

# Sustaining Ourselves under Stressful Times: Strategies To Assist Multicultural Educators

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Resistance that educators face in teaching multicultural education courses, particularly from preservice teachers, is well documented (Carpenter, 2000; Cochran-Smith 2004; Cruz-Janzen & Taylor, 2004; Horton & Scott, 2004; McGowan, 2000, O'Donnell, 1998; Valerio, 2001.). Much of the literature around resistance tends to focus on strategies that multicultural educators can employ in overcoming preservice teacher resistance (Young & Tran, 2001).

However, preservice teacher resistance is not the only kind of resistance to multicultural education. Less well documented is the resistance to multicultural education from fellow educators who sometimes exhibit the same kinds of resistance as preservice teachers (Ahlkvist, Spitzform, Jones & Reynolds, 2005; Gosh & Tarrow, 1993). While there is little literature concerning teacher/faculty resistance to multicultural education, even more sparse is any literature concerned with *the effects* of such resistance on multicultural educators.

The small body of literature in this area, more often than not, has focused on multicultural educators of color and the resistance they face in teaching such topics and the strategies they used to counter such resistance (Boutte 1999; McGowan 1996 & 2000; Vervelde 2003). Rarely has there been any discussion on how multi-

cultural educators cope and sustain themselves in the face of continual resistance. In fact, there is virtually no literature on *how* multicultural educators address these effects and the *strategies* they employ to sustain themselves on a daily basis.

The purpose of this article to address this void in the field by providing a theoretical framework of the ways in which multicultural educators might address such resistance so as to preserve themselves and keep from suffering some of the negative effects of continual resistance, such as despair, hopelessness, and burnout.

## Rationale/Motivation behind the Creation of the Framework

The development of this framework occurred over a period of three years when the authors, two women of color teaching in a predominantly White rural northern California teacher preparation program, were hired to address multiculturalism and diversity which was lacking in the program. We soon came to the realization that a number of stakeholders, not only students but also fellow faculty and administrators, thought that the *idea* of multiculturalism and multicultural education was more appealing than the actual practice of it.

This discomfort from various stakeholders manifested itself in the forms of passive resistance on one hand (e.g., not wanting to address or engage on multicultural education topics at all) to outright hostility on the other (e.g., denouncing various multicultural education concepts). As a result of these reactions, we were forced to develop strategies to help us continue to be effective and healthy educators.

As we struggled to figure out strategies and any means to handle the effects of such resistance (i.e., frustration, anger, sadness, etc.) we began to systematically identify dimensions of our personal and professional lives that were impacted by the resistance we encountered. Specifically, we identified five aspects of our lives that we felt were most directly impacted by resistance to our work. They were the intellectual, emotional, physical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of ourselves.

## Methodology and Overview of the Framework of Sustainment

The development of the framework evolved as we encountered various incidents of resistance and collected data in the form of personal journal entries, notes from conversations and meetings, minutes from meetings, and other documents. It was only after months of reflection that the framework assumed its present form. During the first year, there was no framework because we realized that we were individually addressing each instance of resistance as a unique event seemingly unrelated to any other events of resistance. It was only over time were we able to detect patterns.

For example, fairly early on (in the first year) it was clear that one of the most pervasive and immediate types of resistance we encountered was in the intellectual realm when the credibility of the content we were teaching was questioned. Once we recognized this pattern, we came up with systematic ways to address this intellectual challenge.

Another area in which the resistance was extremely challenging was the emotional arena. While we could intellectually rationalize the resistance we encountered

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towards the various multicultural issues, such as sexual orientation, it was much more difficult to deal with the *feelings* of anger, hurt, and frustration associated with addressing these issues. The emotional energy expended on handling conflicts in the classroom, hostility, and passive resistance was at times almost overwhelming, and we had to come up with concrete psychological strategies to ensure we did not lose hope and simply give up in despair.

Another area of our lives that was showing signs of stress during this time was our physical health. We both realized early on that being constantly challenged intellectually and emotionally did have a physical toll on our health. In short, we were more vulnerable to being sick, suffering from fatigue and lacking vitality precisely because our positive energy was being diverted to addressing the intellectual and emotional resistance we encountered. When we realized what was happening, we came up with some very specific and personal strategies to make sure that we maintained our physical health, so we could continue working.

While it was incredibly helpful to specifically identify the kinds of resistance (i.e., intellectual, emotional, and physical) we encountered so we could address each type of resistance with specific strategies, sometimes we still felt we needed something more. It was at these moments we turned to the spiritual dimension of our lives. This dimension provided a rather unique lens through which to examine our experiences. For one of the authors, the spiritual dimension was the most significant and critical one in enabling her to affirm *why* she continued to be engaged in such demanding work.

Finally, we considered the ethical dimensions of our work. Unlike the other above-mentioned dimensions, we found the ethical dimensions of who we are as educators raised more questions than provided answers. However, it was the process of deliberating the ethical aspects of the various incidents of resistance we experienced that helped reaffirm our work and purpose.

In providing this brief overview of the framework we want to stress a few points. First, these dimensions are perhaps best visually seen as interconnected rings, much like the symbolic Olympic rings. Or, as some people recommended, as slices of a pie. Others saw the dimensions as separate boxes all leading to one bigger box of overall health. The point is that the framework can take any form, but what matters is that it works for the individual who is using it.

Secondly, these dimensions are not necessarily equal in significance or pres-

ence to one another. In other words, for one of the authors, the spiritual dimension was the most prominent dimension in her overall health for awhile, and for the other author it was the physical dimension. The point is that these dimensions are somewhat fluid. At different times, different dimensions will offer the answers sought at just the right time and will be prominent in one's exploration of how to address and overcome resistance. At other times, other dimensions will be foregrounded. To this end, even though the dimensions will be individually discussed in a linear fashion, we are in no way implying that there is a hierarchy of importance.

Finally, by using ourselves as models, we provide a case example to concretely illustrate how a particular incidence of resistance seemed to speak to a specific dimension of our health; then we discuss how we addressed the resistance using strategies and resources that enabled us to directly draw on this dimension and work through the resistance. This framework is based on the unique experiences of two multicultural educators and is offered as a strategy to current educators and future educators alike to help them proactively think about how they will handle resistance they potentially or are currently encountering.

### Expressions of Resistance

While the purpose of this article is not to discuss resistance per se, it is necessary to briefly identify the common types of resistance that have been discussed among multicultural educators because sometimes one type of resistance falls in the province of one of the dimensions we discuss and thus requires a specific set of strategies to be addressed.

Dittmar (1999) and Tatum (1994) have documented facing resistance and outright hostility when addressing multicultural issues in teacher education. Griffin (1997) divides resistance into four types: anger, immobilization, distancing and, conversion. While anger tends to be the kind of resistance that is most uncomfortable for educators, all four of these types of resistance contribute to the overall feelings of stress and disequilibrium which we attempt to provide strategies for preventing.

### The Intellectual Dimension

*The situation: Having completed her doctoral work in anti-racist, multicultural education, one of the authors accepted a position at an institution seeking a faculty member with expertise in the area of multicultural education. She accepted the posi-*

*tion expecting to continue the work she had been doing over the last several years. Once her new role of teacher educator began, it became quite clear that not only were many of the students she worked with completely skeptical of and resistant to multicultural education, but also most faculty and administrators as well. This assistant professor was faced with the reality that her new colleagues were much more prone to "talking the talk" than "walking the talk" and she found herself constantly having to explain, defend and justify multicultural teacher education to a variety of stakeholders.*

This scenario was not all that unusual as multicultural educators around the country face similar challenges when trying to teach about issues that challenge students' preconceived notions of diversity. The surprising element was the resistance on the part of faculty and administration to understanding the need for students to engage in addressing difficult and challenging multicultural topics. As students complained, some faculty members started to question the need for such a course. In essence the very existence of multicultural education was being questioned.

Naturally, in an attempt to defend the validity of multicultural education as a body of knowledge and justify the need for future teachers to study it, she employed an intellectual response. She realized it was important to speak the language of the context—in this case the academy. Students, faculty, and administration would only ever be convinced of the legitimacy of multicultural education if it could be presented in terms they knew: theory, statistics, current literature, and research results.

With regards to the above mentioned scenario, the author realized that the intellectual dimension was the most tangible way to sustain herself as a multicultural educator. Thus, the strategies she employed in this realm were to strengthen her theoretical framework by remaining current in the literature and learning ways to use this intellectual information in such a form that was not threatening or radical to her colleagues or students.

More specifically, when confronted with resistance, she would reach into her intellectual side to ask the question *what does the literature say about this?* By doing so, she found that her ideas were affirmed because she could use state law, current research, and testimonies as intellectual rationalizations for the topics being addressed.

A second intellectual response to the situation above was to find allies who shared the same intellectual philosophy concerning multicultural education and

diversity. In this case, it was the authors of this article supporting one another. Without the support of a colleague to discuss multicultural issues, and the resistance that comes with those issues, there is a danger of being worn down and overwhelmed by the resistance.

Intellectual allies were another source of critical information that could be used in countering the resistance. They can play the role of “devil’s advocate,” or in this case “resister to multicultural education,” and provide sound counsel on how to handle various situations. Just as importantly, intellectual allies were those individuals who were willing to publicly support multicultural education and faculty who taught such courses.

All of these elements of the intellectual dimension of sustaining ourselves were deeply interconnected with the emotional dimensions as well. As our intellect supported us in *what* kind of work we did (i.e., the content), our emotions often determined *how* we did the work (i.e., the teaching approaches and strategies).

### **The Emotional Dimension**

*The situation: After viewing the film “Color of Fear” a class of preservice teachers was asked to write down their immediate reactions on an index card. As the instructor read through the cards she came across one that said “If White culture is the dominant culture then it is meant to be that way, for it has been for centuries. If non-White people have a problem with that get off your butts and do something about it. Change the system, SHOW ME YOU ARE BETTER THAN ME!” Although not completely surprised by this comment, this incident, combined with recent local hate crimes and a lack of support for multicultural education in her college, put this instructor in an emotionally drained state.*

We defined the emotional dimension of the framework as the feelings or the affective responses we had to the work we did as multicultural educators. The emotional output that one engaged in during the course of teaching a multicultural education course was unlike that of many other disciplines. As we hear about the daily injustices that not only occurred in larger society but also in schools, it was easy to feel emotionally taxed.

However, this situation, combined with the resistance from our students and colleagues to either not acknowledge and/or not be willing to address such issues made a difficult situation even more challenging and we often feel “burned out” or completely emotionally exhausted.

One of the ways we have attempted to sustain ourselves emotionally was to recognize when we were reacting emotionally versus when we were reacting intellectually. We noticed that when students made comments, such as the one above, our immediate reactions were emotional ones (i.e., anger, frustration, etc.). The author in this scenario engaged in a strategy that focused on reacting with empathy rather than anger or disgust at such beliefs. Bell hooks referred to this as engaged Buddhism. In other words, the work of multicultural educators is built on loving kindness and it is this loving kindness that can prevail in times of deep emotional crisis.

A second strategy was to train oneself to never react immediately to something that triggered a negative reaction. We found that participating in a cool-down period enabled us to respond to faculty and student comments in a purposeful and controlled manner and prevented further escalation of an already emotionally trying situation. By spending some time thinking about why the resistance occurred, we could be more rational and less emotional when actually responding to an individual.

Finally, it was crucial for our emotional well-being to celebrate the small victories rather than becoming overwhelmed by the big picture or the constant state of inequity around the world and in many schools. When a student reached an epiphany about diverse perspectives or an administrator seemed to better understand why it is we feel so strongly about the work we do, such was a small victory to be applauded and it raised our spirits immeasurably.

### **The Physical Dimension**

*The situation: Four young males of large stature were becoming increasingly volatile during a conversation about gay and lesbian issues in education. As the discussion proceeded, they became physically agitated: they were red in the face, postured defensively, raised their voices, and gestured aggressively. At the height of the outburst, one of the males yells, “What do those fags expect parading around the Castro [the location of an annual gay pride parade in San Francisco]” The instructor immediately addressed the language that was used but was cut off and interrupted by the other three males. At this point she noticed that her heart was racing, she was breathing heavily, perspiring, and physically distancing herself from them.*

We define the physical dimension as the “bodily” realm of the work we do as multicultural educators. For the purposes of this article, we define “bodily” as liter-

ally our physicality. In this situation, the author was caught off guard by the violent reactions of the students, precisely because they were expressions of physical resistance rather than the more traditional emotional and intellectual forms of resistance we were accustomed to experiencing. This was not a situation one would expect in a classroom setting, particularly in a university. An immediate strategy the author employed in this “fight or flight” situation was to defuse the tension by switching topics.

While changing the topic achieved the immediate effect of defusing a potentially volatile physically violent reaction, it was clear the issue could not end on this note. In the days before the next class meeting the instructor agonized over her next course of action and felt physically ill (i.e., stomach cramps) at the thought of having to face the same students in class. She had trouble sleeping and suffered physical signs of stress.

In reflecting on the class, the instructor wondered if any of the students themselves were also suffering physical signs of stress due to disruptive nature of the previous class meeting. So the instructor began the subsequent class by asking students to respond in writing to the situation that had taken place the week before. In reading the responses, it became clear that many of the students, mostly the females, felt physically intimidated to come to class.

To handle such situations, we developed a set of strategies to address the physical nature of this aspect of our work. When facilitating tense classroom situations, we made a point of explicitly monitoring and being aware of our own and our students’ physical reactions to the situation.

For example, we monitored our breathing (i.e., took a few deep breaths), monitored our facial expressions, and spoke in a calm and quiet voice. However, we also held on to the role of teacher-leader by staying on our feet and moving about the room when necessary. With respect to our students, we became much more adept at reading body language and taking short breaks if students exhibited signs of physical stress.

Finally, at the beginning of new classes, we discussed with students this scenario and how it was (1) inappropriate behavior, (2) what they should do if they feel themselves being physically stressed out, and (3) that to some degree such physical stress will likely happen in reaction to some topics discussed over the course of the semester.

Along with these in-class strategies, we also recognized the importance of stress-reducing practices to maintain our own physical health in order to avoid illness.

For example, both of us began practicing yoga, which conferred a number of benefits, such as stress-reduction, breathing techniques, and an overall sense of well being. Additionally, one of the authors engaged in more physically active and intensive activities, such as horseback riding.

Multicultural educators must engage in some physical activity which provides an outlet for the intensity and stress they experience. Although the physical dimension of teaching was not commonly considered, we found that it had a great impact on our overall well-being as well as our teaching both in and out of the classroom.

### **The Spiritual Dimension**

*The situation: After several years of teaching the department's multicultural education course, one of the authors noticed a gradual but definite change in attitude among preservice teachers. There was clearly less tolerance for diversity, let alone acceptance, and more and more students were emboldened to immediately denounce the concept of multicultural education from the beginning. Whereas, several years earlier, students were just questioning its legitimacy. Perhaps most disturbing, the usual responses to such challenges were failing. Intellectual responses grounded in statistical, empirical, and other data were ignored by unwilling intellects. Affective approaches highlighting personal stories of individuals who had experienced a life different from the status quo fell on deaf ears. Even ethical explorations which asked students to examine for themselves current injustices (let alone past injustices) could not penetrate their hearts. It was at this point that one of the authors realized she was on the brink of despair and turned to the spiritual dimension of her life to look for answers that could address this professional crisis.*

The spiritual dimension was perhaps the most elusive and difficult to articulate of all the dimensions of the framework we have discussed so far. To begin with, the "spiritual" aspect of education is a topic infrequently discussed (Noddings 1992). While a universal definition of the spiritual dimension of teaching would be impossible to articulate, Parker Palmer, who has written extensively on this subject, offers a definition of spirituality in the context of teaching which is helpful. He defines spirituality as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" (Palmer, 2003, p.377). It is this definition that we use as a departure point for exploration of the spiritual dimension of teaching.

In addition to being difficult to define, it is also difficult to articulate exactly how the spiritual dimension of education functioned in the lives of educators because this was often a very personal endeavor. Some strategies that worked for one of the authors in exploring this aspect of her professional life included three main activities: (1) meditation, (2) journaling, and (3) identifying role models and mentors (not necessarily in education) who drew on their spirituality to sustain them.

In terms of meditation, the author explored this activity by learning as much as possible about it (i.e., reading and instruction) and incorporating it into her daily life. In terms of journaling, the author wrote daily to engage in consistent and deeper self-reflection about her experiences. It provided a safe place to explore any ideas. Finally, the author sought role models and mentors who engaged their spiritual side as a source of inspiration and instruction for the work they did. For example, she read about ordinary individuals who engaged in activist causes, such as anti-racist work, and learned how spirituality sustained them (Thompson, 2001).

For one of the authors, the above mentioned strategies were extremely beneficial precisely because strategies in the other dimensions were failing her. By utilizing non-educational sources of guidance, such as spiritual texts, (Tolle, 2005), Buddhist and Taoist works, and other alternative information sources, she was able to view her work as a multicultural educator in unique, non-traditional, non-academic ways that helped her reaffirm her commitment to multicultural education.

### **The Ethical Dimension**

*The situation: A student was seeking admission into a teacher preparation program. The candidate was not atypical from many of her peers: she was from a small town and had little experience working and interacting with individuals culturally different from herself (i.e., racially, religiously, linguistically, politically, etc.). She was not a particularly strong student academically but expressed a sincere desire to be a teacher. Over the course of the semester in a multicultural education course, the student's comments during class discussions, in various papers, and in journal reflections revealed some disturbing features: racism and homophobia. When the candidate was asked to examine the beliefs and values that undergirded these apparent tendencies, she became a bit withdrawn and shut down in class. In effect, she refused to examine her belief system and its possible impact on the children she would be teaching. The faculty*

*denied her admission to the program, using the same criteria used for all other candidates. However, due to parental pressure, the denial of admission reached the highest administrative levels of the University, who overturned the faculty's decision despite protests from some of the faculty.*

Of all the scenarios discussed thus far, the above-mentioned one was perhaps the most challenging to us as multicultural educators because the action that should have been taken seemed so clearly unequivocal—the student should not have been admitted. However, as the vignette clearly illustrated, not all the parties who had the power to take action were in agreement.

In this very complex situation there are two salient ethical dilemmas. When, if at all, is it ethical to deny a candidate admission to a teacher preparation program based on his/her dispositions? How do multicultural educators maintain their ethical integrity (i.e., commitment to social equity and justice) in the face of institutional pressure asking them to do otherwise? We will not discuss the first dilemma (though it is extremely significant) because it is beyond the scope of this article and because it does not directly pertain to the issue of sustainment of multicultural educators.

So, what strategies might multicultural educators/faculty who find themselves in a similar situation do to maintain their own sense of ethical integrity under seemingly impossible circumstances? Our first strategy was to garner all the professional and institutional codes of ethics we could find that demonstrated that there are credible professional bodies that do consider the ethical dispositions of future teachers to be a critical criterion for admission.

In our case, we had the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers' "Codes of Ethics." We also had the California Standards of Teacher Practice and our own Department's mission statement concerning democratic education. In short, there was no lack of ethical codes of conduct to support our decision not to admit the candidate in this regard.

We quickly learned that ethical codes or frameworks were just that. They were not binding documents; they were not legal mandates. In essence, they held no weight. They were regarded as "helpful guides" but if necessary could be ignored when they interfered with a desired administrative decision.

What we realized in hindsight was that ethical codes, and even our own Department's mission, meant nothing if the faculty as a group was not clear about the values they held regarding critical multicultural issues. The faculty initially

voted to not admit the candidate, it only took some external pressure for individual faculty members to cave and submit to the administration's overturning of the decision. While some faculty stuck to their original vote, others were willing to compromise and/or abandon ethical principles under duress.

It was in hindsight that we realized there should have been ongoing and sustained discussion about cases such as this one, where faculty were given the time and space as a group to converse and clarify the multicultural and social justice values they believed future teachers should possess. Additionally, use of a systematic ethical framework to shape discussions (Strike & Soltis, 1998) would have also helped individual faculty members clarify their positions on various issues and allow the faculty as a group to reach consensus, not mere agreement of the majority, on key issues.

It was unlikely in this particular case that even if the faculty had been unequivocal, clear, and strong in their reasons for non-admission, that the outcome would have been different. The administrative pressure at the highest institutional levels was just too strong. At the very least, however, the case would have generated much needed discussion and possible future action to prevent another similar event from occurring.

So, what are multicultural educators to do when they want to "walk the talk" and maintain their ethical commitment to social justice and equity but in the end are forced to compromise such principles due to political and legal power? There seemed to be only two viable choices: Accept the decision and continue to do the work we were doing, or resign. We both chose to resign from the institution. One of us resigned immediately and the second one a year later.

Many may have viewed this situation as "giving up." Others pointed out that if change agents keep leaving then change will never occur. But as we have hopefully and convincingly demonstrated throughout this article, multicultural educators must also be very protective about sustaining themselves. In this particular context, sustainment meant knowing that we had done all that was professionally possible to maintain our ethical integrity in terms of multicultural issues. Our ethical response as multicultural educators was to recognize the point at which we had effected as much change as possible at that particular institution at that particular time.

Most importantly, when we realized it would be impossible to maintain any sort

of individual ethical integrity concerning our beliefs about multicultural education and social justice, we realized we had to separate ourselves from that particular institution. In hindsight we both felt we made the correct decision because it reinforced our commitment and beliefs in multicultural education and allowed us to sustain ourselves not only ethically but also in the other dimensions we have described in this article, and thereby continue our work elsewhere.

## Conclusion

As stated earlier, this framework can take many forms and include different dimensions, depending on the individual. In presenting this framework at a recent National Association for Multicultural Education annual conference, one participant recommended that we consider the "political" dimension in future research. The framework suggested here is the one that fit our individual needs at the time and should be altered as necessary.

While some of the dimensions for either of us might have taken on different levels of significance at different times, we both felt that these five dimensions were at work at some level for both of us and strategies of how to take care of each of these dimensions of our teaching lives were necessary to achieving balance and thus overall "good health" in dealing with the resistance we encountered.

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