

Transactions, Transformation, and Transcendence

Multicultural Service-Learning Experience of Preservice Teachers

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Introduction

Using U.S. Census Bureau data from 2000, Cochran-Smith (2004) reported that it was “estimated that people of color made up 28% of the nation’s population in 2000, and predicted that they would make up 38% in 2025, and 47% in 2050” (p. vii). When one examines only the school-age population (i.e., K-12 school population), the demographic imperative is even more dramatic. Hodgkinson (2002) notes that student enrollments are becoming increasingly racially diverse at about 40% which is a rough estimate. Quite obviously, students of color represent a significant if not majority population in many of the nation’s public schools.

However, the nation’s teaching force does not reflect the same proportional racial and ethnic diversity that is found in student populations. The latest data suggests that the nation’s teaching force is becoming increasingly White (86%) and that teachers of color are actually declining but estimated to be at about (14%) (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004). Additionally, most White teachers are female, middle-class, and monolingual (Cruz-Janzen & Taylor, 2000; Howard, 1999) while many students of color bring a different cultural biography into the class: their own cultural and ethnic traditions, a non-middle class orientation (i.e., possibly one of poverty), and a language other than English (i.e., sometimes two or three languages other than English).

As a result, these extremely different cultural frames of reference make it difficult, if not impossible, for such teachers who are not multiculturally literate to teach and work effectively with minority students. More importantly, by not having the proper knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach in culturally responsive

ways and act as cultural brokers between the mainstream educational institutions and home cultures of their students, these teachers might be denying their students significant educational opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous researchers (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto 1996; Sleeter, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) have stressed the critical need for preservice teachers, especially White middle-class teachers, to be educated in strategies and philosophies that are culturally responsive to an increasingly diverse K-12 student population. To this end, Geneva Gay’s (2000) framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, which includes caring, communication, curriculum and instruction, informed this study. Each of these topics was addressed through the preservice teachers’ service-learning experiences of tutoring an English Language Learner (ELL) student.

In addition to culturally responsive pedagogy, this study also drew on the body of research known as White identity formation (Helms, 1990; Tatum 1997). Essentially, White identity formation theories rest on the assumption that many individuals who self identify themselves as White do not see themselves in racial terms. With respect to diversity or multicultural education, the focus is about “others” and does not take into account their own racial/ethnic identity.

Therefore, it would seem that if the majority of teachers (over 80%) are White, then having teachers consider and understand their own racial identity development, particularly in a multicultural context, would be necessary before trying to understand individuals different from themselves. I used Tatum’s model of Whiteness to help preservice teachers understand and make sense of the feelings and thoughts they were experiencing

through their cultural interactions with the students they are tutoring. Tatum’s model has four levels: (1) the actively racist White (e.g., a White supremacist); (2) the uninformed White, an individual who does acknowledge their Whiteness and/or denies the idea of White privilege; (3) the guilty White, an individual who is aware of racism and feels shame for his/her Whiteness and/or powerlessness to do anything to counteract racism; and (4) the White ally, an individual who proactively combats racism.

While Tatum and Helm’s work were invaluable for the preservice teachers’ understanding of themselves as cultural beings, a necessary pre-requisite for interacting in a culturally diverse setting, these frameworks focused mainly on the identity of the individual, in this case the preservice teacher. The theoretical framework in this study attempts to characterize the relationships between the preservice teachers and their culturally diverse students. Currently, there are no such frameworks in the multicultural education literature.

Methodology

It seems logical to assume that a course intended to educate preservice teachers about cultural diversity, such as the one used in this pilot study, would only enhance their cultural literacy. There is research to indicate that this is not always the case. Often multicultural education courses without a field component, the most common and often only means by which teacher candidates address diversity issues, actually have very little to any positive impact on the attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of preservice teachers about multiculturalism (Locke 2005).

However, there is some research to suggest that a field component, such as a service-learning experience, that places preservice teachers in a culturally diverse setting can be successful in this respect

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(Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O'Grady, 2001). It was upon this premise that service-learning was the method of choice in providing the preservice teachers with a culturally diverse experience.

The Service-Learning Project

The service-learning project required each preservice candidate to tutor a school-identified ELL student 2-4 hours per week for 13-14 weeks. The overwhelming majority of K-12 ELL students spoke Spanish as their first language (90%) while the remainder spoke Hmong (10%). At the end of each week, the preservice teachers then submitted a journal response of 2-3 pages reflecting on the issue that they noticed while tutoring. A total of twelve journals were submitted of which half had prompts provided by the instructor.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 106 preservice teachers: 28 males and 88 females. There were 91 elementary candidates and 15 middle and secondary candidates. Their ages ranged from 19 to 55 years of age with the vast majority (86%) falling between 19-23 years of age.

The participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program in a medium-sized university in a rural area of the northwestern U.S. Participants were distributed in one of four sections of a semester-long required multicultural education course taught by the same instructor, and each section had between 25-30 students. In terms of race and class, the majority of participants self-identified as European American (n=86).

However, there were 10 individuals of Latino/a descent, one Hmong individual, two African American individuals, and five biracial or other race/ethnicities. In terms of SES, the majority of participants (87%) self identified as middle class. Linguistically, the majority of participants (n=88) spoke English as their first language. The overwhelming majority of K-12 second language students (the tutees) spoke Spanish as their first language (90%) while the remainder spoke Hmong (10%).

Data Analysis

Content analysis was the methodology employed in analyzing the journal entries of the preservice teachers who served as tutors. Once all the journals from all the sections were collected, they were read holistically multiple times to identify themes that were

present. Reoccurring emerging themes were marked and coded manually.

Results and Discussion

As the journals were coded, three dominant themes immediately emerged, which all centered on the sort of relationship that preservice teachers had with their tutees. I labeled the relationships as "transactional," "transformational," and "transcendent." Of the 105 sets of journals analyzed, 31 were labeled transactional, 67 were labeled transformational, and 17 were labeled transcendent. In this section of the article, I will highlight the characteristics of each relationship and use journal entries that illustrate each theme.

Transactional Relationships

Preservice teachers whose journal entries were categorized as "transactional" described relationships with their tutees that could be best described as impersonal; they displayed the following characteristics:

- ◆ Fear of working with individuals culturally different from themselves;
- ◆ Viewing the tutor-tutee relationship impersonally and simply as a professional, business-like interaction rather than a teacher-student relationship;
- ◆ Preoccupied almost exclusively with what they (i.e., the tutors) bring to the tutoring relationship and their feelings about it; little to nothing is written about the tutees' feelings.

The above-mentioned characteristics seem out of place for preservice teachers, who generally enjoy working with children. However, analysis of journals of tutors considered "transactional" often revealed a common theme of fear concerning working with non-native speakers of English and/or someone culturally different than themselves. While it is often expected that a beginning teacher will have some fears concerning teaching, it was clear among many transactional tutors that their apprehension was not due to the issue of teaching alone as the following journal entry below illustrates:

When I was given my service-learning site, I started tutoring Hmong students who just started learning English in the past several years. Slowly, I realized that I should not dread aiding these students, but I should take it all in and be grateful that I have this opportunity to get to know them. *(European American female, age 20)*

This preservice teacher did overcome her fear to some extent as she became better acquainted with her tutee. However, her relationship with her tutee was never truly a comfortable one. Other transactional tutors did not mention "dread" or "fear" explicitly with regard to their relationships with their tutees. However, their relationships were less than ideal in other ways.

Many transactional tutors were never able to truly establish a comfortable working relationship with their tutees. Instead, they focused exclusively on their role as a tutor and their tutee's role solely as student. As a result, the tutor-tutee relationship was often impersonal and more resembled a business transaction rather than teacher-student relationship. In the journal entry below, the deleterious results of not cultivating a personal relationship with a tutee are obvious.

Today was my last day at Eastman. I think I was more depressed than Jenny, my ELL student, about the situation. I helped Jenny with the same worksheets that I normally do. Then when it was time for her to leave, I told her that today was my last day. She got up and said, "Bye" and hurried off to class! I wasn't expecting an emotional goodbye, but I imagined she would want to know why I wasn't coming back. No, she acted completely normal. May be she had this reaction to me because she was mad at me. Here's why she would be mad at me. She didn't get very far on her worksheets today . . . because she wanted to finish the worksheet as quickly as possible. But I wouldn't let her and as a result, she didn't finish the worksheet when it was time for her to go. I wonder if this is why our goodbye wasn't an emotional one. Oh well, life goes on. *(European American female, age 19)*

Because the preservice teacher was so concerned about herself and her feelings, she never entertained any ideas of why Jenny acted the way she did *beyond* academic possibilities. Jenny might have been frustrated by being asked to perform a task that she couldn't do. Jenny might have been bored, particularly since worksheets seem to be a "normal" activity. Because the tutor had not established a personal relationship with Jenny, it was not surprising Jenny was unemotional about the ending of her tutoring sessions.

Unlike the above-mentioned preservice teachers who were "transactional" tutors because they failed to connect with their tutees personally, "transformational" tutors had radically different relationships with their tutees.

Transformational Relationships

“Transformational” tutors exemplified typical “teacher-student” relationships with their tutees, and there were two distinguishing characteristics that characterized them as a group:

- ◆ Transformational tutors viewed their tutees first and foremost as individuals and were genuinely interested in them as people;
- ◆ Transformational tutors had an insatiable curiosity about their tutees’ cultural backgrounds.

Looking back on this mentoring experience. . . I found that my job changed as time went along. After our first couple of assignments, I realized that his problems were more with [comprehension] not with fluency. In [subsequent] assignments, I found myself talking more with him and finding words and phrases that he did not understand, focusing more on the colloquial language that poses problems for him in everyday conversations. Once we began this type of conversation, the information started to flow, and I would sit back and listen to this young man tell stories of who he was and what he wanted to become.

Now that the sessions have come to an end, I don’t think I improved any specific skill or fixed a reoccurring problem, but what I did was build this young man’s confidence. I gave him American ears that were interested in what he had to say, someone who would listen to his family’s journey to California, how he felt, and what he wants to do in the future. In addition to this I was able to correct his English and provide him answers to the questions he may never get to ask during the course of a conversation with a native English speaker. . .

This was a great learning experience for me not just in [working] with a student, but to get a first-hand account of what it is to be Hmong in America. (*European American male, age 25*)

By seeing his tutee as an individual first and a student second, the teaching of academic skills not only seemed to “flow” naturally but also made the experience mutually satisfying and relevant for both the tutor and tutee on other levels (e.g., personal). Additionally, viewing their tutees as more than students enabled the preservice teachers to experience the unique position of being a “learner-teacher.” Most transformational tutors noted this role reversal at least once in their journals.

- ◆ Transformational tutors recognize

that at times the teacher-student roles are reversed and their tutees are sometimes their teachers.

Erik, himself, taught me a lot. I have [so much] respect for him. He is eleven years old and the oldest of three children. He has so much responsibility in his house. Not only does he care for his two younger siblings, he is a teacher to his parents, who don’t know much English, so Erik is used as the translator. He helps them with everyday activities. I was amazed with his ability to switch back and forth between English and Spanish. . . I feel my personal growth has reached a higher level. I really do not have much knowledge of other cultures, and I didn’t really start becoming educated about other cultures until I came to college. While tutoring I had the opportunity to actually experience another culture. This was so interesting and amazing to me. Because I tutored Erik at his house, I got to see the interaction between [his] family members. It was very different from my own family and interesting. I am fortunate to have seen it. . . (*European American female, age 20*)

The preservice teacher went beyond simply learning *about* another culture. Because of her interaction with her tutee, she was provided cultural insights into the lives of others that were authentic and substantially richer than any academic experience could provide.

Not surprisingly, transformational tutors often commented on the challenges and struggles that their tutees experienced in learning English. Unlike their transactional peers, however, transformational tutors empathized with the hardships their tutees had to endure, and they often made a concerted effort to bridge the language gap by either letting their tutees use their L1 in the process of learning English and/or trying to use what little knowledge they had about their tutee’s home language; this was another distinguishing characteristic about them as a group.

- ◆ Transformational tutors are able to empathize with and understand the challenges that culturally diverse students encounter, particularly with respect to learning English.

The biggest frustration for me has been the inability to speak the primary language of the [two ESL] children I work with. It would seem more equitable and manageable if in expecting them to learn my primary language [English] that I could assist them in learning theirs. One of my regrets of the past is that I did not effectively learn a second language when I was much younger, when it probably

would not have been such a struggle. I have recently taken a couple of semesters of Spanish and that was some of my most difficult course work. . . I now appreciate, more than ever, the difficulties that confront ELL students and their families. (*European American male, age 43*)

The above-mentioned comments from the tutor are interesting on two levels. First, the issue of equity is raised in the context of learning English, and secondly, he alludes to accountability on the part of the teachers in gently suggesting they have knowledge of their students’ home languages. Another preservice teacher who was particularly taken with the entire language issue throughout the semester also alluded to equity issues in the education of ELLs.

I have found that although I am helping her, she is also helping me. Since she has such limited use of English I have been saying certain directions in Spanish and she has been helping me when I don’t know a word. This the main way that we overcome challenges. Also, I am incorporating visuals, so that she can associate a word with what it means, say the word in English, spell it in Spanish, and have them repeat the word in English. I know that ELL [students] experience many problems learning a new language, and I am seeing such perseverance and determination [in my tutee] in learning English that I feel guilty that I, too, didn’t have that same determination when I was learning Spanish. . .

This [event] gave me a really good understanding about the frustrations that a second language learner encounters, and I could only imagine how hard it would be to be forced to sit in a classroom every day without really understanding what the teacher was saying. This example just proved the importance of having either bilingual teachers or aids work with ELL students to help them understand what is being presented in the class. (*European American female, age 21*)

These last two journal entries are significant in that they raise issues of equity and social justice. In fact, it was this more complete and explicit understanding of the socio-political and institutional structures and power that impacted ELLs, their families, and culturally diverse individuals that separated transformational tutors from transcendent tutors, the third category of tutors.

The Theme of Transcendence

Transcendent tutors were the smallest category of all the tutors, and in general had all the characteristics of their trans-

formational peers but often more explicitly and deeply.

- ◆ Transcendent tutors acknowledged significant personal growth in personal ideas, beliefs, and biases with respect to diversity.

- ◆ Transcendent tutors recognize how institutional and social structures impact English learners and minority students in potentially negative ways.

For example, while transformational tutors often had their eyes opened to the cultural lives of their students, transcendent tutors revealed deeper understandings about diversity and revelations about biases and stereotypes they might have had. The journal entry below illustrates this situation.

The class presentations have impacted me and provided additional understanding in helping me examine my personal perspectives while working with my ELL student. For example, on the topic of racism and prejudice, I realize that my student has endured both and it hurts to hear his stories of being teased and taunted because of his skin color. He has also experienced hate because he is an ELL student. Some people tell him to go back where he came from.

I can only imagine the impact these statements have had on him and will continue having on him. I try to help by lifting his spirits back and [letting] him know that he is worthy of an education . . . [Through class] I now know how to intervene quickly and not allow those comments in my classroom. *(European American female, age 21)*

Another characteristic that distinguished transcendent tutors from their transactional and transformational peers and was a hallmark characteristic of this group was the recognition of their role as an educator as change agent. They recognized and accepted the challenge to engage in social action on behalf of their tutees and recognized that as future teachers they would also have to assume this responsibility.

- ◆ Through their relationships with their tutees, transcendent tutors view their future roles as teachers as also that of social change agents advocating on behalf of children and their families.

While tutoring, I have noticed that some students are more accepting of differences while some students bring in stereotypes from home and the media into the classroom. A classroom is a place where students need to learn about the differences they or their peers might have and

embrace them. When a teacher hears a student make an inappropriate comment about someone being different, I feel this is a perfect time for the teacher to introduce the idea of acceptance . . . A fact of life is that not all parents are the best role models. Some parents are very racist and they influence their children to also be racist. At what age is it appropriate to openly contradict what a child learns at home? Can I tell them that the racism they have learned at home is wrong and that they should think differently? *(Hispanic male, age 21)*

This preservice teacher clearly saw teaching as more than the delivery of the curriculum to the students. For him the tutoring experience was not just an academic enterprise but also a socio-political event. The questions he raised were difficult and ethically challenging ones for any teacher, let alone a beginning teacher. However, they are precisely the sorts of questions that teachers must consider since they are charged with preparing students to be participatory citizens in a democratic society. At the very least, by simply being an advocate for social justice and disrupting racism, this teacher was challenging the unjust practices that students are exposed to beyond the classroom.

The role of a teacher as a change agent is a complex one, and the following journal entry below highlights yet another facet of this process. This teacher is not merely asking students to potentially question their family beliefs but also institutional practices and power. In short, this future teacher is asking students to not be afraid to claim their own power as autonomous individuals.

In an earlier journal I talked about different ways to [build] a community relationship of learning with my ELL students, where levels of authority were blurred and many voices could be heard. Yet in this process, I find myself fighting ten years of their prior education and a social institution, which sanctifies rote memorization in order to control the masses. . . It's as though our schools prefer ELL students to stay behind so that society does not have to question why democracy is failing. Their education, from my view, seems to lack the critical thinking skills needed to challenge the system that fails them. I am not saying my students are poor achievers or [poor] students; they just lack the opportunity to be seen, heard, and encouraged to embrace their cultural identity through their literacy. Everyone deserves a chance to add their own meanings in the world and thus into their own education . . .

A good example of this is when my students can not figure out the meaning of a

word. . . They usually ask, "What does it mean?" By asking me that question, they consider me the ultimate authority. Not once have my students questioned me. Every time they ask me about meaning, I engage them to figure it out according to their experience with the world; then together we look up the lexical meaning. Yet I wish they were more trusting of themselves and not worried about the "word" and its lexical definition but rather [more able to] integrate their interpretation of the world into the learning of words. *(European American female, age 23)*

This preservice teacher exhibited a very sophisticated understanding of how the larger socio-political context and infrastructure can impact different students' educational experiences in different ways. By trying to engage them in a dialogue about meaning, she is not only trying to get ELL students to literally "have a voice" but also empowering them to have the confidence and to learn how to question authority, in this case their teacher. Such a lesson will be invaluable later on in challenging the status quo.

What Does All This Mean?

This study suggests that it is possible to identify the level of cultural responsiveness of preservice teachers by involving them in an immersion type of experiences in which they interact with culturally different individuals. The results showed that one category, transactional tutors, displayed non-culturally responsive qualities while the two other categories, composing the majority of preservice teachers, transformational and transcendent tutors, displayed culturally responsive qualities. A question that naturally emerges from these results is "What does all this mean?"

The characteristics that distinguish each category of preservice teachers could help teacher educators devise specific strategies to assist preservice teachers in being more culturally responsive. As these results showed, really only one group, the transactional tutors, required critical assistance. Because the relationships were impersonal and business-like mainly due to unwillingness or inability on the part of the tutor to view the tutee as an individual beyond that of a student, the tutor did not have to leave his/her comfort zone in terms of stretching him/herself culturally. As was shown, fear and/or ignorance about culturally different individuals was sometimes the root of this problem.

It would seem that if this framework was used to gauge culturally responsive

preservice teachers, one possible solution to assisting "transactional" individuals would be to directly address any fears and areas of ignorance concerning diversity and provide preservice teachers with specific strategies on how to develop a rapport with their tutees. Additionally, knowing to what extent to which preservice teachers have interacted and/or are comfortable with culturally diverse individuals *before* their immersion experience might help teacher educators assist preservice teachers more effectively in working with culturally diverse students.

The largest category of tutors, transformational tutors, displayed culturally responsive dispositions and practices with their students. They had personal and authentic relationships with their tutees and an intuitive understanding of the challenges facing ELL students and other diverse students. Although these traits form and excellent foundation for a culturally responsive teacher, there are still opportunities for enhancing their cultural skills and knowledge. Transformational tutors' experiences overwhelmingly focused on the individual (and not surprisingly given the context of the situation).

However, to deepen their cultural awareness, teacher educators could push them to examine the larger socio-political contexts of their students' lives and the institutional structures (e.g., not receiving appropriate educational support and resources) that are sometimes barriers to achievement and success.

Finally the last group of tutors, transcendent tutors, made up the smallest group of preservice teachers. These tutors appeared to have a solid understanding of the various larger socio-political and contextual issues facing their ELL tutees and culturally diverse students. In terms of their growth, teacher educators might help them learn and develop more sophisticated strategies of how to advocate for their students and assume leadership roles with respect to social action. Additionally, transcendent preservice teachers have much to offer their colleagues in the form of role models and insight.

Demographically, the three categories of tutors displayed expected results except in one instance. Not surprisingly, there was no difference in gender or age for the transactional and transformational tutors. Additionally, all the transactional tutors and all but four of the transformational ones self-identified as European American. Given the fact that most of the participants were, female, European American and

between the ages of 19-23, this was an expected result.

Interestingly, however, the transcendent group had the largest number of older students (n=4) and the most diverse. Thirteen of the 17 self-identified as being non-European American and additionally some of them were different from the majority of their peers in other ways (i.e., an ESL learner, gay, having a disability, etc.). This finding was not surprising given that such individuals might be more sensitive to the challenges facing a diverse student because of their own experiences of not being part of the status quo.

Transcendent tutors not only possessed knowledge about diversity but also lived experiences of what it is like to be different from the status quo; this combination of knowledge and experience was indeed powerful and not something tutors in the other groups could offer. The fact that this group was the most culturally responsive *and* diverse affirms the need for a more diverse teacher work force.

Questions for Further Study

The results of this study naturally raised subsequent questions. While it was helpful to be able to define the qualities of sound and unsound cultural relationships between preservice teachers and culturally diverse students, the results reflect only about 13 weeks of interaction. It would be interesting to be able to measure whether any students actually *moved* from one category to another.

In this particular study, the journals provided a kind of snapshot over a short time frame. While some individuals did seem to become more culturally aware and/or responsive over time, it was difficult to determine how and to what degree relationships moved from one category to another (i.e., moved from transactional to transformational or transformational to transcendence) if at all.

This was not a surprising result because thirteen weeks is hardly enough time to expect individuals to change philosophies, beliefs, traditions, and ideas that are grounded in values they have held for their entire lives. However, this concept of growth did raise the question and need for some sort of initial pre and post-assessment to measure any changes in attitudes of the preservice teachers about their relationships with their students.

Finally, another question this study raised concerned whether the cultural responsiveness a preservice teacher

exhibited would transfer to the future classroom. In other words, if a preservice teacher had a transformational relationship with his/her students, would s/he tend to have the same kind of relationship with future culturally diverse students?

Conclusion

The value of this study's results lies in the fact that a set of criteria could be developed for defining a culturally responsive relationship between preservice teachers and culturally diverse students. Additionally, such criteria could be the basis of developing some sort of pre and post assessment measure for assessing the potential change in cultural responsiveness of preservice teachers. In fact, a follow up study to this one might include developing some sort of rubric embodying the characteristics from the three categories and using it with preservice teachers to measure and possibly quantify their cultural responsiveness.

With respect to service-learning, it is clear that powerful, experiential learning events can provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to learn about diversity and challenge their preconceived ideas about various cultural issues. Whether service-learning is the *best* experiential method in assisting preservice teachers in becoming culturally responsive teachers remains to be seen, but the results of this study suggest that it is potentially valuable and doable and warrants further study as a pedagogical method.

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