

Transforming Undergraduate and Graduate Candidate Social Perceptions About Diverse Learners through Critical Reflection

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Introduction and Background

Each preservice or inservice teacher who faces the prospect of student diversity in clinical experiences or practice settings does so with an individual set of assumptions about cultures and languages that differ from his or her own. Mezirow (1991) maintained that reflections on such assumptions and presuppositions about oneself and others can lead to “transformative learning”; or “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference” (Mezirow 2003, 58). In light of the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of student populations across the United States, we believe such introspection is a capacity that should be developed in undergraduate and graduate candidates in colleges of education. Using examples related to ethnicity, race, and language, this article explores how developing the reflection skills of preservice teacher candidates and inservice teachers may strengthen an educational unit’s potential to meet National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard 4 - Diversity.

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An individual’s way of perceiving the world is deeply affected by societal interactions throughout his or her life, and these can be described as one of three types of socialization experiences: (1) primary socialization, which involves families and caregivers; (2) secondary socialization, which relates to the school setting, neighborhood, peers, media, and the Internet; and (3) adult socialization, which pertains to experiences associated with marriage and employment (Cushner, McClelland, and Safford 2003). As a result of accumulated socialization experiences, one internalizes perspectives, values, and expectations related to the norms and functions of social and cultural groups in society.

Individuals are first socialized according to the integrated patterns of the culture in which they are raised. This primary socialization provides each person with “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992) or strategies and bodies of knowledge that enable the family to survive and help members of the family make sense of their reality in relationship to one another. At the same time, primary socialization deeply influences one’s perceptions and assumptions about others in the context of the individual’s personal sense of identity. These assumptions often can be found in the deeply held beliefs that teachers hold about students with diverse backgrounds. Such assumptions often are reinforced through secondary and adult socialization.

The Challenge of NCATE Standard 4 - Diversity

Under NCATE Standard 4, teacher education units must ensure their curriculum addresses “...differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area” in order to receive accreditation (NCATE 2008, 34). Specifically, units must be able to provide evidence that they meet the following expectations:

The unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum, and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn.

Assessments indicate that candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse popula-

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tions, including higher education and P-12 school faculty, candidates and students in P-12 schools (NCATE 2008, 34).

Standard 4 sets ambitious goals for teacher education units, and so they may find putting this charge into tangible practice challenging. We have found that a promising avenue for helping candidates develop the professional dispositions needed for appropriate and proactive diversity-related practice is critical reflection. We believe candidates must begin to be introspective about their own socialization in and out of school in order to transform their approach to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students.

We believe that the concept of transformative learning through reflective practice as described in the work of Mezirow (1978; 1991; 1997; 2003) deserves consideration as a means of capacity building in teacher preparation programs. In discussing the process of reflective practice, Mezirow (1991; 1997) emphasized the premise of reflection in which learners reflected on the validity of norms, paradigms, philosophies, and theories often taken for granted. Experience is culturally and personally shaped and formed, and it is viewed through a deeply ingrained sociocultural lens. If a teacher's socialization includes a background of racism or negative experiences with members of other races, this teacher may have negative feelings toward particular students and yet be unaware of the source of or reason for these feelings. This can result in the creation of a negative climate in the classroom.

According to Herrera and Murry (2005), critical reflection on professional practice begins with assumption checking followed by "validity testing." They assert that the ability to test the validity of one's biases and assumptions is at the core of self-readiness to accommodate CLD students in the classroom. Herrera and Murry (2005) and Mezirow (1991) defined critical reflection within the context of validity testing as a phenomenon whereby adults who examine biases stemming from their socialization can begin to understand how they developed their deeply held belief systems and how these perspectives and assumptions shape how they teach. According to Mezirow (2003), such critical reflection can become a transformative learning experience, allowing the individual to move progressively toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.

Faculty and Undergraduate Student Challenges Related to Critical Reflection

What happens when undergraduate teacher candidates are presented with the opportunity to develop the capacity for critical reflection? According to several education researchers, having few life experiences with people culturally or linguistically different from oneself can inhibit reflection and participation in responsive pedagogical practices (Darling-Hammond and Richardson 2009; Gay 2000; Kean, Campbell, and Richards 2004; Ladson-Billings 2004). Preservice teachers who lack such life experiences may find it challenging to (1) reflect on their belief systems, assumptions, and prejudices; (2) consider the possibility of other interpretations of events and experiences; and (3) apply learnings to their own personal and professional development. When such candidates are required to examine their own belief systems through course content, we have found that they may be reluctant or even defensive. Further, we have found that an instructor who is culturally or linguistically different from such students may increase their resistance to critical self-reflection.

As an example, we know of an incident where teacher candidates in a course taught by an experienced and successful faculty member who was culturally and linguistically different than the undergraduate students rejected examination of their own cultural biases and attitudes. At the end of the course, which was designed to increase teacher candidate knowledge about diversity issues and the academic, linguistic, social, and emotional needs of diverse students, they instead criticized the faculty member in post-course surveys with harsh comments, such as:

- (1) This instructor better learn the material because everyone in the U.S. should speak English and learn to be an American.
- (2) Irrelevant course.
- (3) Work on your teaching style or don't teach this class.

This example is supported by Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008), who argued in their book, *The Black academic guide to winning tenure - without losing your soul*, that students "...experience dissonance when they see a diverse person behind the podium" (p. 18).

If inaccurate teacher candidate assumptions about culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and groups are not addressed at the preservice level, it is possible that these may be carried into their careers. Therefore, activities and projects that require critical reflection may allow undergraduate teacher candidates to practice assumption checking before they become credentialed. As an example, we present an experience with one of our undergraduate students, a white female. In critically reflecting on a project where she was required to interview a person from a different background, this teacher candidate shared the following thoughts:

I really expected him [the interviewee] to start by pointing out the difference between us as black/white or American/St. Lucian, but was greatly surprised when the first thing he mentioned as being the biggest difference between us was male and female. Perhaps in St. Lucia racism is not such an issue...Is it simply an American way of automatically seeing color first? ...For me, this was definitely an "ah-ha" moment, as it opened my eyes to viewing something in a completely different way.

I think my assumptions have everything to do with my socialization. In America we are always bombarded by racism... [When I start teaching] I won't treat my students any different based on race. I hugged that black boy just like I'd hug the rest of my students. I need to make sure I make eye contact and smile at everyone, especially blacks because I want to prove that I'm not racist... I know these are things that go [through] people's heads, because I have had similar ones. I think everyone tries so hard to not be racist that in the end we still are. I honestly believe that this has to do with the way we were raised in this country.

We often hear from our undergraduate teacher candidates that they don't "see" color and will treat all their students the same. Unfortunately, we believe they are missing an opportunity to learn about the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students and to use these assets as a scaffold to engage all students in the content and curriculum.

Inservice Teacher Perspectives on Diversity as Graduate Students

We believe that, at times, teachers' mindsets about culturally and linguistically diverse students need changing. Through critical reflection, teachers may be able to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions about CLD students and families. For example, if a white, middle class, suburban student chooses teaching as a profession because he identified positively with his elementary and secondary teachers (who shared his cultural and linguistic background), he is more likely to affirm and continue conventional practice than to undertake a critical analysis and challenge of current practice (Bruner 1996). Therefore, we believe inservice teachers may need to be jolted from current ways of thinking to consider how the teaching and learning dynamic can change along with student demographics. As Dewey (1927) argued, such change requires "...breaking with the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (p. 183).

The "Reflection Wheel Journal" (Herrera and Murry, 2005) is a five-step activity designed to lead teachers through the process of critical reflection, as follows:

- 1) Teachers identify a precipitating event or behavior, e.g., an interaction with a CLD student, parent, or teacher; or an event that took place at school, in their classroom, or in the community. They describe this event or behavior as the first part of their reflection.
- 2) Teachers next identify the feelings they had in association with the event or behavior. These feelings may arise due to beliefs and assumptions they have regarding schooling, learners, and diversity. Here the emphasis is on the affect; that is, how teachers reacted emotionally.
- 3) Teachers identify thoughts regarding the event or behavior. At this point, teachers focus on the cognitive processing that occurred as a result of the incident. This step provides teachers with an opportunity to review the thought process they experienced during the behavior or event.
- 4) The fourth step involves critical reflection as teachers: (a) consider assumptions made; (b) compare their assumptions to the facts; and (c) identify how prejudices acquired through many years of socialization affect current actions, feelings, and thoughts. After identifying these biases, teachers, at the very least, are more aware of acting in a conditioned and unconscious manner and may consciously choose to act differently in the future.
- 5) The final step is application of the learning from critical reflection. Teachers identify how they have grown personally and professionally, and how that growth will impact their future practice in the classroom and in the larger community.

As an example, we present an experience with one of our students, a relatively young, female teacher pursuing a graduate degree, with the Reflection Wheel Journal. This teacher wrote about an event where one of her students asked, "Can immigration [officials] come to school and take a student?" The teacher's perspectives and beliefs about CLD students were enlarged as she reflected on the event in step three of her journal:

I thought that I had been shortsighted and had a terribly limited perspective about their lives. I thought they would be afraid because of the language barrier, and they are. I thought they would be afraid because there are cultural

differences, and they are. I thought they would be afraid of the unknown, and they are. They are all of that, but there is also a paralyzing fear that something might happen that would separate them from their families.

This teacher then began to reconsider her assumptions about CLD students and safety in step four of her Reflection Wheel Journal and challenged her assumptions:

The assumption that all students feel safe at our school is erroneous. There are deep, terrifying emotions that some of our students deal with. This fear is rooted in questions like: Will officers come to my school and get me? While I'm at school, will my parents be safe? When I get home, will my parents still be there?

In applying her learning from the Reflection Wheel Journal in step five, this teacher identified her professional and personal growth, sharing the following:

I was reminded that day that I do not teach math. I teach children. These are beautiful children whose parents have taken a very difficult step to provide a brighter future for their families, wouldn't I do the same?

At the end of the process, this teacher predicted she would change her practice to emphasize this newly formed belief about CLD students and their families.

We have found that critical reflection can also work well with experienced teachers who formed their teaching philosophy and belief system a number of years ago. In this example, we present an experience with another of our graduate students, a female teacher with 30 years of experience, who after going through the critical reflection process of the Reflection Wheel Journal, also made paradigm-shifting changes. She wrote about her previous beliefs about CLD students and the changes in her teaching beliefs:

In my 30 years of teaching, I have taught many CLD students and as I learn some new information in this [university] class, I realize that I might have gone about my teaching my previous CLD students in a very inappropriate way. At one time, in my educational experience, I was taught in an ESL workshop, that I was not to speak Spanish in my class and neither were the students. They were to repeat and speak English words, write English words, and try to read English words. I labeled some items in my room with English signs like "desk," "book," and so on. With this type of teaching information I did not even try to understand anything about the CLD students' culture or thinking process. I just expected them to convert to English as their educational language with no regard with where they came from or who they were as individuals. I just assumed that these CLD students were slow learners or not paying attention. As I learned new concepts about how to teach CLD students, I realized how misinformed and how ignorant I was when I taught my previous CLD students. [For example,] It only makes sense to build a second language on the first language acquisition.

Through critical reflection, this veteran teacher was able to distance herself from her past instructional practices and check her assumptions to see if they were valid.

She went on to share the following in her journal:

As an educator, I always like to learn as much as possible about students...why did I let a language barrier stop

me from finding out about these culturally and linguistically diverse students? I don't really know why I was so indifferent to other cultures and languages other than my American ways, but I am now beginning to understand that CLD students need time for language development and language transition, an interactive and comfortable classroom environment, more curricular accommodations, more materials in native language, and a teacher that is well educated in teaching CLD students.

Excerpts from both teachers' journals provide examples representative of our experiences of how early career and veteran teachers may develop transformational teaching practices related to CLD students as a result of critical reflection through the use of the Reflection Wheel Journal.

Conclusion

In aligning teacher preparation coursework with the requirements of NCATE Standard 4, we recommend that preservice and inservice programs consider making critical reflection an integral part of their curriculum. Through critical reflection, beginning with checking one's assumptions, undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates may increase their capacity to understand how primary, secondary, and adult socialization experiences influence perspectives that guide their practice with CLD students. However, we think it is important for programs to recognize that candidates who have had few life experiences with people culturally or linguistically different from themselves may find this process challenging. We have found that reminding teacher candidates that every individual, regardless of (and as a result of) socialization, has biases and makes assumptions can be helpful.

We have found the Reflection Wheel Journal an activity that has shown promise in guiding students through the process of critical reflection. The five-step journaling activity provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to explore their reactions to incidents that take place in the context of site-specific professional practice. We believe that by peeling back the multiple layers of experience and considering alternative interpretations and factual realities, preservice and inservice teachers can come to new realizations, find fulfillment in transformative learning, and improve their knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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