

Enacting Diversity at a Single-Gender Liberal Arts HBCU Educator Preparation Program

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Abstract

It is widely recognized by state and national teacher accrediting agencies that there is the need for preservice teachers to have dynamic experiences in working with diverse student populations (i.e., English Language Learners, varying socioeconomic statuses, exceptionalities, different family structures) in order to appropriately address the needs of diverse students when they have their own classrooms. However, it is not uncommon for preservice teachers to have superficial experiences with diversity, where the experiences may reside in one course (i.e., Multicultural Education) or may be reminiscent of their childhood experiences (i.e., White preservice teachers working with White students and Black preservice teachers working with Black students). This article provides an overview of an approach to diversity taken by our Educator Preparation Program as we recognize that preservice teachers need to have well-designed experiences in order to be well equipped and prepared for the diversity of the unexpected upon entering the teaching profession. We address this notion from the lens of a single gender, liberal arts, Historically Black College, as we strive to engage preservice teachers in rich experiences to challenge existing cultural perspectives and ignite new knowledge, as they are prepared to be culturally competent teachers who have the ability to effectively teach students across the country.

***Keywords:* diversity, educator preparation program, Historically Black College, liberal arts**

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According to recent research, the K–12 student population has become increasingly diverse, but the teacher workforce is not representative of the student body it serves (Banks, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Similarly, there is literature that addresses the importance of preparing preservice teachers to experience success in diverse classrooms; however, much of this literature has been done with mostly Caucasian preservice teachers and focuses on the need for cultural awareness, responsiveness, and skills when working with students of a dissimilar culture (Banks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Vaughan, 2005). Furthermore, as very few studies have examined the experiences of African American preservice teachers, one study found that these students may benefit from more knowledge and in-depth experiences especially in urban schools (Mawhinney, Mulero, & Perez, 2012). Therefore there is a need for research that examines the experiences of African American preservice teachers, especially those at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and how we can address the complexities of providing experiences in diversity for teacher candidates. Specifically, these specialized institutions may encounter difficulties in (1) providing a strong diversity curriculum and experiences, and (2) recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and candidates. As Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) move towards Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards, diversity components are embedded throughout all standards, instead of as stand-alone core standards as in previous accreditation documents.

We consider these factors in light of the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2014) citing HBCUs as becoming more essential in meeting our nation’s educational and economic goals. HBCUs remain necessary because of the disproportionate impact of HBCUs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) fields and teaching. Although HBCUs comprise only three percent of America’s colleges and universities, they produce half of the nation’s African-American teachers. Creating a more diverse teaching force, especially one that includes many more teachers of color, is a necessary course of action for our nation. The purpose of

this article is to give voice to the experiences of African American preservice teachers at Spelman College, an HBCU with a long and significant history of preparing teachers, in addressing how we may best implement practices of diversity in teacher preparation given our composition as a single-gender HBCU. The following section will provide an overview of the current demographics in education and will explore themes from current literature pertaining to how preservice teachers are prepared to teach in diverse classrooms across the nation.

Current Demographics in Education

The current demographics of teachers compared to the ever-changing composition of today's public schools demonstrate an increasing and immediate need for a paradigm shift in traditional EPPs. Research suggests that teachers cannot just be aware of changing demographics, but must be equipped with knowledge, skills, and values to meet the needs of diverse learners (Feng, 2010). The field of education is facing a demographic shift and needs to recognize and address the growing diversity in our nation. For example, data from a 2014 Center for American Progress report (Ahmad & Boser, 2014) echoed that over the past 50 years, teaching has become a predominately White profession. Eighty-two percent of public school teachers are White, but students of color make up nearly half of the nation's public school population. Approximately 52 percent of the 50 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools are White. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) states that only 7% of full-time teachers are Black.

Recent literature and reports demonstrate that the majority of American teachers are female, have been reared in predominately White middle class communities across the United States, and are unaware of the social injustices and education inequities that are going to confront them and be a barrier to reaching all learners in their future classrooms (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Vaughan, 2005). In contrast to the current demographics of American teachers, the

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composition of teacher education candidates at Spelman College is 100% African American and 99% female.

Another issue that compounds the problem of unprepared teachers is the lack of diversity among faculty in EPPs. Gay (1997) describes how many teachers implement a teaching style based on the ways in which they were taught. Results of research further shed light on this topic, revealing that 90% of EPP faculty members are White, have not taught P-12 or college students with diverse backgrounds, and received their formal education when schools were monocultural and segregated (Gasbarro & Matthews, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2001). These statistics are also in contrast to the EPP faculty at Spelman College which is comprised of 91% African American and 9% Asian.

Similar to the difficulty Predominately White Institutions (PWI) have in meeting diversity standards or threads of state and national accreditation organizations, HBCUs are confronted with comparable challenges. HBCUs are also mandated to provide substantive and diverse field experiences for their teacher candidates to experience success in diverse classrooms across the United States.

Teacher Education Diversity Practices

Beginning as early as 1976, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recommended that all teacher education candidates experience local, regional, or national subcultures different from their own in newly created diversity standards (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). As a result, EPPs often include class work and field experiences consisting of an assigned numbers of hours observing in public or private school classroom. Questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of these practices due to the fact that they often avoid critical reflection and questioning surrounding issues of access, equity, and social justice, as well as preserve conservative ideologies that emphasize assimilation and perpetuation of the status quo (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Nieto, 2006). Furthermore, candidates often dislike traditional classroom observations and lack analytical self-reflections related to these experiences (Darling-Hammond,

2012; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007). There is also the idea that teachers cling to prior knowledge and beliefs about others, and it is often difficult for them to unlearn preconceived notions regarding diversity characteristics such as race, class, gender, ableism, geographic region, and sexual orientation (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007).

These negative stereotypes are perpetuated during traditional field experience observations. However, when teachers are able to immerse themselves in more intense and meaningful field and clinical placements, they gain a better understanding of the cultural life of the school and community, as well as cultural norms of its children (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007). Examples of program immersion include ensuring that candidates have increased field and clinical experiences, attend college courses that are situated in school buildings, and attend faculty and PTA meetings.

Culturally Responsive Preparation of Teacher Education Candidates

Led by James Banks, multicultural education is most likely the most eminent and vastly cited diversity framework that conceptualizes the school as a social system that consists of several variables that need to be changed simultaneously (Banks, 2015). Multicultural education is not an identifiable program or course; rather it is a movement that emerged out of a need to respond to diversity. It is a broad term encompassing the educational programs and practices confronting educational equity, women, ethnic groups, language minorities, low income groups, and those with exceptionalities.

Included within the boundaries of multicultural education is a theoretical framework developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a fusion and enhancement of the terms culturally appropriate, culturally compatible, and culturally congruent (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Early on, Ladson-Billings suggested using a culturally responsive pedagogy to address increasing the achievement of diverse students, as well as changing

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the mindset of teachers who will serve these students (1995). She voiced that in addition to being familiar with how students of color learn, “by observing the students in their home/community environment, teachers were able to include aspects of the students’ cultural environment in the organization and instruction of the classroom” (p. 467). As generations have changed, Ladson-Billings (2014) enhanced her classic theory to include culturally sustaining pedagogy, which focuses on pushing candidates to explore policies and practices that have direct implications on the lives and communities of P-12 student learners. For example, this new pedagogy would encompass discussions on racism, rising incarceration rates, increased violence towards African Americans, police brutality, White supremacy, and a myriad of topics that surface daily. Ladson-Billings’ classic work and suggested format provides a context for illuminating instructional practices that facilitate the academic success and cultural competence of traditionally underserved student populations. Teachers who recognize who they are as individuals, understand the context in which they teach, and are able to critically question their knowledge base and perceived assumptions have a solid foundation and will begin their careers as effective teachers (Nieto, 2006). Further elements of culturally responsive teaching include dismantling unequal distributions of power and privilege, and teaching diverse students cultural competence about themselves and each other (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Synchronously, teachers who become the authors of their own stories and reflections grow to be change agents and realize the powerful influence that culture and previous experience have on present thoughts and actions (Aminy & Neophytos-Richardson, 2002; Nieto, 2006).

Experiential and Service Learning

In addition to truly integrating diversity practices such as enhancing and embedding multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy into all EPP courses, additional frameworks of teaching are beneficial to assisting preservice candidates in changing preconceived notions

and learning best practices to work in diverse communities. Experiential learning and service learning are two examples of instructional models in teacher education programs.

Experiential learning in higher education provides students holistic and effective opportunities to raise their awareness of and reflect on an unfamiliar culture (Kolb, 2014; Wilson, 2001). Examples of experiential learning include cross-cultural experiences either in the community, across the country, or around the world. Darling-Hammond (2008) suggests that to best meet the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional needs of students, teachers must collaborate to create powerful learning and discuss the connection between differences that arise due to cultural and family backgrounds and student achievement. She defines experiential learning as the “rub between theory and practice” that questions the context of learning with real students versus textbook examples (p. 93). In addition to providing hands on learning, experiential learning reinforces social and ethical values, improves reflection and collaboration, results in better trained workers, and leads to a seamless transition of incorporating service learning into college courses (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Kolb, 2014).

Service learning, or community-based learning, in teacher education is described as a practice that blends mutually beneficial community service with academic learning (O’Grady, 2014). When teacher educators mentor students through a community organization the process is mutually beneficial since both the mentor and mentee learn, grow, and interact to form a greater appreciation for each other’s experiences. By exposing teacher educators to the personal lives of students from a culture different from their own, their changed perceptions positively affect their approaches to teaching and learning. Additionally, service learning fosters interaction between diverse socio-cultural groups and leads to insightful reflection and a deeper analysis of issues in the community through a social justice lens (O’Grady, 2014). Studies conducted on service learning demonstrate that service learning and teaching is a lifelong commitment, can broaden and increase a community’s potential for growth, assists teachers in gaining insights on a community’s

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values and behaviors, is a sociocontextual process, and promotes the value of collaboration and reciprocity (Swick, 2001).

In reviewing accreditation-related diversity standards and literature focused on diversity practices, the faculty of the EPP at Spelman decided to make a shift in the teacher certification curriculum to prepare preservice teachers for diverse classrooms and set a standard for excellence among teacher education programs. The following outlines how the EPP has revised the curriculum, to demonstrate hooks's (1994) *Engaging Pedagogy*, which instructs candidates "in a manner that respects and cares for their souls as opposed to "a rote, assembly line approach" (p. 13). As a contrast to traditional lecture and invited response, hooks advocates for an education that extends beyond the classroom and relates to the candidates as whole human beings.

Program Overview

Curriculum and Experiences

Much of our focus is heralded in our conceptual framework theme, *The Teacher as a Leader: An Advocate for Diverse Learners*, as it represents a shared vision and a singular focus—preparing candidates to become leaders who are committed to bring about improvement in the world. Within our EPP, we recognize that our conceptual framework cannot be addressed by limiting our candidates to one course or one field experience, but that it must be expressed throughout the entire curriculum. We understand that our experiences must be authentic and that the students' attitudes and behaviors toward diversity need to be shaped. We consider how preservice teachers have past schooling experiences, which may inhibit their ability to work with diverse learners, and also consider the need for greater exposure in diversity (i.e., linguistic, ethnic) as a single-gender, HBCU situated in an urban area.

Experiences with Diverse Faculty

Colleges and universities recognize the importance of employing a diverse faculty that can substantially contribute to the growth and development of teacher candidates. As attention has been

drawn to the various ethnicities that are represented at institutions, it is recognized that there is often a lack of diverse faculty represented (Weinberg, 2008). Within Spelman College, teacher candidates have opportunities to learn from diverse faculty members at the college and diverse P-12 school faculty.

Due to the liberal arts nature of Spelman College, candidates in the EPP have the opportunity to interact with diverse faculty throughout campus as they satisfy general education courses (i.e., African Diaspora and the World, International Studies, Women's Studies, Foreign Language, Fine Arts), enroll in electives, and participate in campus activities. The current Spelman faculty is comprised of the following: 66.5% Black, 18.2% White, 4.7% Hispanic, 7.6% Asian, and 3.5% who classify themselves as other. Furthermore, it is the intent of the program to affirm and maintain diversity among its education faculty members, as currently the demographics demonstrate the faculty to be 91% Black and 9% Asian; 80% Female, 20% Male. The majority of the full-time faculty have earned doctorate degrees from culturally diverse institutions in various fields of Education (i.e., Early Childhood Education, Educational Policy, Educational Psychology). Due to these varied experiences, the faculty members of the EPP have broad experiences in education research and in teaching, which enable them to assist in the preparation of candidates to work in diverse settings, including English Language Learners and learners with exceptionalities.

The faculty members also have experiences working in P-12 schools with learners of varying ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and exceptionalities. Additionally, faculty have experiences leading academic presentations, seminars, conducting research, and engaging in professional development activities central to areas that highlight diversity among learners.

Even though we believe that the faculty our candidates interact with represent various diversities, we also recognize the need to include greater diversity and establish and monitor progress related to building a more robust faculty as we assess the needs of our candidates and the program as a whole. Faculty members play a

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tremendous role in supporting and preparing the teacher candidates, and as we prepare our candidates for the challenges of teaching in a global society, faculty need to be well-equipped to take on this task.

Collaboration

In order to address the needs of the EPP we believe there must be a substantial level of meaningful collaboration with the arts and sciences faculty and partnering P-12 schools. The EPP curriculum builds upon Spelman's liberal arts coursework, which is aimed at developing multicultural and global perspectives. For example, all candidates take a course in African Diaspora and the World and Comparative Women's Studies or International Studies. We are able to build upon the candidates' experiences in these courses as we attempt to bridge knowledge attained in these courses with their understanding of the historical, social, political, and economic contexts that impact diverse learners. Another unique feature of the EPP is in the re-designing of the courses candidates must take and the structure for their delivery. At the introductory level of the teacher preparation program, students must complete the course, Orientation to Education, which has been re-designed to have a strong focus on the social and political issues that impact overall schooling in the United States. Furthermore, upon admittance to a certification program we have created a model where candidates are in classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and in the field Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The EPP created this model to strengthen the amount of engagement candidates are able to have with diverse learners in diverse placements. For example, within the same semester candidates take courses in Exceptional Learners and Educational Psychology and have accompanying field placements. In addition to candidates being placed in a general education environment and a special education environment in public schools, we have also partnered with the Atlanta International School. This experience allows candidates to interact with students on various diversity levels including racial, linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic, as the school has student and faculty populations representing over 90 cultural backgrounds. Having

a model that provides more immersion into the field and more designated experiences (i.e., all candidates are placed at the Atlanta International School), faculty who teach corresponding courses provide curriculum experiences that relate directly to the candidates' experiences that challenge them to interrogate their existing beliefs and knowledge about racially, linguistically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse students and classrooms. Additionally, the assignments candidates complete extend beyond simple journal reflections but consider the needs of the learners through activities such as case-study analysis, assessment of culturally responsive strategies, and the designing and implementation of instruction and assessment to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Experiential and Service Learning

There are studies that indicate the benefits of using experiential and service-learning in the classroom to promote greater social awareness and strengthen students' ability to thoughtfully question their perspectives regarding social inequalities and relevant issues (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Kolb, 2014). According to Darling-Hammond (2008), preservice teachers who actively engage in experiential learning experiences that are different from their own are able to grasp the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy and the importance of connecting to cultural and family backgrounds in a more meaningful way.

Within our EPP at Spelman, we utilize a blend of experiential and service learning within our curriculum. For example, there are two mandatory courses, Multicultural Education and Advocacy in Urban Schools, where we implement this model. Within Multicultural Education, candidates are challenged by the notion of observing and participating in an experience within a culture where they may hold stereotypes or biases. Candidates also participate in "community walks" where they have a first-hand look at the differences in communities based on geographical location (i.e., urban to suburban) and how this may impact education and schooling. We have found these experiences improve candidates' ability to reflect on and identify biases as well as the social and ethical values they

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may bring to the classroom. Additionally, in the course Advocacy in Urban Schools candidates participate in a service learning experience where they are placed within a community-based agency for at-risk youth. They also participate in a “community walk” to further understand the environmental conditions in which the students they work with live. This experience allows candidates to witness and examine the social, political, and economic complexities that influence youth in urban areas and how this may impact their academic achievement.

The EPP has also designed and currently offers an opportunity for candidates to complete a service learning elective course. This course is an introductory analysis of the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. This course examines interdisciplinary themes surrounding the impact of the hurricane on the Gulf Coast and its survivors. Furthermore, the course examines themes of education, psychology, history, political science, economics, sociology, environmental justice, and the arts. As a component of the course, candidates are also afforded the opportunity to participate in a study tour to New Orleans to bridge course content with the ongoing challenges that impact schools, students, and families.

In restructuring our curriculum, we agree with research (i.e., Kolb, 2014) which indicates the importance of candidates being able to experience the connections between the learners and their communities, and how these factors may impact them as they strive to be culturally competent teachers who are advocates for diverse learners.

Extracurricular Programming

The EPP has also included extracurricular programming for candidates that occurs during each academic year, to further achieve the program’s diversity outcomes of preparing candidates who are knowledgeable about and committed to diversity. For example, the program has an agreement with Young Harris College, a PWI in a rural southeastern region of the United States where the two institutions rotate hosting a day-long, interactive diversity conference designed to have candidates from both institutions interact

with diverse peers and encourage deep thinking about the impact of language, sexual orientation, religion, race, class, and gender on the teaching and learning process. Candidates are also able to establish connections so that they can communicate throughout the academic year to share strategies, insights and perspectives on addressing the impact of diversity in the schooling process.

To further ensure that candidates have educational experiences with diverse faculty and peers, candidates also participate in sessions via video conferencing with Westfield State University, a PWI in the northeastern part of the United States. Through these sessions, candidates enrolled in the multicultural education course for each institution, along with faculty, discuss shared concepts related to diversity topics embedded within the course content. Through participation in the interactive video conferencing, candidates have the opportunity to engage in an innovative and unique learning experience that focuses on diverse perspectives. To ensure that the program outcomes are met, candidates complete surveys about their participation in these experiences. Faculty from the EPP utilize the survey results to assess the knowledge candidates have gained and also to guide future planning of diversity-related extracurricular events.

Moreover, as we recognize the need to offer a myriad of opportunities for candidates to develop cultural competence, the EPP has also included a global experience to study the intersection of education, politics, and history in Havana, Cuba. Implementing this international experience is the EPP's way of recognizing the need for candidates to be prepared to address an array of educational environments, as teaching is quickly becoming a global profession.

Assessment

To assess candidates' learning, course instructors require candidates to complete assignments (i.e., case-studies, unit plans, assessment creation) to demonstrate their understanding as it relates to their knowledge and experiences. Completion of assignments that acknowledge diversity in teaching and learning, provide anecdotal evidence to supplement formal assessments used by the EPP (i.e.,

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rubrics) and enable faculty to arrive at decisions related to candidates' diversity competence. In addition to candidates receiving instruction and hands-on experiences, assessments were developed or adopted that include the assessment of diversity at multiple points during the program. These assessments included measuring proficiencies in several areas, including: encouraging all students to achieve to their full potential; modeling respect for students' diverse cultures, language, skills, and experiences; recognizing characteristics of diverse learners (i.e., exceptionalities); analyzing data to plan and differentiate instruction; applying knowledge for how students think and learn towards instruction and delivery; and treating all students fairly by establishing an environment that supports diverse learners. At designated points, candidates are formally assessed by faculty and cooperating teachers on diversity competencies, and as a result, proficiency scores are generated. Candidates are considered proficient based on the proficiency rating of the rubric. The assessment results guide the faculty in their knowledge about candidate's diversity competence and provide evidence regarding remediation for those who are not proficient.

Concluding Thoughts

The implications of restructuring the EPP were paramount to ensure our candidate's success in diverse communities. As a single-gender, HBCU we recognized the needs and challenges for incorporating experiences related to diversity in our curriculum. Additionally, changes in the mindsets of college administrators and faculty members who approved the curriculum changes and paradigms of thought, reflected a more rigorous and heartfelt alignment between increasing the number of African American teachers in schools, as well as teaching practices to make our teacher candidates successful. Hilliard (1991) believed, "Just as there is vast untapped potential, yes, genius, among the children, there is also untapped potential among the teachers who serve the children" (p. 35). If we expect teachers to be excellent, we must instill excellence and the will to educate all students in the hearts and minds of teacher candidates.

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