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# Beyond Methods: Embedding a Critical Perspective of Education in a Reading Methods Course

Carol Rozansky-Lloyd  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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*Preservice elementary teachers enrolled in a reading methods course learn how literacy instruction is a political act that can affect children's opportunities. Through discussions and readings, they learn how the ways in which they teach reading to children make a difference in their subsequent access to knowledge. Through a practicum experience in an urban elementary school with mainly African American and low SES children, these predominantly middle class White students apply their knowledge of reading practices and their developing dispositions toward educational equity. Their oral accounts and written work demonstrate developing understandings of equity.*

"I grew up in the western part of the city. I don't think we had more than a couple of African American students in my school. Teaching at Golden Elementary School was an eye-opening experience for me. I was the minority! I'm really glad we had this experience."

Statements like these are common from my preservice teachers during and after their practicum experiences in an urban school with more than eighty percent African American students, and with three-fourths of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The vast majority of these preservice teachers are white and culturally insular (Feiman-Nemser and Remillard, 1996), having grown up in communities and attending schools with little racial, ethnic or economic diversity.

### *Addressing Diversity: Beyond Multiculturalism*

Many PreK-12 schools across the country are required to address multiculturalism. This often takes the form of ethnic food fairs, observing or learning Native American or African dances, or adding a book by a non-white author to a class's reading requirement. However, these are surface-level approaches to multicultural education, what James Banks (2001) identifies as the "Contributions" and "Ethnic Additive Approaches." Many multicultural activities in schools have subdued attempts at radical transformation of the education system (McCarthy, 1988).

What is missing from these approaches to multicultural education is a critical examination of differential power relationships that are framed in cultural and economic differences. A critical perspective of diversity names the world (Freire, 1993/1970) that disenfranchises

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certain groups while legitimizing others. It points out unequal power relationships exhibited by teachers' expectations, histories presented, and authors celebrated in classrooms.

Preservice teachers must develop a critical perspective about education, especially as it relates to diversity and educational equity. A critical perspective adds the concept of morality into the purpose of teaching and thus teacher education. “[Teaching [is] a moral endeavor ... [because] it is, quite centrally, human action undertaken in regard to other human beings” (Fenstermacher, 1990, p. 133). Situating reading instruction within a critical perspective provides future teachers knowledge and perspectives they can use to critique and challenge institutional structures such as “ability” grouping; use of standardized tests; and correlations between race, poverty, and students’ achievement (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001).

The outcomes of education demonstrate differences by race and income. There continues to be an achievement gap and a difference in placement in advanced courses between white students and students of color, and between students living in poverty and those who do not (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). This is true across subject areas such as science, math, and English (Clewell, Anderson, & Thorpe, 1992; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; The Education Trust, 1998) and reading (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). These trends are exemplified in urban schools where histories of racism and urbanization have resulted in inequitable education for many of these students (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 2005).

These disparities in achievement and opportunities to take high-level classes make it imperative to imbed inquiry about systemic educational disenfranchisement of certain groups into teacher education programs. If teacher educators do not do that, they are complicit, even if unintentionally, in perpetuating the unjust status quo (Tatum, 1992).

#### Connecting to an Urban School

I am a teacher educator in a racially segregated state and city that are populated mainly by whites who live above the poverty level. The preservice teachers in the College of Education in which I teach are also mainly white middle class students. Our students have a history of resistance to practica in urban schools. Their resistance ranges from refusing to go to these schools to parents and husbands confronting the college dean about sending their loved ones to “dangerous” neighborhoods. Other teacher education programs have faced similar obstacles (Leland & Harste, 2005).

The urban school district in which my preservice students participate in a practicum has a different demographic – 56% of its students belong to racial/ethnic minorities, and 53% qualify for free or reduced lunch. (Table 1 displays these racial/ethnic demographics.) My

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college is committed to equitable PreK-12 education with a focus on diversity; however, few of our students have had much experience in economically or racially diverse settings. Through my courses, I provide experiences in these settings.

**TABLE 1**  
*Demographics\* of State, City, School District, and College*

	% African American	% Caucasian American	% Hispanic American	% Native American	% Poverty**
State	4	90	7	<1	19
City	12	76	10	<1	25
School District	31	42	24	<2	53
College of Education	4	89	3	<1	

\* School and college data from 2005-2006; state and city data from 2004 census estimates (rounded).

\*\* State and city poverty: people below poverty line; school poverty: students eligible for free or reduced lunch

### *Educational Equity*

The education class I describe here is, by title and syllabus, a methods class. Its general purpose is to teach preservice elementary teachers basic principles and methods for teaching PreK-6 students how to read and how to continue their reading development. Historically, courses like this one are based on a positivist/modernist notion of teaching, one that clearly defines the teaching procedures that should be followed to teach children to read. If children are not successful, it is reasoned within this perspective, it is most likely because the teacher did not adhere to the method or because the child has some sort of deficit that interferes with learning (Bartolomé, 1994). [This belief has recently become entrenched in teacher education programs and elementary schools through policies and statutes in many districts and states, and, more recently, in federal legislation that has defined “scientific research” in reading and resultant teaching methods (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)].

My concern about this perspective relates to disparate educational outcomes that are highly correlated with race, ethnicity and parental income. For example, a traditional way differential achievement levels are addressed is through tracking. While tracking is based on the assumption that leveled classes will help children catch up, most students who are in low track groups or classes in elementary and middle school remain in the low tracks in high school (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). Teachers tend to have lower expectations of these students (Carey, 1989), which impact their performance (Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski,

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1995). The lower tracked students rarely have the same access to knowledge as those in the higher-level tracks, an outcome that is hardly moral (Goodlad, 1990).

Another concern is the assumption that there is one “perfect” method to teach a subject such as reading. Freire makes the point that if education is to be democratized, it “cannot simply undergo changes in methods” (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 78). Yet studies demonstrate that effective literacy instruction reflects complex interactions of, at the very least, students, teachers, methods, materials, schools, culture, and community knowledge (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999).

An alternative perspective of education is a critical perspective. Critical pedagogy, the application of critical theory to education, “expos[es] student sorting processes and power involvement with curriculum, [and] helps students and teachers understand how schools work” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 72). Since students’ reading achievement is a primary sorting mechanism, the ways teachers teach reading have profound political implications (Spring, 1998). Students’ reading achievement is frequently used to determine whether students receive skills-based instruction that focuses on decoding and literal comprehension, or strategy instruction that focuses on higher-level thinking (Allington, 1991). Since much knowledge is text-dependent, the nature of students’ reading instruction directly impacts students’ access to knowledge. Knowledge is not politically neutral; those with knowledge have power (Freire & Faundez, 1989). Literacy education thus becomes an issue of social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

In my course, we discussed two constructs that contribute to preservice teachers’ understandings of equitable education as they develop a critical perspective. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), has three purposes: 1) “to develop students academically,” 2) “to nurture and support cultural competence” and 3) “to develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order.” The second is Moll’s (1993) work which underscores the abundance of community knowledge, i.e., “funds of knowledge,” that critical teachers bring into their classrooms. Bartolomé (1994) maintains that in this altered environment teachers are more likely to develop an effective educational ideology that guides their teaching, rather than implementing methods as if there were no political impact.

#### *Connecting Literacy and Diversity with Science and Mathematics: Cultural Capital in an Urban School*

Schools must provide the codes of power, the cultural capital of our society (Lamont & Lareau, 1988), to all students, including those traditionally marginalized, thus giving them the skills they need to succeed in our society. In math and science, areas that greatly affect

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college and employment opportunities, minorities have poorer attitudes and achievement (Mullis & Jenkins, 1988), and less knowledge about careers related to these subject areas (Clewell, Anderson & Thorpe, 1992). Minority students in the urban district in which we worked also demonstrate these low levels of achievement in math and science.

Teacher educators need to go beyond assessment of preservice teachers' knowledge of traditional educational content and address their dispositions toward and understandings of students' cultures, educational equity, and literacies (Dee & Henkin, 2002). The purpose of this study was to describe preservice elementary teachers' developing understandings and applications of educational equity. They integrated reading methods with the teaching of science and math concepts, all areas in which African American and low-SES children demonstrate lower achievement than their White peers, in a practicum in an urban school.

### **Procedure: Reading Methods Course**

*Practicum*

Reading methods classes for preservice elementary teachers primarily examine ways to teach reading during "reading time." Because I wanted to underscore the ways in which reading needs to be taught and used by students in multiple learning situations, because students' achievement in math and science was unacceptably low, and because I wanted preservice teachers to implement a pedagogy that reflected equity toward students labeled as low-achievers, I developed the following practicum experience in an urban elementary school. I purposely selected an urban school composed of children that were culturally, racially, and economically unlike my students. Such experiences are necessary if our educators are to learn how to effectively teach children in urban schools (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001).

Twenty-four sophomore and junior elementary preservice teachers were enrolled during the semester course I describe here. Similar to the demographics of the college, these students were mainly female (23 students) and mainly White (23 students). (One student was African American female; one was white male).

At the beginning of the fifth week of the semester, I assigned pairs of preservice teachers to one classroom each at Golden Elementary School in a Midwestern urban school district. Approximately 80% of the students were African American, and about 75% qualified for free/reduced lunch. Most of the students had low levels of reading, math, and science achievement.

These preservice teachers observed a class once, and then designed and implemented four lessons, one per week, to an entire class. Their literacy lessons were based on a science or math concept

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appropriate to district grade level standards. These subject-area integrated lessons gave them the opportunity to understand first hand how reading could be taught within science and math contexts. They started each lesson with a fiction or non-fiction text such as a children's book, a magazine article, or an article from the Internet that they read to the children. They integrated students' background knowledge into a pre-reading teaching practice. The pair planned and implemented an extension activity that contributed to children's understanding of the main science or math concept. Children often used writing and/or referred to written materials to complete this activity.

### **Data Sources, Analysis and Findings**

This qualitative study had three data sources. They included my notes about our class discussions, preservice teachers' journals about their practicum experiences, and a written assignment requiring them to address dispositions related to educational equity. These multiple data sources allowed me to triangulate the data with the purpose of learning about my students' understandings of the intersections between literacy education, science and math learning, and educational equity. Understanding their points of view is a phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to the data. I employed the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to the data, reading and re-reading the data, inductively developing an understanding of their knowledge and dispositions.

In our university class, we had often discussed the impact of teacher expectations. Though preservice teachers knew that children differed from one another, they were to assume that their students could think, solve problems, and complete challenging tasks. They also knew that some children would require more support than others. Through our class and others they had taken, they had hopefully developed a sense of cultural awareness that they could integrate into their lessons.

Teachers' beliefs about students' abilities translate into educational opportunities provided or denied, sometimes in subtle ways (Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995). Our classroom discussions and their practicum experience sensitized them to ways in which teachers provided equitable or inequitable opportunities for their students. For example, during a discussion about emergent literacy in my class, a preservice teacher described with shock and dismay a kindergarten teacher she observed who always wrote the (poor, mainly Black) children's names on their papers because, according to the teacher, "They can't write their names." They also shared examples of teachers who spent more time on discipline than on teaching, who told them that "these students are the lowest I've ever had" in a voice the children could hear, and who taught pre-K children only one color and shape a month because "that's all they

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can handle.” On the other hand, preservice teachers also shared examples of ways in which teachers held high expectations of their students and provided the scaffolding that led these children to success.

Most of these preservice teachers learned that connecting reading or writing instruction with math or science is relatively easy to do. They learned they could help students develop understandings of difficult vocabulary, even with “low-achieving” students. In other words, they saw that when they expected children to learn new and difficult concepts and provided motivating, engaging, and supportive ways to learn those ideas, children from the “other side” of town were successful. For some, confronting their own low expectations and reflecting on how their teaching contradicted their prior beliefs was a profound experience. Many talked and wrote about their surprise when students, whom they had initially observed as inattentive and disruptive, were well-behaved when they treated them with respect and demanded high-level interactions with new concepts.

When children demonstrated difficulty with reading, writing, or spelling, these preservice teachers discussed the importance of teaching skills embedded in meaningful literacy practices. They saw this instruction as possible during any part of their teaching day, whether it was during the designated reading instructional period, or while teaching science or math (or social studies, etc.). They often saw these subjects as the motivating contexts behind effective literacy learning. They saw students as needing *more* opportunities to read and write rather than the *fewer* opportunities that struggling readers and writers are typically afforded (Allington, 1991).

In addition to the practicum experience I described above, several other experiences in my “methods” class contributed to teacher candidates’ development of dispositions directed at educational equity. Our examinations of various reading and writing methods were always connected to the opportunities afforded or withheld from students. For example, if students who are struggling in reading are repeatedly given skills worksheets to complete, we discussed when or if they received instruction in that skill, when or if they learned when to apply that skill (i.e., metacognitive, strategic knowledge), and the results of such instruction on children’s developing literacy. We contrasted this with contextualized skill and strategy instruction, and the implications for children’s access to text and knowledge. We also discussed and read about ways in which students’ measured reading achievement is usually used to track them in middle and high school so that these future teachers understood the tremendous impact their literacy instruction can have on their students.

We read more than our methods textbook, reading professional articles that provided reasons for implementing culturally relevant

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pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and the effects of such practices. We read and discussed articles about student motivation and engagement (Guthrie, 1996), connecting those concepts to their own school experiences as K-12 students and their experiences as preservice teachers in our practicum.

There are many factors that impact the equitable or inequitable educational experiences of students. I developed a list of twelve such dispositions based on my professional readings about educational equity and critical pedagogy. They include, for example, “To understand, appreciate, and respect diversity in students, including diversity defined by the characteristics of gender, culture, race, ethnicity, physical characteristics, language facility, and sexual orientation;” “To implement teaching practices that contribute to equitable educational opportunities for all students;” and “To understand and implement the concept of teacher as decision maker through the process of critical reflection rather than teacher as technician.” (See Appendix for the complete list.)

At the end of the semester, these preservice teachers described their understandings of any six of the twelve dispositions. They used examples from our practicum, our readings, and their field experiences from other classes. Sometimes they wrote about their erroneous assumptions, and how students proved them wrong. They wrote about ways in which they provided an atmosphere that encouraged students to take risks as they attempted new and difficult tasks. The importance of every student’s well-being, self-respect and learning was exemplified when they described their responsibilities toward every child.

Several preservice teachers related how they selected reading materials for their practicum that were not only about science or math, but about African Americans so that the children could better relate to the text. Some described how they were aware of whether or not students were learning, and altered their teaching methods or provided extra help to those who were not. This shows how they were decision makers, not technicians. Similar to Navarro’s (2005) findings, they showed evidence of acculturation into an urban school.

### **Final Thoughts**

The federal legislation that defines “scientifically-based” reading research (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) and the narrow view of reading instruction emanating from this research (Coles, 2000) oftentimes has me wondering what impact my teaching has on these future teachers’ instruction after they are hired, and the subsequent effects on their future students. This restricted view of research and instruction ignores the economic and social realities of these students and their urban communities. It also abdicates responsibility for children’s education, especially for children from diverse (i.e., marginalized)

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populations, from those who perpetuate inequitable economic and social policies.

In a conversation with Donaldo Macedo about the “pseudoscience” that attempts to define blacks as inferior to Whites, Freire (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999) says,

What is needed is not yet another study like *The Bell Curve* designed to rationalize the further abandonment of blacks. ... However, in order to make education democratic, we must simultaneously make the society within which it exists democratic as well. We cannot speak of democracy while promoting racist policies. p. 90

With students’ literacy learning, and thus their opportunities to understand, participate, and critique the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) at stake, Tierney (2001/2002) suggests that “literacy educators and researchers may need to develop an ethical equivalent to the Hippocratic oath” (p. 275). Like physicians’ ethical commitment to patient care, literacy educators and researchers would have an ethical commitment to learners rather than to a government-sanctioned definition of effective literacy instruction. I try to remain optimistic that these preservice teachers will continue to develop and implement a critical stance in their teaching that guides them to equitable educational practices.

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## **Appendix**

### *Dispositions of Teacher Candidates*

Assumption:

The major purpose of pre-K – 12 schools is to develop citizens who can participate in a democracy.

- 1) To recognize and work to dismantle unequal power arrangements in schools that benefit some students while subordinating others
- 2) To implement teaching practices that contribute to equitable educational opportunities for all students
- 3) To be an advocate for all students, especially those who are marginalized within existing educational structures
- 4) To understand, appreciate, and respect diversity in students, including diversity defined by the characteristics of gender, culture, race, ethnicity, physical characteristics, language facility, and sexual orientation
- 5) To build on students' characteristics (listed above) in the implementation of learning goals/standards/curricula
- 6) To demonstrate respect for students and their communities through attitude, language, teaching practices, and interactions
- 7) To demonstrate actions that promote the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all students
- 8) To understand and implement the concept of teacher as decision maker through the process of critical reflection rather than teacher as technician
- 9) To share in the responsibility for student learning of all students
- 10) To look for, recognize and build learning opportunities based on students' assets rather than perceived deficits
- 11) To demonstrate and provide support for high expectations for all students

To participate in the critical evaluation of curriculum to ensure the accurate representation of multiple points of view