

Comments on Stoddard's *Educating for Human Greatness*

by Lulaellen Pilgrim

Many of the students who enroll in Pacific Oaks college classes are practitioners in the field of human development which includes but isn't limited to early childhood education. They teach, lead, facilitate, design programs, work collaboratively with people in other agencies, problem solve, assess, plan environments, and otherwise do the important work oftentimes coming under the umbrella of education. These students attend class nights, weekends, holidays, and online, when they aren't working at their "day job," to add to their skills and to gain an advanced degree in the field of human development and teacher education.

Questions they bring with them and that we try to find answers to during their course of study include:

- How does a teacher maintain an interesting, supportive, and developmentally appropriate environment that encourages children to build on what they know and become enthusiastic, independent, lifelong learners, when the requirements from federal and state entities often prescribe and mandate rigid, "same size fits all" curriculum to prepare for tests that now begin as early as three years old?
- How do I show a child and her family that I honor, respect, and value her language and culture while at the same time providing her with the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in this English-speaking society?
- Is there an acceptable way to balance a skills-based approach with a "process is important" approach?
- Sometimes I feel like I'm just a pawn for some politician who thinks he has the answer to "why Johnny can't read," and that if he writes and passes a bill that restricts teachers to using a "canned" curriculum written by a publishing company that is looking for a restrictive environment where only that and

perhaps one other program is allowed, then, by golly, Johnny will learn to read. Is there a way to make required, restrictive curriculum palatable?

- How do I productively use the knowledge, experience and training I've received as a teacher when it doesn't seem compatible with the requirements of those who manage the "purse strings?"

To support students in finding answers to these questions, and others, my courses are designed around available resources. Books, articles, media, the internet, lectures, observations, action research, and discussions with others in the field are all part of the course. The students are encouraged to use their ideas and what they are learning to collaboratively design their own programs suited to the people with whom they work. Questions and the means of finding answers to those questions are encouraged. Full engagement in the course, responsibility for one's own learning, reflection, analysis, and self-assessment are standard expectations.

I stumbled upon Lynn Stoddard's book, *Educating for Human Greatness*, during the spring of 2004 in time to use it in one of my college classes, Developmental Education, as a required reading text. A minimum of five books are required for this course, and it was necessary to move another to an optional reading list to make room for it, but after reading it, I had a hunch it was just the book I was looking for. I thought it would help to strengthen the roots of those who know that education as it is today is not working for a great many students. Advocacy skills for a grassroots or "reform from the bottom up" approach is a substantial part of this class and I felt that this book supported and encouraged that student voice.

At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to write a personal ideology statement that included their current ideas about the nature of human nature, power, motivation, human diversity, free will, learning, teaching, and the goals of education. This was a work in progress with the expectation that ideas would continue to develop and change over time. The ideas in *Educating for Human Greatness* are closely aligned with this assignment and it offers students support in developing their own ideology.

During the semester, we read, discussed, and compared *Educating for Human Greatness* with the other books on the required list and with some

recent articles about current issues in education. In teams, the students began to design their own ideal school or learning center, using the knowledge and ideas they had gained during our work together. Lynn Stoddard's principles: Value Positive Diversity, Draw Forth Potential, Respect Autonomy, Invite Inquiry, Support Professionalism, and Unite for Greatness, were very much in evidence during this project.

One of the questions on the class evaluation to be completed by students was, "Which of the books and articles on the reading and discussion list for this class was most useful to you in your practice?" *Educating for Human Greatness* received a resounding thumbs up! It will be on the required reading list in future classes and I continue to recommend it to teacher and principal friends.

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