre pa’ que otro viva mejor” (There are more important things in life than God; that a man doesn’t spit blood so another lives better). I could not understand why a priest would present what sounded like heresy until he began to educate us about liberation theology and invited us to name, to reflect critically, and to act on the social inequalities present in Ecuador. He invited us to explore our role as Christian students and future professionals, to contribute to the transformation of society for the glory of God. God was at the core of our reflection and action.

Liberation theology is “rooted in the Christian Scriptures and has evolved from a political-critical theology” (Oldenski, 1997, p. 62) that sides with the poor and oppressed and “attempts to integrate both theory and praxis from the perspective of a faith community” (Oldenski, 1997, p. 75). Liberation theology was first articulated in Latin America in 1968 by the Catholic Church in the General Conference of the Latin American episcopacy (CELAM II) in Medellin, Colombia. The Medellin conference focused its “attention on the Latin American situation, particularly the pervasive human injustice and oppression” (Ferm, 1988, p. 11). Liberation theology now represents only a small section of the Catholic Church and has been criticized by the Vatican and orthodox Catholicism for its integration of dialectical materialism in the analysis of reality. Nonetheless, liberation theology is concerned with the liberation of the poor and oppressed from socioeconomic and political subjugation as well as their liberation from sin through an encounter with Christ. The new Pope, Francis I, is now changing the discourse around issues of wealth distribution to the service of those most in need (Bergolio & Skorka, 2013).

Despite the criticism from the Catholic Church, Gutierrez, an influential voice in the liberation theology movement, centered God at the root of the movement. Gutierrez affirmed “that political, social, and economic liberation must emanate from a spirituality of liberation, a life of prayer” (Ferm, 1988, p. 19). Gutierrez saw liberation as encompassing freedom from oppressive socio-economic, social and political conditions, allowing people to take control of their historical destiny,

and the “emancipation from sin and the acceptance of new life in Christ” (Ferm, p. 19).

I integrate faith and learning in the work I do as a teacher educator who prepares teachers to work with minoritized students in the United States. I have been part of a faculty team that takes teacher candidates in cultural immersion field experiences to Ecuador. In preparation for and during this trip, we assigned readings and lead discussions to help candidates understand the educational context in foreign schools and to increase their intercultural competence. The readings have included selections from Jonathan Kozol (2012), Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2005), and Parker Palmer (1998). We placed candidates in private and public schools to allow them to compare how different socioeconomic groups experience school. We helped them identify and name inequities as well as possible avenues to combat them in their role as teachers. Moreover, we facilitated their discussions, analysis, and learning during these short-term cultural immersion field experiences to help them reflect on their own assumptions and perspectives towards culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Addleman, Nava, Cevallos, Brazo, & Dixon, 2014).

**Critical pedagogy.** Critical pedagogy also had a significant impact on the development and actualization of my Christian faith by sparking the interest in bilingual education that led me to apply my Christian faith professionally in the field of education to work on behalf of disadvantaged groups, namely culturally and linguistically diverse students. Since 1999, I have worked directly with Hispanic students as a bilingual teacher and then with families and teachers as a coordinator informing parents about the educational choices for their children and supporting developmental bilingual programs. During my year as a bilingual instructional assistant at a public high school, my faith led me to address an issue of inequity: I brought to the attention of the administration inequities on the transcripts of English learners whose credits had not been updated once ELs took—and passed—a sheltered class to make up for an existing F grade in a mainstream class. My faith gave me the courage to confront systemic racism that was affecting ELs’ GPAs.

In my current role as teacher educator, I now prepare teachers in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement to become advocates for English learners. I make teacher candidates aware of the social inequalities, opportunity gap, and minoritized status that ELs face in schools. I stress the advocate role and responsibilities that teachers have towards all students, from a legal perspective, a social justice commitment, and Christian values (Jeremiah 22:3).

The central figure in critical pedagogy in Latin America was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who conducted a national literacy campaign to teach Brazilian peasants to “read the words by reading their world.” Freire emphasized that peasants identify and define their daily experiences as a basis for expanding their literacy (Wink, 2005). He later worked in several countries in Latin America and Africa as well as the United States, inviting educators and educatees to be involved in a liberation process by working towards social justice.

Freire introduced the word “conscientization” to describe a process in which people relate to their world in a critical way with the goal of transforming their reality. Freire believed that the transformation of society was an act of love in which both the oppressed and oppressor engaged in the liberation process together (Freire, 2000).

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Although Freire saw education helping individuals to “understand themselves and their world with a view toward transforming it” (Oldenski, 1997, p. 64), he recognized the limitation of education as a system that is controlled by the groups in power that perpetuates the current societal structure (Shor & Freire, 1987). Freire rejected the banking model of education in which the learner is perceived as an empty vessel and receives

instruction, mainly through lectures, with information and facts that the student later has to recite back. He viewed this as a “teaching model compatible with promoting the dominant authority in society and with disempowering students” (Shor & Freire, p. 10).

For Freire (1987, 2000) education occurred through the dialogical model in which the learners make sense of their world by beginning with their experience and thus analyzing issues and situations that reflect their reality through problem posing. Critical pedagogy calls on the educator and educatee to name, to critically reflect, and to act (Wink, 2005).

### **Coming to Oregon to Serve my Faith**

The seeds of activism in God’s name on behalf of the disadvantaged were sown during my undergraduate years at the Catholic University in Ecuador, but it was not until I came to Oregon to earn my Master’s Degree in Education that I found my calling – bilingual education. During my work as an Instructional Assistant at a high school tracking the academic progress of English learners, I observed hostility toward these students by teachers charged with implementing programs designed to assist and eventually mainstream these ELs. Seeing students who exhibited talent and intelligence in their native language risk failing and falling behind or dropping out altogether because of their lack of English skills made me realize that I needed to serve those at greatest risk in education (1 Peter 4:10).

Over the past 30 years, the United States has seen a rapid increase in school- age students for whom English is not the primary home language. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1989, there were 5.2 million of language minority school-age children and youth attending public schools. This population doubled to 10.9 million students by 2008 (Aud et al., 2010). From 1991 to 2002, the total number of students who are not proficient in English upon school entry increased 95% (in Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola, 2007, p. 249). The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) reported that the percentage of EL enrollment in schools

has increased by 719.8% from 1980 to 2006 and the demographic trends show that the number of ELs enrolling in Oregon schools will increase annually. In the 2013-2014 school year, 22% of students enrolled in K-12 schools in Oregon spoke another language at home other than English; out of those students, 10.5% were considered ELs (ODE, 2014).

Effective education of ELs that meets their language and academic needs presents particular challenges. Among others, the teaching workforce in Oregon remains predominantly White and does not mirror the demographic trend of school population growth. Without proper training, this demographic mix of teachers may not be capable of addressing the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Based on these statistics and my experience, I decided that a diverse school district represented the best opportunity for me to help the most ELs. Integration of faith and learning occurs in innumerable environments, but a diverse district provided a challenge for me to manifest my Christian faith in a manner that was appropriate in my role as public school teacher. My purpose was to serve God by serving the predominantly Hispanic immigrant children and their families who contribute to the cultural and language diversity that is part and parcel of the U.S. “melting pot.” During this period, my primary means of integrating faith and learning focused on leading by example and working every day to faithfully serve this disadvantaged population to the best of my ability within the legal framework. In doing so, I attempted to put into practice Matthew 5:6: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your father who is in heaven.” I kept high standards for my emergent bilingual students and encouraged and pushed them to produce quality work. I celebrated their bilingualism and combatted deficit views of parental involvement and language barriers.

After seven years in the school district, I had witnessed enough of the internal and external politics surrounding bilingual education in public schools. I was aware of some needs and deficiencies in bilingual teacher preparation. I began to consider new ways to do God’s work and

serve ELs by ensuring they receive just treatment in institutions straining to accommodate them. I was already involved in staff development and coaching through Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) training and seminars. The obvious answer was to find a way to be directly involved in bilingual teacher preparation, and I was blessed at that time to learn of an opening in George Fox University's Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Program.

Not only does working in the MAT Program provide the opportunity for me to ultimately impact more lives in service to God, the university's Christian mission does not require that I suppress my commitment to God even though the School of Education (SOE) serves graduate students from diverse faith backgrounds and interacts with agencies that do not necessarily reflect or embrace the school's Christian faith. In short, I have the opportunity to serve God and integrate faith and learning for myself and my students in an environment that represents real world diversity of faith, gender, and race. In class, we discuss inequities and challenges that minoritized students face in public schools. We value students' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) and learn to integrate them in lesson plans. More importantly, we learn how to combat deficit views and stereotypes that English learners and their families face when trying to integrate to the American mainstream culture (Gallo, 2017). We do so within a spirit of love and compassion (Matthew 25:35-40).

Furthermore, the SOE's Conceptual Framework meshes closely with liberation theology and critical pedagogy, espousing a "Christ-centered worldview that supports and develops professionals who think critically, transform practice and promote justice." In fact, Ferm (1988) proposed an integrative model of liberation theology and critical pedagogy that focuses on the similarities of both discourses and praxis as follows: (a) a critical discourse describing the "present" world and its problems; (b) a methodology which produces changes by developing awareness of the conditions that impact the current world and an implementation of solutions; and (c) benefits that include, among others, solidarity towards the poor and oppressed

in developing a humane and just community. Both discourses focus on the transformation of society by engaging each individual in the creation of a process that will make "his or her world more caring and just, and thus eliminate or lessen that which oppresses or keeps the world from accommodating the individual and others in the same 'state of existence'" (Oldenski, 1997, p. 75).

While the MAT Program, the school's Conceptual Framework, and my personal development provide additional structure that facilitates my integration of faith and learning, the primary sources that motivate and direct me are my faith in God and the teachings of Jesus Christ. At the core of my praxis is John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Specifically, as an MAT faculty member, I integrate faith and learning by embracing the university's mission of demonstrating the meaning of Jesus to students who will achieve the highest intellectual and personal growth and will participate responsibly in our world's concerns. I stress the role that ESOL specialists have in advocating for English learners at schools and their impact in the lives of ELs. As teachers and advocates, we embody Teresa of Avila's prayer where she reminds us that we become Christ's eyes, hands, and feet in this world. I continue the legacy of my theology professor by reminding my students that we must contribute to the transformation of society for the glory of God.

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As I integrate faith and learning, I do it at a personal and social level while working with my colleagues (Harris, 2004; Hayes, 2001). I embrace critical pedagogy and a student-centered approach to education. I believe education

empowers students and communities and I constantly reiterate this idea and the service done in God's name by seeking to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse students receive quality education. I incorporate readings from culturally responsive educators such as Geneva Gay, Sonia Nieto, Aida Walqui, and Joan Wink that challenge eurocentric views on education and advocate for a critical examination of the curriculum.

I endorse and teach personal reflection of teaching practices (Palmer, 1998). I rigorously challenge pre-service teachers to develop the critical thinking skills that will be integral to their ability to go forth and do God's will as individuals and professionals and to have high expectations of themselves and their relationship to our society. I strive to nurture their desire to become strong advocates for their students, to promote social justice through education and to better the lives of their students and their communities (Matthew 25:40). These efforts apply equally to my Christian and non-Christian students.

The SOE recognizes in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Preconditions Report (2008) that while the university is a Christ-centered institution, the SOE serves graduate students from diverse faith backgrounds and interacts with school agencies that do not necessarily reflect or embrace the school's Christian faith. This area of potential conflict finds common goals with secular students and institutions through the conceptual framework.

...many of our goals centering on *critical thinking, transforming practice, and promoting justice* are compatible with other viewpoints though the foundations from which these are built have a different starting point. For example, this Christ-centered worldview emphasis in promoting justice might have similar learning activities found in critical pedagogy that is espoused by educational philosopher such as McLaren (2001) and yet the foundational worldview is very dissimilar. (p. 8)

In short, I have traveled a path filled with the amazing wealth of diversity of all God's children. I believe it is my duty as a Christian educator to prepare teachers in the MAT Program who will be

properly equipped intellectually, technically, and spiritually to work effectively with diverse populations, become advocates for their students and "take the lead in reforming practice at their institutions" (SOE, 2008, p. 2). I pray, study, and work every day to demonstrate my faith in Jesus Christ through acts on behalf of my pre-service teachers and their future students in His name and I am blessed for the opportunity to do so.

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