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Abstract

Calls for culturally competent teachers persist amidst the ongoing diversification of the P-12 student population (Aud et al. 2010), continued racial homogeneity of the teacher workforce (Boser, 2011), chronic academic achievement disparities between majority and minority student groups (Vanneman et al., 2009), and persistent racial disproportionality in school discipline practices (Losen et al, 2012). In an effort to encourage and promote cross-cultural competence and awareness, we describe a graduate seminar we designed and taught around the integration of western and nonwestern perspectives on cognition, development and learning. We share a number of insights gained from the seminar experience and conclude with an appeal for a critical examination of existing practices in teacher education.

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Promoting Cross-Cultural Competence and Awareness in Teacher Education: Toward the Integration of Western and Non-Western Perspectives

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Abstract

Calls for culturally competent teachers persist amidst the ongoing diversification of the P-12 student population (Aud et al. 2010), continued racial homogeneity of the teacher workforce (Boser, 2011), chronic academic achievement disparities between majority and minority student groups (Vanneman et al., 2009), and persistent racial disproportionality in school discipline practices (Losen et al, 2012). In an effort to encourage and promote cross-cultural competence and awareness, we describe a graduate seminar we designed and taught around the integration of western and nonwestern perspectives on cognition, development and learning. We share a number of insights gained from the seminar experience and conclude with an appeal for a critical examination of existing practices in teacher education.

An hour into our weekly graduate seminar our teachers begin to explicate a chapter on the Islamic educational tradition, which they had read as an assignment in preparation for the class. In small “fishbowl” like circles groups of three to four respond to the prompt asking them to identify and consider the fundamental beliefs and values of an Islamic education, while others outside the inner-circle analyze the conversation.

Sue, an experienced elementary teacher, begins by calling attention to the idea of “unity” in the reading and how everything for her “is connected in Islam.” Jonathan, also an elementary teacher, responds by reading from the text about the openness of learning from within the Islamic/Koranic tradition but then positions himself critically by observing “it’s open if it fits the Koranic perspective but I don’t know how it’s really open if it has to fit the Koranic perspective.” Drew, a middle school language arts teacher, echoes Jonathan’s concerns about the lack of openness to which Jonathan sarcastically responds, “We all use text but they do everything with the Koran. I can’t imagine what would happen in our schools if we did that...that’s what we call a ‘true canned curriculum.’ It’s based on one book!”

The outer circle of teachers then joins the dialogue. Belinda asks, “So, where does the concern for the holistic child fit in?” Janet quickly replies, “the five pillars that’s where everything comes together” before recalling how two Muslim students in her college religion class accepted the Koran with “their whole being.” Looking up from his book, Jonathan adds, “I realize that’s a small population sample but doesn’t that confirm what we’re saying?”

This excerpt from our field notes occurred in a course we designed and co-taught for two years in a graduate program for inservice teachers at Pacific Lutheran University. Our goal was to promote cross-cultural competence by developing deeper understandings of cognition,

development and learning through the study of teaching and learning across home, school and community contexts in diverse cultures. We describe our experience from the course in the hope that sharing what we learned will spur more discussion about adopting a more globalized approach as one way to address the challenges of teaching diverse student populations. We conclude with a number of insights gained from our seminar experience and close with an appeal for a deeper and more critical examination of existing curricular practices in teacher education.

Addressing Cultural Differences in Teaching and Teacher Education

Calls for culturally competent teachers persist amidst the ongoing diversification of the P-12 student population (Aud et al. 2010), continued racial homogeneity of the teacher workforce (Boser, 2011), chronic academic achievement disparities between majority and minority student groups (Vanneman et al., 2009), and persistent racial disproportionality in school discipline practices (Losen et al, 2012). In the face of these trends we believe too many teacher preparation programs still operate from mostly Eurocentric perspectives but convey expectations to candidates that they adapt a more non-Eurocentric or “culturally responsive” approach to teaching (Cross, 2005; Howard, 2010). As practitioners we operate from the standpoint that we have a professional—if not moral—responsibility to assist current and future teachers in examining their own cultural identity (Spindler & Spindler, 1994), deepening their knowledge of other cultural systems and developing frames of reference that will inform and guide their instruction, curricular interventions and capacity for self-reflection and critique (Nieto, 1999).

We believe these processes facilitate the development of cross-cultural competency—or the attitudes, behaviors and practices that Cross et al. (1989) attribute to effective and empowering work in cross-cultural settings. Yet, in our view, many of the efforts designed to promote cultural competency in both university programs and district-based workshops are superficial and largely additive in scope. As Michael Vavrus observes (2002), “Teacher education programs have generally perceived multicultural education as a possible elective or singular addition within a Eurocentric core curriculum that is supported by conventional pedagogies and systems of evaluation” (p.1). Asking teachers, for example, to affirm students with classroom posters of famous identities from their social group, to showcase students’ home cultures on cultural holidays or even to mimic students’ home talk in their instruction encourage at best a shallow and tourist-like approach to teaching. These efforts are often well meaning and speak to the importance of creating inclusive classroom communities, but such strategies rarely extend to the deeper and more impactful question of how we as educators develop communicative and epistemological frames of reference necessary to establish pedagogical conditions for the educational empowerment of all children (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Teachers in today’s classroom must have some familiarity with how students’ ways of knowing are shaped by the traditional or “home” culture’s approach to teaching and learning, and also how to use these insights to design instructional environments that promote deep and powerful learning (Marzano, 2004). In designing our seminar we wanted to push our teachers as well as ourselves to go beyond typical “diversity” exercises like the listing of racial stereotypes on butcher paper or reading the latest crushing indictment of the educational system to critically analyzing the myriad of ways human development, culture and schooling intersect each day in the context of one’s classroom or instructional practice. We therefore started from the premise that cultural awareness needs to be instilled in every aspect of the curriculum.

Structure and Content of the Seminar

Our seminar met once a week for three hours over the course of a fourteen-week semester. Each course in the program was connected to one of four curricular themes—ours was linked to the theme of “advanced cognition, development and learning.” However, rather than focus solely on the western tradition in cognitive and behavioral psychology as past practice had established, we transformed the seminar into an international/intercultural comparative approach to support and foster the integration of western and non-western perspectives. In doing so we were guided by a number of questions like: How can an anthropological and globalized approach to educational inquiry promote cross-cultural competence and awareness? And, how might our students integrate and apply knowledge from different traditions in their own instructional practice?

Given the rapidly shifting demographics of many school districts in the Pacific Northwest like those along the thirty mile “I-5 corridor” between Seattle and Tacoma where seven school districts now enroll minority majority populations (Shaw, 2009), we believed a singular focus on and commitment to the theories and approaches of mainstream educational psychology would limit teachers’ understanding of diversity in their classrooms. But as we embarked on this collaboration our search for a curricular model linking western and non-western perspectives yielded few leads. Although this posed some challenges, not having a predetermined curricular template provided opportunities to be creative and to draw from multiple perspectives in designing the course.

While the curricular materials changed a bit from our first to second year, the central focus did not. We juxtaposed one text representing what we would consider the Western tradition in educational psychology, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (Bransford et al. 2000) against another, *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Indigenous Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice* (Regan, 2005). We also layered in an assortment of articles, book chapters and position papers depending on the learning objectives of each class session.

We started the seminar with foundational work around the history of learning theory and conceptualizing culture, which involved defining terms like “cultural and epistemological ethnocentrism” and considering multicultural perspectives on teaching and learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). The assignment for this part of the course included a cultural autobiography in which the teachers were asked to analyze their experiences with group membership (e.g., ethnic, class, religious, gender, linguistic, etc.) and to identify how that membership has shaped their view of schools and the kinds of assumptions they hold about teaching and learning.

By the third week we shifted the focus to the integration of western and nonwestern educational perspectives. We devoted one session, for example, to forms of apprenticeship learning in which teachers considered expert/novice studies (e.g., Wineburg, 1991) alongside the funds of knowledge framework in the context of Mexican-American families (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg, 1992). This line of inquiry was continued when teachers considered ideas pertaining to the transfer of learning (Bransford et al, 2000) via Oloko’s (1994) research on children’s “street work” in Nigeria and Louis Moll’s (1990) work on “Creating Zones of Possibilities.” We also asked teachers to read about the role of proverbs as an oral practice in traditional African societies in relation to scholarship on effective teachers of African American children (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The assignment accompanying this portion of the course included a reflective

essay in which teachers analyzed themselves as learners and considered how their own learning modalities shape their classroom instruction and beliefs about learning more generally.

To illustrate concepts related to informal apprenticeships, funds of knowledge, and the transfer of learning Vidya introduced teachers to the traditional South Indian practice of rice flour doorway drawings called *kolam*. This is a primarily female practice taught informally to and performed by young girls and women, who have used the practice as a way to convey messages of well being in front of their doorways in the early morning. A *kolam* is designed around patterns with dots and lines and is created using a technique that sifts the rice flour between the thumb and forefinger. Vidya first demonstrated the activity to the teachers in the seminar and then encouraged them to try while asking them to monitor their own learning as they engaged in the activity. She then asked the teachers to examine the cognitive strategies they used and the intellectual competencies that might be developed through participation in the activity. The teachers then engaged in a reflective theory building discussion in which questions about the relationship between the spatial intelligence, imagery and visualization required to design elaborate kolams and mathematical proficiency were considered.

In the final segment of the course we asked teachers to read about traditional educational practices in places like Africa, China, and the Islamic world (Reagan, 2005). One in-class exercise, for example, prompted teachers to identify the beliefs about learning and performance embedded in the imperial examination system in Confucian China and those currently informing “high stakes” assessment regimes in the United States. Additionally, we challenged the teachers to reflect on how cultural minority students at their school are tasked with navigating expectations, interactional norms and so on. We did this, for example, by assigning excerpts from Phillips’ (1983) work on native and Anglo communication on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, and Delgado-Gaitan’s (1994) work on “*Consejos*: The Power of Cultural Narratives.” The assignment connected to this portion of the course asked teachers to collaborate in designing a school, school system or a professional development pathway for teachers, which included an artistic representation, narrative description and metacognitive reflection. The culminating assignment involved narrative entries aligned with the thematic focus of the course within the program’s electronic portfolio system. These entries offered participants a more individualized approach to reconcile, synthesize and reflect upon the full range of course content and experiences.

Data Collection

The first seminar we taught consisted of twenty-three students and the second contained sixteen. There were therefore, a total of thirty-nine students enrolled in the two seminars all but one of who were professional educators. Among the thirty-nine students were three international teachers—two from Scandinavia and one from Africa—in addition to three Asian American, two African American and at least four students of mixed racial heritage. The majority of students—just about two thirds—identified as white.

The data collected and analyzed for this study include course papers and assignments, fieldnotes taken during and after the seminar, emails sent to us from students, in-class writings including weekly “metacognitive reflections,” informal conversations and the final narratives students included in electronic program portfolios. Our analysis of the evidence included reviewing fieldnotes about student participation in the seminar, analyzing student coursework and communications for themes and patterns, and engaging one another about our own

respective interpretations of the collected evidence.

Reflections and Insights from the Seminar

In designing this course we wanted to provide seminar participants with substantive learning and professional growth opportunities. The opening vignette, however, exemplifies the kind of tensions that sometimes occurred as a result of elevating a globalized approach within teacher education. The teachers in our seminar engaged in participation strategies that extended from resistance and indifference to glorifying “other” cultures to critically engaging with the course content in ways that ignited what some participants described as a deeply transformational experience. We conclude by sharing a few insights from our seminar for those similarly committed to complicating the conversation around cultural competency in teacher education.

In looking back on the two years we taught this course we believe we were hindered by the curricular scope and sequence of the program, which only allotted four-credits to the study of cognition and development. We believe the limitations of the single seminar format itself proved the biggest barrier to teacher learning. While multicultural perspectives were embedded in other parts of the program curriculum, our seminar was the only one that brought these perspectives to the explicit examination of teaching and learning as social practices. Clearly, this programmatic approach does not constitute the kind of institutional transformation needed to help practitioners respond to the dramatic demographic changes resulting from global economic restructuring and the concomitant appearance of immigrant children in their schools and classrooms (Lipman, 2004). We believe the seminar would have better served participants as one experience among a number of carefully sequenced courses attending to the complex relationships between and among human development, culture, and schooling in the 21st Century.

Another insight we took away from the seminar was the disparate response to course readings. The majority of white teachers experienced discomfort and difficulty in reading articles/chapters that discussed nonwestern educational thought and practices, while many of the teachers of color (10 of the 39 teachers in the combined seminars) expressed their excitement in reading about nonwestern cultural groups. In some cases the reading material pushed teachers to test their cultural boundaries, which in turn created visible discomfort. Some even expressed difficulty in understanding the meaning of the content. Could the anxiety experienced by some of our white teachers parallel the difficulty some minority populations experience with a Eurocentric curriculum? We think this question is worth exploring especially if teachers are provided with more rigorous and ongoing opportunities to engage with these issues.

We also view the frustration with the seminar readings in line with what Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) refer to as the “essential tension of teacher community.” This concept refers to the strain that often emerges in professional development contexts between some teachers wanting to learn only that which is directly applicable to improving their instruction versus those committed to deepening and broadening their knowledge base more generally. For a number of our seminar participants wading through theoretical terminology like, ethnocentric epistemology or considering research on the thinking behind children’s street work in Nigeria was not applicable to their day-to-day realities in the classroom and they experienced aggravation and dissonance with the lack of direct and practical *take aways*. For others, though, especially our international teachers and teachers of color, this content provided an opportunity to explore what Greenfield and Cocking (1994) term the “cross cultural roots of minority child

development.” These participants seemed driven more by intellectual curiosity and a commitment to address the inequities of historically marginalized students than they were to learn a new instructional strategy they could use in their classroom the following day.

Third, most teacher educators like us are graduates of a Eurocentric educational system that too often limits our ability to demonstrate the very same cultural competencies state and national accrediting bodies and standards boards are asking us to impart to our candidates (State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, 2010). We encountered challenges while teaching aspects of the seminar when our own limited knowledge and familiarity with some nonwestern cultural traditions was exposed. Instead of pivoting around these shortcomings we urge teacher educators to make them visible to their candidates and to model intellectual openness and continual inquiry as signifiers of what lifelong learning looks like within the profession. While there is no agreed upon script for how one becomes a culturally competent teacher, we do not see anyone becoming so without first being intellectually open, inherently curious and self-reflective.

Our final insight involves connecting theory with practice. Because our seminar—like most in university-based teacher education programs—was located on a college campus removed from the schools and classrooms, the students and families, and the neighborhoods and communities invoked by the course content, an uncomfortable social distance textured our deliberations in ways that again, exposed the contextual limitations of the seminar approach. We believe that if teacher educators are to play our part in closing the achievement gap in public education, we will need to go beyond assigning articles about it or asking program participants to reflect on its causes. In short, we have come away from this experience believing even more deeply that it is incumbent upon teacher educators to build partnerships in diverse communities (Murrell, 2001; Seidl, 2007), which will support and sustain the development a new professional paradigm for thinking about who we teach, what we teach and the ways we go about crafting pedagogies that are both personally relevant and culturally responsive (Keengwe, 2010).

Conclusion

This essay reported out on the design and development of a graduate course for inservice teachers that sought to integrate western and non-western perspectives on cognition, development and learning in the hopes of promoting cross-cultural competencies and awareness. After teaching the seminar two times, we came away with an even deeper respect for the challenges of moving cultural competence to the center of teacher education than at the outset of our project. Even during the second seminar, for example, we often found ourselves preoccupied with the complexities of delivering a truly integrated curriculum. As a result while many teachers reported a deeper awareness of cross-cultural issues upon completion of our seminar, we were never able to answer our second question regarding the extent to which the seminar experience impacted our participants’ instructional practice. We attribute this shortcoming in part to the limitations of a single seminar approach, which we liken to the old adage of pouring new wine into old bottles. While we thus remain committed to the integration of western and non-western perspectives as one way to promote cross-cultural competency and awareness, we believe such an approach would be better supported by a deeper and more structural transformation of teacher education itself.

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