

**A Collaborative Inquiry with White Women on their Understanding of Difference
in Education**

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Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationships between White women's life experiences and exposure to diversity-related coursework in a special education graduate program. The purpose of this exploration was to gain deeper insights about our journey toward developing a critical consciousness about difference in education (e.g., race, class, language dominance, ability). Collaborative inquiry was used to gather life histories and develop portraits of White female graduate students in special education. The two main findings from this study were that; (1) life experiences and demographic data were significant in re-constructing our understanding of difference in education; and (2) mindfulness was a key factor in facilitating growth toward a critical consciousness about difference in education. Perspectives from the teacher educator, researcher, and participants are represented in order to gain further insight into re-thinking teacher preparation.

Introduction

As the racial, ethnic, economic, and linguistic diversity continues to grow among the US school-aged population, White teachers remain the majority at 86% (Ooka Pang, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001). At the same time, such diverse learners continue to experience the pervasive problem of academic failure, inappropriate referral, disproportionate representation in special education, and high dropout and retention rates (McCray & García, 2002; Townsend, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Their “underachievement” has, in part, been attributed to the cultural and linguistic discontinuities that result from the demographic differences between students and teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994 & 2001; Delpit, 1995; Pugach & Seidl, 1998).

Pugach & Seidl (1998) suggest that educators’ inability to understand the complex relationship among students’ racial and political identities and how it affects student behavior and outcomes is in large part due to the fact that “White teachers do not often experience a ‘racialized identity’ (though, indeed they have one) nor have many had the opportunity to think about what it might be like to be a person of color in a racist society” (p. 325).). Nieto (1996), hooks (1994), and Haymes (1995) suggest the need for White teachers to self-actualize and have a solid foundation in who they are with strong roots in their identity in order to have the ability to validate *others’* experiences (Delpit, 1995).

Townsend (2002) suggests that teachers’ perceptions and expectations of “minority” students can greatly impact classroom practice and student outcomes. Thus, teacher’s deficit or stereotyped beliefs about students may have a greater impact on student achievement than an intervention because if a teacher does not believe the student

can perform then the teacher does not interact in the same way and may do less to support the student's achievement. As Vygotsky (1978) suggests, an individual can become more or less "disabled" depending upon the environment. Thus, teachers' interactions with students with disabilities become critical in the students' success or failure.

In special education, the term "culturally linguistically diverse" (CLD) is used as an umbrella term to connote students from any background *other* than the dominant White mainstream. As a result, race, ethnicity, culture, language dominance, economic status are collapsed and signified by the term CLD. This is problematic because educators must take a "critical look at issues of race, culture, and class and the manner in which these influences are understood or misunderstood and used or misused to explain school failure" (Pugach & Seidl, 1998, p. 325). It is important to recognize that when educators use the term CLD, often they include economic class as an element of diversity. As such I prefer the term culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLEd) to legitimize and make transparent that economic class is included in the discussion of diversity. This is especially important because the report of *Minority students in special and gifted education* suggests that economic class is a critical component of why "minorities" are underachieving and disproportionately represented in special education (NRC, 2002).

However, CLEd should be understood from a socio-cultural lens that legitimizes difference rather than viewed from a deficit perspective that can oppress or undermine difference as problematic. In particular, the term "culture" has been mis-used in education because it has been situated in a way that connotes a deficit; that is, when we talk of cultural differences in education it is typically in a manner that suggests those who

have cultural differences are “disadvantaged” (Hill, de Valenzuela, Cervantes, & Baca, 1998) and thus marginalized by the system. For example, there seems to be a pervasive deficit perspective associated with diversity in that students from culturally, linguistically, and economically different (CLED) backgrounds are viewed as “at-risk” or “struggling learners” in need of “extra support” to succeed in school (NRC, 2002). As a result teachers equate student “underachievement” or “failure” to individual or environmental factors (Valencia, 1997; Walters, 2002) rather than understanding the underlying “culture of schooling” (Hollins, 1996) as promoting mainstream practices that reproduce cultural oppression and institutional racism in the school context.

Additionally, a common belief is that empirically based practices will promote equitable education for all students because research-based practices have been proven effective; thus they must work for *all* students (NRC, 2002). However, many of the practices that have been researched are mainstream constructions of effective teaching practices and have not been tested on populations for which they are now being used (McCray & García, 2002). With the privileging of mainstream constructions of effective practices comes an erasure of “other” perspectives in education, thus “other” is re-situated as “underserved” “disadvantaged” and/or “at-risk” (Ladson-Billings, 2001) in relation to the mainstream/dominant perspective. McCray & García (2002) suggest that disregarding the contextual factors such as race, class, culture, and language when understanding “disability” can result in “misconceptions of diversity as disability” (p. 599). Thus, it is no wonder that educators have deficit views of their students who come from culturally linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. The question is how do teachers maintain a critical perspective in teaching CLED students in an era that

promotes deficit thinking about such students?

Approaches to Shifting Beliefs

Since 1978, researchers in the field of special education have recognized the need to infuse multicultural perspectives in teacher preparation programs to address and counter deficit beliefs of difference in education, more specifically CLED students (Trent & Artiles, 1998). However, much of the multicultural content has emphasized a “tourist” approach that serves to perpetuate stereotypes rather than dismantle them (Cochran-Smith, 1995). In addition, much of the research that utilizes “various methods to foster change in teachers’ thinking, attitudes, and behaviors regarding cultural diversity...have produced mixed results because they often focused on content rather than process of cross-cultural learning” (McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 3) and lack a critical analysis of the structures that inform *why* teachers believe what they do and how they make meaning of newfound beliefs that challenge the dominant discourse on education (Sleeter, 2001). More attention has been paid to teachers’ continued deficit beliefs (e. g., Cuccaro, Wright, Harry, & Rownd, 1996; Lamorey, 2002) and the effects on CLED students (e. g., Obiakor, 1999; Townsend, 2002) than a critical examination of how preservice teachers came to believe what they do, why they believe what they do about working with CLED students, and what works to shift teachers beliefs. Finally, notably absent in the research literature on shifting beliefs are the voices of the teachers and their perceptions of factors which facilitate their growth, as well as an examination of their personal and professional life experiences which have shaped their beliefs.

Reframing Teacher Preparation in Special Education

Traditionally, teachers' deficit beliefs have been positioned at the center of the multicultural teacher preparation discourse (e. g. McIntyre, 1997; Obiakor, 1999; Sleeter, 1992), which serves to complicate teachers' ability to develop a critical consciousness (Freire, 1990) because there is a de-emphasis on the ways in which competing discourses about difference/diversity in general and special education influence teachers' beliefs. *Critical consciousness* refers to the process of learning to recognize the social, cultural, political, linguistic, and economic contradictions that account for the disparities in education (e. g., disproportionate representation of race/ethnicity in special education, drop-out rates, low achievement, etc) as a way of understanding and changing such oppressive and inequitable practices (Britzman, 1991; Freire, 1990).

In reviewing the literature, the process of developing a critical consciousness has primarily been promoted within the context of multicultural-centered coursework. Multicultural-centered coursework has made concerted efforts to promote transformative learning experiences for educators in that such coursework serves to shift teachers' understanding about working with culturally, linguistically, economically diverse learners away from deficit perspectives toward a pluralistic and critical understanding of difference. Adapting the definition from the adult learning model of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1995), *transformative learning* is the complex interplay that occurs when an individual's consciousness is shifted toward a critical understanding of the institutional inequities inherent in society, in particular education, and promotes educational practices that counter hegemony (Freire, 1970; O'Sullivan, 1999).

Notably absent are the voices of the teachers involved in transformative learning experiences (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1990, 2000) and their perceptions of factors, which facilitated their growth in developing a critical consciousness about difference in education. As a result, research on teachers' perceptions needs to examine the system or contexts in which teachers are being socialized and educated, in order to understand why teachers believe what they do. Drawing from sociocultural theory, we must understand the social relations in which the individual exists to understand the individual (Wertsch, 1991). With this in mind, examination of the complex interplay of teachers' personal and professional life experiences that shape why and how they believe what they do about difference in education (e. g., CLED students) becomes critical in understanding the individual teacher. As suggested by de Valenzuela, Connery, & Musanti (2000) teacher preparation in special education needs a merger of perspectives from socio-cultural, multicultural, and critical theory to address the social, historical, and political constructs that influence classroom, curricula, and academic cultures of practice.

Theoretical Lens

As a result this study draws on critical theory, whiteness studies, and feminism as tools for understanding the varied layers of what shapes White women's understanding of difference in education and what works to help them shift away from deficit notions of difference. Feminism has its roots in critique of the discourse that created the binary of man and woman, the inconsistencies or interruptions that shape what it means to be a woman, and the power structures that serve to oppress those who are not male (Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1997). Similarly contemporary whiteness studies serve to break the binary of race as a black/white dichotomy toward examining the intersections of race

with multiple identities such as class, gender, political orientation, religious practices, and historical context (Gallagher, 2000; Omi & Winant, 2000). Critical theorists devote their research to examining the power structures that shape individuals' beliefs and actions (Schwandt, 2001), while deconstructivists dismantle the power structures by examining the contradictions of those structures (Weedon, 1997).

A major theme of this research is to recognize and situate White women in a broader sense as products of their socialization and examine the juxtaposition of power structures. From a critical perspective, this study examined: (a) the ways in which White women's perceptions of working with CLED students in special education are influenced by their experiences growing up White in the "privileged dominant class" (Hatch, 2002) and (b) the structural forces that shape the dominant discourse about difference in education. This research attempts to recognize the structural forces that shape, interrupt, and complicate the discourse of difference. One of the tools of deconstruction is the concept of looking beyond the structure to recognize the interruptions/contradictions of constructs and binaries. This research attempts to break away from essentializing differences toward critically reflecting on the role of multiple identities (e. g., race, gender, class, education, context, etc.) and the contradictions in those multiple identities (i.e., White teachers are much more than racialized beings).

In particular, identities can be interrupted by life histories/experiences, which influence our beliefs and/or perceptions about difference in education (Gilliam, 2003; Weedon, 1999). From a sociocultural perspective White women are products of their socialization of being women and White. As Howard (1999) suggests in his poignant book about White teachers in multiracial schools, "We Can't Teach What We Don't

Know,” similarly White women cannot deconstruct and reconstruct their identity if this process has not been a part of their education or socialization. Pugach and Seidl (1998) posit that White women have not experienced viewing themselves as racialized beings. Thus, they have had few opportunities, if any, to negotiate their racialized identity and how it privileges them while marginalizing others. This study was an attempt to provide an opportunity for White women to engage in an examination of their life histories/experiences and how these have shaped their understanding of difference.

Methodology

This collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Brooks & Edwards, 1997) represents a move to (a) shift the deficit paradigm from teachers-as-problem toward a structural understanding that situates teachers within the contexts that they have been socialized to understand their beliefs about difference in education and (b) reduce the power differential of researcher-as-expert to a collaborative co-creation toward understanding *why* teachers believe what they do about difference in education. In particular, the researcher collaboratively engaged in a study with White women who were enrolled in a Master’s level course, *Cross-Cultural Interactions in Multicultural Special Education* that served as a transformative learning experience. Collaborative inquiry is the systematic process of repeated reflection around a central question or set of questions in which participants collaboratively explore answers and participate in analyzing the data. In particular, collaborative inquiry was used to gather life histories of the participants, including the lead researcher, to understand the intersection of previous life experiences with learning that occurred as a result of participating in the course. The intention was to collaboratively explore with White women (a) aspects of the course that

facilitated a shift toward a critical consciousness and (b) personal life experiences that have shaped what they believe about difference in education. Rather than merely reporting deficit beliefs or the outcomes of addressing beliefs, the final analysis includes a collective, multivocal account of our exploration.

The participants were six White female graduate students in special education (principal investigator included) in their 20's and early 30's, who had taken a Masters' level course on *Cross-Cultural Interactions in Multicultural Special Education*. The participants reflected a variety of beliefs about diversity related topics. White women were selected because they are the most prevalent in the education field and there has been concern about the cultural incongruence between White teachers and the culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners they serve and its role in perpetuating the failure of such students (García & McCray, 2002; Obiakor, 1999, Ladson-Billings, 2001). Surveys, individual interviews, written reflection and collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Brooks & Edwards, 1997) were conducted to actively engage participants in a critical discussion/reflection about our life stories and experience in the course. Participants were not only actively involved in the data collection but also in the analysis and representation of the data. Data analysis involved two phases. One in which we collaboratively analyzed the data in a six hour session of coding transcripts, journal reflections, and surveys for common themes and then sharing our findings together as a group. Additional analysis systematically reviewed the themes created to confirm or disconfirm patterns across the data. A reflective journal was maintained by the lead researcher to record impressions and contradictions. The final analysis of the data was then shared with participants for feedback.

Findings

Two main findings from this study were that; (1) life experiences and demographic data were significant in re-constructing our understanding of difference in education; and (2) mindfulness was a key factor in facilitating growth toward a critical consciousness about difference in education.

Interrelationships of Life Experience and Demographic Data

Some of the major findings related to the interrelationships of life experiences and demographic background were that some participants had minimal experiences with people of color until adulthood and thus prior to the course perceived White as “normal,” did not recognize “other” perspectives of knowing. For example, Kimberly talked about being tracked through her schooling process and while she attended a diverse school her classmates were all White. In the cafeteria, students self-segregated by sitting with racially similar peers and there was an unspoken rule that promoted segregation. She would say “hi” to students across racial backgrounds but they did not make plans to do things outside of school. Caroline had similar experiences, she commented that the church she attended was all White, the extracurricular activities she was involved in were all White and her neighborhood was all White. She summed it up best by saying, “So I guess what you could say really is that I lived in a little bubble!” Jennifer said that as a youth her experiences with people of color was centered around volunteering in which the message was sent that it was okay to help people who are different but that you do not develop relationships with them. As a result, those who had limited or sheltered experiences with difference perceived their Whiteness as normal and their White identity was reified rather than interrupted.

We found that life experiences which assisted in our development of a critical consciousness included experiences of being an outsider, seeing differential treatment, and developing relationships with people who were different. For example, Renee and I being from working class backgrounds experienced the hardship of rejection and feeling like an outsider in our educational experiences growing up as peers made fun of us for the way we dressed and teachers pitied us for the resources we lacked. Kimberly, who worked for Teach for America in the Mississippi Delta, experienced what her White racial identity afforded her in comparison to her African American colleagues who could not have access to the same housing or customer service. Participants also talked about how their relationships with people from different cultural and racial backgrounds helped to demystify difference and develop advocacy for inequitable treatment. For example, Amy shared that her friend Margaret who is blind shared how professors have lowered expectations and her frustration because she is capable of doing the work. As a result Amy has become more aware of how she treats people with disabilities.

Mindfulness as a Pedagogy

Mindfulness was found as a key element in supporting White women's growth. Mindfulness, as defined by Gudykunst & Kim (1997), is the act of being conscious of our communication or behavior. It is a process of being self-reflective within the act of communication in order to prevent or circumvent habitual or scripted behavior that can potentially serve to undermine how we receive, interpret, respond, and are in turn received and interpreted during communication. Gudykunst & Kim (1997) use the analogy of responding on automatic pilot to explain the act of habitual or scripted behavior during communication. As such the goal of mindfulness is to think before

responding (on automatic pilot) so that one can recognize alternative explanations and respond in new or informed ways. Key characteristics of mindfulness include; creating new categories, being open to new information, and being aware of more than one perspective (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

Within the context of the course the instructor, Dr. Morales embodied mindfulness as a pedagogy for the course by (a) exposing students to another way of looking through teaching frameworks for understanding cultural and racial differences in behavior and reading literature that exposed students to multiple perspectives, (b) being open to students ways of understanding in meeting them where they were at in the process, and (c) being aware of more than one perspective by helping students recognize that developing a critical consciousness about difference in education is a process that is ongoing and not a place of arrival.

For example, Jennifer learned frameworks for understanding behavior and how identity influences the ways we behave, interact, and make meaning of the world.

Individualistic/Collectivistic and High/Low context. I think that naming these two important dimensions of culture changed the way I think and talk about groups of people. I had noticed the characteristics of individualism and collectivism and the difference of high low context communicators, but I didn't know what they were called or how deep they penetrate cultural groups. (FJE, S202, p. 2)

An insightful time for me during the semester was when we learned about Helm's Stages of White and Non-White Racial Identity...I think that it's interesting to think about what experiences people have to

move through before they can reach the final stage of acceptance and how many individuals aren't in the place or time in their life where they are exposed to the necessary people or ideas that will help them along in that process. (FJE, S202, p. 3-4)

This new knowledge of intercultural communication also helped her [re] shape her relationship with her boyfriend Nizar who is Pakistani. Jennifer explained that the religious and cultural differences in their relationship affected them differently and that her family, being more individualistic, would accept and most likely respect her decision to marry Nizar. While she felt like, Nizar being from a collectivistic background, his family would see his actions as disrespectful. So she began to develop new understandings of her relationship with Nizar and the future of their relationship. In the end, she seemed at peace with knowing that if their relationship didn't work out, it was not personal but rather a result of their religious and cultural differences.

Next, participants reported that the instructor met each student where they were at, which helped them adopt new ways of knowing. For example, participants reported that feeling safe and valued was an important factor in their growth. Jennifer reported that the reflective journals were especially helpful because,

Jennifer: I don't just always feel that much better having written it down because I'm kind of like, "yeah, that's how I felt inside my head already." You know, it's when someone reads it and says, validates how I was feeling, first of all and then says maybe you should try this. Then I feel better.

Additionally, Kimberly said that when she recalled events where her understanding of difference was limited, rather than being criticized for her beliefs, the instructor was mindful in meeting her where she was at in the process of developing a critical consciousness. For example in responding to one her journals where she was processing through how race impacted her teaching, Dr. Morales encouraged her to learn from her previously held misunderstanding.

Kimberly: I tried to, kind of, smooth over it and Dr. Morales just did a really good job of, again, like we were talking about earlier, meeting me where I was and not be like, “Oh yea, I can’t believe you did that.” [Laughs] You know? Or like, “Kim, that should have been obvious, why did you not...” instead it was just like...

Barbara: That we’re human.

Kimberly: Right. Exactly. You know? And like, that’s a natural thing to do. And don’t worry about it and...

Barbara: Now you know for next time.

Kimberly: Exactly, exactly.

Finally, participants talked about how developing a critical consciousness is an ongoing journey rather than a place of arrival. For example, Caroline discussed how she became more aware of the process of developing a critical consciousness about difference by recognizing her own biases and being open to learn more about others’ perspectives.

Caroline: I cannot even begin to explain how much I have learned throughout the semester. Many times it has been difficult for me to let go of my previously held beliefs, but I know that I have grown through listening to other people's views and challenging what I have always thought about.

I will never be black or know what it is like to be them. I am me. But, I have learned both through past experience and through your class how to be a better me. I have noticed I am a lot less critical. I used to judge people pretty quickly and I have noticed I am a lot more accepting of people and their differing points of view.

I realize real growth and learning do not come with out a lot of challenging work and I had to take a good look at myself and who I was and how I could become a better me... I feel that my learning and evolving into a person that is alert and open to all cultures and all learners will not stop here. The information I have learned from you and your class has prepared me to be open to all ideas and all types of people. Learning is a lifelong process and I will not stop learning about the world and all it has to offer when I graduate. (FJE, S201, p. 1-3)

Participants commented that they were able to shift their understanding of difference because they were exposed to another way of looking at difference by learning frameworks for understanding difference, given opportunities to “think about it” by reflecting and learning from others’ experiences, recognized that developing a critical

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consciousness about difference in education is a process not a destination, and met by the instructor at their place in the journey rather than feeling judged.

Implications

Multiculturalism has mostly been focused on nonwhites (Haymes, 1995). More specifically students of color and how teachers can “accommodate” them rather than understanding the role that teacher’s identity and understanding of difference influences the teaching and learning process. Ignoring White identity serves to naturalize whiteness (Haymes, 1995) rather than viewing it through a critical lens, which can illuminate the ways that racial identity influences our behavior with others. As a result, as long as teacher preparation programs do not allow opportunities for White educators to unpack their own identity, dialogue with perspectives that counter or differ from their own experiences, and reflect on how their beliefs interact with classroom practice; equitable education will remain an ideal.

One way teacher educators can facilitate this process of reflection is through dialogic journaling (Britzman, 1991). Dialogic journaling is the process of reflecting in a journal and for the instructor to respond to student’s journaling thus being dialogic. Such a process would enable educators, in particular White teachers with minimal prior exposure to diverse groups, to recognize and understand the role of deficit thinking in education. Once their awareness is raised they can begin to learn skills to activate a critical consciousness to counter such deficit notions and improve their teaching with CLED students. Equally important, teacher educators must teach the concept of mindfulness as a pedagogy so that educators can learn how to become mindful in their own practice. Mindfulness as pedagogy requires teacher educators to create new

categories and expand students current understanding of difference, be open to new information from students and provide frameworks to help students to remain open, and be aware of more than one perspective by allowing for interruptions within our understanding of difference.

This study provides important foundations for further studies that focus on the ways in which White teachers activate a critical consciousness in the classroom so that they may develop high expectations and provide more equitable educational experiences for CLED students.

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