

Multiculturalism in Teacher Education: Let's Talk About Strategies That Work

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Introduction

Preparing future teachers for diversity is a rather involved task. It has to start by assessing these future professionals' understanding of diversity and helping them to examine the deeper layers of the construct through exposure to real diverse situations. What, then, would be some strategies that lead to a deeper understanding of what diversity entails?

To discuss issues related to teacher preparation in multiculturalism, we have compiled information and raised some issues to be discussed by a group of professionals in a roundtable format. The goal of this roundtable is to stimulate dialogue on the current practices in teacher education programs on issues of diversity to help pre-service teachers function effectively in diverse teaching and learning environments.

Preparing Future Teachers for Diversity

Making curricula accessible to and inclusive of all students is a challenge even to experienced professionals. Every classroom situation is unique and requires special accommodations to allow students to be active participants and successful learners. For these accommodations to occur, the instructor needs to have developed the ability to be flexible and understanding of the need for an alternative route in teaching and learning.

The rapidly shifting demographic make-up of the American classroom has made it imperative for pre-service teachers to develop the skills to promote an equitable

environment for learning and to design lessons that appeal to a variety of learning styles, all within an inclusive curriculum. As a result, there is a colossal responsibility for teacher education programs to help these future professionals develop cultural sensitivity, background on linguistic diversity, and teaching strategies effective for linguistic and culturally diverse students (Parla 1994). It is crucial to bear in mind that multicultural education should not only be employed in situations where linguistically and culturally diverse student populations are present; multicultural teaching is a practice that needs to be adopted in all classrooms of all schools and with all students.

Strategies to Promote Multicultural Teaching

Providing future teachers with tools to teach multiculturally goes beyond learning about effective instructional strategies; it must be made a part of the curriculum.

Zeichner (1993) identifies the following key elements for educating teachers for diversity:

1. Admissions procedures screen students on the basis of cultural sensitivity and a commitment to the education of all students, especially poor students of color who frequently do not experience success in school.
2. Students are helped to develop a clearer sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities.
3. Students are helped to examine their attitudes toward other ethnocultural groups.
4. Students are taught about the dynamics of prejudice and racism and about how to deal with them in the classroom.
5. Students are taught about the dynamics of privilege and economic oppression and about school practices that contribute to the reproduction of societal inequalities.
6. The teacher education curriculum addresses the histories and contributions of various ethnocultural groups.
7. Students are given information about the characteristics and learning styles of various groups and individuals and are taught about the limitations of this information.
8. The teacher education curriculum gives much attention to sociocultural research knowledge about the relationships among language, culture, and learning.

9. Students are taught various procedures by which they can gain information about the communities represented in their classrooms.
10. Students are taught how to assess the relationships between the methods they use in the classroom and the preferred learning and interaction styles in their students' homes and communities.
11. Students are taught how to use various instructional strategies and assessment procedures sensitive to cultural and linguistic variations and how to adapt classroom instruction and assessment to accommodate the cultural resources that their students bring to school.
12. Students are exposed to examples of the successful teaching of ethnic- and language-minority students.
13. Students complete community field experiences with adults and/or children of other ethnocultural groups with guided reflections.
14. Students complete practicum and/or student teaching experiences in schools serving ethnic- and language-minority students.
15. Students live and teach in a minority community (immersion).
16. Instruction is embedded in a group setting that provides both intellectual challenge and social support. (24)

According to a longitudinal study still in progress, Lopes-Murphy has identified trends across groups of students. Through a pre- and post- cultural sensitivity survey, pre-service teachers perceive experiences such as numbers 13, 14, and 15 above as having a bigger impact on their understanding and empathy towards diversity compared to others. Opportunities that allow pre-service teachers to immerse or engage in interactions with diverse populations seem to be extremely powerful in reshaping their original definition of diversity as well as their teaching conception.

Teaching Practices We Use

It is a normal reaction for students to feel threatened when their perceptions of the world and their places in it are challenged. Multicultural teacher preparation often brings up strong emotions and discomfort in students and there are strategies we can use to help students interact with the ideas we present in meaningful and transformational ways.

Modeling Democratic Behavior

One of the first things instructors of multiculturalism can do at the beginning of the semester is to stress the importance of respecting everybody's right to hold their own opinion. For instance, on the first day of class we ask students to discuss ways of disagreeing with someone in a respectful manner and what it means to "agree to disagree." Creating an ethos of respect for one another's right to hold their own opinions ensures a safe space for students to discuss deep personal thoughts and feelings without the fear of being criticized or ridiculed.

Students must understand, however, that once they share their opinion it may then be analyzed and critiqued by the teacher or other students in the class. Here it must be stressed that while it is okay to critique an idea it is not okay to ridicule or demean the person who expressed that idea. Being firm, yet sensitive to students' feelings and insecurities, helps challenge students' thinking and hopefully encourages others to open up and share with the group.

Community-Outreach Activities

First-hand experiences are powerful strategies to help us more closely relate to and understand diverse situations. To give future teachers opportunities for first-hand experiences, they engage in projects that require them to reach out and identify real diversity sources and bring them into the classroom. At the beginning of each semester, students in the "Teaching in a Diverse Society" course select from the following constructs on which to do research: social status, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, religion, ability/disability, race and ethnicity, among others. Once each group is given the opportunity to select the topic, they develop their logistics to conduct their investigation. Their findings should be organized in a teaching segment. They are to

adopt an approach that takes into consideration techniques to engage the group, to help their fellow students interact among themselves and negotiate ideas. The presenting group should also be conscious about their movement in the classroom and the amount of eye contact they establish with individual students. Their teaching behaviors are evaluated by the group through a peer evaluation rubric.

In addition to their teaching segment, they are required to bring someone from the community to focus on the chosen topic from a real perspective. In the past, groups have invited priests; panels of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people; coordinators of Head-Start programs; and directors of Mercy House among others to share their experiences dealing with specific social needs and circumstances.

Students in this course have consistently reported the benefits of the community-outreach activities as being one of the most eye-opening experiences they have had in this course. These real experiences helped them reflect on issues of diversity more in-depth and develop greater empathy for issues they disregarded as important in the past.

Sharing Personal Stories

Teachers and students who come from underrepresented groups can reinforce important concepts and add a dimension of reality to the course by speaking from their own experiences. Personal stories spark students' interest on topics related to diversity. When faculty share their personal experiences as a result of their own diversities (e.g., being international, gay, Muslim, disabled, etc.) with students, they are able to heighten students' motivation to learn more about whatever the topic may be (Macgillivray 2004). This is a powerful strategy that helps create a learning community in the classroom and brings opportunities for people to learn about each other's uniqueness.

Other Strategies

Students often need time to process thoughts and emotions. We have discovered, for instance, that when students walk out of our classrooms they often discuss topics brought up in class with their friends and families. When they return to the next class period they often have questions and new ideas about the previous class's topic. Before moving on to a different topic, it can be helpful for the instructor to take time at the beginning of each class to reflect on what was covered in the previous class and to give students time to explain how they dealt with the material in the time that passed since the class last met. Another idea is to have students do a "free write" for five minutes on questions that have arisen in their minds since the last class, then trade what they wrote with another class member, and discuss new ideas and reinforce important concepts.

It may seem simple but having food or candy to share and pass around has a pacifying effect on students and can help to lighten the mood when potentially controversial subjects are discussed. Assigning groups of students to bring food from other countries and cultures can be a fun way for students to experience new flavors and smells. The food often sparks larger questions and discussions on different cultures and helps students get over the fear of trying new things. Students are reminded they cannot decide if they like a food or not until they try it. Also, reminding students to be aware of their facial expressions as they sample new dishes helps them to understand how we unconsciously send negative messages through our body language.

Videos can be a fun and interesting diversion from lecture, group activities, and writing assignments. An aspect to videos that makes them useful learning tools is that students will often identify with one or more of the characters portrayed in a video.

Macgillivray (in press) describes elsewhere that in discussing the video later on, the student can then project his or her ideas onto the character who shares them and discuss the character thus deflecting attention and possible criticism away from his or herself in discussing the character's prejudiced attitudes, for instance.

Course evaluations reveal that students pay more attention to videos that are recent and that are not more than about thirty minutes in length. There are always exceptions, of course, and we have found that one of the best videos for teaching about racism and white privilege, a video that students often remark on as being one of the most memorable parts of the class, is *The Color of Fear*. This ninety minute video is easily shown in two forty-five minute segments, which makes it well suited for shorter class periods and allows for discussion before moving on to the next segment.

Other videos that have grabbed students' attention (to name a few) are *It's Elementary: Discussing Gay Issues in School* and *Both My Moms' Names are Judy*, both of which help pre service teachers consider how they will deal with their future gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students, parents, and coworkers. *People Like Us: Social Class in America* is a great video for demonstrating how socio-economic class status plays out in peoples' lives. (See the resource list at the end of the article for more.)

Collaboration and Interaction

Students often comment that our education courses were the first time they were ever given the opportunity to interact with other students in a university course. Not only do pre-service teachers enjoy the experience of collaborating with their peers, but they are then able to learn from one another and construct knowledge together. This allows them to help one another with new understandings and takes some of the responsibility

off the instructor to be “the authority.” Debates are another fun way for students to interact and express ideas without taking ownership of them, such as when “playing devil’s advocate.” Much like students being able to project their ideas onto a character in a video, playing the role of debater allows students to express and “try on” different ideas they may or may not hold themselves without the fear of others in the class accusing them of actually subscribing to those ideas. For instance, if it is a student’s task to argue in favor of forced bussing then the class understands that the student is playing a role and the ideas expressed by the student are not necessarily his or her own. Thus, the student has more freedom to express controversial ideas without owning them as his or her own and becoming the subject of criticism. Likewise, role playing affords these same opportunities but tight controls and explicit directions are needed with role playing so that students don’t fall into stereotypical behaviors, which can distract the class from the intended purpose of the role play.

Simulations

Simulations can be powerful educational tools because they are experiential and require students to physically interact with the concepts in the lesson. Star Power is a popular simulation that teaches about power and socio economic class disparity and helps students to realize the complexity of common ideologies Americans use to explain poverty. In this simulation where different colored poker chips represent varying levels of wealth, students start out poor, middle class, or rich and the goal is for everyone to trade their way up to being rich. During the game the instructor tells students common ideologies like, “Everyone in America has a chance. Just work hard and pull yourself up by the bootstraps! It’s a level playing field; anyone can strike it rich.” Students discover,

however, that the social class one is born into is usually the same social class where they end up no matter how hard they try to move up the ladder of economic success.

Bafa Bafa is another popular simulation to help students understand cultural differences. The class is divided into two “cultures,” each with differing behaviors. Representatives from each culture are then sent to the other culture to learn the behaviors of “the other” and then return to their home culture and try to explain the differences. This simulation brings up issues of cultural identity, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

Presentation Format

Both Dr. Macgillivray and I decided that the best format for an exchange of practices regarding diversity in teacher education programs would be through a roundtable. The structure we have selected to direct our conversation would be to start by sharing our own practices with participating professionals. Prompt questions and challenges we have faced in preparing future teachers for multicultural teaching will be presented to the group. It is then expected that the conversation will flow as participants present and react to ideas.

Lessons Shared By Participants

Our roundtable discussion brought up other strategies for helping pre-service teachers become multicultural thinkers. Several professors have their students attend international or cultural celebrations in the community where they may be one of the few or the only person of their color. For instance, having white students attend a church service at an all black church forced students out of their “comfort zone” and gave them a feel for what it’s like to be surrounded by people who are different from one’s self.

Another professor has his students complete a field ethnography where students are required to conduct participant observation for at least forty hours with a group of people of a different ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. He also tries to remove the focus on “getting a good grade” in the class so that students do not feel that they are being graded on how well they “conform to politically correct dictates,” for instance. He also has other students in the class give a portion of their peers’ final grade so that the students are not being evaluated solely by the instructor. Finally, all the attendees agreed on the effectiveness on “family building” exercises early on in the semester to help the students in the class get to know one another. This helps students to open up and be more comfortable engaging in difficult conversations with their peers and instructor.

Conclusion

One of the biggest and most obvious challenges teacher educators face in teaching multiculturalism to pre-service teachers is that most pre-service teachers are white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, academically successful, and able-bodied and few have had more than superficial interactions with others of different backgrounds and abilities. As a result, pre-service students of color often do not feel comfortable speaking up in our courses. One of my students, who is African American, explained to me in an email

Although I may not say much in class about our discussions on racism please believe there is a lot on my mind. I like to think of myself as someone who speaks their mind and I do in many of my classes, but this seems to be the exception. I can't say that I have been in a predicament like this before. This is my third year here and about three-fourths of the classes I have been in I was the only black student, this one is different though. Not that there is anything you are doing, but some of the things said in class I do find offensive and don't want to seem like the "angry black person" so I keep most thoughts to myself.

Thus, it is up to teacher educators to try and provide the opportunities for our pre-service teachers to identify with others of diverse backgrounds. The strategies we have discussed in this article are some of the more effective ways we have found for providing our students with these experiences.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We believe that teacher educators of diversity and multiculturalism need more opportunities like this to share strategies and resources that work. We propose revitalizing the Virginia Association of Multicultural Education (VAME) as a clearinghouse of information for this region's multicultural pre-service teacher educators. One effective strategy for acting as resources for one another would be to set up a listserv to which members could post such questions as: "I need a good video on the effects of gender on academic achievement. Does anybody have a recommendation?" or "I'm not sure how to respond to this situation that arose in class yesterday. Has anybody else had this experience? How did you handle it?" If we can learn from one another's experience and expertise then we will all be stronger and can present a united front in defending the importance of multiculturalism in teacher education programs in this day and age when such courses are often cut.

Resource List

Videos

As If It Matters: Written, directed and produced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) youth, this video deals with issues of homophobia, cultural acceptance, body image, relationships and labels.

Both of My Moms' Names Are Judy: This poignant nine-minute video is a montage of interviews with elementary aged children of same sex parents. The children discuss their experiences in school and why it is important for elementary schools to acknowledge LGBT families.

Children in America's Schools: This two-hour video depicts the effects of poverty and unequal funding on schools. The first thirty-three minutes contrasts under funded schools with wealthier schools and works well with readings like *Savage Inequalities*.

The Color of Fear: This 90-minute video depicts men of different races engaging each other in dialog on white privilege and racism. This is a powerful video—one that students remember and often comment on—that requires time for processing afterwards.

The Color of Fear II: Walking Each Other Home: This fifty-five minute video is a condensed version of the original with a little new footage.

Educating Peter: This video follows Peter, an elementary school student with Down's syndrome, for one year as he is mainstreamed into the regular classroom. The video focuses on how the teacher and other students had to adapt to and make accommodations for mainstreaming a student with very special needs.

It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School: This 90-minute video depicts elementary school teachers incorporating LGBT-themed lessons into their classrooms. It shows that elementary aged children are able to comprehend and discuss sexual orientation differences.

Teaching Respect for All: This video, produced by Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org), makes a powerful case for the rights of LGBT students.

Offtrack: This 30-minute video depicts a successful detracked classroom and makes a powerful argument in favor of detracking.

Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth: This 43-minute video allows LGBT youth to speak from their own experiences.

People Like Us: Social Class in America: This two-hour video highlights themes of social class difference. It is powerful and engaging and students really enjoy it. We typically show the first 60 minutes only.

The SIOP Model: Sheltered Instruction for Academic Achievement: Strategies for working with English Language Learners in the mainstream classroom.

Starting Points Video Series (Programs 1, 2, 3): Strategies for teaching English Language Learners.

The Way Home: This 90-minute video depicts women of different races and ethnicities engaging each other in dialog on white privilege and racism.

Simulations

Star Power: Players attempt to accumulate wealth through trading with others. The wealthiest players are given the right to make the rules of the game. The simulation highlights issues of the myths of meritocracy and the strong individual. Pre-made kits can be purchased on the Internet or you can email (macgilik@jmu.edu) for a “do it yourself” version we use.

Bafa Bafa: The objectives of this simulation are to increase awareness of one’s own cultural identity; increase intercultural communication skills; understand the problems of adapting in a new environment; stimulate thoughtful discussion about differences in values, attitudes, and communication styles among cultures; and identify

principles of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination occurring within the groups. Pre-made kits can be purchased on the Internet or you can email (macgilik@jmu.edu) for a “do it yourself” version we use.

Implicit Association Test: This test can be taken online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu> and is a powerful tool to demonstrate to students how we all carry biases. See Vedantam under “Readings” for more information.

Readings

Educational Leadership, 62 (3). This November 2004 issue is dedicated to “Closing Achievement Gaps” and is a great collection of easy to read articles on gender, race, class and other issues that affect achievement.

Sax, L. (2005). *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences*. NY: Doubleday. An excellent review of the literature on sex differences that can affect achievement in school. See especially Chapter 5.

Sonnie, A. (Ed.). (2000). *Revolutionary Voices: A Queer Youth Anthology*. LA: Alyson Books. LGBT youth tell their personal stories, which helps pre-service teachers to understand their needs.

Vedantam, S. (2005). *See No Bias*. The Washington Post Magazine, January 23, 2005, pp.12-17, 38-42. This article is based on the Implicit Association Test (<https://implicit.harvard.edu>) and highlights how biased people really are.

References

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