The Challenges of Urban Education:
A Conversation with Gerardo Gonzalez,
University Dean of the School of Education
at Indiana University

Gerardo Gonzalez, Indiana University
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Abstract

This article presents a conversation between Gerardo Gonzalez,
Dean of the School of Education at Indiana University, and Patrick
Jenlink, Editor for Teacher Education and Practice. Indiana
University is a large Research Extensive institution, with a traditional
teacher preparation program on the Flagship campus in
Bloomington in concert with a Professional Development School
(PDS) based teacher preparation program on its Indianapolis
campus. Dean Gonzalez shares his perspectives on the challenges
of urban education and teacher preparation, as well as his vision of
a framework for changes in teacher preparation over the next five
years.

Jenlink: First, let me thank you for joining me in this conversation.
Perhaps I could begin by asking you to describe your role in the
School of Education at Indiana University, in particular teacher
preparation, in order to help set a context for our conversation.

Gonzalez: Indiana University is a multi-campus institution. We have
the Flagship campus in Bloomington, where my office is located.
We also have a large and vibrant urban campus in Indianapolis. These
two campuses are what we describe as the core campuses of Indiana
University. In addition, we have six smaller regional campuses lo-
cated throughout Indiana. We have teacher preparation programs
on every one of those campuses. As University Dean, I am fiscally
and operationally responsible for the School of Education programs

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in Bloomington and Indianapolis. I am also responsible for personnel and academic program implementation on the other six regional campuses, though the regional campuses have budgetary independence and report through a chancellor. Thus, the bulk of my responsibilities as Dean of the School of Education revolve around Bloomington and Indianapolis. Bloomington is a traditional residential campus in a rural setting. We have approximately 37,000 students on the Indiana University campus, and the School of Education in Bloomington enrolls approximately 3,000 students, with 2,000 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. The Indianapolis campus is an urban setting and enrolls approximately 1,800 students. Some of our programs are joint programs, with faculty in Bloomington teaching in Indianapolis and vice versa. Some of the courses are delivered through distance education, and there are a number of research projects where faculty collaborate. By and large, there is a great deal of interaction between Bloomington and Indianapolis faculty.

The Teacher Education program in Indianapolis is a PDS model where almost the entire program is offered on site in various PDS schools that partner with the School of Education. Several of our faculty actually spend most of their time in these schools. Many of the teachers working in the PDS schools provide supervision and help teach our teacher preparation courses. The courses are often blocked so there may be two or three education faculty working in one school at a particular time, and there may be a number of teachers working on a team with the faculty. In contrast, the teacher education programs in Bloomington are more traditional. The field experiences generally begin with early and progressive field experiences attached to various courses, which culminate in a one-semester student teaching experience.

Jenlink: This is an interesting description of Indiana University, juxtaposing the rural setting of Bloomington with the urban setting of Indianapolis. One campus is more traditional in teacher preparation, while the campus situated in Indianapolis uses a PDS model for teacher preparation. I think it would be helpful if you could elaborate on the primary mission of the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington, as well as the education program of Indiana University in Indianapolis and surrounding area.

Gonzalez: The mission of the Indiana University School of Education, especially as it relates to the core campuses, is to provide
high-quality undergraduate teacher education programs as well as a world-class program of research and graduate education. We provide outreach and engage in partnerships with schools and communities in the implementation of that mission. Everything we do is focused on preparing teachers and other education professionals to address education and human development problems that confront America, and indeed the world, today. Because some of those problems are so highly concentrated in the urban settings, we have focused a great deal of our research on the unique characteristics of urban populations. And because we are a technologically sophisticated School of Education, we use technology in various forms to both conduct research and deliver instruction related to our mission.

Jenlink: When you mention the issues and problems within the urban setting that confront teachers and that are present in schools with respect to what teachers have to deal with in the classroom, what do you see as the major issues or problems confronting the urban teacher in schools today and, in particular, those schools in districts most directly served by Indiana University?

Gonzalez: I think the overarching problem in urban education today is the high concentration of poverty in the inner city schools. Poverty is correlated with ethnicity and race, so you not only have a high incidence of poverty and all the problems that brings, but a concentration of poor populations which are disproportionately minorities, speakers of English as a Second Language, and who have grown up and experienced family disruptions related to immigration or single parent homes. That combination of cyclical family dynamics, social characteristics of the population, and poverty creates very high-risk situations for educational failure as well as many other social problems. This can become a generational problem as populations have difficulty making improvements and, in many cases, just surviving. It's often very hard for them to think about goals for the future or thinking about education as a vehicle to break out of that cycle. They often assume they are in a situation from which they cannot get out, and there is a sense of hopelessness, which I think the teachers today must try to overcome. Teachers need to create conditions that instill a positive outlook, a desire to be successful, and motivate their students to want to break out of the cycle they and their families experience. In doing that, teachers must look at their own attitudes and their own experiences and develop a conviction that all children can learn. I think teachers sometimes can become discouraged themselves, and sometimes the system
discourages them from accepting or developing the fundamental belief that all children, even those who don’t speak English, who are poor and who experience family disruptions, can in fact learn. Keeping teachers from being discouraged themselves is something that all of us concerned with education should work hard to do. Inner city schools need the best, most highly motivated teachers. Yet, the inner city school problems are such that they often make it difficult for schools to attract the teachers they need.

**Jenlink:** When you bring the challenge you have described to the foreground of considerations for teacher preparation, what implications does this challenge have for what happens in the teacher preparation program itself? In particular, what is the impact on curriculum and practical experiences that perhaps contextualize this challenge for teacher preparation? Are there any other kinds of impact that this challenge might have for teacher preparation? What do you see as the implications of that challenge on teacher preparation for Indiana University?

**Gonzalez:** I think one of the immediate challenges that it presents is developing real and sustained partnerships with the types of schools our graduates are going to be working with. Having those partnerships and being actively engaged with the schools provides a vehicle for not only forming our research and instructional agendas, but also providing opportunities for the students in our courses, and those who are involved in our research, to experience what schools are really like. In teacher education, we still mostly have students who come from middle class backgrounds and who attended schools that in many cases are very different from the schools that they may end up working in, particularly if they work in urban settings. Students have a notion of what schooling is and what schools look like. However, in order for students to have a context grounded on the realities that our schools exhibit today, we must actively plan curricular experiences that will help shape their thinking about education and about the kids they will be working with.

**Jenlink:** If you could, please share a little bit more in terms of the PDS approach or model that Indiana University uses in Indianapolis and other schools where you have PDS partnerships. Help me understand in more detail what life would look like in a PDS school that is a partner with Indiana University.
Gonzalez: The PDS approach involves setting up sites at elementary, middle, and high schools that are partner schools. Students spend most of their class time in one or more of these schools where they actually take their methods courses and have field experiences. They often work in teams with the faculty. A faculty member, for example someone teaching the methods course, might be working with a foundations person and a technology person in the same school teaching a group of students who stay together as a cohort throughout the program. The students would have various and different kinds of experiences in the schools. The teachers in the PDS schools also become involved in teacher preparation, becoming supervisors and mentors very early on in the program. From the start of the program, students take courses with these teachers and work with them to see the real life of the teacher in his or her setting. PDS teachers participate in ongoing conversations about planning and curriculum development that are informed by the experiences teachers have with our students. In turn, that provides feedback to our faculty for the improvement of the curriculum and to work out the problems they might encounter in any particular setting or any particular preparation experience. We use technology extensively so there are opportunities for interaction and collaboration even when teachers, students, and faculty cannot physically be in the same building at the same time. It's a very interactive model of teacher preparation that is site-based and affords a systemic way to continuously provide input and feedback into the kind of experiences that we provide for our students. Many of our faculty members do their research and offer field-based professional development programs for teachers in the PDS schools. Thus, what we have is a dynamic partnership for the preparation of students as well as the development of new knowledge that informs pre-service preparation and professional development, applying knowledge to critical areas that confront us in teaching and teacher education.

Jeulink: What are the challenges of a more traditional teacher preparation program such as that offered at your institution in Bloomington, as compared to the PDS-based program in Indianapolis?

Gonzalez: In Bloomington, while we don’t have the PDS model, we do provide early and progressive field experiences for students beginning with courses in the methods and content area curriculum, but not the blocked courses and on-site team supervision we have in
Indianapolis. This can sometimes present interesting problems. In fact, just this morning I was dealing with a situation where a student in one of our methods courses in Bloomington was required to go out and spend a day in Indianapolis shadowing a high school student. This activity was designed to help our students get a sense of what is experienced by high school students in an urban school setting. Sending a student to Indianapolis to spend a day in a school presented a conflict with another course the student was taking in Bloomington. Getting the faculty in the other course to accept the idea that a student would be required to participate in a field experience in an urban setting, one that would mean having to miss one of the professor’s classes, presented a problem. All of us in the academy somehow must accept the notion that teacher preparation is a university responsibility. We need to look systematically at ways to collaborate and be flexible about ways that curricular units relate and complement each other throughout the university. We are not used to thinking that way, and we have a history of compartmentalization. Faculty members, particularly those outside of education, seem to be much more concerned with what students learn in the 50 minutes spent in their class rather than looking comprehensively at the teacher education curriculum and how it relates to the field of practice. So we need to have internal conversations about how to share responsibility for the preparation of teachers. The partnerships that we’ve been talking about are not just partnerships with the schools but partnerships with our colleagues in Arts and Sciences and some of the other disciplines within the institution.

Jenlink: If you could, please elaborate on building partnerships within the institution, and with schools in terms of creating a PDS. What are the challenges?

Gonzalez: Unless we as an institution deal in meaningful, positive, and constructive ways with the notion that preparing a teacher is a university responsibility, engaging students in authentic school experiences outside the classroom will continue to create problems. We can’t just focus on what the teacher is able to do once he or she is in charge of the class, we must first work to change the structures within our own institutions to make it possible for teacher preparation programs to provide the experiences our students need in order to be effective in different settings. Historically, we have thought of teacher preparation as a school of education responsibility with little integration and collaboration across disciplinary lines. Thus,
creating a climate for this type of multi-disciplinary collaboration is one of the challenges higher education institutions are trying to work through. I firmly believe that presidential leadership will be needed to resolve some of these differences. But, of course, it ultimately comes down to faculty ownership and willingness to participate in this kind of partnership. In the end, teacher education students should gain a deep understanding of both the subjects they will teach and how to teach them effectively.

Jenlink: As you think about the next five years for teacher preparation at Indiana University, including your Bloomington and Indianapolis core campuses as well as the regional sites which primarily serve urban schools and urban teachers through preparation, what do you see as major changes in terms of program preparation? Also, regarding your partnership with these schools, are there future plans for programmatic change?

Gonzalez: Yes, I think that there’s a framework for change. First of all, I think we’re going to become much more data-based in making decisions about the quality of experiences and the quality of programs we offer. Our states have pulled more and more aggressively into the area of standards, subject specialization, testing, and holding schools accountable for testing results. We must figure out ways to document how our graduates are able to impact student achievement. As schools become more accountable and more concerned with whether or not they are performing at high levels as measured by the various tests and accountability mechanisms required of them, they’ll want to make sure that anyone who comes into their schools, whether it’s a new teacher, intern, or just someone who is taking courses there, is contributing to student learning in measurable ways. Those of us charged with preparing teachers have a responsibility to ensure that we have the best available data to show that our programs and the experiences our students bring to the schools have prepared them well, and ultimately, they contribute to student learning. That forces us to think differently about our own internal mechanisms for documenting the quality of our programs.

We are also challenged to connect our research in meaningful ways to program development and the field of practice. We have to develop programs that are based on solid research and not just on current trends. Our research should clearly point to activities and initiatives that are the most appropriate for the purpose of development.
We are enhancing our research infrastructure and our research enterprise to focus on developing practices that are research-based and supported by the best available knowledge. And, as I have already mentioned, we’re going to move much more aggressively in the direction of forming partnerships with schools and communities. We simply cannot do our research or instruction in isolation and expect it to connect in meaningful and effective ways to the realities of the schools and communities we serve. By engaging our schools and communities as partners, not only is our research going to be formed and developed around the issues which they confront, but we will be able to bring that knowledge and our experiences back to inform the preparation of teachers and other education professionals.

I also think the technology now exists to link universities, schools, and communities in ways heretofore unimaginable. Technology is going to be much more important in both research and instruction as well as in the way we interact and relate to one another. We know that technology has changed our world, and most of us intuitively believe that teaching and learning can be transformed through technology. But we don’t necessarily know the best way to use technology in the educational process. Thus, we must look at technology as an instrument to enhance teaching and learning as well as a tool to help us learn about teaching and learning. For that reason, greater technology integration throughout the curriculum and throughout everything we do will likely be a focus of our efforts in the future.

And finally, I think we’re going to pay a lot more attention to diversity issues. It’s not enough to just have greater representation of students and faculty of color. Greater representation is critically important, but the way demographic trends are developing in this country, we must seriously think about the ways diversity transcends demographic characteristics. We have to create a curriculum that addresses diversity issues and brings the voices of people who represent different world views and different histories into meaningful contact with our research and instruction. We are going to work very, very hard to increase the representation of traditionally unrepresented groups in our student bodies and among our faculties, but I’m afraid the demographic trends are such that the growth in the population of people of color will outgrow our ability to bring them into the academy in representative numbers in the short term. We also need to think about ways that we can immediately connect the majority populations to the experiences of those minority groups.
that we increasingly are going to serve, and make a long-term commitment to increasing access to a quality education for all.

So, I think the next five years will bring a greater focus on research-based quality teacher preparation that is informed by the best knowledge in the field, that is accountable, that is technology oriented and rich in technology integration, that involves true collaborative arrangements and partnerships, and that pays special attention to diversity issues. That is going to be the framework that guides our programmatic efforts and our research in the School of Education at Indiana University.

Jenlink: Among those areas, which do you perceive as the most demanding area to address or that will require perhaps more focused attention than others, if any?

Gonzalez: It's hard to separate them because they're so intimately related. How do we speak about quality teacher preparation separate from research in the field? Or how do we talk about research in the 21st century without also thinking in terms of technology utilization or in terms of multi-disciplinary approaches to reach the diverse population that we have? How can we achieve any of these goals without meaningful partnerships? So all of these areas are interrelated and interdependent. However, if I had to separate them, I would say the one that presents the greatest challenge to the academy is creating and sustaining meaningful partnerships.

Jenlink: If you could, help me understand, from your perspective as Dean, the challenges to creating meaningful partnerships.

Gonzalez: The organizational structures, the boundaries and mechanisms we have set up to sustain our institutions work against partnerships. The conceptual frameworks and mechanisms that have evolved over the history of experiences in education, as well as in society in general, have pushed us in the direction of specialization and compartmentalization. And the challenges today, including the need for multi-disciplinary approaches, require collaborations, and that, by definition, means a breakdown of structures and boundaries that we have set up for ourselves. Structures and boundaries that were, historically, very functional no longer have the same level of functionality. And so breaking down those barriers and creating meaningful, long-term partnerships within the academy as well as
with the schools and communities will, in my opinion, present all of us with the most difficult challenge. But as I said, all of the areas I mentioned are interdependent. If we have good research and good preparation we will be better able to make the case for sustainable partnerships. If we have good sustainable partnerships we'll be better able to support our research to document the effectiveness of our graduates. So it's a multi-task, interdependent augmentation that I think will be required for effective, high-quality teacher preparation in the future.

Jenlink: I want to just briefly return to one reference you made earlier to standards, and if I could, ask a question related to the effect or impact of national and/or state standards and accountability on both teacher preparation at the Bloomington main campus and across all the campuses, particularly as you think about the impact programmatically across all your campuses. I'm thinking about national standards, which might include professional development standards, content or subject area standards, and accreditation standards that affect institutions of higher education and, in particular, teacher preparation and accreditation. Do you see any particular elements of the national and state standards and accountability movement as very clearly impacting Indiana University more so than perhaps what you described with respect to the subject area standards within the public school?

Gonzalez: Yes, I think that the accreditation and professional preparation standards are impacting our institutions in a very direct way. The goal is to align preparation standards with state and national standards for school subject area mastery and high achievement. That alignment is forcing our institutions to think carefully about the kind of data we collect to document the effects of our programs. I think the greatest challenge the standards movement presents is really one of assessment. Conceptually, most people agree that articulating performance goals in measurable terms is an important component of accountability. But when you then say, here's how we are going to assess whether or not students are learning and teachers are teaching, then it becomes a more difficult conversation. We simply have not been able yet to develop the types of assessments or assessment systems that would allow us to measure performance in valid and reliable ways. And so I think that from a higher education perspective, focusing on devising assessment systems that would allow us to say with confidence that our students and our faculty...
and our graduates are performing at high levels is going to be one of the most difficult barriers to overcome in order to implement a viable, standards-based system of teacher preparation.

Jenlink: Thank you. What I'd like to do is to shift directions just a moment and ask if you would share with me your background in terms of your own academic professional career and how long you've been at Indiana University and perhaps prior experiences and your particular research or scholarship focus?

Gonzalez: Let me start with a bit of a personal history. I came to this country as a Cuban refugee at the age of 12. I was the first person in my family to attend college. My parents were both working people, and we came to this country in search of freedom, as many Cubans did in response to the Castro revolution. We came here with just the clothes we had on and literally less than five dollars. That's how I started my experiences here in this country. I did not speak English. I initially had great difficulty adjusting to the American system of education, and the language was a big part of that. Like other Cubans who immigrated in the early 1960s and settled in south Florida, I was placed in schools that were thought to help with the transition into a traditional system of education. The general school responses to the influx of Cuban refugees were not very well thought out because the extent of this migration really caught everybody by surprise. So there were many kids failing in the schools. I was one of those kids who was tracked into a vocational program by well-meaning people who thought I could never be successful academically. I graduated from high school with no college plans, or even knowledge about what college was. And through a set of circumstances, which included association with a friend who was in college, I was encouraged to consider attending college.

I was not prepared for college, but fortunately I was able to enroll in a community college that had an open door policy. At the community college I was exposed to college work and college level teaching and learning. Suddenly I realized what a wonderful experience and what a gift it would be to participate fully in a world of ideas. I learned about college and developed a love of learning while attending college. I would not have ever considered college except for the interactions I had with a friend who guided me. My parents always wanted me to get an education, but they didn't know what was necessary or how to guide me in that direction. Once I had the
opportunity, though, through my own efforts I began to realize what learning and college were really all about. With financial support from loans and need-based grants, it became possible for me to succeed in college.

After completing community college, I transferred to the University of Florida. My major was psychology, and, after completing my bachelor's degree, I also pursued a graduate degree in counseling and higher education administration. I received my Ph.D. from the University of Florida and I remained there first in an administrative position and later as a faculty member. My area of research was alcohol and drug abuse prevention, an interest partly created by the experiences some of my best friends had while growing up. I was eventually asked to Chair the Department of Counselor Education at the University of Florida. Then I was asked to serve as Associate Dean, and the last year that I was there I served as Interim Dean of the College of Education. In July 2000, Indiana University offered me the position of University Dean of Education, and I accepted. So I am now professionally responsible for the core campuses of Bloomington and Indianapolis, and the six regional campuses of Indiana University as I described.

Jenlink: Thank you. Perhaps you would like to take one final opportunity to share other areas of your experience related to urban education, teacher preparation and challenges that we haven't touched on up to this point.

Gonzalez: Speaking a little bit about myself reminded me of something that I did not mention earlier, which is how important it is that we look for areas of strength and not just the problems that confront members of minority groups and urban populations. We must try to address comprehensively the needs of families and children and to support and encourage them to be all they can be. Unless we as educators have faith and commitment to each and every child, no matter how difficult and complicated their situation may be, it becomes very difficult for those children to overcome and succeed. The life experience minority and poor children often have helps them develop remarkable levels of resilience. They have learned to survive in difficult situations, and oftentimes, they acquire strength of character and a real desire to succeed as a result of their experiences. But we must help them realize their potential by believing in them and helping them break through the obstacles that they
encounter every day. Having significant people in their lives, such as teachers, who believe in and encourage them to be successful is sometimes the only thing that allows poor and minority children collectively to see themselves as truly capable of success in spite of all the negative experiences. Nurturing resiliency and fostering a desire to overcome requires understanding and a real commitment on the part of the adults who come into contact with these children. To me, making the most out of the opportunity to positively impact the children whose needs are the greatest is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the teaching profession.

Jenlink: Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and experiences. That concludes my questions and I appreciate your taking time out from what I know is a very busy schedule to take part in this conversation.

Gonzalez: I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the conversation.