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Developing Cultural Critical Consciousness and Self-Reflection in Preservice Teacher Education

In this article, the authors argue that developing personal and professional critical consciousness about racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity should be a major component of preservice teacher education. They discuss some maneuvers teacher education students use to avoid engaging with racial issues in education, and suggest some strategies for counteracting them. The resistance strategies include silence, diversion, guilt, and benevolent liberalism. Techniques to offset these and develop critical cultural consciousness and self-reflection include creating learning expectations of criticalness, modeling, providing opportunities to practice critical consciousness, and translating conceptual multicultural education into K-12 instructional possibilities. Woven throughout the specific suggestions is the general directive that critical consciousness learning experiences should take place within the context of guided practice, authentic examples, and realistic situations.

WE BELIEVE THAT CULTURALLY responsive teaching (CRT) for ethnically diverse students should be a fundamental feature of teacher

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preparation and classroom practice. CRT involves using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of African, Native, Latino, and Asian American students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills. Other critical elements of culturally responsive teaching are unpacking unequal distributions of power and privilege, and teaching students of color cultural competence about themselves and each other.

Our beliefs about the necessity of CRT are based on the premises that (a) multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected; (b) teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one's own teaching beliefs and behaviors; and (c) teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom. These premises are supported by scholars such as Danielewicz (2001), Gay (2000), Ladson-Billings (2001), Palmer (1998), Schön (1983), Valli (1992), and Zeichner and Liston (1996). They explain that teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness. Critical racial and cultural consciousness should be coupled with self-reflection in both preservice teacher education and in-service staff development. In this article we explain some of the challenges to developing

cultural critical consciousness, techniques we use, and insights we have gained in helping preservice teachers develop these skills.

The demographics of our students reflect those of the national profile of teacher candidates. They are overwhelmingly European American, middle-class, monolingual, White females who have had little sustained and substantive interactions with people of color. We believe the principles of our proposals for developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in teacher education apply to other populations as well. However, how they are operationalized in practice should be contextually specific.

Challenges to Developing Cultural Critical Consciousness and Self-Reflection

Self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are imperative to improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color. They involve thoroughly analyzing and carefully monitoring both personal beliefs and instructional behaviors about the value of cultural diversity, and the best ways to teach ethnically different students for maximum positive effects. Corresponding behaviors have to be changed to incorporate more positive knowledge and perceptions of cultural diversity. To engage in these continuous critiques and efforts to make teaching more relevant to diverse students, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of their own cultures and the cultures of different ethnic groups, as well as how this affects teaching and learning behaviors.

Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection is challenging to teacher education students, but it can be accomplished. A natural place to begin the learning process is by being aware of the obstacles that can interfere with the process. Some of these have to do with challenges of self-reflection in general that prospective teachers face; others are specific to ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.

General obstacles

General difficulties stem from several sources. Some derive from the fact that many prospective teachers do not clearly understand what constitutes self-reflection, or how to do it. They

confuse reflection with describing issues, ideas, and events; stating philosophical beliefs; or summarizing statements made by scholars. They miss the analytical introspection, continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and the recurring transformation of beliefs and skills that are essential elements of self-reflection (Stronge, 2002). Even teacher education programs that emphasize reflection frequently do not incorporate issues of race, ethnic diversity, and social justice in classroom practices (Vavrus, 2002).

Another general problem is that teacher education students have few high-quality opportunities for guided practice in self-reflection. This should be corrected by instructors in preservice programs using inquiry teaching techniques and helping students develop the habit, skills, and spirit of criticalness as habitual elements of their learning experiences. If these approaches to learning are cultivated and modeled across the general teacher education curriculum, they will set a foundation and precedent for teacher candidates to use in their own classrooms. As Danielewicz (2001) explains:

Reflexivity is an act of self-conscious consideration that can lead people to a deepened understanding of themselves and others, not in the abstract, but in relation to specific social environments . . . [and] foster a more profound awareness . . . of how social contexts influence who people are and how they behave. . . . It involves a person's active analysis of past situations, events, and products, with the inherent goals of critique and revision for the explicit purpose of achieving an understanding that can lead to change in thought or behavior. (pp. 155-156)

Other difficulties in developing a general reflective ethos among preservice teachers come from traditional beliefs that teaching is an objectifiable craft. It requires the mastery of technical components that are applicable to all teaching contexts and student populations. These beliefs are captured in statements such as, "Treat all students the same regardless of who they are," and "Good teaching anywhere is good teaching everywhere." It is troublesome for some teacher education students to overcome these orientations, and to accept teaching as a highly contextualized process. In fact, teaching is as much a personal performance, a moral endeavor, and a cultural script, as it is a technical craft (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Danielewicz, 2001; Palmer, 1998).

Specific obstacles

Developing skills in self-reflection and critical consciousness specific to racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity among preservice teachers is obstructed by several more deliberate maneuvers. One of the most common is for teacher education students to divert or diffuse attention away from the targeted topic. This is accomplished in several ways. Rather than reflecting critically on the race-related and culturally diverse situations presented, they merely offer descriptions, evaluations, or justifications for actions taken or predicted. For example, in discussing achievement among students of color, many preservice teachers simply repeat the trends, or the conventional reasons for why discrepancies exist, without examining their own personal positions on the issues, questioning traditional explanations, or analyzing how achievement dilemmas are influenced by culture, class, ethnicity, and racism. They seem unable to imagine novel ways of tackling underachievement. When provided with some possibilities, it is difficult for them to see the merits of them because the new proposals conflict with their conceptions of teaching. A case in point is the difficulty preservice teachers have making distinctions between using multiple culturally appropriate means to achieve learning outcomes for diverse students, and lowering academic standards. They think the two ideas are synonymous. Teacher education students also frequently try to shift the focus of analysis from race to class, gender, and individuality. Invariably, when discussions about race and racism in education are raised, someone quickly counters with comments like, “it’s more about economic status than race because there are more differences within than among groups”; “in the final analysis it is the individual that counts”; and “promoting high-quality education is for all students.”

A second common maneuver that preservice teachers use to avoid analyzing their thoughts, beliefs, biases, and behaviors about racial and cultural diversity in education is silence. When asked to participate in these discussions they don’t. If pressed to do so, they plead ignorance or lack of exposure to and contact with diverse peoples and cultures. They seem mystified about how to acquire knowledge to overcome their ignorance. This

places the instructor in the position of having to carry the conversation by providing all of the analyses, examples, and interpretations. What should be thoughtful, co-constructed dialogues among students and instructors quickly lapses into monologues. The students may listen intently to the reflections of the professors, but their own self-reflection and critical consciousness about racism, ethnicity, and cultural diversity in education are not accomplished.

In addition to simply not engaging with race, racism, ethnicity, and cultural diversity in education some prospective teachers try to silence the significance of these issues. That is, they try to undermine the importance of the questions raised and explanations provided. These maneuvers take many different forms, but two are most frequently used. One is to question the validity of the issue by pointing out, “I know someone who is a member of (the particular ethnic group) and he or she doesn’t act (or believe) that way.” Or, “I know people who are not members of (the particular ethnic group) and they think, believe, and behave the same way.” The other silencing attitude often expressed is, “Isn’t that stereotyping, or overgeneralizing?” The comment tends to be offered in response to readings and discussions that deal with specifically named cultural values and behaviors of different ethnic groups, such as preferred learning styles, communication behaviors, and even achievement patterns.

These reactions, and the contexts and timing when they are delivered, convey the implicit message that if the individuals expressing them can point out exceptions, the accuracy and worth of the explanations will be nullified. These skeptics are missing some critical points about how to engage with cultural information. Among them are understanding that (a) one or a few exceptions do not invalidate patterns and trends, and (b) individual exceptions are givens in dealing with issues like culture and ethnicity that are group phenomena (Gay, 2000). Yet another problem is that these individuals do not question the validity, accuracy, and authenticity of their countering argument. They do not realize the privilege, presumption, and entitlement that are embedded in using their personal outsider knowledge and limited experiences to outrank

the cumulated scholarship and extensive experiences of scholars (many of whom are members of the ethnic groups they write about, and certainly are far more experienced with racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity).

The third barrier to preservice teachers genuinely thinking critically about race-related issues in education is their claims of benevolent liberalism, and guilt over past acts of oppression, injustice, and marginalization. They may profess commitment to promoting educational equity based on their newly found awareness, but they do not think deeply about the implications and consequences of this knowledge for changing their personal and professional behaviors. As discussions about cultural and racial diversity move beyond general awareness toward specific instructional actions that challenge prevailing conventions, resistance is increasingly apparent. It is signaled by statements such as, "Yes, but students of color have to live and work in the U.S., so they need to learn to be American like everybody else," and "If I teach them according to their cultural styles, won't the White kids be discriminated against, and won't I be lowering my educational standards?" As with awareness, many prospective teachers assume that feeling guilty about racism is sufficient to make them worthy promoters of equality and social justice in their classroom instruction. They do not examine the causes, motivations, depths, and manifestations of their guilt, least of all how to move beyond it, and to ensure that the guilt-provoking actions are not perpetuated in the future.

Some teacher education students even believe that race and racism are non-issues, and are no longer problems in U.S. society and schools. As one student remarked, "Why shouldn't we teach the Western canon; it's the truth." Individuals like this are incredibly naive, do not understand the academic racism and cultural hegemony embedded in statements like this, or are in total denial of their existence. This leads to assumptions that whatever racial problems in schools and society that existed in the past have been resolved. They evoke notions of color-blindness and universality as the standard for how to engage with diverse students. These preservice teachers do not interrogate the sources of their standards of universality, what they

mean when operationalized in classroom practice, or how color-blindness may conflict with some other educational principles, such as maximizing human potential, and using students' prior knowledge in teaching new information and skills. One of our major goals in helping teacher education students develop multicultural critical consciousness is to understand how these beliefs and related behaviors are cultural determinations and, when translated into practice, are discriminatory to students who do not share the teachers' values and beliefs.

Overcoming Resistance to Cultural and Critical Consciousness and Self-Reflection

Even students who are not deliberately opposed to dealing with racially and culturally diverse issues in education need guidance and support in critiquing and changing thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors related to them. One effective way to do this is for teacher education programs to create learning climates and expectations where self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness are part of the routine, normative demands of students. In our classes students are informed from the very beginning that they are expected to "think deeply and analytically," and to "check themselves" about the topics they are studying; to carefully examine their feelings about what they experience; and to work diligently at translating the knowledge they are learning into instructional possibilities for use with the students they will teach. They are expected to think about both the personal and professional ramifications of their newly acquired knowledge—how it impacts them as human beings and as classroom teachers. We convey to students our beliefs that the person who performs the role of teacher, and understanding the cultural contexts in which they teach, are as crucial to instructional effectiveness with diverse students as the mastery of content knowledge and pedagogical techniques.

While personal and inner reflective dialogues are imperative, they need to be accompanied by similar dialogues with others. We build into our teaching classroom climates, expectations, and learning opportunities for preservice teachers to have critical conversations with each other about racial and culturally diverse dilemmas in education. We have had students work together to construct

position statements on multicultural education for skeptics, friends, colleagues, and family members. They have examined the power of language to perpetuate racism, cultural hegemony, and marginalization even as one claims vehemently to be opposed to them. Students have dramatized, through role-playing and simulation, different ethnic perspectives on multicultural education issues, and then critiqued the adequacy of others' performances. They have converted ideas about educational inequities, and effective multicultural education from one expressive genre to another, such as from essay or oral discourse into drama, metaphor, and visual presentations. We also have used variations of jigsaw cooperative learning for students to examine various aspects of multicultural education, and then teach them to each other. Our reasoning for using these techniques is that the processes of converting knowledge from one form to another, then sharing it with others, and receiving constructive feedback on the quality of the delivery, offer valuable practice in self-reflection and critical consciousness. These different discourses also are important because of the camaraderie they build, the intellectual clarification they provide, and the support and confidence students gain in confronting issues of educational equity for ethnically diverse students. Furthermore, teachers talking with each other about their individual and collective thoughts, insights, and instructional actions is an essential part of being reflective practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Richert, 1992).

Another technique that works well for us in helping preservice teachers develop critical racial and cultural consciousness is modeling the process in our own teaching. Many of the key components of multicultural education (e.g., ethnic learning styles, culturally responsive teaching, and cultural values and beliefs of different groups of color) are academic abstractions to preservice teachers because they have no practical experiences with them. Yet they need to understand the knowledge, concepts, and principles in personal ways to implement them in their own classroom teaching. Instructors who demonstrate multicultural education principles in their instructional behaviors are much more effective than those who simply talk about them.

In addition to actually exhibiting multicultural self-reflection and critical consciousness in our teaching behaviors, we use two related techniques to help our students understand what is going on. During teaching episodes we routinely stop the substantive discussion and shift attention to debriefing the process that has just occurred. Initially, we assume responsibility for telling students what just happened, using conceptual, analytical, and interpretative descriptions, as well as pointing out textual and functional shifts in the discourse. For example, the instructional conversation may have been about the negative consequences of teacher expectations on the intellectual efficacy and academic achievement of African, Native, and Latino American students. The information shared may include a combination of facts reported by researchers and scholars, personal opinions and feelings, autobiographical and observational stories, and suggestions about how racism among teachers can be counteracted. In the midst of this conversation, we may use a variety of conversational modalities from high academic language, to informal speech, colloquialisms, metaphors, Ebonics, written texts, poetic renditions, and visual imagery.

During the reflective debriefing aspect of the teaching exchange, we name the different types of communication and information used; reveal where within the discussion we were expressing personal feelings and biases; share our own introspective thoughts, questions, and insights provoked by the discussion; and assess the adequacy and completeness of our instructional delivery. In subsequent debriefings students are first assisted through the process by being asked to answer a series of critical and reflective questions that approximate the debriefing we modeled. Eventually, they are expected to do their own nondirective reflective analyses of the instructor's, their own, and each other's pedagogical conversations. In other words, our class discourse patterns become the subject of analyses on two important levels of developing critical consciousness: first, in the act of their construction and delivery, and second, in the analytical critique of them.

We also provide frequent and genuine opportunities for students to practice being multiculturally reflective and critically conscious. Projects

are designed to allow students to bring to consciousness cultural values and beliefs embedded in U.S. schools and society that are taken for granted, or assumed to be universal; to understand how cultural hegemony and racism are manifested in school programs and practices; and to practice modifying curriculum content, instructional strategies, and learning climates to make them more responsive to ethnic and cultural diversity. We begin with discussions about the core values of mainstream U.S. society and different ethnic groups. Our intent is to help preservice teachers understand that what they may consider “just the way things are” or “the right way to behave” are, in fact, culturally determined standards of behavior, and that students from different cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds may ascribe to very different ones.

One technique that has been very effective for us is using poetry as pedagogy (Kirkland, 2001) to examine critical social and educational issues from the perspectives of different ethnic groups. We also have our students spend selected periods of time doing guided observations of “ethnic others” in their daily routines. These experiences are designed to help European American students dispel the myth that culture is only specialized artifacts and events, and to deconstruct the claim that “they (ethnically and racially diverse groups) are just like us.” We teach them how to look at the interactions of ethnic group members, and what to do with what they find.

We also provide numerous opportunities for preservice teachers to have guided practice in translating the conceptual principles of multicultural critical consciousness into instructional possibilities for use in K-12 classrooms. These activities are organized around cooperative learning projects; are based on the philosophy of learning by doing; involve realistic situations, issues, and events; and require students to use knowledge they have learned about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity in creating their instructional strategies.

Our students also practice multicultural self-reflection and critical consciousness by deconstructing and then reconstructing major U.S. icons, symbols, and celebrations, such as national holidays, the national anthem and other patriotic songs,

and *e pluribus unum*. These are re-visioned to make them more inclusive of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Conclusion

Our experiences in teaching multicultural education to predominately European American female preservice teachers have taught us that it is not enough to have courageous conversations about racism and social injustices, to appreciate cultural differences, and accept the need to be reflective in their personal beliefs and professional practices. They need to practice actually engaging in cultural critical consciousness and personal reflection. This practice should involve concrete situations, guided assistance, and specific contexts and catalysts. Real-life experiences make the learning activities more genuine and authentic, and lessen the likelihood that students will escape the intellectual, emotional, psychological, moral, and pedagogical challenges inherent in reflection and critical consciousness.

Teaching for cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection should also provide opportunities for preservice teachers to construct tangible results of the ideological reconfigurations that are part of reflection so that they can assess the quality of their efforts and continue to improve them. Turning critical thoughts into transformative instructional actions helps to internalize the process so that it can be replicated in future endeavors. Our “learning by doing within the context of authentically lived experiences” approach to teaching models techniques that they, in turn, can use with their own students to teach similar skills. It also is one of the anchors of effective teaching for social justice in multicultural contexts.

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