

CROSSING BORDERS: HELPING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO CONFRONT DIFFERENCES

By

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In teaching, the distance is widening between the number of white teachers and the number of students of color. *Edutopia* (2006) reports nearly 40 percent of students are children of color, but the number of teachers who identify as non-white is holding at about 11 percent.

Not surprisingly, because this color gap is a factor in the break in cultural understanding between teachers and students; teachers with sharpened cultural sensitivity are needed. Nieto (1996) argues that "becoming a multicultural teacher means first becoming a multicultural person." Becoming multicultural is a process wherein an individual develops competencies of perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing in multiple ways (Banks, 1988). Without this self-transformation, developing a multicultural perspective will be shallow and superficial (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). Hill-Jackson, Sewell, & Waters (2007) call for advocates, teachers who can relate to multiple cultures. Advocates embody an overall approach to teacher education that welcomes multicultural education, skills, and understanding in support of all learners. They must also empathize with others whose culture is different from their own, be ethically aware of the democratic and moral necessity for multicultural education, and employ strategies in the classroom to change the academic lives of their learners.

Because there are so many more White Preservice Teachers (WPTs) (Hill-Jackson, Sewell, Waters, 2007), we teacher educators need to be sure that they have well-developed intercultural competencies (Kang & Dutton, 1997). Positive growth in WPTs' intercultural competencies as reflected in attitudes toward student diversity was observed after experiences were provided requiring interaction with people from other walks of life. These evidenced dispositions were identified as an openness to learning and to new ideas; proactive behavior to learn about diversity; high empathy for minority students; and significant caring about social justice (Winitzky & Barlow, 1998). If schools become a true celebration of options and choice that allow students to appreciate the beauty of individual styles, especially their own; students will move beyond mere *tolerance* of diversity to *valuing* diversity as vital to a free society (Manfredi/Pettit, 1994).

Autobiographical Context

Before I was school age, my family lived next door to a woman who taught at a one-room Amish school. On special days, I went along to school with her where I sat next to Leah, an eighth-grader. Leah indulged me, the little 'English' boy who shared her double-seated desk. She let me write and draw on her tablet. She brought me homemade treats. I was 'crossing borders' but soon this unfamiliar territory became a warm and loving community whose strangeness all but dissolved for me.

I did not cross the next border so successfully. When I finally got to public school, I crossed the border from the lower working class to a school with middle class norms; I was eager to please and to be praised by adults, but I had no idea how to be a good student. It seemed not to matter that I did little homework and daydreamed through school. If teachers ever wondered why I was so uninspired, I never knew it. None wrote notes or telephoned my home to try to penetrate my indifference. My mediocre report cards went unexamined. Neither of my grandparent/guardians ever attended a single school function. Now I understand that they were more unable than unwilling to be involved. This detachment was probably a hybrid of their distrust and feelings of inferiority. School was just another unapproachable institution whose boundaries were too intimidating for uneducated lower working class folks like us.

In that rural Pennsylvania school, students *appeared* homogeneous: white, mainstream Protestant, and middle class. We could identify the few students who were Catholics or Jehovah's Witnesses. Some of us must have come from working class families, but we all acquiesced to the normativity of middle-class Protestantism. It was obvious who the poor were because the school bus stopped for them in front of their shabby houses. Sexism, with its traditional gender roles and stereotypes was a given. Prejudice was regarded as a hypothetical problem because we never interacted with anyone who was not white, but we still laughed at racist jokes. No one challenged *or acknowledged* any aspect of privilege.

My own late-in-life decision to teach in middle school came from my optimism that teaching could be politically meaningful and liberatory (Friere, 1998). As my consciousness of students' own individual spaces grew, I had to choose if I would replicate the pedantry of my own school experience. I could discard the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975), consciously rejecting the class bias I could not name as a child but had felt so keenly. In fact, it began to dawn on me that I had to contend with the prejudices I held toward the middle and upper social classes; I had been touched by "the tragedy of the class system, which inflicts a scar of inferiority so deep" (Lahr, 2008, p. 87).

I taught a self-contained sixth grade classroom in a small Midwestern town and here I continued to locate my identity. Again, a cursory inspection might conclude that these were all white middle class kids, but that judgment would be superficial. There were children from the trailer park, others from the enormous houses on the golf course. There were students with two lesbian mothers. There were adopted children, African Americans, mixed race, and Asians. There were children of a physicist, teachers, merchants, factory workers, fast food servers, and farmers. There were Catholics, Pentecostals, Amish, Mormons, Jehovah's

Witnesses, atheists, and Methodists. Some students had significant learning disabilities; others were considered gifted. The list of diversities in this seemingly homogenous group could go on.

Now, in university teaching, my Elementary and Middle Grades Social Studies methods classes follow the national trend; most of these education students are white, middle class females while public school students are increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. I require my pre-service students to look at their own students to see just how much diversity is present.

In class discussions and in their writing on identity, many students indicate that they have not formally considered what it is like to be a member of a non-majority group. Among several assignments aimed at developing sensitivity around diversity, I challenge these pre-service teachers to step outside of their comfort zones in a “crossing borders” assignment. Individually or in small groups, they seek out borders of race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, age, or physical and mental abilities. Some examples of things students have chosen to experience include religious services: African-American churches, Mormon, Catholic, and Protestant churches, Jewish synagogues, a Muslim mosque, and Zen meditation. Korean students have gone clogging, white students attended black hip-hop night, fraternity step-ups, poetry slams, and NAACP parent meetings. Straight students sat in on gay support groups and danced at a gay bar. Other creative choices have included interactions with international student houses and in a dormitory for physically disabled students. (One particularly troubling border some women students crossed without my consent was a strip club for men. Knowing I would have questions about their safety, they informed me after their visit. However, these young women redeemed this experience because of their thoughtful debriefing. Their discussion interrogated men’s spaces, the limited options for desperate women to support a family, and middle-class privilege.)

First, this social inquiry is introduced with a discussion about preparing for the experience. To maximize the impact of this activity, students are asked to think, write about, and discuss what they propose to do, carefully sorting out their pre-conceptions. After the fact, they write about what they have experienced, their emotional reactions, and how they will integrate what they have learned into their teaching practices.

Methodology

At this large public university in the Midwest, sixty students in two sections of Elementary and Middle Grades Social Studies Methods participated in the border crossing assignment. With institutional approval, these students consented to the use of their writing about the border crossing assignment. All but six of these preservice teachers were women and nearly 90% of them were white. There were approximately seven Asian American and three African American students. After two consecutive class sessions in which they shared how they had chosen a border to cross, how they had prepared, what the experience was like, and what they think they had learned, I collected the informal handwritten notes they had been asked to prepare. I was particularly interested in what they felt they had learned from the

border crossing, so I excerpted some short quotes. While some students wrote little, no one expressed a negative response about the assignment itself, although some said they wished they had sought out experiences that had been more interesting.

In the evaluations students completed *after* in-class processing of their border-crossings, about one-eighth admitted that they did no preparation for crossing the border they chose. A larger number, about one-fourth, characterized their preparation as “thinking about” what they were about to encounter. The greatest number, about one-third, reported that they actively prepared for where they were going. The preparations they specified included: talking to peers about what they were about to experience; making advance contact with people from the proposed sites; and finding out what kind of dress was acceptable. They then arranged times to visit; researched the group; compiled a list of preconceptions; and perhaps most effectively, deliberately wrote to speculate on the proposed visit. I wanted them to compare what they expected to encounter with their actual experiences.

In interpreting the post-visit and discussion data accumulated from our students, I solely coded their comments into categories. Some of these headings, however, overlapped and it was difficult to separate them into independent codes. I arranged their self-evaluations into the following broad headings: disappointment (implying that the experience was not as powerful as they had hoped); implications for teachers; new knowledge; feelings of being an outsider; positive outcomes; and feelings of unity. I also made a list of the preconceptions they acknowledged.

Student experiences reflected *a before* and *after*; that is, generally, students expressed that they thought they would be different teachers *after* the crossing borders experience. From this small exposure to being in the minority, some claimed a new, expanded identity, a raised consciousness.

Students' comments included:

(It) broadened (my) horizons.

Being newly aware of how others don't get to choose the border you are crossing.

It opened my eyes that there will be different students than me.

We fear only what we are unsure . . .of.

I know nothing and need to understand more.

I thought I did not have stereotypes. I really did.

Not to be timid about trying something new.

The constant feeling of self-consciousness.

(Being the outsider) was an interesting way to feel. I am not used to feeling like this.

I found it to be a very uncomfortable environment.

I learned what it felt like to be the only one like me.

This assignment was a complete wake-up call.

Some students whose prime identities were African-American, Asian, or homosexual expressed relief that this border crossing inquiry gave them the opportunity to talk openly in class about their own daily lives as 'outsiders'. During the group discussions or in the later written evaluations, they acknowledged that they experienced crossing borders as a constant:

Although I am quite familiar with crossing borders, I still learned a lot.

Many of us cross borders everyday. We feel different in most situations. This was a good assignment that pushes others to do the same.

It was interesting to hear other students say that it felt weird to be the one who stands out. I feel like, now in some way, others can experience how I feel.

As a Vietnamese-American, I cross borders in almost all the events that go on around me. Everywhere I go, I stand out because I am the minority.

Concurrently, as students crossed borders, I have confronted many of my own issues with differences and with my unfounded assumptions about others. I had to acknowledge the biases I held that impacted how I related to those who differed from me. Had I allowed these notions that grew from my own lower working class consciousness to determine how I related to teaching peers who I thought were middle class? Most importantly, how fairly was I relating to students when I assumed them to be middle class? As a classroom teacher still very aware of my lower working class beginnings, I questioned my own conflicted class-based feelings toward those I considered well-off, those children with involved parents who valued orthodontia, travel, brand name clothing, and themed birthday parties. As I struggled to have meaningful dialogue with the series of young white university women doing their practicums in my classroom, I needed to confront my own tendency to assume white middle class privilege in others.

Recommendations

Pre-service teachers should be helped to identify their areas of discomfort and comfort around diversity so they may more specifically target areas where they feel they need to grow. To help students make these choices, faculty and students need

to compile and regularly update lists of special and ongoing events that may help students fulfill the crossing border assignment.

Over the semesters I have been using this border crossing experience, I have learned that investing ample in-class time in explaining, preparing for, and debriefing seems to enhance student understanding of the importance of examining diversity issues.

Teacher Education Programs should provide pre-service teachers, especially WPTs, a safe place to explore their own identities and to honestly express the comfort levels they feel when interacting with the multiple diversities they will encounter in teaching. While encouraging students to take risks in facing challenges to their previous experiences, it is important that we as university professors provide them with emotional and peer support in the form of class discussions and sharing. Students must feel they are listened to as faculty and peers attend to their accounts of these border crossings. Also, it may be especially helpful if faculty disclose their own challenges regarding borders they have crossed.

Conclusions

As these elementary education majors in the methods class have begun to question their cultural borders, awareness of my own racial as well as social class identity has expanded. I had been comfortable with what Frankenberg (1996) calls the “invisibility” of my whiteness. But my privilege had to be examined as we discussed diversity and multiculturalism. As we read and discussed various pieces about social injustices in race, class, gender, and sexuality, I saw my own whiteness could also be interrogated, quantified, and “historied” and I shared this evolving consciousness with students.

I believe that the border crossing assignment is useful for pre-service teachers. With each subsequent semester, I have been more deliberate in helping students to choose the most meaningful border to cross. We compile a list of possibilities. At the beginning of the course, I ask students to write about their multiple identities of race, class and gender; this has proved useful in helping them name their locations and identify where their borders lie. I have also found that requiring students to write copious reflections *before* and *after* their experiences which they consult in our discussions greatly enriches our in-class debriefing.

Requiring pre-service teachers to “cross borders” makes it more likely that they will have more empathy for others, and as a result, more understanding of their own students. I wonder if there are long-range influences resulting from these episodes. Does this deliberate but gentle nudge to explore differences result in changed teacher practice, both for those who experience border crossings frequently as well as for those who require an assignment like this to understand what it is like for those who are drawn as *outside*?

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