Teachers for the New Millennium

James Lerman
Columbia University, USA

INTRODUCTION

They say if you drop a live frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump right out. But, if you place the same frog into a pot of water at room temperature and then gradually raise the flame under it, the frog will not notice the changes and remain in the pot until it is cooked.

Now, you might ask, what is the connection between a frog in a pot and what a millennium teacher should know and be able to do?

My view of the connection is that there are events and processes happening around us every day. Most of the time, we do not pay them much attention because they occur so frequently or gradually that from moment to moment they do not seem to signify very much—like the gradually rising temperature in the pot of the cooking frog. Once in a great while, a potentially transformative event occurs and it makes us jump: September 11, Columbine, sending a man to the moon, or Y2K hysteria. Usually though, we conduct our routines and make our way through the day or the semester and tend to rely on the comfort of the familiar, seemingly unchanging, landscape. Yet, were we to carefully study and reflect upon that landscape, we might discern important trends that hold meaning for how we conduct ourselves presently, and in the future.

In terms of the specific professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of new teachers, I believe there are others who have done a much more effective job at identifying and describing them than I can. This information can be located at the Web sites of organizations such as the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

In this article, I wish to briefly identify four trends that I think will affect teaching, learning, and schools in the future. I am not so sure about their impact on the entire new millennium, or even the whole new century; but I do think they will be important over at least the next generation or so. I will describe factors in the wider environment that I think have the power to affect the practice and preparation of teachers, and comment on some of the challenges these factors may present.

INCREASING DIVERSITY OF THE STUDENT POPULATION

Racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity will continue to grow in the public schools. In addition, the numbers of students in special education classifications and alternative placements will likely increase. Cries for cost containment in special programs and the squeeze for classroom space within school buildings will result in more and more “non-traditional” students being placed in “regular” classes. Teachers will confront the need to become more adept at providing differentiated educational experiences for the multiple needs of students present in their classrooms, for diagnosing those needs, and for assessing student progress in multiple ways. Technology will offer much help in this area and teachers will be increasingly pressed to be proficient in its use.

It is likely that increasing numbers of adult educators will also be present in classrooms—co-teachers, support teachers, assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, and the like. Skills in team leadership and collaboration will increase in importance for classroom lead teachers. Student diversity will increase at a more rapid rate than diversity of the teaching staff. As a result, the need will rise for the teaching force, which will remain overwhelmingly white and female, to become more and more sensitive to, and adept at, simultaneously addressing differences in race, language, culture, and (dis)ability. Teachers’ repertoires of available knowledge, skills, and dispositions will be challenged to expand and become enriched. The abilities to affirm and coach one’s colleagues and students, in a spirit of solidarity, will likely emerge as highly desirable. These challenges suggest that prior to enrollment in teacher