

Preparing Pre-Service Teacher Candidates to Teach for Diversity: One Teacher Educator's Story

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While few teacher educators would disagree that the development of a professional disposition, inclusive of both cultural competence and cultural responsive, is critical, the process of assisting pre-service teacher candidates in interrogating their own firmly-held beliefs and biases is not an easy process. The goal of helping teacher candidates develop a greater self-awareness requires time, effort and a willingness to move toward reflective practice. This article chronicles one teacher educator's attempt to improve her own teaching practice in order that she might contribute to the ongoing professional development and personal growth of the pre-service teacher candidates in her charge with regard to teaching for diversity and inclusiveness.

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One of the major challenges facing teacher educators is assisting pre-service teacher candidates in the development of a professional disposition, inclusive of both cultural competence and cultural responsiveness. Teacher educators seek to improve the degree to which their teacher candidates exhibit self-awareness and show potential to work effectively with children and families whose values, ideas, worldviews, language, traditions, and physical attributes differ from their own. Teacher education programs may attempt to do this by providing coursework that addresses issues of diversity and inclusion; they may also require pre-service teacher candidates to observe, volunteer, or complete field placements in schools with diverse populations. The goal is to help candidates develop a greater self-awareness and to look at the ways in which they overgeneralize, stereotype, or make assumptions about children and families whose backgrounds differ from their own. This article documents the challenging journey one teacher educator has taken in helping the pre-service teacher candidates in her course develop a professional disposition that includes a high degree of cultural competence and the potential to be culturally responsive in their own future classrooms.

The process of developing cultural competence and responsiveness is not easy or linear. Many practicing educators, for example, still assume they understand their students' families' needs, priorities, and values when, in fact, they do not. Likewise, many educators overgeneralize; their failure to analyze the personal misconceptions and stereotypes they hold may lead them to act on biases and prejudices they (perhaps unknowingly) have about individual students or groups of children. Furthermore, research has indicated that educators may tend to avoid interactions with children and families that differ significantly from their own. This is noteworthy when we consider that, in the 2011-2012 academic year, for example, 81.9% of educators teaching in public schools were white, while the children they served were far more diverse: 45% white, 24% Hispanic and 16% black (National Center for Educational Statistics). Thus, teacher educators attempt to teach for diversity in order that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions may be assimilated by pre-service teacher candidates prior to beginning their entry year teaching experiences.

Pinar has indicated that the classroom has become an unpleasant space for a number of educators, causing them to withdraw into the "safety of their subjectivities. But in so doing, they have abdicated their professional authority and ethical responsibility for the curriculum they teach" (Pinar, 2004, pp. 3-4). In order to prevent pre-service teacher candidates from relinquishing both their professional power and their ethical duty to teach in an inclusive classroom even before they officially enter the profession, teacher educators must continue to explore the ways in which pre-service teacher candidates can be encouraged to look critically and carefully at themselves. Indeed, the teacher education classroom is likely the most appropriate place for teacher candidates to challenge and unpack their own belief systems. Specifically, it is important to find ways to organize, modify, and facilitate a classroom discourse that allows teacher candidates to find a space in which they can discuss the ways in which the world systems of domination impact them, their thinking, and their future teaching. Hooks (1994) asserts that the

classroom is the most radical space of possibility in the academy because in it one can think, rethink, and create new visions. According to hooks (1994), teachers can utilize classroom discourses in order to acknowledge that the structure of education is often shaped by racism, sexism, and classism, creating a lived reality that is often in place before classroom pedagogy even begins. The result is that students from diverse backgrounds may or may not find themselves reflected in the curricular structure and classroom discourse. Greene (1998) asserts that few students enter courses with an inclination to problematize, question cultural assumptions and ideologies, or examine their feelings of boredom or shame. Thus, the purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which pre-service teacher candidates may be encouraged to do just that.

The following two sections outline my experiences as a teacher educator who works at a large, public university. This university has eleven colleges, and the teacher education program is one of three hundred undergraduate programs of study. The student profiles at the college at which I teach indicate that, during the 2011-2012 academic year, the student population was 72% White, 10% Black, 2.2 % Asian, 1.6% Hispanic or Latino, 1.2% Biracial, and 11% unknown or unreported.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education Coursework: Background

The Foundations of Early Childhood course is one of the first classes that early childhood pre-service teacher candidates take as they begin their studies in their teacher education program. Designed to introduce pre-service teacher candidates to the historical, philosophical, and social foundations of contemporary early childhood programs as well as familiarize them with current theories of child development and pedagogy, the course aligns itself with three state teaching standards. Specifically, the course is intended to help pre-service teacher candidates understand student learning and development, develop respect for the diversity of the students they teach, and assume responsibility for their professional growth and development. In addition to meeting these state teaching standards, the course outcomes specified by the offering college indicate that upon completion of the course, early childhood teacher candidates will not only be able to create developmentally appropriate activities that support the progress of all students in every domain, but will also be able to define reflective practice and explain its role in the development of a professional disposition.

As the course instructor, my personal goal for the course is bifurcated: 1) I want my pre-service teacher candidates to see themselves as emerging professionals, not simply as students, and to consider themselves as “teachers-in-training,” who have been called to not only a challenging vocation, but also a very rewarding avocation. As such, I want them to approach their current and future coursework in their teacher education program as preparation that must be undertaken earnestly as a way to orient themselves to a professional disposition; 2) I want my pre-service teacher candidates to reflect upon their own motivation to become a teacher, to help them understand the serious undertaking of teaching young children as something not to be taken lightly, given the strong theoretical and historical foundations of early childhood education and its impact on not only the remainder of a child’s academic career, but also the value of an educated citizenry for society at large.

As such, I designed this course for the purpose of leading pre-service teacher candidates through an understanding of what being an early childhood educator may entail; it begins by exploring the ways in which

current practice is rooted in historical theories and philosophies. Throughout the early weeks of the course, we define and discuss the term “reflective practitioner.” This is particularly important because one of the main purposes of the course is to provide career orientation; it has been explicitly organized to assist pre-service teacher candidates in not only understanding the foundations of early childhood education programs, but to help them grow in their understanding of whether or not teaching is a “fit” for them. Thus, from defining “reflective practitioner” and assisting the pre-service teacher candidates in understanding the value of developing a professional and reflective teaching disposition, we attempt to move into a cognizant dialogue about the ways in which a teacher’s personal theories of how the world works influence his or her future practice. Toward the middle of the semester, we begin to look more specifically at diversity and inclusion, focusing primarily on issues of racism, sexism, and classism in the classroom context, including the pedagogical practices of teachers, as well as the texts consumed and produced in the classroom. This is the area on which this particular course analysis is focused.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education: Teaching for Diversity

My experience with teaching diversity to pre-service teacher candidates has been a difficult and eye-opening one. When I first began exploring issues of diversity in this particular course in the fall of 2013 (the first time I taught the Foundations of Early Childhood Education course), I was surprised to find that I struggled to navigate the often contentious conversations that arose in the classroom. Having almost two decades of elementary classroom experience and nine years of teaching in higher education prior to initially teaching this course, I did not anticipate any pushback from my students regarding the content I was presenting. I primarily used the course text, *Exploring your role in early childhood education* (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012), which I felt adequately introduced pre-service teacher candidates to the terms and to issues of diversity, inclusion, and the principles of fairness and ethical behavior in the teaching context. I did not, at the onset, feel a need to use auxiliary materials for the unit on diversity.

However, I quickly realized that my own inexperience in sharing my experiences in teaching diverse populations led to a struggle in challenging my students to look at the world systems of domination. Learning to lead a discussion whereby the teacher candidates might contest their own hidden biases left me floundering and uncomfortable. I found that I was woefully unprepared to present my pre-service teacher candidates with the information necessary for them to challenge their firmly-held beliefs, so I, therefore, attempted to present the content as a *product* rather than allow them to engage in the *process* of exploring it and themselves. Additionally, I was surprised by their strong opposition to the classroom discussions, having mistakenly believed the pre-service teacher candidates would be excited to move toward what I considered to simply be reflective practice. I had also assumed, based on my own experience in this area as a practicing educator working with diverse populations, that they would willingly and enthusiastically take a hard look at the ways in which classrooms are microcosms of the larger society. Instead, I was faced with students who stated that “racism would disappear if we would just stop talking about it so much,” and I dealt with at least one occasion in which a young student left the room in the middle of class in tears because she felt attacked for voicing her opinion that “color doesn’t matter” when it comes to young children because they are “too small to be aware of those differences.” It was also indicated on course evaluations that I

failed to “value differing opinions” expressed in the class and suggested that, despite my inherent desire to exemplify how a classroom might embrace diversity and capitalize on the many differences within, some of my students suggested that I “shot down” their attempts to vocalize their thoughts and failed to appreciate their attempts to understand diversity. I think it would be fair to say that I learned more than my students that first academic semester. Clearly, I struggled to share with them my own experiences of working with diverse populations, and somehow changes needed to be made before I taught the course in the spring.

In order to bolster my ability to work with the teacher candidates, I contacted a colleague in the humanities. Having had virtually no critical race theory in my own teacher education program decades ago, I was unprepared to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy in diverse settings. As a teacher myself and then eventually a teacher educator, my focus was on praxis and classroom practice, and I was failing to make the connections between theory and praxis explicit. Moreover, I had failed to revisit and relive my own growth in this area, something that I had forgotten was actually years in the making. Like all other educators, I had grown in my practice and understanding over decades of teaching, and I failed to remind myself that I could not expect my students to simply “take my word” for it and accept what I was telling them on face value.

With my colleague’s help, I decided to focus my efforts on walking the students through activities that would not simply present them with “facts” in the form of definitions and statistics, but would provide them with experiences that encouraged reflection and self-awareness. I also needed practice in negotiating and navigating the necessary conversations along the way. I decided to invite that colleague as a guest lecturer. She did a one-day presentation on critical race theory, which introduced my students (and me) to the issues of racism as not only pervasive, permanent, and systemic, but as issues that can be explored using “story telling” as a means to understand individuals’ experiences in the real world. Her lecture included three very personal and poignant disclosures of her own racism, and her attempts, as a young white female, to be aware of her own white privilege, her complicity, and her deeply-held beliefs and biases. She also encouraged the students to share, either in class or in a more private way, their own experiences. This lecture was well-received by the students, and allowed me to think more clearly about how I could organize the diversity unit in the future.

After the relative success of the addition of the guest lecturer, I decided to restructure the entire diversity unit for the fall of 2014. I went back to the classroom text, and decided that, after reading the fourth chapter and introducing and defining the terms “cultural competence” and “cultural responsiveness,” we would delve more deeply into issues of world domination using supplemental resources that incorporated that “storytelling” element and focused on personal experiences.

In the fall of 2014, the first thing we did after reading and discussing the chapter on diversity in the course text was to consider the white privilege checklist (McIntosh, 1989). I modified this list by choosing approximately twenty-five items that I felt were age- and life experience-appropriate for the students I taught. I provided the list in hard copy to the students without telling them what it was, and I read the items one at a time aloud in class, asking them to circle the number if it applied to them. Items included statements such as: I can, if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time; I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed; I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of

my race widely represented; When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

After we finished, I asked my pre-service teacher candidates to tally the number of items they circled and put it at the top of the page. I then broke the students into small groups to discuss three questions: 1) What do you believe is the purpose of the list? 2) What items on the list stood out to you as surprising or thought-provoking? 3) What have you learned when considering the items you circled as compared to those circled by your group members? Following the small group discussions, we engaged in a whole class dialogue. Most groups had little trouble figuring out that the list was some sort of assessment that centered on race and individuals’ experiences of race, and had no trouble identifying items that were interesting to them. However, when asked to compare the items they circled to those circled by their peers, the students became reticent to talk. They repeated some of the small group commentary in the whole class context, but only three students were willing to share their personal experiences as they related to the items on the list.

At this point, I did not challenge the students to speak in class, but instead, we followed up with a YouTube video (Nosek, 2007) that introduced Project Implicit (2011a), a “non-profit organization and international collaborative network of researchers investigating implicit social cognition—thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control. Project Implicit is the product of a team of scientists whose research produced new ways of understanding attitudes, stereotypes, and other hidden biases that influence perception, judgment, and action...[and] translates that academic research into practical applications for addressing diversity...” I encouraged students to take the online assessment of implicit biases but did not require it (Project Implicit, 2011b). I reinforced to the pre-service teacher candidates that many of them will, at the end of their academic preparation, find employment in inner-city schools, schools with a substantial number of at-risk students, and students whose racial, cultural, and linguistic background differ from their own, and I felt taking the assessment would be of huge benefit to their personal and professional growth. Approximately half of the students took the time to get online and complete the assessment, and, at our next class meeting, six students shared their thoughts and feelings about the assessment results.

Following this, we left issues of racism and looked at sexism. I began this session by doing a “feminist reading” of *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1962). I read the text aloud, and I told my class of pre-service teacher candidates to jot down issues of sexism that they recognized in the child’s picture book. The plot of the book follows the life of a female apple tree and a boy who communicate and interact throughout their lives. In the beginning, the boy is simply happy to eat her apples, swing from her branches, and rest in her shade. But as he enters adolescence, he wants money, at which point the tree proposes he take her apples and sell them, which he does. Then, after reaching adulthood, he wants a home and a family, so the tree suggests he cut her branches to build a house, which he also does. Upon reaching middle age, the boy wants a boat and the tree offers to let him cut her trunk to build one. This he does, as well. And at the end of each interaction, the book indicates that “the tree was happy.” At the end of the story, the boy, now an old man, returns a final time, at which point the tree indicates she has nothing left to give. But the boy requires only a “quiet place to sit and rest,” which the tree can provide, and the book ends with the sentence, “And the tree was happy.” At first, my pre-service teacher candidate students were reluctant to express

their opinions, but not quite as reticent as they were during the discussion of racism. After one example provided by me, the students quickly began to provide insight into the text. They talked about how women are often characterized as givers, while men are portrayed as takers; how women are expected to be nurturers and caregivers; how women alter themselves to suit men like the tree, who literally cut off parts of herself to please the boy. As a class, we then discussed the ways in which sexism is so pervasive and implicitly embedded in our culture that we often do not “see” it. I ended this particular lesson with two YouTube videos that explore sexism in Disney films (Danubata24, 2007) and representations of masculinity in Disney (Newton, 2007). My pre-service teacher candidates watched these videos and then eagerly shared their thoughts. While a few students, complained that the videos “ruined Disney,” more students expressed amazement at how covert these messages were and what the cumulative effect these messages might be over the course of a child’s lifetime.

We then explored the ways in which they, as future educators may, willingly or unwittingly, become complicit in perpetuating bias through their use of instructional materials. Using the Sadker website (n.d.), we explored the seven biases in instructional texts. These included invisibility, stereotyping, imbalance and selectivity, unreality, fragmentation and isolation, linguistic bias, and cosmetic bias. Using a handout and some pertinent examples from a variety of textbooks, the students were required to indicate which of the seven biases were apparent. The pre-service teacher candidates expressed surprise when they saw how science, history, and even language arts textbooks use these types of curricular strategies to support revisionist histories, to perpetuate inaccuracies, and even to skew facts.

As a follow up to this, I divided the students into small groups and gave each one a children’s picture book. I asked them to read these texts and consider the issue of bias in light of both the text itself and the illustrations. Specifically, I required them to evaluate the text based on its portrayal of gender, including traditional and nontraditional roles; issues of power and dominance; the amount and type of diversity with regard to race and ethnicity, including the accuracy and appropriateness of the depiction of cultures; the ways in which the book perpetuates negative or positive perceptions of the very young or very old; issues of body image, sexual orientation, language, religion, and socioeconomics were also considered. This activity appeared to be successful, as it allowed the students to focus on the ways in which authors and illustrators represent races, ages, sexes, persons with disabilities, and cultures. This allowed students to step outside themselves and look at the ways in which all people (educators included) may unknowingly incorporate their own biases and prejudices into their work; in this way, I was able to de-personalize the difficult conversations and situate them in a broader, more public perspective, thereby making them more easily navigated by my students.

The evolution of the diversity unit has been eye-opening for me. I continue to modify this unit, in the hopes that I will not only positively impact my pre-service teacher candidates’ pedagogical practices in the future, but also assist them in their personal growth as well. One additional assignment that I intend to implement for future sections of this course is for students to be required to rewrite the children’s picture book for the final assignment. After identifying issues of bias in the texts, students will be required to address and correct those issues in a rewritten form of the book. I have not yet had a chance to utilize this idea, but recent feedback from the pre-service teacher candidates appear to indicate that the changes I have already made in the organization of this unit have been

relatively successful. Several students, on more recent course evaluations, have indicated that they “really enjoyed the test we took where we rated our biases.” Another student indicated that while she does “joke about stuff that has to do with race and ethnicity,” the course content has “really opened her eyes about that in the classroom.” Equally important to me as a teacher educator is that many students stated that they “liked the discussions we had during the unit” and they many of them felt that “everyone’s opinion was respected and appreciated.”

Discussion

Critics of teacher education programs have long suggested that pre-service teacher candidates are inadequately prepared to teach diverse populations including students from low-income backgrounds and diverse cultures, students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities and academic challenges (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). In essence, pre-service teacher candidates are not always equipped to work with students unlike themselves. More recent studies have continued to indicate that despite the fact that faculty in teachers colleges maintained that they designed courses that included objectives related specifically to diversity and equity, pre-service teacher candidates still held limited understandings of diversity, especially with regard to an awareness of the connection between race and class after exiting these courses (Lee & Hemer-Patnode, 2010). As indicated in this article and as borne out in the existing literature, the process of developing cultural competence and responsiveness is not easy, but is, nevertheless, urgent for educators who are required to work with diverse populations on a daily basis.

While there is evidence that pre-service teacher candidates receive coursework designed to address issues of diversity and multiculturalism, the content focus varies significantly between and among institutions (King & Butler, 2015). While some learning objectives associated with diversity and inclusive education training may be embedded in coursework more closely identified with the content areas (i.e., mathematics, science, literacy, history) or pedagogy (e.g., foundations coursework, curriculum and instruction, materials and methods courses), some may be indicated in stand-alone courses designed specifically for the purpose of improving teacher education training for diversity (e.g., multicultural education courses). Regardless of the various ways teachers colleges may attempt to prepare pre-service teachers to teach for diversity, research appears to indicate that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for this are difficult to acquire (Lee & Hemer-Patnode, 2010).

As the personal experience delineated here clearly indicates, an issue may arise when the teacher educator entrusted with the development of diversity training in pre-service teacher candidates may feel inadequately prepared to explore issues of race, class, and sex as it relates to the classroom. In consideration of the analysis of classroom practice described in this article, I had considerable actual teaching experience prior to the beginning of this course instruction—in fact, I had almost three decades of actual teaching experience. Moreover, my education in my field (education) was substantial, including ten years of post-secondary education. Still, I entered the process with a limited understanding of how problematic it would be to negotiate those difficult conversations with my pre-service teacher candidates, and how long and involved the process of understanding would be especially when working with candidates who have had limited teaching experience, restricted exposure to diverse populations, and perhaps even a narrow world view as a result of limited experiences.

While it is clear that many teachers colleges recognize that working with pre-service teacher candidates for the purpose of promoting cultural awareness and responsiveness is urgent and critical, it is also important to remember that there are some things in teacher preparation that require time, guidance, and experience. Just as one does not presume that a few methods and materials courses will adequately prepare teacher candidates for all the demands of preparing lesson plans and administering instruction, especially in the absence of practical classroom experience, neither can coursework incorporating issues of diversity immediately modify pre-service teacher candidates' firmly-held beliefs, assumptions, and dispositions around working with diverse populations. It is the role of everyone who is involved in teacher education to continuously develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equitable and inclusive education (Causey et al. 2000). By looking at the entire teacher preparation program and analyzing specific courses where diversity education is situated, we may be able to better prepare pre-service teacher educators for the challenges they will face in the work force.

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