

EXPLORING THE SELF AND THE OTHER:
Achieving the Empathic Goals of Teacher Preparation through
Multicultural Education

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ABSTRACT: Effective multicultural education courses require both instructors and students to examine their own cultural backgrounds and philosophical underpinnings in order to understand their societal dispositions and behaviors. In this article, the authors share effective strategies for teaching about race and racism in a college multicultural teacher education course. They discuss ways in which they assess the impact of this process on the course participants.

The increasingly changing face of the United States affects the structure and content of teacher preparation programs throughout the nation. The need to prepare educators who understand the ever-present realities of diversity in their communities and schools has translated into multicultural education courses being required in almost all teacher preparation programs across the country. This paper focuses on a multicultural education course offered in the teacher education program at a state university in the West of the United States. The course is titled “The Sociocultural Context of Schooling.” The authors have taught the course several times and both have discovered that it presents instructors with a unique set of pedagogical challenges because, to be effective, it must significantly affect the course participants’ attitudes towards themselves and others and, also, in significant ways, alter dispositions.

This paper focuses on effective strategies for teaching about race and racism within the framework of cultural identity development and clarification in “The Sociocultural Context of Schooling” course. After giving a brief description of ourselves as instructors and of where the course fits in our curriculum, we define the context and goal of the course. Then we discuss four steps to teaching about race and racism. Our conclusions and recommendations highlight signs of success as well as our unsolved dilemmas.

The Course

The course is taught by two faculty members. One of us is a Black African female of the Mormon faith. The other is a White male of Jewish extraction who was born in Los Angeles. Despite the obvious differences in our cultural upbringing, we have discovered strong underlying commonalities in our multicultural education teaching philosophies and approaches. Our teaching philosophy and approaches are inspired by our shared concern for “humanization” (Freire, 1993), the process by which one comes to understand the realities of another’s existence as though those realities were one’s own. We believe that the course must lead participants to become self-reflective in order to reexamine their understanding of others (Howard, 1999; McIntosh, 1989; Ndura, 2003; Powell, 2000; Sleeter, 1994). In essence, the course is dedicated to strengthening empathic ability, ultimately for the purpose of helping pre- and in-service teachers gain the ability to see the world as their students might, so that their teaching might be made relevant to and accommodate for the lives of those they teach.

To be effective in such a course, the instructors must resist the temptation to correct students’ contributions and responses to the various issues raised by the course, and they must force themselves to play “the believing game” (Elbow, 1973), by suspending judgment and accepting the notion that participants have come to their views through a process that has to be understood to be a legitimate one, a valid response to the conditions and circumstances of their lives.

“The Sociocultural Context of Schooling” is designated as a major education capstone course that is required of all undergraduate students pursuing teacher certification at the university. The course asks participants to examine some of the most complex and compelling issues facing American society. It pushes them to use the tools of scholarly analysis to discover, through literature, the meaning of relationships that exist between groups of different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds and the implications of these relationships for the society. The overall goal of the course is to provide participants the opportunity to explore, examine, discuss, and critique literature and societal practices concerned with broad issues of multiculturalism and to gain an

understanding of how these issues affect educational decisions and practices.

Participants who enroll in The Sociocultural Context of Schooling course are, for the most part, college undergraduate juniors and seniors in their mid-twenties. Most of them are White and from middle-class communities that, until recently, have been relatively homogenous and almost exclusively White. They attend a university with small minority enrollments; so the classrooms in which they take their courses are filled, almost entirely, with White, middle-class participants like themselves. All participants in the course have completed most, if not all, of their liberal arts general education requirements. While they may be exposed to course content touching upon multicultural issues, most have had little contact with people from cultural backgrounds different from their own and, thus, they have not, in any significant ways, been exposed to the realities of cultural diversity. They may know of race, of cultures different from their own, and of socio-economic differences that exist between people, but they may neither know nor understand the real effects of these differences on the lives of real people.

Teaching About Race

Discussions about race and racial issues can be extremely uncomfortable and easily get out of control in the classroom. Therefore serious preparation and planning is key to bringing issues of race into the open while fostering an environment of open mindedness that is prerequisite to sharing and learning. Here we describe the four-step process that we have used to teach about race in our multicultural education course: (1) establishing a safe learning environment; (2) defining cultural identity; (3) relating cultural identity to individual attitudes and behaviors; and (4) broaching issues of race.

Establishing a Safe Learning Environment

We use the first class meeting to build an instructor-participant and participant-participant coalition upon which the whole semester is built. Our introductory activities are therefore designed to be personally validating and engaging. To introduce themselves, the participants and instructors share their name and something special

about themselves. Most of the time the special information may seem trivial to an outside observer. Participants may share likes and dislikes, the number of pets they own, their last fun trip, how far along they are in their schooling, etc. Nevertheless, it is information that opens up a little window into their life experiences as human beings.

Another introductory activity, “Whom do I Bring with Me,” asks the participants to talk about someone who has influenced them or made a difference in their lives. These introductory activities help begin to create a sense of community where the participants trust one another enough to share personal information and insights.

Defining Cultural Identity

Banks (1997) explains that educators must have “a clear understanding of their own cultural identity and its influence on their attitudes toward and relationships with culturally different people” (p.85). Thus, we as instructors must provide the participants with opportunities to explore, rediscover, clarify, define, and understand their cultural identity. We do this in two stages. First, we involve them in a discussion of macroculture and microculture (Banks, 2001). According to Banks (2001), “the United States consists of a common overarching culture or macroculture and microcultures that consist of unique institutions, values, and cultural elements that are non-universalized and are shared primarily by members of specific cultural groups” (p.11). We ask the participants to identify cultural attributes that make them American and those that support their membership in a given microculture. Then, we ask them to focus on intersections between their macroculture and their microculture. This helps them see and appreciate the interdependence between the American macroculture and the many microcultures that contribute to it. Then we direct their attention to the intersection between the various microcultures, thus highlighting the similarities and interconnectedness that bind the diverse microcultures together.

After establishing the above definition of self at the macroculture level, participants are guided through another activity, “The Real Me, More than the Eye Can See,” which helps them determine the many variables that contribute to their individual cultures. At this point many participants, most of who have never before looked at

themselves as cultural human beings, make powerful discoveries. They learn that their culture is a product of their nationality, race/ethnicity, religion, exceptionality, social class, gender, age, and other variables sometimes known to them alone.

Relating Cultural Identity to Individual Attitudes and Behaviors

Multicultural education, if effective, leads to changes in the participants' worldviews and dispositions. As Giroux (1994) explains, one goal of a multicultural curriculum is to make participants "responsible for their practices, particularly as these serve to either undermine or expand the possibility for democratic public life" (p.339). The task of relating cultural identity to individual attitudes and behaviors moves participants beyond exploring the complexity of their cultural identity to understanding how their culture shapes their view of the world and influences their attitudes and actions. To this effect, they are directed to write a narrative examining how their culture influences their classroom practices and their relationships with students from culturally different backgrounds.

Pre-service teacher candidates who have no classroom experience write about who they are culturally and how who they are influences their attitudes, behaviors, and actions. The written narrative--as opposed to open class discussion--allows for deeper and more critical analysis of self and the relationship of self to culture. It offers participants a safe means for getting at real feelings and attitudes and probing those they fear to make public.

Broaching Issues of Race

It is very easy for many educators to avoid discussing issues of race by subscribing to the color-blind perspective. By claiming that they do not see color or that they treat all of their students the same regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, they skillfully avoid confronting the fact that race and ethnicity greatly impact every person's life experiences. Quite often, race is a taboo topic that educators do not want to address, as they prefer to avoid issues outside their comfort zones. Consequently, problems relating to race are rarely dealt with openly and instead perpetuated and even aggravated.

Through the activities described above, the participants learn to see and accept race as yet another cultural identity variable just like social class, language, religion, gender, and exceptionality. They learn to appreciate the extent to which their life experiences may have been affected by their race. At this stage, they are ready to examine and discuss ways in which racism has privileged some and victimized others.

Teaching about Racism

The discussion about racism opens with an array of definitions of racism from scholars such as Helms (1990), Howard (1999), Kalback & Aguilar (2000), Powell (2000), and Tatum (1994). The definitions help us uncover the different facets of racism. It can be individual, institutional, or cultural. Racism can also be active or passive. It can be internalized. Whichever way it is looked at, though, it is still racism, a societal problem with unlimited potential for destruction. The discussion of racism evolves in the following seven steps in order to lead the participants through an emotionally laden learning experience: (1) clarifying the rationale for talking about racism; (2) sharing untold stories; (3) uncovering race-based obstacles to education; (4) brainstorming reasons why racism lingers on; (5) relating awareness of racism to the drive to strive for excellence; (6) voicing messages for people of other races; and (7) reflecting on the learning experience.

Clarifying the Rationale for Talking about Racism

Through readings, videos, and shared personal experiences, the participants learn that racism is enslaving. It is victimizing. Racism destroys the human spirit. As such, it is a very difficult issue to discuss openly in a classroom. But we must bring it out into the open. We must talk about it. The rationale is simple: ignoring and hiding the problem will not make it go away. Racism grows in hiding. It grows sharp claws that attack and destroy the human power to believe in self and others. It destroys the human potential for success. It destroys faith and hope. Racism shatters the hope for life. Confused, blinded and unable to hold on the slick walls of darkness, the human stumbles on his own steps, falls and refuses to get up, thus burying his body and his hope in the dark, endless tunnel. We must talk about racism. We must unmask racism, to ignite the light at the end of the tunnel.

Sharing Untold Stories

One myth that has to be dispelled early in the discussion of racism is the argument that only white people can be racist. When we engage the participants in the task of unmasking racism, we start from the premise that racism has no color. We then encourage them to share stories they may have heard or read about as well as life experiences they may have had that relate to issues of racism. Almost always, examples are cited from past history as if our students feel safer by looking at racism as something that happened in the past only. We push them to think about current manifestations of racism in the media, the schools, their communities, and in the world. If we are successful, racism becomes real and begins to hurt. Participants sometimes share testimonials of racial profiling. They talk about relationships that families forced them to abandon due to racial differences. They break the silence about their fear of people of other races. They talk about their frustration with race-based misunderstandings. As we share these untold stories, we commiserate, together, almost as if caught by surprise that the ills of racism are still so pervasive in our midst.

Uncovering Race-Based Obstacles to Education

As we encourage the participants to confront the evils of racism in everyday life, they realize that education is part of our daily experience and that, as such, it is affected by racism. We ask them to brainstorm and discuss some of the race-based obstacles to the success of culturally diverse students. Some of the most salient obstacles that they often mention are hidden agendas, inconsistent expectations, lack of trust in the educational system, history, personal and family experiences, skepticism and apathy, group identity issuing from a shared feeling of powerlessness, the media, and the lack of consistent economic progress despite steady gains in the education of people of color. Thus, the participants begin to understand that educational equity is still far from being achieved. They begin to realize that providing equitable education is a much more complex task than allowing equal access to school buildings. They begin to capture the complexity of the role schools have to play in order to provide equitable education to all students. They recognize that lifting or dismantling these obstacles requires a lot

of work and cooperation on behalf of parents, administrators, teachers, and students themselves.

The participants begin to picture the product of such work to be a school where respect and appreciation for self and others is the norm, regardless of racial or cultural background. It is a school where teachers hold the highest expectations of all students. It is a school where the curriculum reflects the diversity of the nation and empowers the students to seek multiple perspectives on issues as they strive to find their own voice.

Brainstorming Reasons Why Racism Lingers on

In her article on “White racism,” Sleeter (1994) argues that Whites seem to believe that racism disappeared once the Jim Crow laws were eliminated, an ostensibly colorblind legal system was created, and openly saying negative things about groups of color became politically incorrect. This is true of most of the participants. They become confused and act shocked when they are made to discover that racism lingers on.

As we engage the participants in the discussion of some of the reasons why racism still exists in our society, they realize that this is also a complex issue. They begin to understand that while the Civil Rights Movement inspired powerful anti-racism legislation and initiated the equity dialogue, it had, for a good portion of the population, limited effect on individual dispositions. Thus, the participants conclude that the first reason why racism lingers on is that it is an individual disposition. Laws can never legislate what individuals can say within the confine of their homes or how they feel about people of different racial background than their own. The second reason is that society has given racism alienating power by making it a taboo topic that is frightening to broach in inter-racial groups or environments. It becomes apparent that only education can take this power away by lifting the taboo image, encouraging open discussion of racism and providing people with opportunities to analyze and reflect upon their perceptions of other racial groups.

Relating Awareness of Race and Racism to the Drive to Strive for Excellence

How can awareness of race and racism stimulate the drive to strive for excellence? Awareness of race and racism, from the experiences and discussions the participants have shared thus far in the course, relates feeling of apathy, anger, guilt or even revolt. So it is not surprising that when this question is posed, they grow silent and, for a moment, wonder if it is a trick or rhetorical question that they do not have to address. Usually with some guidance, they begin to understand what the question is about.

The above question recognizes the destructive power of racism while using it as a source of motivation to achieve. Most educators ignore the existence and effect of racism in the lives of their students of color. Others use their knowledge of such impact as an excuse to pity their students of color and expect very little out of them. Our discussion helps the participants realize that both approaches are equally unproductive and disempowering for the students. By failing to acknowledge the race-based struggles that impact the students' lives, educators render them invisible. The participants begin to understand, then, that the only constructive alternative is to use their knowledge of the ills of racism to help motivate and inspire students of color to strive to achieve.

Voicing Messages for People of Other Races

At this stage in the discussion, we conduct an activity that gives the participants a powerful opportunity to communicate their feelings toward people of different racial backgrounds than their own. They are asked to reflect upon and respond to the following question: "As a member of a particular race or ethnicity, what do you want members of other races or ethnic groups to do in order for you to prosper in this multicultural world?" Often white participants articulate that they do not want to be presumed racist and that they do not want to be blamed for what their ancestors did. Sometimes they plead with people of color to teach them about their cultures so that they can understand them better. Many participants of color often express resentment over the Whites' presumed unwillingness or inability to understand the plight of people of color and other issues of White dominance. Every participant is given a voice and a forum. Thus, the class witnesses, reverently, what could be their first attempt at inter-racial open and honest communication.

Reflecting on the Learning Experience

The discussion of race and racism is so intense and emotionally engaging that it requires careful processing. To this effect, we ask the participants to respond to the following questions: (1) To what extent has the conversation about race and racism helped you better understand yourself as a racial/ethnic human being and your position in the community, nation, and the world? and (2) Discuss three ways in which you will utilize the knowledge that you have gained through this dialogue to equitably educate students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. This closure activity allows participants to collect their thoughts, synthesize their learning experiences during the process, and construct a vision of how their experiences will impact their teaching practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As we try to assess for the effects that the discussion of race and racism has had on the participants, we look at heightened levels of comfort and openness in discussing multicultural issues in general, and issues of race and racism in particular. We also look for signs of identity clarification that affirm the participants' individual racial membership and renewed appreciation for their membership in a multiracial society. We look for more inclusive dispositions and signs of a clearer sense of individual and collective social responsibilities.

Participants' assertion of their growth is another indicator of positive impact. Most of the time this growth is articulated at the end of the course when they are asked to reflect on their whole multicultural education experience. The following participant's reflection (Fall 2001) is typical:

I have come to base my own thoughts about the troubling differences in our world around the issue of power. In the beginning, I never understood why other races hated other races. My guess was that they were raised that way through history to dislike other people based on race or lifestyle. But 3/4 of the way through the semester, I realized that it's all based on power struggle.

Such a testimonial is very meaningful. Nevertheless, the ultimate measure of effect or impact would be to observe participants'

attitudes and practices in actual classroom settings where they would need to bring to bear all they have learned in order to successfully educate students from different cultural backgrounds. This is our challenge, and it inspires the following recommendations.

First, multicultural education must become an integral part of the teacher preparation experience instead of just one isolated course. As such it would permeate all of our teacher candidates' academic discussions, their methods classes, practica, and student teaching experiences. Second, follow-up programs must be designed with data collection and feedback capabilities in order to examine the impact that such a course has on the participants' long-term attitudes and classroom practices. Finally, it would be naive to assume that a one-time course would be sufficient to change the participants' dispositions and practices for good without any refreshers throughout their career. Therefore, sustained professional development opportunities must be afforded to all educators in order to keep them actively involved in the dialogue about race and racism and relevant effective instructional practices in the increasingly culturally diverse classrooms.

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