

# “Upsetting the Apple Cart”

## Issues of Diversity in Preservice Teacher Education

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### Introduction

Over the last decade, teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities across the United States have attempted to respond to the challenges of preparing teachers for the increasing diversity that is represented in public schools today. Teacher programs have responded to these challenges by altering courses, curriculum, fieldwork experiences, and other policies to include a diversity and multicultural education focus (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Finley, 2000). Such a response aligns with research that has indicated that preservice teachers often enter teacher education courses with no conception of, interest in, or concern about, cultural and racial diversity (Milner, 2007).

These teacher education students adopt color-blind (Johnson, 2002; Lewis, 2001; Milner, 2005) and culture-blind ideologies (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005) that obscure the enormous, central, and profound influences that race and culture have on an individual's teaching and learning. Thus, courses that endeavor to provide preservice teachers with the knowledge base and understanding necessary to teach in highly diverse and urban classrooms must consider that many preservice teachers will enter these courses without any (or very limited) prior knowledge and understanding of diversity or of individuals quite different from themselves (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Finley & Adams, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

This article examines the relationship between the attitudes of preservice teachers towards discussing controversial diversity topics with peers and the likelihood that they would address them

as teachers. In this study, the likelihood that they would broach such topics was directly related to the candidates' perceptions of whether their future teaching positions would be jeopardized by doing so. We maintain that the teacher candidates' concern about engaging in practices that “would rock the boat” within their school context was due to a disconnect between understanding the possibilities of enacting positive change on an individual level versus the daunting undertaking of striving to change school culture or educational institutions as new teachers.

We argue that explicitly identifying and modeling language that teacher candidates can use in their classrooms is a necessary component to increasing the likelihood that teachers will develop a praxis that foregrounds the multicultural content that they encounter in their teacher education courses. In this way, new teachers may be more likely to implement theories of social justice that are emphasized in many teacher education programs today.

### Theoretical Framework

Important to the analysis in this article is the notion of teacher identity and the influence that identity factors have on teaching. There are many influential factors that contribute to an individual's self-identity, such as race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, age, and so on. In studies of American mainstream teachers and the factors that influence their pedagogy, White racial membership and the cultural positionality that this inherently implies has been shown to have implications for teacher/student interactions in ways that limit minority student academic achievement (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sleeter, 1996).

This situation is further complicated by the embedded nature of racial and cultural assumptions, making it difficult for teachers to know the extent to which

their own ideologies are influenced by the assumptions they make of people from different backgrounds (Hinkel, 1999; Liggett, 2008). Addressing the relatively unexamined culture of the self is important in confronting underlying issues of power that work to sustain certain knowledge forms and solidify the positionality of the White race in the context of teacher education—with the result being the racial-cultural divide in school achievement. Being unaware of how dominant culture validates knowledge structures such as written and spoken discourse could cause teachers to misinterpret the alternative knowledge structures that inform their students thinking in ways that disadvantage, rather than empower them (Liggett, 2009).

The underlying set of factors that directly generate the discursive field take place at what Foucault (1972) calls the pre-conceptual level. One social consequence of this discursive field is the establishment of a hierarchy of humankind where racial classification—the ordering of human groups on the basis of inherited or environmental differences—implies that certain races are superior to others (Goldberg, 1993). Breaking down preconceptions and dismantling the established discursive fields are necessary acts in preparing teachers for diverse classrooms.

In conjunction with the hierarchical social structures that frame individual notions of race and culture, neoliberal factors influence preservice teachers' willingness to incorporate diversity into curriculum design and teaching practice. Canadian scholar Elizabeth Brule (2004) argues that the corporatization of the university has constructed students as rational, economic decision makers. As such, the only choices that are acceptably rational are those that increase one's employment opportunities within the confines of the labor market. Brule also connects this construction with students' disengagement with critical pedagogy, suggesting that the corporatiza-

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tion of the university makes it increasingly difficult for educators to foster feminist and anti-racist perspectives.

Such difficulty stems from ideological neoliberal constructions that place competition, self-sufficiency, and individualism at odds with the ideological focus of critical pedagogy that seeks to deconstruct power relations (Feigenbaum, 2007). Feigenbaum argues that such corporatization is not, as Brule suggests, a form of student resistance, but rather, a valid and political articulation on the part of students, which attests to the institution's isolation from the very forms of knowledge that enable students to envision the types of social transformation that a diversity centered teacher education program promotes. "It eats away at their imaginations, making it difficult for students to envision how university knowledge translates into meaningful possibilities for self or social change" (Feigenbaum, 2007, p. 338).

We appreciate the lens through which Feigenbaum views student construction—it looks beyond a deficit model to consider the broader social influences that frame student thinking about critical pedagogy. Such a recasting highlights the limited scope of a neoliberal ideology that contains the possibility and "imaginings" of teacher candidates to envision themselves as change agents in the teaching profession.

Having a limited lens through which one perceives their ability to effect change works against the mission/goal of many teacher education programs that strive to instill a sense of agency in teacher candidates as a way to enact change in their local classroom and school contexts. Indeed, in this study, the diabolic notions that teacher candidates expressed about their ability to enact change in their future classrooms was tenuous. These notions hinged on their feelings of realizing the importance of such actions while not wanting to "rock the boat" as new teachers.

### The Study

The analysis in this article stems from two sections of a course titled "Social Context", one of the first courses taken in an intensive 15 month Master's in Teaching program at a university in the Pacific Northwest. A total of 33 students read material based on a critical pedagogy framework, which included the work of several critical theorists.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the course was to develop a sense of awareness about the impact of social stratification on education in the U.S., particularly focus-

ing on issues of poverty, race, and culture. In addition, one of the course goals was to instill a sense of openness and individual reflection on personal identity factors that influence teaching and pedagogy. Much of the material addressed the social inequities of institutional structures and the role of education in maintaining the marginalization of underrepresented populations. There were two sections of the course, taught by the two authors of this article.

Data for this article were collected from responses posted on the open forum site, Blackboard. The discussion format of Blackboard was used to provide students with a venue for processing the (often) new information and alternative perspectives from course readings, and to continue topics of discussion beyond the time allowed by our regular seminar meetings. The syllabus stated that Blackboard participation was mandatory, but specific guidelines for numbers of entries or definitions of quality entries were not included; instead, the syllabus promised that faculty would contact students if their contribution seemed less than satisfactory in terms of quantity or quality of entries, in order to negotiate participation, accommodate special circumstances, or otherwise address systemic roadblocks to participation.

Use of Blackboard for the two course instructors was for the purpose of action research. The aim was to guide us in our teaching, to understand the perspectives of individual students, and to identify areas in which we should engage further discourse during class time. Similarly, we revisited the discussion boards for the purpose of further analyzing information that might be useful to us in our overall purpose of presenting a course in subsequent semesters that would be foundational in preparing preservice teachers to address issues of diversity.

Moreover, the discussion boards were established for the purpose of encouraging critical consciousness by individual students. Our efforts were toward drawing out personal stories and emotive responses to issues in order to bring together students' life events with the theoretical explanations we offered through the text and seminar topics. With this approach we sought to provide a pedagogical space in which our students could develop the habits of social critique, within the framework of collective conscience. In this effort we were using this early course to support the coming together of personal and political, which could then lead to activism and change in schools, prompted by teacher activism.

Susan, one of the two professors presenting the "Social Context" course, had used this Blackboard approach during seven previous iterations of the course. Over the years, she has continually changed the discussion board prompts to keep the course current, but the 24 discussion boards used by students in this research effort included discussion board topics that in previous years have provoked substantive conversation or sustained dialogue. Keeping some discussion boards open to student initiated topics was part of the overall structure of the discussion format.

Her approach to using the Blackboard discussions as a site for action research was to maximize participation through students' (and instructors') participation in both virtual and physical meeting spaces. Individual boards and threads function as virtual focus groups as students self select which to join, in search of other students whose interests are similar; classroom discussions then provide opportunities to cross-generate discussions and link issues, and develop and explore possible agendas for teaching for diversity.

A complexity of this process was the fact that two professors, Susan and Tonda, simultaneously taught the course in two different sections of a program structured on a cohort model. This division of students brought about the further pedagogical goal of breaking barriers between the two sections, so all students would be members of a blended community, across sections. With Susan's section enrolling 21 students and Tonda's roll of 12, it was particularly important to create a collaborative atmosphere, so as not to isolate the 12 students in Tonda's section.

In that sense, the data formed in this research took shape within the context of a case study of building classroom community through virtual small group meetings. In addition to the professorial collaboration that was taking place, we were asking for additional collaborations at the levels of student to student, cohort to cohort, and, finally, participatory action research in which the participants in a research setting are collaborators in performing social action.

On this front, we requested two things from our students: (1) willing conversation with students who were not in their section of the course, to include providing some background descriptions of in-class discussion as necessary to contextualize their comments for understanding by the entire cohort; and (2) collaboration as participants in the professors' ongoing research

about preservice teachers' uses of reflection in their learning about diversity.

Blackboard discussion topics for individual and collective reflection included:

- ◆ General (anonymous posts, reactions to class, readings, teaching style, all comments welcome)
- ◆ What is the state of America's children?
- ◆ Academic achievement gap
- ◆ *No Child Left Behind Act*
- ◆ Equity and equality
- ◆ How shall we treat others responsibly and justly in education?
- ◆ Democracy, capitalism, and globalization
- ◆ Teachers as cultural workers/Letters to those who dare to teach
- ◆ How is/has the war on terror impacted U.S. education?
- ◆ What is democracy?
- ◆ Financing schools: Equity or disparity?
- ◆ What is the impact of poverty on education?
- ◆ What is zero tolerance?
- ◆ *Brown v Board of Education*
- ◆ Affirmative action: Facing the challenge
- ◆ Separate schools/separate classrooms
- ◆ Religion-church and state: Unification or separation
- ◆ Health and fitness
- ◆ Week 1-6 (a place to share notes and insights on reading assignments, continue conversations from class, pose questions to each other, etc.)

These topics related to those covered in our texts and in classroom discussions as well as broad general topics for students to initiate their own threads (or subtopics). Overall, there were 565 substantive student entries in Blackboard discussion that included all 33 students. Forty-three responses were professorial interactions in student-generated conversations.

For the purpose of this article, we focus on two, student-initiated threads: the first titled, "Controversy," and the second, "What can we do?" Both were posted under the "General" discussion topic. After reading through all of the Blackboard responses, we believe these two threads most poignantly describe the contexts that frame and influence the responses that these teacher candidates had when addressing controversial diversity issues.

The topic of "controversy" was logged

into the first discussion board, which drew general commentary on the class, teaching format, and readings, and it was the only discussion board that invited anonymous commentary, an option no participant chose. Ten students participated in the conversation around "controversy."

The second thread examined here, "What can we do?," emerged in response to readings and classroom discussions that encouraged new teachers to bring about change in systemic structures that subvert difference. Eight students participated in this discussion. In both threads there was near equal participation from students in both course sections.

The data were analyzed using a grounded theory method of coding in order to apply analytical techniques for handling data, considering alternative meanings for phenomena, and systematically relating concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The procedures for this analysis consisted of reading through all of the discussion posts for each topic on the Blackboard site, specifically identifying posts related to participants' notions of diversity and teaching diverse populations. From this narrowing of discussion excerpts, categories began to emerge for open coding. The categories were interconnected based on comparing and contrasting phenomena to identify discrepancies, inconsistencies, similarities, and divergences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Discussion

Many of the readings in the "Social Context" course tied education to influential political, social, and historical events from the turn of the last century until the present, exposing students to alternative perspectives about teaching and learning. As such, the issue of what this new information has to do with actual teaching practice became an ongoing component in many discussions both inside and outside regular course meetings. On Blackboard, the discussion delineated into two separate categories: (1) addressing controversial issues with peers, and (2) addressing controversial issues as future teachers. Responses to each of these discussions are explained below.

### 1. "Controversy": Addressing Controversy with Peers

Under the student initiated thread on Blackboard titled, "Controversy," candidates posted thoughts and attitudes they held about addressing controversial subjects with each other. Some responses

conveyed a sense of worry about offending peers while others expressed interest in reading different perspectives and comfort in expressing opinions and beliefs that varied from cohort members. The first student wrote,

Does anyone else feel a little stressed when you post your opinion on a controversial issue? I am always worried that I am going to offend someone. Some people make you feel like you are a bad person if you have the "wrong" opinion on something. I'm not saying anyone in our class does that. Just people in general.

Several students responded expressing concerns similar to those below.

I am always worried that I am going to offend someone.

[It's] always a little intimidating...especially in the face of opposing views.

Some students' concern stemmed from not wanting to be misunderstood, judged as a "bad teacher," or to offend one of their fellow students. Conversely, however, many students enjoyed hearing alternative opinions and beliefs, such as the following:

It makes me rethink my own perspective...forces me to alter my view or to even abandon it...it helps me to increase my awareness and understanding.

I love hearing opinions that are wildly different from mine. If a person's beliefs are parallel to mine there is [little] room for discourse. Conversation and a good debate, I feel, are the heart of real education.

I love reading and hearing other people's opinions especially if their thinking is vastly different from mine. It makes me rethink my own perspective and forces me to try to see things from other people's views. Sometimes seeing someone else's perspective forces me to alter my view or to even abandon it. When this happens—I've learned something!

Maintaining a sense of camaraderie was important to students as well as the instructors. One student posted, "It's good to get this stuff out there *so we're all on the same page* and we can get more comfortable with each other!" Much research on multicultural and anti-racist curricula indicates that students' level of comfort in the class corresponds with more open engagement with course material that challenges their identity (Bolgatz, 2005; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Wang, 2008).

An increased comfort level results in the willingness of students to more openly discuss controversial topics after

there has been a relationship established and a “safe” environment for which to do so. Several students expressed that need for familiarity in order to feel comfortable discussing the topics. “I feel nervous about posting opinions that are contrary to values or beliefs...*not being familiar with everyone*. Familiarity allows me to gauge potential reactions to my beliefs and opinions.”

Fostering relationship building throughout this course was important to compel students to take part in the topics covered. In discussions with peers, these teacher candidates expressed a range of opinions and beliefs with each other, however, this range narrowed sharply when the discussion turned to addressing controversial topics in their own classrooms.

### 2. “What Can We Do?”:

#### Addressing Controversy as Teachers

The second thread, “What can we do?,” was posted by a student grappling with how to take action—how to do something to counteract the social stratification and educational inequity that they were reading about in their “Social Context” books. There was a marked difference between their previous responses to addressing controversy among peers versus the way they would address them as new teachers.

In this regard, student responses did not vary—they uniformly agreed that they would not disrupt the status quo by bringing up or pursuing controversial diversity issues. Their responses illustrate the apprehension they feel.

I’m afraid of pushing peoples’ buttons and causing tension. I am also afraid of losing my job if I push too hard. I feel like this is asking a lot of beginning teachers, yet it’s also necessary. How do we initiate this change without causing chaos?”

If I’m going to screw up in my first year of teaching...I want to do it following what I’ve been told to do!

I’m not going to jeopardize my future by upsetting the apple cart...

For these students, addressing issues of diversity as teachers was seen as causing tension and acting outside the scope of regular teaching requirements. In a sense, such actions were interpreted as having school-wide implications. They didn’t want to lose their jobs, nor did they have the sense of agency or imagination that Brule refers to in a neoliberal school environment to envision how to pursue change within the context of becoming a new teacher. In

this sense, regardless of the social justice/diversity focus in the teacher education program, these preservice teachers were not going to implement aspects of diversity if doing so meant jeopardizing their jobs.

### Potential Gaps in a Social Justice Framework

How did these students envision the action component of a social justice framework playing out in their own classroom? What sense of agency did they have around making positive change as new teachers? From this data, the relationship between a critical pedagogy knowledge base and the ways that this knowledge base could inform classroom practice remained unclear and abstract.

This undefined area indicates a need for us, as teacher educators, to make more explicit connections between the individual actions that teachers can take and the cultural and institutional inequity described in their social foundations course texts. Doing so, we believe, could help foster a sense of agency for new teachers so that they would feel empowered and compelled to take on controversial topics in their classrooms.

Below, we outline four potential in-class strategies regarding language use that could facilitate better understandings of how to address aspects of diversity and controversy without attempting to change school culture wholesale—a daunting task for anyone, and especially new teachers trying to develop a teaching practice and start a new career. Providing ways to make positive social change that starts with language use in their own classrooms confines the action component of critical pedagogy to a strategy that can be incorporated through awareness of discourse used when teaching.

### In-Class Strategies

#### 1. Inclusive Language

When teachers use inclusive language they are assisting children in understanding broader conceptualizations, such as notions of family. For example, using terms such as guardians, caretakers, dads, moms, aunt, grandma, and whoever else may be involved in the students’ care. This often more accurately describes the reality of students’ situations in the classroom context.

In addition, the use of gender neutral pronouns works to include all students, specifically terms such as: people, children, or everyone, along with empowering

descriptors such as: scientists, readers, writers, or mathematicians.

#### 2. Qualifying Language

Using phrases that do not over-generalize helps teachers model an awareness of speech. This includes phrases such as: some people...; in my experience...; often...; sometimes.... These qualifiers raise awareness of nuance and complexity in individual experience and situations.

#### 3. Indirect and Direct Language

Much research has been done regarding the connection between indirect and direct language with socioeconomic status and school performance (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Kailin, 2002; Tough, 2006). Using both forms familiarizes students with multiple ways of expression.

Indirect polite structures using modal verb formations include: could you...; would you mind...; why don’t you...; whereas, more direct phrases include: put away...; don’t...; give this to.... For teachers, being aware of differences in grammatical constructions can highlight the underlying meanings that children may attach to them based on their background experiences.

#### 4. Clarifying Questions

Two simple clarifying questions that work to unpack generalizations and serve to raise awareness about a topic are “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” Bolgatz’ (2005) study indicated that when teachers used these two questions with students during controversial diversity discussions, students were more apt to identify the bias statements they were using to generalize about different groups of people. As teachers begin asking such questions of their students, they model critical analysis and raise awareness about language that students choose and implications from it.

### Making Distinctions

In addition to the language strategies described above, making distinctions in teacher education courses between the individual, cultural, and institutional realms wherein identity discourse occurs highlights the scope, purpose, and power located at each level so that the relationship between the formation of personal beliefs can be linked to cultural values, which in turn connect to and are influenced by institutional systems of governance (See Figure 1).

For the largely White teacher candidate population to recognize that they are, indeed, “cultural beings (Sleeter, 1996)” is important to becoming aware of differential status, positionality, and stratification in the broader realm of society. Talking about identity on the individual level involves discussion that focuses on choices one makes and the ways one conforms (or not) to the social pressures that surround life choices.

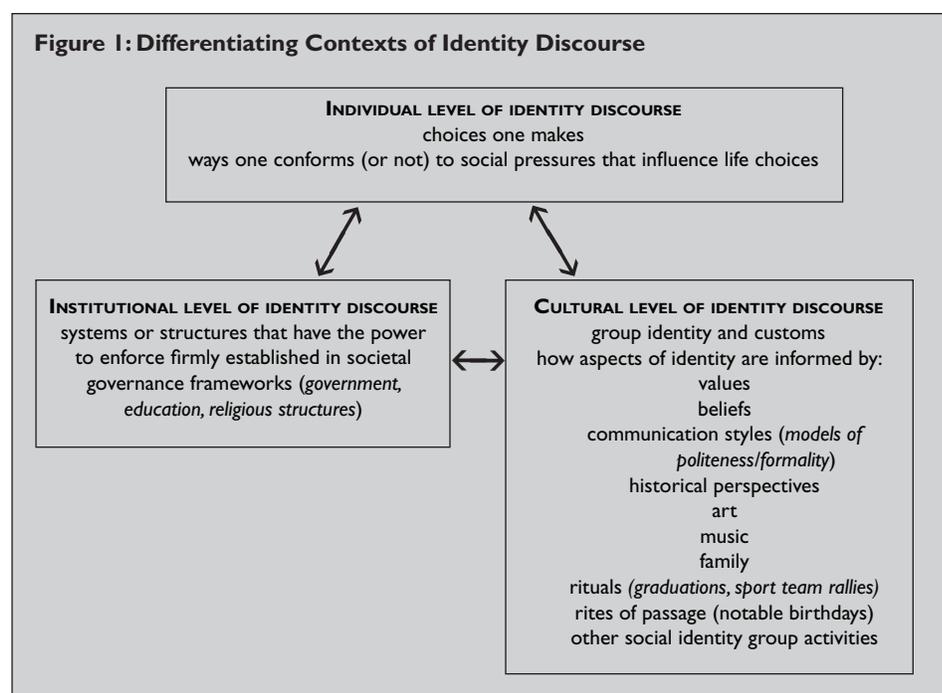
At this level, examining personal choice in relation to societal pressure to conform allows for an expansion to the broader cultural level, illustrating the dynamic interaction between cultural and individual conceptions of the good. For example, asking about the identity groups teacher candidates belong to helps to focus on personal identity such as race, ethnicity, native language, sexual orientation, physical ability, gender, religion, previous education, and work experience.

For White teacher candidates in particular, to actually talk about what it means to be White is often a new experience or one that they have had little opportunity to do (Liggett, 2009). In addition, affinity group memberships such as sports/exercise groups, organizations, and clubs, as well as free-time activities can be identified and differentiated. Such focus allows teacher candidates to see that their individual identity has cultural orientations that shape the ways they think about values, beliefs, communication styles (models of politeness/formality), historical perspectives, art, music, family, rituals (graduations, sport team rallies), rites of passage (notable birthdays), and other social group activities (Katz & Ivey, 1977).

At the institutional level, the focus turns to discussion of entities beyond any one individual or group of individuals, to include systems or structures that have the power to enforce (government, education, religious structures) and that are firmly established in societal and governance frameworks. Fostering deeper understandings about the ways that knowledge is constructed at this level was a key focal point throughout the “Social Context” course readings. Indeed, much discussion dealt with how to connect the social construction of knowledge to ways that individual teachers could disrupt the maintenance of inequitable systems.

### Conclusion

Highlighting and forefronting the individual ways that teachers can model



and use language that is empowering for their diverse students ensures that teacher candidates have the strategies and language to enact change. In this study, the likelihood that the candidates would engage in controversial diversity topics as new teachers hinged on their perceptions of whether such engagement would jeopardize their teaching positions. We believe that the possibilities of enacting positive change on an individual level versus the daunting undertaking of striving to change school culture or educational institutions as a new teacher was not specifically clarified in this teacher education course.

In future courses, explicitly identifying and modeling language that teacher candidates can use in their classrooms could instill an increased sense of agency. In this way, preservice teachers would be more likely to put into practice the theories of social justice that are emphasized in many teacher education programs today. Such a focus would better ensure that a multicultural curriculum will actually become a part of the development of teaching praxis by new teachers.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> There were two required texts: Ballentine, J., & Spade, J. (2008). *Schools and society: A sociological approach to education* (3rd edition); and McLaren, P., & Kincheloe, J. (2007). *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* One additional recommended text that we also discussed in detail was Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*.

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