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## The Cultural Curriculum: Constructing Social Justice in Teaching and Learning In the Classroom

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### **The Cultural Curriculum: Constructing Social Justice in Teaching and Learning in the Classroom**

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#### **Abstract**

Every teacher education program hopes to produce graduates ready to be teachers. Schools of education must prepare teachers to be culturally sensitive as they teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds. This research study focuses on what it means to teach for social justice, and how the implementations of this study can be a building block for teachers who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. Preservice teachers were interviewed and they responded to a questionnaire that provided phenomenological insight and ontological knowledge on how to engage students from diverse backgrounds in learning course content. These findings indicate that the preparation of preservice teachers must include new ways of teaching and learning for the new generation of students.

Key words: educator preparation; preservice teacher; social justice; culturally responsive; culturally sensitive; cultural curriculum.

A fundamental pledge of the American (democratic) government is that all children, regardless of their status in society when they enter public school, have the opportunity to receive a good education and, as a result, improve their capacity to be successful in society (Pugach, 2006). However, throughout the history of public schooling in this country, specific groups of children have failed to receive the full benefits of public education and, as a result, have had difficulty achieving success in school (Cremin, 1988). Students who most often experience school in this negative, harmful way are members of racial and ethnic minority groups and/or children from the lower socioeconomic levels of our society (Pugach, 2006).

Many dynamics in society contribute to the systematic deprivation of specific groups of students. Some practices that contribute to the low achievement of students from racial and ethnic minorities or

from low-income families unfold in individual classrooms between particular teachers and students—and are under the direct control of teachers (Banks, 2008; Pugach, 2006). Other practices are part of the larger organizational structure and policies that govern schooling. Still others reflect problems in the larger society. The actions of an individual teacher certainly cannot solve widespread social problems. Individual schools and individual teachers, however, can and do make a difference in the lives of their students every day. Teachers and schools can have a profound positive effect on the achievement of racial and ethnic minority students.

Despite these individual successes, the achievement gap persists (Hendrie, 2004). In too many classrooms, minority students continue to fail. The purpose of this research project is to discuss and explore the need for post-secondary Schools of Education to adequately equip preservice teachers for the changing demographics in our schools, to prepare preservice teachers to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students, to promote the success of their preservice students, and what all of this means for future teachers.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is based on the model of phenomenological study (Patton, 2002). Through this particular lens, the participants' experiences were the most important elements to examine. As Patton describes, there are two approaches to phenomenology: (a) the first, is for the researcher to become a participant observer and (b) the second, is to focus on the experience of others and how they interpret these experiences in their own personal worldview (pp. 104-105 ).

Since at the core of this research was the participants' description of their own experiences, how the researchers guided the participants to express their interpretations of the phenomenon was the major concern that determined the reliability of this research. It was crucial that the researcher skillfully craft questions and conduct interviews in order to get at the true essence of the participants' experiences. It is imperative that the phenomenologist employ rigorous analysis of the experiences of the population studied (Patton, 2002). The aim of this particular study was to understand the essence of being a preservice teacher in a culturally diverse classroom while learning how to teach and connect to the students.

## **Methods**

### ***Setting and Participants***

There were six participants in this study, all of whom were undergraduate students enrolled in the teacher education program of a Midwestern university. Three of the participants identified themselves as European American and Caucasian, one as African American, one as Latina (Hispanic), and one as Asian American. Three of the participants were studying to be teachers at the elementary level; two were in Science Education or biology/chemistry and special education; one was in physics and one in

Spanish education. Two of the participants were male and four were female.

The participants in this study were recruited and selected based on their ability to contribute their thoughts and feelings about their experiences as preservice students teaching science to culturally diverse students. Students were recruited with the assistance of instructors in general undergraduate education courses. They all volunteered of their own volition to participate in this research project. The researcher was not the participants' instructor, and the students were not obligated to participate.

### **Data Collection**

As this is a phenomenological study, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to each of the participants; the questionnaire asked questions to elicit responses addressing the study's guiding questions. There were five questions, all of which were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to write openly about their feelings and insights.

Following the completion of the questionnaire, a scheduled time to interview each participant was arranged. Each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The interview was used as a follow-up to the questionnaire in order to seek clarification or additional information. Collecting data from multiple sources increased the credibility of the results (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), affording me the opportunity to understand how the participants interpreted their phenomenological experiences.

### **Results**

In accordance with this study's theoretical framework, I interpreted what the participants described about their experiences. The information described from the participants contributed to current research. In the tradition of qualitative research, the following responses given below are findings that emerged from this research study.

The African American student stated:

it is important that teachers realize that everyone is different and that there are times when we want to be left alone and not compared to the White students. ...Also, it is important that the curriculum focus on different groups. The library should have diverse books for students to read and teachers should learn about other cultures from having people share their experiences. This way the teachers will be better prepared to incorporate it [diversity/multiculturalism] into the curriculum. Hopefully, by having this knowledge they will be able to understand diversity in their classroom, school, and community.

The Latina student responded:

Students should be taught to value and respect their peers to learn all they can about the world around them. They should be encouraged to have an open-mind and to consider others opinions. A teacher can

make a big difference in the way one feels in the classroom. He or she should not look down on us because we may speak different or have different ways of thinking. We just want to be accepted, so don't try to change us to be White... think white, act white...

The Asian student was adamant in making it clear that:

Multiculturalism should be promoted through lessons, activities, and actions that teach students to accept and know about people who are different from them. These lessons should be taught continually throughout a child's education.

During the interview, the white students had very similar comments; one stated:

... to start, it [diversity/multiculturalism] should be embraced by every faculty and staff member. Because that is where it starts. Next, it should be part of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. These are ways to start talking/asking questions. Creating groups with diverse students will start a "welcome place" for all. No matter color, religion, status, all should feel welcome in the classroom. This will begin the promotion of multiculturalism in the schools.

Another White student stated:

Within a school setting, I feel that it is extremely important to investigate other cultures through traditional and non-traditional methods. Textbooks can provide information about other cultures, but knowledge conveyed from people that have a close connection to a culture can provide valuable experiences for the student. I realize that opportunities are not always available and that textbooks and traditional teaching strategies may convey a sense of cultural respect to students. Multiculturalism should be conveyed in a school through the faculty and staff being positive role models. Every teacher needs to integrate multiculturalism into their classroom.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

As illustrated in the above statements, preservice teachers advocate using the curriculum as a vehicle to infuse multiculturalism into daily pedagogy and programs. The ideal curriculum (cultural/multicultural) for teacher educators in Schools of Education - A cultural/multicultural curriculum is needed in order for all students—and especially for minority students—to achieve academic success. From a phenomenological perspective, my hope is that the reader will begin to germinate, cultivate, and nourish/feed his/her consciousness as I have done throughout this research project.

Teachers can begin to feed their consciousness in classrooms and schools where cultural, linguistic, or economic experiences differ significantly from their own. Whether this difference exists between the teacher and one student or between the teacher and a group of students, teachers need to bridge the gap. They need to identify and overcome personal biases they may hold about a particular group of

students. Teachers need to make sure their classroom environment provides support for all students, where everyone is respected, feels comfortable, and can learn. All teachers need to create a strong classroom community among students from many different backgrounds.

Through my experiences of teaching (over twenty years), I have also learned the importance of the knowledge of history in understanding the present, and I have developed an appreciation for the sacrifices and accomplishments of progressives such as John Dewey, who preceded me. Dewey (1966) believed that teachers' concern for their students' entire educational experience—not just learning the material—should be at the forefront of their planning and teaching. Dewey (1966) believed that the purpose of education, rather than “pouring in” knowledge, was to promote individual growth and intellectual development as a means of preparing students to participate actively and creatively in a democracy (Tanner & Tanner, 1980). According to this view, when students interact with the curriculum in meaningful ways, they will grow intellectually and be prepared to address the needs of students. It is my hope and desire that the teacher will germinate as he/she becomes nourished by the diverse culture of students in the classroom. In addition, learning about students' heritages and cultures is essential to adequately understand the students' present struggles and possibly to grasp what economic and political forces are in operation so inferences can be made regarding the academic success of all students.

As I continue to respond to the call to inquiry of teacher education programs, a quote from Melnick and Zeichner (1988) guides me: “Teacher candidates, for the most part, come to teacher education with limited direct interracial and intercultural experience, with erroneous assumptions about diversity among youngsters and with limited expectations for the success of all learners” (p. 89). The results of this study suggest that preservice students in teacher education programs need to have a variety of experiences interacting with diverse students. This can be accomplished with field placement opportunities for preservice teachers in several diverse school settings. The diverse school setting encompasses several components that include students from various racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, and different geographic areas (i.e. rural, suburban, and urban settings). In order for a multicultural/diverse opportunity for preservice teachers to take place in an institution of higher education, several conditions need to be present: (a) first, the college's or university's strategic plan needs to identify diversity as a central component of its mission; this has to happen first in order to make available adequate resources for a quality program; (b) second, diversity/multicultural education has to be infused/integrated across curricula; this encompasses all colleges and programs; (c) third, retention and recruitment of underrepresented ethnic minority students, faculty, staff and administrators; there is a need to provide minority role models and personnel of color to mirror the student population; (d) fourth, development of collaborative partnerships with K-12 schools with diverse students; it is imperative that collaborative partnerships exist with school districts that have diverse/multicultural groups; (e) fifth, allocation of sufficient resources for planning and implementation of diversity initiatives; the administration must set aside adequate funds in order for

the diversity initiative to be successful; (f) sixth, a review of university/college diversity action plan and implementation; and (g) seventh, ongoing assessment and reevaluation of diversity efforts are essential.

The above enumerated points are essential for administrators at Schools of Education in the planning process to articulate the needs and benefits of a diverse curriculum that is infused across all disciplines on college campuses. Multicultural courses provide the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teacher education candidates need in a global society, including an understanding of cultural differences, as well as cross-cultural communication and critical pedagogy. The imperative to provide preservice teachers with an education for the 21st century—including an appreciation of diversity—means that we must create well-rounded and educated teachers who can meet the needs of diverse learners.

Preservice teachers at one Midwestern university had several opportunities for world travel, communications, study abroad, and interaction with those who were different; therefore, it is important that preservice teachers in teacher education programs enjoy increased contact with other cultures. This requires understanding other cultures and respecting their value, which is fundamental to being culturally competent. We fail our students if we do not prepare them intellectually and culturally to work and live in our global world. This understanding will evolve as we continue to discover and come to value our differences as well as our similarities. With this said, how do we begin to take on the challenge of preparing preservice students to teach in diverse classrooms? Moreover, how do we confront the major challenge of changing the perceptions and assumptions held by students who come to teacher education programs with myths regarding diverse students?

To better prepare teachers to integrate multiculturalism in their K-12 classrooms, schools of teacher education should prepare future teachers by infusing multiculturalism across the curriculum. Research indicates that teacher preparation, the knowledge of teaching and learning, subject matter knowledge, experience, and the combined set of qualifications measured by teacher licensure are all leading factors in teacher effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2006). All of these factors are important, and the literature enumerates a laundry list of these aforementioned traits; however, the issue of multiculturalism and/or diversity does not exist in the research about teacher preparation and what makes a teacher effective in the classroom. Research supports the idea that high quality teacher preparation is important; this preparation, however, has to include addressing the needs of culturally diverse students in the classroom. This is a wake-up call to all Schools of Education.

According to McLaren (2005):

It is important to recognize “the gift of fire” as the gift of revolutionary action itself that is offered by the teacher who struggles alongside students, making the road by walking. The road here is to be understood as Freedom made Real in the commitment to learn to “read the world” critically and expending the effort necessary to bring about social transformation ... transforming the self through

transforming the social relations of learning and teaching; establishing democracy as a fundamental way of life; developing a critical curiosity; and deepening one's solidarity and commitment to self and social transformation and the project of humanization. (p. 160)

It is important that teachers build upon students' culture by recognizing, valuing, and utilizing students' cultures and languages in their instruction. It is also essential that teachers assist students in connecting concepts they're studying to what they already know, a process consistent with effective teaching and learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). In order to have rewarding diverse educational experiences, teachers should recognize and build on students' diverse cultural heritage. Valuing differences is a commitment. When teachers learn about differences, they can use their knowledge to create the conditions in which students who are different from their teachers all have the opportunity to achieve well in school. This can be accomplished by using culturally responsive teaching.

Data obtained through the student interviews and the questionnaire point to some essential characteristics that teachers must exhibit if they wish to motivate and be successful at teaching culturally diverse students; teachers should: (a) be positive role models; (b) care about their students; (c) be open-minded; and (d) be willing to teach all students. Teacher education candidates' field experiences in culturally and ethnically diverse settings helped to modify, nurture, and solidify their feelings and dispositions toward minority students. Their experiences promoted positive attitudes and enhanced teacher candidates' multicultural knowledge and understanding of diverse students.

## **Implications**

### **The Curriculum**

If I had to choose a curriculum for Schools of Education, what would it consist of, or specifically what would it look like? Using a critical lens, and the phenomenological approach used in this project, my vision of a curriculum for a teacher education program is centered on the concept that "all children can learn." When I think of curriculum, the term "subject matter" or "course content" is implied. In preparing preservice teachers, the curriculum needs to change in order to address rapidly changing demographics of student populations.

Poorly prepared and under qualified teachers are less likely to offer their students the most challenging curriculum. And if they are teaching in high-poverty, racially segregated Black or Latino schools, they are less likely to have the supplies to engage students in challenging, hands-on, or project-based learning. This lack of rigor creates a curricular gap that undermines Black and Latino students' access to selective colleges and universities (Yun & Moreno, 2006).

The need for a multicultural curriculum is paramount to the future of teacher education. The foundation of our ever-increasing learning and understanding about different populations is grounded in knowledge of the globalization of world cultures. Ladson-Billings and Brown (2008) suggested

several questions that we must ask of all curricula: (1) What is the nature of the knowledge precollegiate students need in a global culture? (2) How do we prepare prospective teachers for implementing a global curriculum? and (3) How do we integrate multiple perspectives into the curriculum without losing some sense of curriculum coherence? (p. 168). Each of these questions should be addressed in Schools of Education as they redesign their teacher education programs. The multicultural curriculum is a living and breathing specimen that is used to prepare the next generation of educators. It is the lock and key with a unique combination that we have difficulty implementing; however, it provides an avenue for unique opportunities and constraints.

### **The Cultural Curriculum (Multicultural Curriculum)**

The cultural curriculum is a “sensitizing concept” (e.g. culture, society, institutions) that addresses the distributed nature of learning in modern society, warning us of the comforting albeit fallacious notion that historical consciousness develops rationally and sequentially through efforts to create and deliver a state-mandated curriculum (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Moreover, the cultural/multicultural curriculum should not be confused with schooling and education. The former, schooling, refers to what takes place in schools with students, teachers, administrators, textbooks, assessments, and standards. The latter, education, is a process by which culture is transmitted, a way of teaching essential things to people. The cultural/multicultural curriculum is so much a part of our landscape that teacher education programs should do a better job of preparing teacher education candidates. The cultural/multicultural curriculum plays a major role in shaping the consciousness of preservice teachers of today’s iPod-ed, YouTubed, Instant Messengered, and MySpaced generation of students. Failing to equip preservice teachers for the next generation guarantees cultural/multicultural curricular irrelevance through the current system.

### **The Future**

The message that seems less certain concerns the nature of work force opportunities for young people and how to prepare students for them. While American public education is much more than job preparation, it is myopic to deny that it has served that purpose. Teacher education programs have to do a better job of removing the fog/film from the lens of prospective teachers with the mindset that all students will respond to the same pedagogical methods used by their teachers. This is a new day, a new horizon, and the playing field is larger and more complex, classroom environment that encourages home-family-school-community relationships. This can be accomplished only with fundamental changes in instruction and a level of collaboration between university academic scholars and public school teachers and administrators. I see tomorrow’s youth requiring the following skills: (a) evaluation and analysis skills; (b) critical thinking skills; (c) problem-solving strategies (mathematical problem solving); (d) technological skills; (e) multicultural and global skills; (f) organization and reference skills; (g) synthesis; (h) application; (i) creativity; (j) decision making; and (k) communication skills through a variety of modes. In sum, we need a larger number of preservice



teachers who are prepared to know how to think, to solve problems, to discern fact from ideology, to communicate inter-culturally, to be culturally competent, and to demonstrate all the other skills aforementioned. In other words, I envision Schools of Education that take ownership of academic instruction as they provide the keys that will unlock tremendous potential for reform.

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