

# Growing in Multicultural Education with Alumni

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## Introduction

Multicultural education does not develop along a linear path. An individual who decides to become a teacher brings countless life experiences to the prospect of gaining certification to teach in any state of the multicultural United States. This person has a history and a present situation that likely include various experiences along a spectrum from oppression to privilege. A certification program introduces concepts of multicultural education in hopes that the candidate will enter student teaching with a firm foundation of knowledge and respect regarding cultural diversity.

The program, hopefully, uses readings, discussions, and activities that challenge and support the candidate toward growth in becoming a multicultural educator who understands and embodies a practice of cultural competence and equity. If this individual does go on to become a teacher with an effective practice of multicultural education, then the teacher educators of the certification program would do well to maintain a working relationship with this teacher and other alumni who have similar success.

The purpose of the case study reported here was two-fold. One purpose was to begin the work of exploring how able and willing alumni can contribute to a secondary certification program's ongoing goal of preparing pre-service and new teachers to become effective multicultural educators. The other purpose was to evaluate how the alumni had developed perspectives on multicultural education along a path from pre-service teaching to experienced teaching.

I interviewed three alumni who be-

came teachers under a state provision of a fast track that allows one to teach after one year of courses and 50 hours of classroom observations. The three became teachers at the same time and then within two years graduated with the same master's degree again at the same time. I was their instructor for the capstone portfolio course when I was a new faculty member. The three have been teaching in public schools of a large city on the U.S. eastern seaboard, and they are in their seventh year of teaching as of this writing. One of them recently completed credentials for becoming a principal, and the other two are in the late stages of completion of an administrative credential.

For a small group of three, the alumni are culturally diverse—an African American female, a White male, and an Asian American male. I find it is important to disclose that I am a White, generally abled, heterosexual male with a middle-class, Protestant upbringing. All of this places me with unearned privileges regarding race, abilities, sexual orientation, gender, class, and religion. Although I did not choose to grow up with these privileges, I face choices daily as an adult whether to work toward growth in my journey of becoming a better ally in struggles to end oppression and unearned privileges.

My current work as a teacher educator, like my former work as a secondary ESL and social studies teacher, gives me a grand honor and a grand responsibility to participate in the hard work of joining with others to advance democracy, equity, and social justice in our communities and our world. This is a labor of love and joy, and reconnecting with three esteemed alumni reminded me of how exciting and rewarding it all can be.

## Importance of Alumni Relations

Teacher educators mostly are former K-12 teachers who have been away from their elementary or secondary classrooms

for years. Although we have gained some level of wisdom from teaching experience and from completing doctoral degrees, the memories of day-to-day classroom teaching cannot remain as strong after each passing year. Teaching alumni have the current practice that can add a great deal of legitimacy in efforts to mentor pre-service and beginning teachers (Wepner, Krute, & Jacobs, 2009). Any certification program will have much to gain by encouraging alumni to support each other through the challenging first years of teaching. As some of the alumni grow to become master teachers, some among them likely will be willing and eager to return to their certification program and mentor new teacher candidates.

The program in which I work has a tradition already of bringing alumni to a face-to-face session once each year to meet with new pre-service teachers. For a few years I asked the alumni to speak mainly about job search strategies, lesson planning, and so-called classroom management (I prefer to use the phrase "building a learning community"). More recently I have asked them to comment also on meeting the needs of all students in multicultural schools. The four alumni who have regularly participated include two people of color. All four have been glad to share their insights on what approaches they find work for their diverse students. My challenge is to keep moving this topic of multicultural education more to the center in these sessions.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the readings of two courses that students took in their first year of the program as pre-service teachers. The concept of multicultural education for transformation and social action is important in both courses. The faculty members who design and/or regularly teach the courses have a strong commitment toward fostering in candidates not only

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cultural competence but also an advancing efficacy in teaching for equity and social justice. One of the courses addresses social, political, and economic contexts of education in the history and current times of the United States, and the anchor reading is Joel Spring's (2013) *American Education*.

The other course focuses on diversity in U.S. schools and how families of the past and present have experienced education. The anchor reading in this course is Spring's (2012) *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*. Both courses include numerous other readings, several of which are in Jana Noel's (2011) edited book *Multicultural Education*.

The pre-service teachers learn that multicultural education goes beyond celebrations of heroes, foods, and holidays as they read about how it can and should be a process and effort that culminates in personally and socially transformative learning and a will to engage in social action as global citizens (Banks, 1994). Whether these teacher candidates witness such dynamic multicultural education in their 50 hours of classroom observations is hit or miss. In these times of high-stakes testing many teachers feel pressure to teach efficiently to the test, and deep conceptual learning of multiculturalism is not an explicit priority in many classrooms and schools. The teacher candidates (hereafter "candidates") develop their conceptions and misconceptions of multiculturalism from their past experiences as students as well as from their current classroom observations, so it is imperative that the course readings receive careful attention in discussions, activities, and assignments.

The candidates of the Transitional B certification program do not have traditional student teaching, but they plan and conduct microteachings in two of their first-year courses. One of these two courses explicitly focuses on the importance of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). All of the candidates, including those in math and science, must demonstrate in their microteachings how their conceptual lessons are culturally responsive for diverse students. Each must make clear in the lesson's plan and delivery how the content and pedagogy are accessible and relevant to culturally diverse adolescent learners. There are only a few chances to show in these microteachings how one is emerging as a caring and competent candidate who

shows potential for becoming an effective teacher for all students.

Another particular challenge is fostering in candidates a sense of how multicultural education involves multiple forms of diversity in a complex sociopolitical context (Nieto & Bode, 2011). They read how diversities of culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, and ability all come with histories and current realities of power differentials, oppression, and privilege. They reflect on how they, as individuals, have experienced oppression and privilege in different contexts.

To experience oppression is to have a kind of heart knowledge of it as well as head knowledge. To experience privilege, though, can be like having the invisible knapsack to which Peggy McIntosh (2008) referred in her landmark essay. Candidates of color often speak about how they have experienced so many of the unpleasant situations of racism listed by McIntosh. White candidates have a range of responses to this article from insistence upon colorblindness to a critical reflection of privilege in their lives; what nearly all seem to agree upon is that they had never thought much about Whiteness and its privileges before reading the article.

An understanding of how different diversities and -isms intersect and stand alone is something that teachers need to develop as multicultural educators. When women of color found that their experiences were left out of prominent discourses of feminism, they gave a name to the study of their experiences and struggles: womanism. Although other intersections—for example, between gender and class, and between race and class—have not developed names in the same way, there is a need to study how they can help to explain the complex experiences of marginalization and privilege that play out in U.S. society and schools.

Zeus Leonardo (2012) has attempted to give a name to such an intersection between race and class: critical raceclass theory. He argued that race and class, although each stands apart in important ways, have undeniable intersections in history and in the current global political economy of neoliberalism. Marxists and liberals alike came together during the Occupy movement to demonstrate against the market fundamentalism of the global economy, but largely missing was a focus on how institutional and systemic racism plays a role in class dynamics (Abendroth, 2014; Campbell, 2011). Now, the current

unrest over institutional racism in U.S. police forces has brought race back to the center, but a critical analysis that includes class has been difficult to find in corporate media.

Critical teachers need to be intellectuals with a curiosity to understand the currents of history and how they come together in the present, and Paulo Freire wrote volumes about this. Teachers are cultural workers who have tremendous influence over young people, and the work of teaching requires deep knowledge of cultures and the nature of culture (Freire, 1998a). Their intellectual work is incomplete, though, without a commitment to democracy and moral courage (Freire, 1998b). To care about students is to care about changing social conditions that oppress so many of them.

Social justice in education is having effective teachers in every classroom, and it is fostering in students the capacity to be change agents and global citizens in a multicultural participatory democracy. I did not learn how to be a critical multicultural educator in a short time when I was teaching in an urban public high school, and it is a long process of lifelong learning for anyone who places importance on development as a multicultural educator. I, therefore, approached this study knowing that, like the interviewees, I continue to have much to learn.

### Method and Analysis

This was a case study in that it explored in depth a program and process "bounded by time and activity" (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). The program involved a master's degree and an accelerated track to classroom teaching after a year of courses. The process under study was the alumni's development of perspective toward multicultural education from initial phases of pre-service teaching through to experienced teaching. As noted above, the three alumni who volunteered to participate in the individual interviews were in the program for the same three years, becoming teachers at the same time and in the same urban district.

The interviews involved a series of questions in three sections. The first section addressed each participant's background information: such as age; self-identity in terms of race, ethnicity, and/or nationality; and memories of one's schools as a student with regard to cultural diversity among students and teachers. The second section provided the main content for data. Several

detailed, open-ended questions aimed for changing perspectives and practices regarding multicultural education. The third and final section provided closure with invitations to add any further testimony and to ask me questions as desired. I met with each individual at the time and place of her/his choice. Two interviews occurred at the teacher's school after the school day had ended, and the other was at a public library. I conducted the interviews from December of 2013 through February of 2014.

Data analysis involved a study of the transcripts to find common themes among the testimonies. Each participant responded to every question, and each had some more to say at the end. I sought examples of responses that went into greater depth with particular emphases. The interviews were not video-recorded, but I noted the moments in which each individual spoke with heightened emotional intensity. I reread, coded, and further studied the transcripts until I could chart salient themes clearly.

### Findings

Three major themes emerged in no particular order from my data analysis. One involved the perspectives among the three alumni regarding how the graduate program changed the way they viewed multicultural education. A second was the manner in which participants identified with mainstream and transformative views of multicultural education. A third was how the participants varied in their views of culture, race, and class as isolated and intersecting characteristics of students' identities and experiences. After a brief explanation of each finding, I will present each participant and highlight how s/he contributed to the themes.

Before discussing the program's impact on the alumni, it is important to consider how they viewed multicultural education in the first place. They varied some when responding to the question "What do you think of when you see or hear the phrase 'multicultural education'?" They also varied in their thoughts on how the graduate program changed their perspectives on multicultural education. Each shared how the program had addressed relevant theories but also how gaining actual experience in classroom teaching completed the theory-to-practice learning process.

The spectrum of mainstream and transformative views on multicultural education appeared in several points of each interview. There were comments that revealed attention to the mainstream ideas

such as ethnic groups' contributions and celebration of diversity. The more transformative matters of equity and social justice surfaced in direct and indirect ways. It was clear that all three alumni valued multicultural education in general as a means for making learning relevant for all students with regard to their cultural experiences. They clearly cared about students and their achievements, and they expressed how multicultural education has an important role in effective teaching and learning.

Participants' views on details of culture, race, and class showed some interesting similarities and differences. Each had a different way of expressing how these concepts matter in the lives of students, and there were statements that suggested how one of the concepts is more central than the others. There were instances as well when word choice became a noteworthy factor in suggesting how the participant was viewing one of the concepts. Perceptions on how the concepts stand apart and intersect surfaced in some comments.

All these findings can be most clearly presented by considering one participant at a time. Each of the alumni is a talented and dedicated professional who has gained tenure and has made great progress toward gaining credentials for becoming a principal. Each has developed a unique perspective on urban education and how multicultural education is an important part of meeting the needs of culturally diverse students.

### The Alumni

The three participants appear below in chronological order of the interviews. One requested that her/his actual name be used, and the other two provided a pseudonym for any publication of the study. The words/phrases "Black," "African American," "Latino," and "Hispanic" appear as each interviewee used them.

#### Edward

Edward, a math teacher in a high school, agreed to meet with me in his classroom after classes had ended on the last day before the winter holiday break of two weeks. He was 44 years old. When asked to identify himself in terms of ethnicity, race, and/or nationality, he replied, "Asian American." He grew up in the same city where he was teaching but in a distant neighborhood that he described as diverse European. He estimated that the students at his current school were 60 percent

Latino, 39 percent African American, and one percent Eastern European. He noted that the teachers were not "predominantly Caucasian." At one point he used the term "White" but then corrected himself, saying that he did not like that term and preferred "Caucasian."

Edward said that multicultural education is mainly a responsibility of English language arts and social studies teachers, but he was well versed on what students were reading in literature assignments and was pleased that students were learning from orientations other than Eurocentric. When asked how the graduate program changed his views about multicultural education, he enthusiastically replied that it had helped him to understand how students have different experiences and different needs and, therefore, require differentiated instruction. He stated,

... It's too easy to say, 'I treat everyone the same'. You know, it's not fair. It's the same thing as saying, 'This student has a learning disability; I'm going to treat him the same as this honor student'. Absolutely not! ... Fairness and multiculturalism is giving them what they need ... not treating everyone the same.

These words and more revealed how Edward had become mindful of education for equity, and they were similar to the words he had used to describe his overall teaching philosophy. He implied that culturally diverse students need culturally responsive teaching as much as students with learning disabilities require accommodations for their special needs.

When the interview came to a close, I asked Edward whether there was anything more he would like to say. He included in his reply,

... I don't really make multiculturalism a priority; it's just part of what I do ... It's always blended in with everything we do ... Maybe this approach wouldn't work in a suburban school in [name deleted], where they're a little bit more upper-class or something, but then I'm sure there are different cultures over there that, you know, would need to bridge.

A sign of effective transformative multicultural education (hereafter, "TME") is that it becomes a part of one's everyday thinking habits, and Edward indicated that this is the case in his school for his colleagues and himself. On the other hand, this thought of not needing to consciously make multicultural education a priority could indicate a sense of complacency. The work of TME comes from a goal to end all forms of oppression until there is a just



society, so one would be hard pressed to declare that there are no new challenges on the horizon. The statement about the suburban school assumes that students with privileges of race and class are not in need of TME. This assumption perpetuates privilege when privileged students never experience the challenge to critically examine the social conditions that give rise to oppression and privilege. Edward is well-meaning by indicating that even in that suburb there likely are different cultures “to bridge”; however, the trouble lies in not seeing how students with the most privileges and in homogeneous settings are in great need of TME if they are ever to become allies in the struggles for equity and social justice.

Edward was delighted to share his thoughts and ideas. He had been an eager learner as a student in the graduate program, and he always will be. As a math teacher who knows and cares about what students are learning regarding cultural diversity in their novels from English language arts classes, he embodies what all teachers need for becoming and being multicultural educators.

#### Ramona

Ramona, an English language arts teacher, had recently transferred from one middle school to another when I interviewed her in a public library. Her new assignment involved a combination of teaching and administrative/mentoring duties, and she spoke of feeling a bit overwhelmed with the combined workload of both. She was 36 years old and identified herself in terms of ethnicity/race/nationality as “Black, African American.” She grew up in the same city where she was teaching, in a neighborhood that she described as middle-class but “rough around the edges.” The student population in her first teaching assignment was majority African American with some Caribbean, and she estimated that her second school was half African American and half Hispanic.

We had to speak quietly because we were in a library, but Ramona still spoke with passion. She was the only one of the three interviewees to utter the word “racism” or “racist,” which came only when she described her experience as a student in K-12 schools:

Elementary school, I remember, was a wonderful experience... Once I got into middle school, it was a little different. I was accepted into a magnet school program where I didn't have to go to a school in my neighborhood, and I was

able to go to a school that was out of my neighborhood and majority white, which was different for me at that time in the 80s, especially living in [name deleted] in a predominantly black neighborhood... I was never in a school with so many students of a different race from myself. And some of the teachers, I'm not sure if they were ready for that either. It wasn't extreme, but I did experience some type of racism. I didn't have nightmares, but it was different.

Although Ramona remembered the teachers' racism as being not extreme, it was enough for her to remember it. Although the words “racism” and “racist” never surfaced elsewhere in this interview or anywhere in the other two, there were multiple inferences to bias or ignorance in the context of cultures and sometimes in conjunction with the word “race.”

Ramona spoke of how the graduate program had helped prepare her to become a mentor among teachers:

...through the MAT courses and me interacting with other students in that [unexposed to diverse cultures] mind frame ... it helped me understand. And that was one of the reasons why I developed this great interest in mentoring because I want to teach them through the lens that I have, to show them another view of looking at teaching and looking at kids from different backgrounds...

Ramona has become a leader among teachers, and her work of professional development for teachers clearly will have a strong component of multicultural education. White teachers who know nothing of the racism that Ramona experienced as a child will be fortunate to learn from Ramona, who will be firm and direct with them while being supportive and understanding.

When asked what goal she had set for her work in multicultural education, Ramona spoke of fostering students' awareness of diverse cultures:

I want to do more things to expose students to other cultures because I think it's rewarding for kids and it allows them to see what else is out there ... [spoke of Multicultural Day in former school] ... “the students were so overwhelmed and overjoyed to see all the different cultures and learn from it. I think it's an eye-opening experience to learn about other cultures, what they do, and why ...

This might appear to be more mainstream than transformative in multicultural education, but this kind of work provides students with a knowledge foundation for and an appreciation of cultural diversity. Will middle school students who gain cul-

tural awareness be more likely to become high school students, college students, and adults who not only celebrate diversity but also take action to demand social justice when it is lacking? It seems fair to say that they likely will.

Earlier in the interview, Ramona had stated that her philosophy of teaching was that all children can learn. She added that all children will learn when all teachers share this belief. Certainly, a large part of social justice education is every student having a competent teacher who genuinely cares about every student and her/his achievements. Upon being asked to share any additional words at the end of the interview, Ramona focused on the ideas of personal growth and respect. It was an important way to express how learning multiculturalism is a journey of lifelong learning from the head and the heart, and Ramona has this strong commitment to her own growth as she mentors other teachers.

#### Mr. G.

I interviewed Mr. G., a middle school math teacher, in his school's teachers' lounge on a Friday afternoon after classes had ended. It happened to be Valentine's Day, and I expressed my gratitude that he took time for the interview before going home to be with his wife. He was 50 years old and identified himself in terms of ethnicity/race/nationality as “White.” He grew up in a White suburb outside of the city where he was teaching. He estimated that the student population in the school where he was teaching was 75 percent Hispanic and 25 percent Black. In contrast, the teachers were mainly White with a few exceptions who were Hispanic or Black.

When I asked Mr. G. to describe his teaching philosophy, he replied, “I believe in having children construct their own knowledge. I think that through that exploration they learn better.” As the discussion turned toward multicultural education, he recalled that the graduate program's mission was to serve urban schools and that there was an emphasis “to try to get the children to think about real-world situations and what's going on in their life.” He acknowledged that the program introduced him to multicultural education theory but that teaching experience led him to a greater understanding.

When I asked Mr. G. to explain how his views on multicultural education had changed since leaving the program, he turned toward the topic of social class:

So I guess what I realize is that it's not so much culture, it's, one of the biggest things I think we're up against is socioeconomic. It's a poverty thing, and, you know, kids that I have, that I teach, haven't had the same resources that I had when I was growing up... They don't have access to the arts although this is an arts school, so they're getting it here...

While emphasizing class, Mr. G. also stated that the challenges are not so much about culture. In this way he differed from the other two participants, who gave only brief mention to poverty or class while focusing on culture and sometimes race. Why both cannot be heavily prioritized is a question I would ask if there were time and resources for second interviews or a focus group.

Near the end of the interview I asked Mr. G. what advice he would give pre-service teachers regarding multicultural education. His reply included the following:

... To remember that all children are human beings, and, you know, you can't treat anybody differently from anybody else. They need to know that you care about them personally. But I don't think this applies just to people of certain cultures; I think it applies to, you know, little humans in general. They want to be loved, they want to be cared about, and as soon as they know that you care, they drop some barriers and you're able to get to them.

Mr. G. stated that caring is something that needs to be the same for all students. A large part of multicultural awareness is that all young human beings have the same basic need for caring adults in their lives. It was clear to me that Mr. G.'s caring for students was genuine. He was committed to students' intellectual development through constructivist learning methods, and he was equally committed to their holistic development as human beings.

### Relevance of Findings

The findings from the three interviews provide helpful information as I continue to work with colleagues in rethinking how to improve the graduate program's courses that we teach with regard to multicultural education. The three themes that emerged in the testimonies will be important to the course improvements.

First, it is clear that the program did introduce the pre-service and novice teachers to the theories of multicultural education. Program faculty members are in the process of bringing these theories more directly into the pre-service teachers' initial practice in microteachings.

Second, it appears that the program

can continue to bring greater emphasis to a multicultural education that is transformative. The program ends with a portfolio project that places a strong value on candidates' development of pedagogy for social justice, equity, and democracy. The findings showed that the three alumni directly or indirectly affirmed this value in several statements.

Third, there were varying emphases on culture, race, and class in the testimonies. The program's courses address these matters among more—gender, sexual orientation, abilities, and language diversity, to name a few. The study's findings are limited in how they can be generalized to all teacher education programs, but they show how a program can learn from the experiences and reflections of alumni.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Two main questions arise from completing this study. How can the graduate program promote transformative multicultural education across its curriculum? How can alumni participate in fostering multicultural competence and effective pedagogy for equity in pre-service teachers?

Multicultural education is more than just a topic to include in a teacher certification program. It is central to the development of a multicultural, multiracial democracy. It is central to understanding how diverse cultures in our globalized world can live in solidarity and peace rather than domination of the powerful over the vulnerable. Multicultural education needs a central location within and across the curriculum, and it must be more than the traditional multicultural education that stops after food, heroes, holidays, and contributions.

Banks (1994) argued two decades ago for a multicultural education that transforms curricula and leads to progressive social action, and it still needs to happen. The systemic racism of today is documented in the literature of the school-to-prison pipeline (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Orozco, 2013; Wilson, 2014). The recent police killings of unarmed African American men and subsequent acquittal of the police involved have led to a national uprising, and educators cannot ignore what is on the minds of concerned people of color and their White allies.

I conducted the interviews for this study after the death of Trayvon Martin and before the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. If I were to have waited until now to interview the alumni, I won-

der how their responses might be different. There are difficult questions for our society to face, and all educators need to become multicultural educators dedicated to equity and excellence in their work. They are the teachers of future citizens, including police officers. Instead of allowing sound bites to dominate the debates, educators need to prepare students to become critical thinkers, skillful researchers, and active citizens who ask the tough questions, seek truth, and demand justice.

There is no solution in demonizing either the police or the protesters. Hope lies in growing a social movement that works urgently to understand how destructive forces of history are still with us and must be stopped. Dr. Martin Luther King in his later speeches addressed the triple threat of racism, consumerism, and militarism. There is still a need to examine how these forces work together to dehumanize people. Wars continue to rage while racism builds its concrete and metaphorical walls, and while neoliberal capitalism continues its race to the bottom for deregulation, privatization, and greater extremes of wealth and poverty.

Meanwhile, corporate-driven educational reforms put pressure on teachers to teach to high-stakes tests that isolate content areas and prevent an integrated curriculum from opening young minds to complex social, political, and economic problems. Parents and educators have organized efforts, though, to resist this narrow interpretation of standards and accountability and to demand alternatives (Hagopian, 2014).

Finally, teacher education programs with commitments to social justice and equity can benefit from enlisting able and willing alumni in their work with pre-service teachers (Wepner, Krute, & Jacobs, 2009). The three alumni who volunteered for this study are committed to their own growth as multicultural educators, and they have plenty to share from their experiences that can help new teacher candidates to prepare themselves to become critical educators in a multicultural democracy.

The message becomes more credible to pre-service teachers when it comes from a classroom teacher who in recent years was in their shoes and not from only a book and a professor. Growing a cadre of alumni who are serious about a transformative multicultural education is a project worthy of patient, hard work.

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