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Using Critical Self-Reflection and Resistance Strategies in Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers *RESEARCH*

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Abstract

As our country becomes more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, pre-service teachers must be fully prepared to deal with these changes. As the demographics change, the majority of teachers continue to be white, middle-class females having to teach students who are different from themselves. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that schools of education must prepare teachers with the knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to be culturally competent in the classroom so as to meet the challenges of a pluralistic society. According to Brown (2004) and Sleeter (2001), many pre-service teachers simply lack cross-cultural competence and attitudes regarding diversity that would allow them to teach culturally diverse students. Therefore, various scholars (e.g., Cannella & Reiff, 1991; Suleiman, 1996; Ukpokodu, 2003; Vaughan, 2002) argue for the inclusion of diversity training within education programs that are designed to build a better cultural understanding. Several studies (Bennett, 1995; Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Sleeter, 1995) suggest that only teachers who are sensitive to the diverse cultures that students bring to the classroom would be able to understand the cultural cues of different ethnic and social groups, and in following, provide learning experiences that will meet their needs.

Keywords: critical self-reflection, resistance strategies, preparation, culturally responsive teachers

Introduction

Pre-service teachers in most diversity courses are often asked to reflect critically on their own cultural, racial, social and personal identities through the lens of power and privilege. Because of most pre-service teachers' backgrounds, there is an expectation of unfamiliarity and discomfort with this process, resulting in cognitive dissonance as well as some form of resistance. If all students are to be effectively taught, teachers must be prepared to address the diversity (of language, ethnicity, social class, religion, abilities, and cultures) that is growing tremendously in our schools. Banks (2000) posits that students of color comprise one-third of our nation's school populations. Further projections show that by the year 2020, about 48-50 percent of the student population will be students of color (Banks, 2006; Nieto & Bodie, 2008). Likewise, the rise of students whose first language is not English has also been challenging for educators. In some cases, more than 100 different languages have been documented, thus indicating that many students in our nation's schools are English language

learners. Research also suggests that the majority of preservice teachers are white, monolingual, middle-class females (Banks, 2006; Grant & Secada, 1990; Sleeter, 1995; Zimpher, 1989) and from a society in which whiteness is seen as the norm (Weiler, 2008). Therefore, most pre-service teachers do not see themselves as cultured (Banks, 2006; Ryan, 2006), which makes it very problematic for them to discuss concepts centered on race, social class, or culture as they relate to teaching and learning, hence the resistance to multicultural education. Research studies have suggested that colleges and universities must prepare students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed in order to be culturally responsive (Gay, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and to meet the challenges of diverse classrooms (Delpit, 1995).

In order to prepare pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive in diverse classrooms, many teacher education programs have embarked on implementing courses in multicultural education, with most of them categorized as stand-alone courses (Brown, 2004; Vavrus, 2002).

However, other researchers (Banks, 2006; Farley, 2000; Sleeter & Grant, 1999; Ukpokodu, 2003) have all suggested that multicultural education can be very instrumental in helping pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive in culturally diverse classrooms.

Research has shown that many teacher education students who enroll in stand-alone multicultural education courses attempt to resist multicultural concepts and seek to reinforce their perceived cultural biases (Brown, 2004; Irvine, 199; Sleeter, 1995). Furthermore, Brown (2004) reports resistance in participation, inadequate class participation, opposition to required cross-cultural field experiences, and mediocre class work in general. Other research has shown evidence of frustration and resistance to content and pedagogy in multicultural education courses from pre-service teachers who are mostly white and middle-class (Dittmar, 1999; Wiggins & Follo, 1999). These educators have also reported evidence of resistance in name calling, frustration, and lower faculty evaluation scores.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how some selected strategies used in a foundations cultural diversity course in the teacher education program at a Midwestern university helped students who could be categorized as “privileged” to self-reflect, and counter fear and resistance to concepts of diversity and social justice. The intent is to share with the reader the various strategies students engaged in during the semester, highlighting some of their comments and reflections.

This course consisted of a high percentage of white, “privileged” suburban students who attended private Catholic schools and who in most cases had very little experience with diversity in their communities or schools. With this background, students were leery and sometimes offended by having to take a

class that addresses issues of social justice, discrimination, racism, sexual orientation and inequities in society and especially schools. To help students through what I termed the “Resistance Stage,” strategies were developed that would allow them to self-reflect on their cultural identities and experiences, and then encouraged them to become immersed in cultures different from their own. The intension was to help them to become more culturally sensitive and aware in order to develop new knowledge and dispositions about ways of thinking pertaining to issues of diversity. These strategies were also specifically chosen to provide opportunities to break down any cultural barriers that would hinder them from becoming knowledgeable, effective, and culturally responsive teachers.

Students

The majority of students consisted of white, female undergraduates/graduates specializing in Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Middle Childhood Education and Montessori Education. For all students, this was the first required course taken in cultural diversity.

Course Description

This course, “Cultural Diversity in Educational Settings,” is one of the courses designed to meet the diversity requirements set by the state. All students majoring in Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Middle Childhood Education and Montessori Education are required to take this course during their sophomore year. In this course, students explore areas pertaining to race, class, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, religion, stereotyping, racism and discrimination and the impact of all these on the process of schooling. They also engage in activities to gain a greater understanding of the marginalized cultures present in our society.

As mentioned earlier, research indicates that before one can begin to understand others, one needs to understand oneself first. At the beginning of the course, students begin by critically self-reflecting on their identities (Cultural Puzzle) as well as their world as it relates to diversity (My World and I).

My World and I

My World and I is the first culturally self-reflective exercise students are engaged in, which forces them to examine their world from a diverse perspective. Students are given a sheet of paper featuring a large circle with a smaller circle in the middle. A key for the various cultures is provided at the bottom of the circle (White=W; Black=B etc.). Students begin the exercise by writing their names in the smaller circle. They are then given a list of words of people involved in their lives (e.g., doctor, dentist, parents, siblings, teachers, etc.). They are required to think about these individuals in their world and fill in the circle with letters based on their ethnic background. If a student's doctor is black, the letter B will be placed somewhere in the circle. Students are encouraged to spread their letters throughout the circle to get a good sense of how diverse their world is. The next step is to reflect on what they see in their circle by responding to a series of questions provided.

- What are your thoughts about what you see in your circle?
- Explain the rationale for your circle looking this way?
- Is this a good representation of your views about diverse people?
- What challenges might you face in schools as a result of your socialization?
- What strategies can you implement to compensate for the limited exposure to certain diverse groups?

Students are asked to complete the questions followed by small and then large group discussions. From students' comments, it can be concluded that most students who enroll in the program do not have culturally diverse backgrounds and are not proud of it.

In response to the diversity of the circle, one student stated that it was all she knew and she lived a very sheltered life. Another student stated that her world did not have a lot of diversity, simply because of her community and the people she associated with. Most reasons given by students were the geographical location and community in which they lived.

In response to the idea of socialization and their views of diverse people, most students agreed that although diversity was lacking in their world, they had no problems socializing or working with diverse populations. One student stated that although she did not know much about other cultures, she did not have a problem with them, and she has made many acquaintances of different races through her life. Another student stated that she was very open to diversity, but has not been exposed as others may have, and has been sheltered from the harsh realities of cultural differences and racism.

This exercise allows students to self-reflect on their lives with respect to diversity, examine the challenges they might encounter because of a lack of diversity, and devise strategies to offset their limited exposure.

Cultural Puzzle

The Cultural Puzzle, based on the work of Brown (2006), is a self-reflecting activity that encourages students to examine their cultural and racial identity and design a cultural puzzle highlighting the cultural forces that have made them who they are today. In self-reflecting, students must

design the puzzle to meet these criteria: Design a cultural puzzle depicting how you became the person you are today; examine how, by what and by whom was your current persona shaped; conduct family interviews that include your current generation (siblings, cousins, extended family), at least two from the previous generation (parents, aunts/uncles, primary care givers), and at least two generations prior (grandparents, extended family).

Students become very creative in designing their puzzles. Puzzles come in all shapes and formats, including real puzzles with pieces, collages, and pictures of themselves with their descriptors around them. However, on examining the puzzles and their presentations, many commonalities emerge among students. Very evident are family, church, coaches, teachers, and heritage. However, Brown (2006) identifies the following as her vision of a cultural puzzle: urban, ability, gender, dialect, ethnicity, religion, extended family. Although students seem to have a general understanding of who they are, evidence indicates that they lack a true sense of the deeper underpinnings that helped shape their lives.

Cultural Diversity Plunge

The cultural plunge, modeled after the work of Nieto (2006), forces students to become immersed in cultural settings which may be somewhat uncomfortable for them. Students are required to participate in an unfamiliar culture for a minimum of one hour to gain a better understanding of the cultural differences that may exist within our community; to experience what it would be like to be different from most of the people around them; to have direct contact with individuals who are culturally different from themselves; and to gain insight into their knowledge, values, and dispositions pertaining to the focal group. After the

experience, students will try to make sense of it by forging connections to the experiences of minorities in our schools today. The situation selected must meet the following criteria: The group must be a historically marginalized people; the majority of people must be from the focal group; experience must be one that you have never experienced before and must last for at least 1 hour; no notes must be taken; plunge must take place after the course begins (credit will not be given for past experiences); and in reflecting, connections should be made to education. Some groups that students focused on were African American culture, Hispanic culture, Gay /Lesbian culture, and Jewish and Muslim culture. After completing the experience, students are required to write a three-page paper reflecting on their experiences. The first page consists of listing five stereotypes, misconceptions and biases they might have, or have heard about the group, and what prior contacts/experiences they have had with the group. The second page describes their reactions as well as the reactions of the group to the experience and reasons why they reacted that way. The third page discusses whether the plunge reinforced or challenged the popular stereotypes of the group. The paper concludes with how their experience may impact them in the teaching/learning practice, especially when dealing with minorities in their classrooms. As students reflect after the conclusion of the plunge, they are required to reflect on their experience by focusing on the following questions:

- What impact did the plunge have on your perceptions of (group on which you did your plunge)?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- Did you feel intimidated by the plunge? Explain.
- Do you feel that the plunge was a worthwhile experience?

In analyzing students' responses, although most students felt that the plunge was intimidating and uncomfortable, forcing them out of their comfort zone, they all agreed that the plunge was a worthwhile experience. It helped them to change their held perceptions of the groups' stereotypes, biases and misconceptions. One student stated that the experience enriched her knowledge and thoughts about life, and noted that we sometimes need to be shaken from our prejudices and misconceptions. Another student, describing her understanding of the Gay/Lesbian culture, stated that she learned never to judge a person by appearance, and that personalities and beliefs make them who they are. A third student stated that she supported the project 100% and wanted to take this experience and use it in her life to become a better teacher. She also stated that through this experience, she wanted to be challenged by emerging herself into other cultures. Several students also agreed that if they are going to be educators, with the changing demographics in schools, they need to be more educated about dealing with diversity in the classroom. Meanwhile, students who attended Jewish or Hispanic church services came up against a language barrier. This enabled them to draw comparisons to the plight of the limited English proficiency students in our classrooms. They encountered situations where they could not make connections to what was going on around them because of the language barrier, resulting in feelings of frustration, loneliness, and the desire to remove themselves from the situation. One student commented that she takes comfort in her language, but when placed in a situation where that is stripped away, there is a feeling of being uncomfortable and insecure. She stated that because of the language barrier, she left the experience confused and unaware of what was going on. Another

student stated that she was able to learn about a different minority culture and it helped her to understand how students may feel in the classroom. She also agreed that she cannot help her students achieve until she knows what it feels like to be in their position and the plunge gave her an opportunity to do that. A third student also stated that the plunge allowed her to get a sense of how marginalized students may feel in the classroom, and how experiencing other cultures enables you to further develop who you are as a person and how you accept others.

In sum, all of these white, middle-class, female pre-service teachers agreed that if they are going to maximize the potential of all students they may encounter in the classroom, they need to be exposed to and understanding of the diversity that surrounds them and their students.

Assets-Based Service-Learning

Assets-Based Service-Learning, as used in this context, is based on the work of Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) and Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan (2007), who suggest that service-learning should go beyond the "Do Gooder Aspect." They argue that the individuals who are being served have assets to offer those who are serving. Therefore, any learning that takes place should be reciprocal in nature, hence the term Assets-based service-learning. On the other hand, Nieto (2000) suggests that students can provide service to the community while examining societal issues such as social power, privilege and oppression.

The goals for the participants are to gain a better understanding and appreciation for the racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity that exist within our community; to decrease their biases and misconceptions they may have about groups different from themselves; to develop a sense of their own cultural identity though

the process of self-reflection and reciprocal learning; and to increase their commitment to working toward social justice.

At the beginning of the course, students are asked to select a marginalized group that they would like to learn more about. Some service-learning activities chosen are: tutoring African Americans (low income); working with after-school programs and students with various disabilities; serving in soup kitchens; working with Hispanic organizations; assisting in hospitals and homes for the elderly; and working with the homeless population.

They are then required to write a two-page self-reflection on their experiences with diversity, stating what they know about the particular culture chosen, and identifying the various misconceptions, prejudices, or stereotypes they may have or heard about the particular group. After discussions and readings about the importance of service-learning in today's society, students complete five hours of service-learning with the chosen group. They are required to keep a log reflecting on each experience with the group.

At the end of the service-learning experience, students are required to give an oral report to their classmates on their experiences. Emphasis here is not on what service they provided, but whether reciprocal learning occurred. In other words, students indicate or share what they learned from the group, and what the group learned from them. They were also required to write a three-page report on their experience, focusing on the concerns and misconceptions they had prior to the service, as well as the impact of the experience on their values and beliefs.

From students' oral reports and written reflections, students tend to enjoy this exercise, and show strong feelings about the stereotypes and misconceptions society

has placed on various marginalized groups. They realize a greater understanding and appreciation for those in poverty and especially the homeless. One of the themes that always emerges is that homelessness can be an economic issue rather than being lazy. Many students who worked with this group suggested that they never viewed homelessness from this perspective. They envisioned them as alcoholics and drug addicts. Most students also seemed to suggest that it gave them a better self-understanding. They indicated that their experiences with marginalized groups helped them to reflect more about their racial and cultural identity and how privileged they were in our society. Overall, participating students were convinced that their biases and misconceptions about minorities and lower socioeconomic groups were all stereotypes, and these groups have many assets that could be beneficial to them as future teachers.

Conclusion

This article discussed using critical self-reflection and resistance strategies in preparing culturally responsive teachers. Research (Banks, 2006; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Nieto, 2008) indicates that self-reflection is an important first step to understanding others. Current research (Grant & Secada, 1990; Sleeter, 1995; Ukpokodu, 2003) also indicates that with the changing demographics, pre-service teachers need to have the knowledge skills and dispositions required for working with students who may be different from themselves.

Additionally, Gay (2000) advocates for culturally responsive teachers in our classrooms. She defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively.

Students' cultural backgrounds should be integrated into the classroom with the goal of maximizing academic achievement.

Based on comments and written responses from students for each activity, they all agreed that because of the lack of diversity in their backgrounds and experiences, it is very important to be challenged and open-minded in dealing with aspects of diversity. They embraced the idea that school populations are becoming more diverse and if they are going to be effective and successful teachers, they must have a greater understanding of the diversity that surrounds them. They agreed that these strategies were very helpful in allowing them to self-reflect from a cultural perspective in ways that they had never done before, and the field experiences allowed them to make direct contact with marginalized groups and helped them to become more sensitive to minority groups they might encounter in the classrooms.

In order for pre-service teachers to become more culturally aware and

responsive, teacher preparation programs must have programs in place where this can take effect. Teacher educators must recognize that the demographics in society are changing, which is being reflected in our schools. Therefore, in the preparation of pre-service teachers, it is paramount for them to engage their students in activities where they can gain the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are required to work with culturally different populations. The Cultural Puzzle and My World and I are strategies that encourage one to self-reflect from a cultural perspective, while the Cultural Plunge and Assets-based Service-Learning can be helpful in promoting self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among the pre-service educators. If pre-service teachers have a keen sense of their cultural and racial identity, and are sensitive to the beliefs and values of others, then they may be on the road to being culturally responsive educators.

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