

Breaking the Yoke of Racism & Cultural Biases

Two Pre-Service Teachers' Online Discussions & Candid Reflections about Race & Culture

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The benefits of Multicultural Education go beyond the classroom. We also need it in order to obtain complete justice in our social system and to raise a crop of diverse 'movers and shakers' that will bring our nation to its highest potential. (Brianna, 2010)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how critical and reflective thinking about race and culture evolved and manifested in online threaded discussions among pre-service teachers during a required Multicultural Education course. Because of the ubiquitous presence of computer-mediated forms of communication, research has increased in recent years that examines critical and reflective thinking practices of pre-service teachers in various web-based forums (e.g., Bodzin & Park, 2007; Jeong, 2003; Killian & White, 2003; Kippen, 2003; Levin, He, & Robbins, 2006; McCrory, Putnam, & Jansen, 2008; Meyer, 2004; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008).

However, there are still relatively few research studies that track critical and reflective thinking about race and culture in web-based forums. This study investigated students' online threaded discussions as they related to personal beliefs about racial and cultural differences, personal experiences with regard to interracial conflict, as well as course readings and assignments about racial, cultural, and linguistic differences in classrooms and in societies. More specifically, online threaded discussions were analyzed to explore the evolution of critical and reflective thinking for particular

target students during the semester-long course.

Background

Providing appropriate opportunities that teach pre-service teachers how to effectively engage in critical and reflective thinking is a main goal of many teacher education programs. In the complex world of teaching, teachers make a multitude of decisions. Some are nearly instantaneous while others are carefully deliberated. Teaching this complicated process of reflective thinking and problem solving has become an integral component of teacher education programs across the country (Gore, 1987; Harrington, Quinn-Leering, & Hodson, 1996; Hatton, & Smith, 1995; Howard, 2003; Loughran, 2002; Milner, 2003), particularly in educational environments where the mainstream or dominant cultural group's ways of "doing" or ways of schooling are often assumed and taken for granted as true and right.

The majority of teachers continue to be female and White while their students are increasingly diverse (Milner, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). We argue that it is through discussion, reflection, and critical analyses of beliefs and experiences that teachers deconstruct preconceived notions and taken-for-granted assumptions about diverse cultures.

Framing the Study

According to Whipp (1999) and Levin (2000), learning occurs in social contexts through guided support where learners are scaffolded to more complex ways of understanding. This social view of learning holds that interactions with people in the learner's environment determine what individuals learn and how they think about knowledge and express it (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Researchers Putnam and Borko (2000) have characterized social learning as understanding how "to par-

ticipate in the discourse and practices of a particular community" (p. 5), which provide ideas and concepts individuals can use to make sense of their own experiences.

Discourse communities provide "the cognitive tools—ideas, theories, and concepts—that individuals appropriate as their own through their personal efforts to make sense of experiences" (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 5). These discourse communities involve conversation and dialogue which can be learner-centered and participatory and provide a way for constructing knowledge (Levin, He, & Robbins, 2006; Van Manen, 1977; Wade & Fauske, 2004).

Computer-mediated communication offers an "unprecedented opportunity for educational interactivity in a social learning environment" (Killian & Willhite, 2003, p. 379). Researchers of computer-mediated discussions have discovered that these kinds of forums can have multiple advantages in encouraging critically reflective thinking (e.g., Jeong, 2003; Killian & Willhite, 2003; Levin, He, & Robbins, 2006; Wade & Fauske, 2004).

Since online threaded discussions and other web-based forums like email are print-based, they do not have to be responded to immediately, thus allowing participants in the discussion to have time to think about, form, and edit their responses (Killian & Willhite, 2003; Wade & Fauske, 2004). According to Wade and Fauske (2004), these online forums are well-suited to reflection because the teacher and the text generally take on a peripheral role in these contexts and participants are forced to view problems and issues from multiple perspectives and collaborate with others to gain understanding. Online threaded discussions seem to provide a promising forum for pre-service teachers to learn about, reflect upon, and discuss multicultural education (Levin, 2000; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008; Whipp, 2003).

The work of Dewey (1910/1991) and

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Van Manen (1977) has informed current thinking and research regarding reflective thinking. The social context of reflective thinking is also important to Van Manen's theory of reflection. Dewey's theory of reflection is often characterized as being a "never-ending process" (Howard, 2003, p. 200) as well as a cyclical one (Rodgers, 2002).

The cycle and process that Dewey developed requires that a problematic experience occurs which creates a state of disequilibrium. The problem is then described so that it can be framed and solutions sought. During this process, individuals make connections and identify relationships among experiences. Following this process, individuals develop a working theory which guides practice until it no longer works. Then begins the revision, refinement, or discarding of the old theory for a new one to take its place (Rodgers, 2000; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008).

Van Manen's term "co-orientational grasping" (p. 213) refers to the interaction among individuals as they come to understand the perspectives of others. His concept of experience "requires openness and choice, and...presumes the possibility of reflective actions and voluntary commitments" (p. 216). The social context of reflective thinking is also important to Van Manen's theory of reflection. He calls this "making sense together" (p. 218) and characterizes it as "friendly dialogue" (p. 218), much in the same way that Socrates described his own methods for seeking understanding.

Recent Research

Milner's (2006) study of pre-service teachers' learning about cultural and racial diversity led to his developmental typology which is comprised of three interactions. Based on his research indicating that the most effective pre-service teachers are insightful and aware of cultural and racial perspectives, able to engage in critical reflection, and adept at understanding the relationship between theory and practice, Milner (2006) based his typology on these three features. Each interaction of the typology emphasizes critical thinking.

For instance, developing cultural and racial awareness and insight requires understanding the sociopolitical context of race and culture. What Milner terms "relational reflection" (2006, Table 1, p. 351) involves focusing on the individual's own particular experiences, privileges, struggles, and position in relation to oth-

ers. The third interaction of theory and practice involves a deep understanding of theories so that they can be tested and employed to inform practice (Milner, 2006).

Research studies about pre-service teachers' reflective thinking in computer-mediated discussions indicate more positive than negative findings regarding the depth and complexity of discussions. In a qualitative study of pre-service science teachers' interactions in a web-based forum, Bodzin and Park (2007) found evidence of reflective discourse among the students in the course. The pre-service teachers asked focused questions, sought common meanings in teaching practice, and constructed ideas with others.

Killian and Willhite (2003) studied the electronic discourse of pre-service elementary education teachers and found that the level of student involvement increased, especially for those students who were not regular participants in face-to-face discussions, that students reported gaining a better understanding of peers and their perspectives. The investigators also noted, throughout the online discussions, an increase in frequency of reflective thinking.

Finally, in an analysis of four different kinds of electronic communications among pre-service teachers, Levin (200) found that the peer-to-group messages contained more reflective exchanges than the other forms she studied. A recent self-study of a secondary teacher education course (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008) investigated critically reflective problem solving in a peer-led online discussion of a case study about English-language learners. The authors found evidence of reflective problem solving, but few students engaged in the highest level—critical reflection, i.e., considering the sociopolitical consequences of solutions and promoting social change.

Method

Context of the Study and Participants

This study took place in an off-campus teacher education program in a rural town in the southern part of the United States. The off-campus program is an extension of the teacher licensure program offered on the main campus of a mid-size university predominantly serving African American students in a large urban city in the South. However, the 40 students in this program are predominantly female and White. Moreover, the majority of these students, due to the demographics of the area, had little experience with cultural and racial diversity as do their main-campus counterparts.

It is the goal of this licensure program to prepare students to teach in a variety of educational settings, including urban and rural, as well as to work with students from varying cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The purpose of this multicultural education course was to discuss the history behind racial conflict, differences in cultures and languages among various races and ethnicities, and the current sociopolitical context that influences decision making processes about curriculum, assessments, and funding to provide a deeper understanding of the context in which pre-service teachers will work as well as of the students with whom they will work.

For the purposes of this study we focus on the electronic postings of two particular students. We began, however, by separately examining all the threaded discussions over the semester, i.e., both researchers reading, rereading, and charting the threaded discussions as we searched for patterns among all the postings for the class of twenty. As we looked for patterns, we discovered that including all the students in our analysis would be an enormous, daunting endeavor. Instead, we arrived at the decision to focus our study on two women from different backgrounds who provide rich, illustrative cases.

Case Study Participants

The two students were chosen for the purposes of this article as illustrative cases after reading, rereading, and charting patterns in the threaded discussions that occurred over the semester. One of the cases chosen for the study is Tressa,¹ a non-traditional White student, who returned to school to seek teacher certification after ten years of working as an x-ray technician. Married to an African American, Tressa and her husband have two biracial sons.

Brianna, the second case study, is also White and was homeschooled intermittently for about six years before attending three years of high school and graduating from a public high school in 2005. At the time of the study, she was twenty years old and living at home with her parents and younger sister.

The Course and the Curriculum

As stated previously, this multicultural education course is a required course for initial teacher licensure at this particular university. The course is offered completely online for these students. The purpose of the course is to aid pre-service teachers

in developing “awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to the needs and interests of ethnic and cultural groups. The differences and similarities that characterize individuals and groups should be cherished for their worth and cultivated for the benefits they bring all people.”

Course objectives include defining and discussing multicultural education; exploring cultural, linguistic, and social diversity in the United States; examining and reflecting upon personal beliefs, biases, and prejudices; discussing challenges facing diverse students in classrooms and schools; and identifying strategies for increasing and improving learning opportunities and environments for diverse students. The required course text was Bennett’s (2007) sixth edition of *Comprehensive Multicultural Education: Theory and Practice*.

Threaded Discussions

Although students were required to complete four major assignments, we focus only on the threaded discussions for the purposes of this article. To facilitate students’ ability to become reflective educators, decision makers, and to construct meaning for an understanding of the interrelationships and application of educational theory into classroom practices, students responded to prompts and participated in threaded discussions with classmates.

Altogether there were ten threaded discussion topics that students responded to during the semester-long course, some complemented the readings from the course text while others engaged students in reflecting about their own experiences, gaining a deeper understanding of multicultural education issues, and providing a forum for interacting with classmates regarding the electronic research projects, multicultural lesson plans, and a service learning project.

The first prompt asked students to discuss their conceptions of multicultural education, to discuss their personal histories with regard to interracial contact, and to recall and discuss their earliest memory and most recent experience of an interracial incident. Another discussion topic engaged students in discussing how an increased understanding of African-American history might help them better support African-American students in their classrooms.

Data Analysis

To analyze these threaded discussions, we built upon methods of critical

discourse analysis, drawing from the work of Fairclough (1995) and Gee (1999), and also upon the work of Milner (2006) and Wade et. al. (2008) with regard to reflective thinking.

To develop our particular means of analyzing the threaded discussions for the two participants, we reviewed the literature in critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and other studies of critical reflective thinking among pre-service teachers. The coding chart (see Appendix) we developed to analyze the threaded discussions is a continuum of the evolution of reflective thinking which progresses in stages from resistance to transformation. As we created the coding chart, our thinking was informed by Banks’ (2005) work with transformative curriculum, Gay’s (2000) work with critical pedagogy, and Milner’s (2006) typology of critical and reflective thinking.

Discussion postings were tracked and coded according to the five categories in the coding chart. Both researchers coded and analyzed the two sets of threaded discussions separately and then met to review, compare, and discuss the coding and analyses. Where differences in coding occurred, the researchers discussed until agreement could be reached. Following this pattern helped ensure inter-rater reliability.

Findings

Our analysis revealed interesting insights into the evolution of critical and reflective thinking about race and culture among pre-service teachers. Our exploration of data reveals that the threaded discussions provoked students to discuss and reflect upon the importance of multicultural education and to think more profoundly about themselves as racial beings personally and in relation to others.

In addition, the findings suggest that deliberate and systematic reflections and discussions about race and issues of classroom diversity as well as about mandated instructional programs and methods yield a considerable amount of change in teachers’ beliefs about race, language, and diversity. Throughout the semester, students questioned the hegemonic discourse of the dominant culture, of mandated curricula, and of American society in general. Our case studies serve as illustrative cases to our broader findings.

Tressa

Tressa is a nontraditional White student, who returned to school to seek

teacher certification after ten years of working as an x-ray technician. Married to an African American, Tressa and her husband have two biracial sons. Perhaps because of her interracial marriage and biracial children, Tressa’s postings on the threaded discussions revealed that much of her thinking could be characterized as self, relational, and transformative reflection. A theme that threads it way through her postings involves her family’s journey as they navigate a changing world.

She credits her marriage and the birth of her children as transforming events in her own quest for understanding and acceptance. We discovered after many readings of Tressa’s threaded discussions that she sees children as a key piece of her vision of a future without racism. For instance, we can see how Tressa’s thinking evolves in one of her postings where she discusses her marriage. She writes:

Most of us are taught all our lives that it is o.k. to be friends, play sports, attend school, and even eat together, but that it should stop at that. When someone develops feelings for someone of a different culture, it is often frowned upon. If this is how it is supposed to be then why not stay segregated? Why bother to accept and be tolerable of someone else’s (sic) culture if you can only accept it half heartily (sic)? To change this means to change the way we think and view people that are different.... My experience with interracial contact is daily. I am married to a black man and we have two interracial boys[My husband] is the best thing that has ever happened to me and he just happens to be black. We dated secretly for three years and then my mom and dad found out and of course (sic) had a fit. [My husband] was a great guy until he started dating their daughter. Their whole attitude changed toward him as soon as they found out. We have now been together for 17 years and married for 11. I find it interesting that people seem to be okay with the relationship, but often say they would not want their daughter or son to be involved in an interracial relationship because of the ridicule they would have to endure. Saying your okay with it, and being okay with it are two different things and this is where multicultural education must come in to play. No one can change the color or the culture they have, but we can change the way we view these colors and cultures. Once we change our views, we then can begin the acceptance process.

Our analysis revealed that Tressa, because of her personal experiences, sees herself and others as cultural beings. She clearly has been successful in changing the beliefs and behaviors of others regarding

their views of interracial relationships. In one of her postings, Tressa notes that it “has taken three generations to become a non-racist family.”

Tressa’s children’s experiences in school have also influenced her thinking about issues of diversity. In one of her postings she relates an incident about one of her sons. When the child’s father went to school to read a book to the class, one of the boys in the class asked, “Why is your dad Black?” The teacher diverted attention away from the father’s race and re-focused the child’s attention on his fireman’s uniform. Tressa describes this as a “negative experience that made him aware that his family was different.” Her point is that children “pick up the attitudes of racism from their parents, and...the world that we live in today.”

Tressa notes that too many opportunities [to discuss diversity] are “lost in the classroom by the teachers when they do not stress how different we are as individuals.” Tressa’s postings regarding her beliefs about teaching children, her own and others, are transformative reflections. She writes that teachers must expect high academic achievement from all of the students, and later, she notes that she has high academic expectations of her own two boys. She even expresses hope that issues of bias in school systems are a thing of the past.

In fact, this theme carries over into a later posting that she makes in reply to another student’s post. She writes,

If we would only learn from history instead of try to hide it! The school curriculum is so vague about the way/why slaves were brought to this nation that the students really have a false sense of history....Children have a way of making adults see the world in a whole new perspective. If the children had the truth to use they could make a great impact on the view of the world that adults have.

Finally, Tressa discusses a classroom observation experience she had where

... the teacher stood a black girl and a white girl in front of the class and instructed them to name as many differences as they could. Color was never mentioned. That shocked me because I just knew they would say one is black and the other one is white. Sometimes the first thing we see is color and it was nice to witness the opposite from the children.

Brianna

Brianna, the second case study, is also White and was homeschooled intermittently for about six years before attending

three years of high school and graduating from a public high school in 2005. At the time of the study, she was twenty years old and living at home with her parents and younger sister.

The predominant theme throughout Brianna’s threaded discussions is her belief that multicultural education is the transforming change needed to achieve equity in both schools and society. Researchers were able to trace Brianna’s reflective thinking throughout the semester. As we coded her postings, we noted many instances of cultural awareness and insights, but as her thinking evolved she began to make meaningful connections between the course readings and her own life. Some of her comments indicated her desire to change the beliefs of others.

In fact, Brianna’s most powerful posting was a persuasive argument she recounted in response to the second prompt about recent experiences. Brianna recreates a conversation about racism that she had with a soon-to-be family member.

One day I was over at his [her fiancé’s] parents’ house with him and we were watching TV. A mixed-race couple was on whatever show they were watching and I just waited for [my fiancé’s] dad to say something.

“I can’t stand to see a n***** with a White girl.”

Now, I understand people are products of their raising, but this is the 21st century. I had put up with his racism long enough and I decided to let him have it.

Me: “I don’t see anything wrong with a Black and white couple.”

HIM: “Well I do.”

ME: “Why?”

HIM: “Because it’s wrong.”

ME: “Why is it wrong?”

HIM: “Because people need to stay with their own color.”

ME: “But J, we’re all people made in the likeness of God, why does it matter what color our skin is? If they’re happy, share the same religious beliefs, and they’re prepared to face the hardships, why shouldn’t that be allowed?”

HIM: “Because it’s against the Bible.”

ME: “AGAINST THE BIBLE? Ha! Show me where.”

HIM: “It says not to be unequally yoked.”

ME: “Uh huh. And if you finish the sentence it would read ‘...with unbelievers.’

The scripture is referring to Christians and nonchristians.”

HIM: “Well you don’t hear about mixed couples in the Bible.”

ME: “Moses was married to a Black woman.”

HIM: “Well it goes against my beliefs.”

ME: “So why exactly do you think it’s so wrong, other than your racist prejudices?”

HIM: “Because they’re different.”

ME: “Different looking, sure. Different color skin, definitely, but J, we’re still all people.”

HIM: “It’s like this, you have cats and dogs...”

ME: “Cats and dogs? Don’t you mean Dalmatians and Labs? Different breeds of the same species?”

HIM: “No, I mean, you wouldn’t see a bird mating with a fish.”

ME: “J, are you suggesting Black people and White people are of different species?”

HIM: “Yeah like cats and dogs.”

ME: (Stares with mouth wide open in amazement)...surely you mean different breeds...like red birds and blue birds...not different species...”

HIM: “Well you don’t see blue jays and cardinals mating.”

ME: (Continue staring in amazement of the stupidity)

HIM: “And you don’t see cats and dogs mating, either.”

ME: “So you’re saying Black people and White people are like cats and dogs—completely different animals.”

HIM: “Yep.”

ME: “You realize that is the most idiotic thing I have ever heard in my life.”

HIM: “Well if you are from different countries, you shouldn’t get married.”

ME: “So if your daughter wanted to marry a Canadian or Italian, you would have a problem with that?”

HIM: “No.”

ME: “Why people from Mexico or Africa but not Italy or Canada?”

HIM: “Well there are certain countries that shouldn’t mix.”

ME: “So tell me, J, what countries are and aren’t allowed to mix?”

HIM: “Ugh, I don’t know. I guess everyone

just needs to marry within their country.”

ME: “What if a country splits in two like Korea or Czechoslovakia?”

HIM: “Uhh...”

ME: “Or what if you’re a mutt that has such a mixed heritage you don’t know what you are anymore, aka American?”

HIM: “Well...uh...”

ME: “What if you move to another country to escape political and religious oppression and take up citizenship there? You’re officially a member of that country. Can you now marry within that country?”

HIM: “Oh hell, I don’t know. All I know is White people should marry White people.”

ME: “What is a White person?”

HIM: “A White person.”

ME: “Well if you wanted to get technical, you could say a ‘pure’ White person is someone with fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Just what Hitler thought was the pure White race.”

HIM: “Well I ain’t Hitler.”

ME: “If you really wanted to get down to it, you could say I’m not White. I have brown hair, brown eyes, and am 1/4 Native American. My dad is 1/2 German, and my mom is Irish and Scottish. I’ve even got some African in me somewhere down the line. I’m not a perfect White person. So, do you have a problem with your blond-haired, blue-eyed son marrying me?”

HIM: “Well, no, but...”

ME: “Well if you’re going to make up your own standards of what is and isn’t correct, and you’re going to throw your racist bigotry at me, perhaps you should first get a little educated on history, the world, and your past before you pass judgment on another person.”

HIM: “Well I guess I just ain’t educated, then.”

ME: “That’s the smartest thing you’ve said all night.”

After that night, [my fiancé] told me he no longer sees anything wrong with a Black and White couple. Apparently, I busted a few myths that he had been raised to believe. Ever since then, his family has tried to not use the “N word” around me anymore and if a Black person comes on TV, at least while I’m there, they keep their mouths shut....My fiancé and I have always had the discussion in the past about mixed race couples. Every time we’d see a mix couple walking around the mall, he’d always say something like,

“That’s just wrong. I can’t stand that.” I’d always harp in with something like, “Why?! Why is it so wrong? If they’re happy and their share the same beliefs, why is it so wrong?” He’d try to tell me the Bible speaks against it, and I’d tell him he was an idiot.

As Brianna took part in the threaded discussions, she became more aware of herself as a cultural being and the stereotypical beliefs that she harbored. She writes,

I myself am guilty of stereotyping when driving through a Hispanic neighborhood and taking the extra precautions to lock my doors and roll the windows up because I was afraid “Pedro” was gonna come at me like a spider monkey with his 52 cousins and jack my car. There was no sense in me assuming that about Hispanics...

She relates another stereotype she held about Mexicans and their work ethic, but notes how her views are changing because of the readings for the multicultural education course and a discussion that she had with an aunt who went on a mission trip to Mexico. In her own words, Brianna reflects that

When I think about Mexico and how they are pulling children out of school at 11 or 12 years old, I’m reminded of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. At the bottom of the pyramid is the need for food, shelter, and all the other basics to sustain life. On up, you would find security in jobs and education. Many Mexican families are struggling just to survive. Everyday is about gathering enough food just to eat. Here in America, for most of us, our most basic needs are a given. I know I don’t have to worry about whether or not I’m going to eat tomorrow. Education can become a main goal for us because we’re not having to worry about the basics.

In several of Brianna’s postings, we found that the course readings, because of her self-acknowledged limited personal experiences, shaped and informed her thinking regarding issues of diversity. For instance, she notes in an early posting that she felt “intimidated” being a White student at a historically Black university. She indicated that she had not been exposed to much diversity in her life and eventually came to consider it a learning experience that will shape her work in the classroom.

In a posting where class members are discussing how textbooks often are not accurate. Brianna writes about a change she would like to make.

So many history books, especially those for

elementary grades, not only white-wash but down-right distort history to make it a nice little fairy tale. I want my children to learn the truth from an early age. But I guess using a public school curriculum, you don’t have that sort of freedom.

In response to a prompt about Chapter 4 in the course text regarding the three phases of African-American history, Brianna thinks about African Americans in ways that she previously had not. She exhibits an awareness tinged with guilt and disbelief when she writes

When I first started reading this section of the chapter...I was really shocked to read about some of the basic rights denied to Black people. When I read that slaves could not receive or give gifts, get married, or own anything, it really put into perspective just how horribly mistreated they were. I don’t know what it was about the gift giving/receiving part that hit me so hard. I guess it just made me realize how terrible it must have really been to be treated like...well...worse than any animal I’ve ever seen. I just couldn’t imagine being forced to live life that way. Even worse, when I literally sit here thinking about being ripped from my home—my family—taken to a foreign country, forced to be someone’s personal property and slave for life, not having the basic rights of life God intended for even the lowest of living creatures, and being beat, tortured, and raped without the slightest hope of justice, practically brings me to tears as I type. So much for being a “Christian” nation. That’s what makes me so mad.

She adds, later in the posting, that “I think having an increased understanding of A[frican]-A[merican] history will help me better support my A[frican]-A[merican] students.... I will be better equipped to truthfully and candidly present the facts of what really happened....why certain traditions are carried out and the like.”

Brianna’s strong beliefs about the importance of multicultural education are tied to her commitment to be an educator who is transformative. She writes that

... in order for a teacher to bring awareness to his/her students, he/she must first bring awareness to him/herself. Multicultural Education must begin with the educator.... I think that is the whole purpose of this course—to soak up as much diversity as we possibly can, growing and learning from experiences, so that we can go into the classroom and “squeeze out” everything we’ve acquired onto our students....It is necessary in order to provide an equal learning opportunity to all students. However, the benefits of Multicultural Education go beyond the classroom. We also need it in order to ob-

tain complete justice in our social system and to raise a crop of diverse “movers and shakers” that will bring our nation to its highest potential.

Brianna’s description of her future classroom provides a brief glimpse of how she plans to promote diversity in religion and culture by celebrating many holidays and reading multicultural literature. She writes “if...children had a better understanding of other children’s cultures, there might just be less discrimination....I think exposure, exposure, exposure is key to understanding and accepting differences amongst peers.”

Discussion

When we examine our findings, we see that our two case studies exhibit many of the qualities of effective pre-service teachers. Their analyzed postings, as reflected in the coding chart we developed, point to individuals who are insightful and aware of their own and others’ cultural and racial perspectives. Throughout the semester-long course, they demonstrated critical and relational (Milner, 2006) reflection in that they focused on and questioned their own particular cultural and racial experiences, struggles, and position with regard to themselves and others.

Additionally, the two illustrative case studies’ responses to prompts indicated that their reflective thinking extended to critical thinking related to readings in the course text. Both individuals, as they read, thought, and posted in the online forum, developed a clear sense of themselves as racial and cultural beings who have begun testing what they have learned in the multicultural education course as they move toward implementing these ideas in their practices.

Although not illustrative of the group as a whole, the two students chosen as case studies, regardless of the prompts, seemed to bring personal experiences into text-driven prompts while connecting to texts when asked to report personal experiences. When students were able to connect personal experiences to the discussion, they were more apt to reach the “Transformative” and “Transforming” categories. Students’ who did not connect to or reflect upon personal experiences or were void of relevant personal experiences to reflect upon often did not reach the “Transformative” or “Transforming” categories.

Researchers Reflections: Challenges and Limitations

While the focus of the research was on critical reflection, we also gained insight into the nature of online threaded discussion. Several challenges related to the nature of online threaded discussions caused us to direct our thinking to future offerings of the course. The discussion prompts, authored by the course instructor, sometimes guided the level of critical, reflective thinking of the participants.

With regard to reflective and critical thinking, critical thinking was not linear, progressing from beginning to end, but rather prompt driven. That is, the profundity of the response given was a result of the question posed, whether it asked students to connect with personal experiences or the text.

For instance, the second prompt, which followed reading the first chapter of the course text, asked students to “Discuss your conceptions of multicultural education. What is it? Why do we need it? Discuss your personal histories with regard to interracial contact. Consider your earliest memory of an interracial incident and your most recent experience.” Students were responsive to this prompt, and many shared personal stories that led to deep reflective thinking about transformative experiences.

On the other hand, a prompt about learning styles and teaching to meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles did not engender much reflection. Both phrasing of the prompt and topic or focus of the prompt seemed to guide the thinking of course participants. Constructing prompts that allow for students to make meaningful connections and force them to think beyond the course reading materials seems to be a sound direction to take with future online threaded discussions.

One of the researchers described the threaded discussions as coming in “fits and starts” rather than in a linear, progressively more complex evolution. This systematic lack of critical thinking also might be related to prompt construction which leads us to consider the question of how scaffolding and guidance from the course instructor may have impacted the level of critical and reflective thinking.

As we noted previously, the instructor maintained an outsider’s stance and did not participate in online threaded discussions. Would students have responded in a more reflective manner to some of the prompts that did not yield the more complex reflection we anticipated if the

instructor had entered into the discussions?

Certainly another consideration that is addressed in some of the studies of reflective thinking in online threaded discussions (Killian & Willhite, 2003; Whipp, 2003) is the level of critical and reflective thinking that occurs in an online format compared to a face-to-face situation. Although our study did not specifically compare the extent to which students revealed their thinking in online forums and face-to-face situations, we found that students freely seemed to share personal reflections and were highly supportive of each others’ stories. Investigating this topic might provide a direction for future research.

Conclusion

Teachers must develop a knowledge base that includes knowledge about culture—their own and that of others and attitudes and beliefs necessary to teach diverse students effectively. The majority of teachers continue to be middle class and White. Additionally, like Tressa and Brianna, many preservice teachers live in areas where they are exposed to little diversity yet they seek teaching positions in diverse settings.

Online threaded discussions provide researchers and teacher educators a way of examining and tracking change and growth in thinking over time. This research not only has implications for the preparation of pre-service teachers for teaching in diverse settings, but also for in-service teachers who have not had the opportunity to engage in this type of reflective practice.

Through this type of systematic reflection, teachers will be able to analyze learning situations and the individual needs of their students to design appropriate and effective instructional and interactional activities. Conceptualizing how teachers learn to teach for diversity and the various pedagogies used as part of their teacher preparation must be determined. Reflecting about one’s own ideologies and those ideologies in relationship to others, reflecting about various teaching problems and issues, and reading engaging material about various multicultural perspectives (Cochran-Smith et al., 2004) can provide effective ways to aid pre-service teachers as they learn to be critical and reflective teachers.

Note

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of participants in this research.

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Appendix

Coding Chart Used to Analyze Data from Two Participants' Threaded Discussions

Resistance/ Unawareness R/U	Cultural Awareness/Insight (CA/I)	Critical Self-Reflection/ Relational Reflection (CS/RR)	Transformative Reflection (TR)	Transforming (Others and Society) (T)
<i>Descriptors:</i>	<i>Descriptors:</i>	<i>Descriptors:</i>	<i>Descriptors:</i>	<i>Descriptors:</i>
Believing in color-blind and culture-blind ideologies	Realizing the importance of studying cultural and racial diversity	Focusing on self and own experiences as racial, gendered, and cultural individuals/cultural beings	Making meaningful connections with the theoretical perspectives in class readings and their own lives	Making persuasive arguments to transform discriminatory behaviors of others (e.g., classmates, family and peers)
Exhibiting lack of knowledge base and understanding necessary to teach in highly diverse classrooms	Recognizing the political and social realities of race, SES, and culture in the context	Reflecting about their own perspectives, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction with, comparison with, and contrast to others	Exhibiting desire to change beliefs and behaviors with regard to issues of diversity	Making connections between class readings and theoretical perspectives and experiences in diverse schools and classrooms
Reliance on stereotypes	Letting go of reliance on stereotypes	Exhibiting evidence of empathy (taking on the perspective of another culture)	Exhibiting desire to change beliefs and behaviors of others with regard to issues of diversity	Transforming curriculum and pedagogies to better reflect students they taught
Exhibiting lack of willingness to discuss issues of diversity	Thinking about issues of cultural and racial diversity in ways they would not have (without the course)	Sharing of experience, i.e., the experiences of individuals of color in the course		Transforming the political and social realities of race, SES, and culture in the context (social justice)