

The Anatomy of a Teachable Moment: Implications for Teacher Educators

Phyllis I. Thompson
Buffalo State College

A university professor observes the use of a Native American stereotype by a cooperating teacher in an elementary art classroom while supervising a preservice teacher. She identifies ways that the teacher's words potentially harmed her students and reflects on her own role. This "teachable moment" is described, and characteristics of institutionalized racism and white dominance are examined as a foundation for racist insensitivities in the classroom. The professor calls for preservice teachers to be prepared in their teacher education programs to be culturally responsive. She draws on a study of preservice teachers mentoring minority children to demonstrate how change can begin with restructuring teacher education pedagogy to embrace multiculturalism (Adams, Bondy, & Kuhel, (2005). Implications include practices that help educators identify assumptions about race and socio-cultural difference and overcome learned stereotypes.

The phrase "teachable moment" is used to describe many sets of circumstances. Generally speaking, it is most often used to describe a point in time in a particular place (usually a classroom) when a teacher has the opportunity to deliver a message about a concept or a procedure in such a way that a light goes on for students and they thereafter understand that concept or can carry out that procedure. Conventional wisdom concerning teachable moments suggests that they occur when a student asks a poignant question or when a drawing, a model, or some kind of teacher or student behavior reveals something that was formerly hidden. The sophisticated teacher recognizes the potential of that moment and the extent to which one, most, or all students in his or her charge have reached a cognitive launching point from which they need only a skillful pedagogical push (Peters, 2000).

The concept of a teachable moment for teacher educators is somewhat different or at least it is complicated by the gradual shift that has brought a significant portion of the teacher education process into the nation's public and private schools. Preservice teachers are spending significantly more time in the classroom prior to student teaching. There they observe, help the classroom teacher, and teach lessons, sometimes under the watchful eye of the college instructor. The increasing amount of time teacher educators spend in public school classrooms dramatically increases the number of potential teachable moments for preservice teachers, and watchful, alert

teacher educators. But in most cases there are other learners and at least one other teacher playing pivotal roles that define these moments. These other parties convolute the pedagogical potential of the moment to a great degree. This article examines one actual teachable moment in all of its complexity in the hope that in doing so other teacher educators may be better prepared to confront similar circumstances when they inevitably arise.

The Moment

I had visited this pre-K to 5th grade elementary school numerous times before, supervising my students who had been placed in the art classroom with a certified art teacher. The block long, 75-year-old, two-story school building stands elegantly on a residential street of a small urban school district in a northeastern city within the United States. Its entrance hall shows off ornate ceilings with walls and floors of imported tile. Primarily Hispanic and African American students comprise the diverse student body of approximately 850, though there are small numbers of White, Asian, and American Indian students as well.

My selected observation seat was at the back of the classroom so that the view of the class and preservice teacher's movements would not be obstructed. The walls displayed children's colorful drawings and paintings. To the side of the room, 3D works sat on top of bookcases and a long table. Open shelves of storage units held work in progress organized according to grade levels, while nearby, tall cabinets housed an array of art materials.

The cooperating teacher was a mature woman with salt and pepper hair who came to teaching later in life. She conveyed to me on several occasions how much she loved children and teaching art. Often during my visits she showed me, with pride, the creative work that the students had completed. In her opinion the visual learning requirements of children with special needs were not being met. She gave extra attention to those children who were in her class with the understanding that visual art experiences supported their developmental needs too, and provided tools for self-expression. Her patient, caring demeanor was refreshing after seeing some teachers in the field who conveyed through their actions, that they did not want to teach the children assigned to them.

The preservice teacher, well prepared for the 45 minute session, implemented her lesson with confidence, while the cooperating teacher stayed on the side lines, acting in a support capacity when needed. I reviewed the lesson plan and noted management areas that needed

improvement, along with suggestions to make those improvements. Toward the end of the period, I watched as the teacher candidate brought closure to the teaching episode, and complimented the children for being so cooperative and productive.

With the art period over, some of the approximately 25 third graders looked for their art teacher who had taken a passive teaching role that session. They located her at the back of the room and competed for attention by calling her name and beckoning her to come to their desks. A few students left their seats, tapped on her flowered smock, and gleamed with pride as she acknowledged and praised their images. More and more students left their seats, crowded around the teacher, and held up their drawings, eager to show both finished projects as well as works in progress.

I didn't consider the classroom disorderly and didn't feel that the students were misbehaving. To me, they were expressing their satisfaction with this opportunity to be imaginative, and demanding the affirmation they had received many times before from their teacher. In their excitement, they had forgotten or perhaps ignored class rules regarding movement about the classroom. And of course rules had to be upheld in order to maintain a productive learning environment. I watched with interest, knowing the cooperating teacher would apply her own management strategies to settle the students, and provide a model for the preservice teacher.

Finished with my observation of the preservice teacher, I was about to leave this engaged group of enthusiastic students when the classroom teacher, that same woman with the patient, caring demeanor shouted out, "Sit down! Stop running around this classroom like a bunch of Indians!" I stopped in my tracks, stunned that a teacher would utter such a racially prejudiced command to her students. At the time, all I could do was continue moving out of the classroom and the school and into my car. I was in disbelief all the way home and thought about the incident for weeks. I felt let down by someone I thought was sensitive to all children, including those who were of a different racial, ethnic, and social class than their own.

The Anatomy of the Moment

What could it mean to this class of impressionable learners to be characterized as a bunch of Indians running around? To answer this question, let's identify some of the ways that this

stereotype could negatively influence the thinking and learning of the third graders and the preservice teacher.

The students were potentially harmed when their teacher's words implied that they will:

- support and promote a stereotype of American indigenous cultures, just as she had.
- connect being out of their seats with excitement about their artwork to running around like *bad, misbehaving* Indians.
- view Indian art, music, and dance traditions as lacking substance and significance, based on insufficient knowledge.

In addition, what would an American Indian child think upon hearing the teacher's characterization of Indians? The child, no doubt, would feel intimidated, disrespected, and confused (Heckard, 1993; Pewewardy, 1997). Furthermore, Native children attend the school and more than likely have had or will have her as a teacher.

In what ways was the statement a reflection of the teacher's individual bias, an underlying societal attitude, or a slip of the tongue? Did the statement reflect the teacher's own inherent, but up to now, well-hidden racism, a hegemonic influence of a racist culture, an automatic reflex where without thinking she brought up a statement she had heard in the past? We all say things we rue during stressful teaching moments. Did this teacher say to herself after the statement, 'why did I say that'? Or was she totally unaware of the implications of her words?

Based on my earlier interactions with the teacher, I believe that her statements were not planned, but spontaneous, and that she was not aware of the implications of her words. Apparently her teacher education program did not prepare her to be a culturally responsive educator.

Institutionalized Racism

One must dig deep to uncover the reasons why a teacher would utter a racial slur effortlessly in her classroom, as though it were a normal teachable moment. Where did this teacher get such a negative impression of Indian culture? American mass media has for decades distorted Indian life and history (Pewewardy, 1999). It is probable that her outburst was grounded in learned childhood prejudices perpetrated by popular entertainment in the form of storybooks about the wild west, cowboys and Indians movie and television programs, Indian

mascots used in sports (Molin, 1999a.), as well as the attitudes and opinions of significant adults in her life.

Moore and Hirschfelder, (1999) in their study of stereotyped imagery in children's picture books state that "American Indian stereotyping occurs when particular characteristics are treated as distinguishing Native people from other people," (p. 59). Their research data leads me to theorize that growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the teacher probably experienced White-created Indian imagery that further de-sensitized her to Native people: stereotyped drawings of Indians with high cheekbones, two black braids, a head band with a large feather, and a tomahawk or bow and arrow; photographs with captions referring to Indians as 'savages,' 'braves' and other derogatory terms; and female Indians (with babies on their backs) called 'squaws,' a name associated with sexual parts and prostitutes (Molin, 1999b.). When recognizing these illustrations of Native cultures as romanticized or racist could be a teachable moment itself.

Molin (1999a.) discusses how American Indian protesters have fought for many years to eliminate the use of mascots, invented names, and the ridicule of Indian dance during half time at sports events. Their efforts have encouraged numerous public and private sports teams to eliminate the use of Indian nicknames and good luck icons. However, there are still sports teams who continue using Indian nicknames and symbols today, and to profit from their use, regardless of protest from American Indian activists, insisting that it is their constitutional right to do so.

As insensitive as the teacher's words sounded, they reflect an institutionalized American attitude toward Indian people and their culture (Howard, 1999). Howard identifies disease, warfare, religion, land theft, and education as some of the ways that Native cultures have been marginalized by White dominance and systematically removed from their land and exterminated in the name of development.

White Dominance

In the year 2000, every third American was a person of color (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Many White educators practice racist thinking but, consider themselves anti-racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Howard, 1999). They think that their view of the world is a correct representation of reality. Howard examines the foundation of social supremacy and racism in the U.S. and identifies what he calls 'paradigms of dominance' to assist white teachers and those of other ethnicities who want to examine their assumptions about race and socio-cultural difference.

The first component, the assumption of rightness, confronts a social reality that favors Whites. It includes the melting pot theory that all Americans should melt away differences and become White, Jim Crow and other racist laws notwithstanding. It includes as well what has been called color-blind theory, the contention that not seeing color will erase difference and thereby equalize social and economic conditions. Bonilla-Silva contends that by insisting that minorities now have equal social, economic, and educational opportunities, and disregarding the effects of past and existing discrimination, racism is minimized as a primary reason affecting progress. Blame for slow social, economic, and educational advancement is therefore placed on the shoulders of the minorities themselves; their progress impeded by immorality, laziness, and a general indifference toward learning. “Color-blind racism is racism without racists” (p. 29) that effectively protects White privilege.

Yet another assumption, sometimes called “luxury of ignorance,” suggests that many Whites come to view their personal reality as the only reality. They know little about the groups they call other, but institutionalize their ignorance, ignoring the pain they cause with their narrow views and oppressive policies.

The legacy of privilege, the third assumption, is a privilege that is unearned. All Whites were descendents of foreign-born, but they view themselves as American with more primary rights and privileges than any “other” group (McIntosh, 2000; Schlumpf, 2006). The only true Americans are the Indigenous Nations who are ridiculed and relegated to a second-class status. It is essential for educators to see the negative impact of dominance on the lives of students and their families.

Self-Transformation

Gay (2003) emphasizes that part of the preparation to work with a multicultural and multiethnic student body is teacher awareness of their own skills, knowledge, and attitudes in multicultural education. Action begins with critical reflection (Ambrosio, 2003) on one’s own beliefs and connecting one’s personal and professional lives to that of other human beings. Ambrosio, of Italian ancestry, recounts, “I was exposed to a steady stream of cultural and ethnic stereotypes through television, movies, newspapers, and magazines and from being socialized within the dominant White culture. Although we lived less than an hour’s drive from New York

City, a global center of cultural diversity, I grew up culturally isolated and completely unaware of the ethnic biases and stereotypes that influenced my thinking and behavior” (p. 19).

A study of one’s past leads to learning about and understanding one’s true self. Teaching and learning can be effective when you know your own and your students’ cultural voyage. Whites must recognize their ethnic heritage and identities. Not doing so supports viewing one’s self as a true American and non-Whites as other people who are different with alien customs and beliefs. Clearly, the teacher did not see herself as coming from a history of repression and could not relate to the inappropriate treatment and struggle of Native people.

Personal Reflections

The third graders, the cooperating teacher, the preservice teacher and I experienced immediate and long-term damage by this incident. The preservice teacher was in a real classroom exposed to teacher bias and not in a position to say anything. It is also quite possible that she was unaware of what she was hearing and seeing or preferred not to speak up. As her supervisor, it was my responsibility to seize the moment to show how seemingly innocent behavior can perpetuate prejudice generation after generation, and empower members of a society who are insensitive and ignorant of the cultural history of groups other than their own. I could have been the key player in encouraging self-analysis, stimulating critical thinking, and opening up her perception of multi-cultures. Instead, my thoughts were kept inside of me. By not acting, I let a teachable moment, about a topic that I deeply believe is critical to education, slip by.

Some of my subjectivities emerged after this experience. I likened the cooperating teachers’ commands to statements I’ve heard since childhood such as ‘don’t hang around those niggers’ or ‘see if you can Jew him down.’ An incident some years before when I was a preservice teacher supervisor at another institution also played a role in my behavior. I was critical during a seminar of the way a cooperating teacher disciplined her mostly African American elementary students, pointing out management strategies to my preservice teachers that could be more effective. The preservice teacher assigned to this cooperating teacher shared what was discussed in seminar and the cooperating teacher accused me of non-support and of undermining her. She felt that questioning her management approaches would cause her student teacher to disrespect her. Feelings of mistrust prevailed despite attempts to reach an

understanding. The incident caused me to reflect on my responsibility as a university supervisor of student teachers and a partner with inservice teachers who offer their time and expertise (usually without charge) to prepare teacher candidates in a real classroom setting, and to realize that the partnership agreement between a university teacher education program and a school district does not include an *official* right to be critical of individual or institutional behavior.

My behavior reflects my inability at the time to handle the potential response and consequence of my assertions. Reflecting on how I would handle a similar encounter in the future, meeting with the teacher soon after the incident and telling her how unfounded and harmful her statements were to the elementary students, preservice teacher, and myself would be imperative. Further, I would encourage her to tell the elementary students and preservice teacher that she made a mistake. And I would expect her to listen to my concerns and take them seriously. I decided to write an essay, saying what I couldn't say at the time to a particular teacher, and directing my comments to many teacher educators. To make the most of such a moment takes courage, commitment, and belief in one's own convictions.

Restructuring Teacher Education Programs

The cooperating teacher's profile that I discuss in this essay is like that of many other educators in school systems around the country. They want to teach, many in urban settings, and believe that they are culturally sensitive. Many of them create a classroom culture that is inclusive and respectful. On the other hand there are too many others who do not recognize the prejudices they bring to the classroom, and refuse to confront insensitive or biased pronouncements that come from colleagues (Sleeter, 1994). They are not prepared to meet the needs of multi-ethnic, multi-racial students who are different in social class, language, religion, and learning ability (Ladson –Billings, 2001). Yet white teachers teach most of the students of color in the United States. Research suggests that teachers must be prepared in their teacher education programs to be culturally responsive, and those who are will be less likely to be culturally insensitive in the classroom (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2004).

Change can begin with restructuring teacher education pedagogy to embrace multiculturalism and prepare teachers to be culturally responsive. Recent studies indicate that connecting course content and pedagogy to field experience supports learning and increases

probability of becoming culturally responsive teachers (Adams, Bondy, & Kuhel, 2005; Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2004).

What could a multicultural teacher education program in a college or university look like? Adams, Bondy, and Kuhel (2005) studied preservice teachers in a multicultural teacher education program that included a field experience in an unfamiliar setting, equity and social justice themed courses, education courses that help students understand diverse groups, team teaching, and a safe class environment for questions and discussions. Elementary preservice teachers functioned as one-on-one mentors to African American children residing in a housing project. The goals of the teacher education program were to help teachers “create supportive and productive environments for diverse students and (b) work with school personnel, families, and communities to educate all children,” (p. 45). The authors characterized seven kinds of responses from preservice teachers in this first field experience that begins with *resistance*, distant from their goals, and ends with *passion and commitment*, meeting the goals of the teacher education program.

Building on the findings of Adams, Bondy, and Kuhel, (2005) and Kea, Campbell-Whatley, and Richards (2004), that linking course content and pedagogy to field experience supports learning and becoming culturally responsive teachers. I list the seven responses from the Adams, Bondy, and Kuhel study and use them as a model to show teacher educators how preservice teachers, with their guidance, can move toward becoming culturally responsive educators in a teacher education program grounded in diversity. I have also included suggestions for teacher educators based on my experience teaching and supervising preservice teachers in urban school districts.

Resistance: Preservice teachers found little connection to their course work and thought a field experience in a community setting was not meaningful because it was outside of a classroom setting. They didn't see value in getting to know students and their families beyond the classroom. Statements of resistance such as “I'm going to teach in the suburbs anyway, so learning to teach low income minority children is of no value to me” were common. Often preservice teachers who resist the most have grown up in homogeneous communities, and have limited experience with people unlike themselves. Teacher educators are already combating resistance when they establish field experiences for their students in diverse community settings early in the professional program. I successfully incorporated service learning into an art

education course to connect preservice teachers' academic learning to real life experience in a community setting. Preservice art teachers taught after school art to African American and Latino children in a neighborhood recreation center.

Teacher educators can confront resistance by providing course readings that teach about the lives of people from diverse groups, and offer insight into these groups' lived experiences. It is important for preservice teachers to understand that the views on life of people different than they are, are as valid as their own.

Teacher educators can set high standards for their preservice teachers, stressing that well qualified educators are prepared to teach all children, not just a select few.

Heightened Awareness: Preservice teachers display a developing recognition that families who have different histories, customs and traditions, and who are of lower economic status than they are, are not deficient. They may be surprised that minority parents have similar desires for education and societal success for their children as their parents had for them.

Teacher educators can heighten self-awareness by designing course work for preservice teachers that trace their own personal development as members of American society. They examine their family practices and schooling, and determine the source of their customs, assumptions, and values.

Teacher educators can offer preservice teachers examples of multicultural-based teacher education programs from the field of education as models of the success that will be forthcoming to them (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Conscious Openness: Preservice teachers learn not to judge the students and their families. They become more open to receive and apply what is learned and challenge their own stereotypes and personal beliefs. During the field experience they realize that children having difficulty have parents who care about them and are there for them, regardless of financial and/or academic problems. A stereotype held by preservice teachers, for example, that children who wanted hugs from them didn't have parents who gave them attention and affection, was reversed.

Teacher educators can emphasize the importance of including parents in the process of their children's education (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, and Richards (2004). Teacher educators can encourage conscious openness by building opportunities into the course work requirements for preservice teachers to communicate with parents and caretakers. This can include phone conversations, home visits, interviews, and social gatherings.

Knowing Children as Learners: Preservice teachers had the opportunity to work with students one-on-one and to get to know the student as an individual. The value of this kind of internship is that the preservice teachers can learn of the students' interests, priorities, and needs. Also personal bonding beyond what could happen in solely group interactions is supported. Teacher educators can help preservice teachers know children as learners by creating safe classroom environments in which readings from the course on sociocultural topics can be questioned and discussed, and connections made to experiences in the field. Preservice teachers come to understand that both students' and teachers' identities directly relate to their learning and teaching needs. Teacher educators can stress that feeling sorry for disadvantaged students and lowering expectations of them is harmful. They can encourage tough love and caring that will scaffold students upward.

Cultural Responsivity: Preservice teachers begin to realize that the sociocultural aspects of the child's life are factors in shaping their interests, life perspectives, cultural capital, and lived experiences, and cannot be ignored or separated from getting to know the child. They begin to understand the position of culture in the process of teaching and learning. Teacher educators can create opportunities for preservice teachers to attend community-based cultural events and learn about family history and rituals of those different than themselves.

Insights into Oppression: Preservice teachers learn through social justice literature the origin and background of systemic educational and political policies that maintain oppression over decades. Field placements in community settings and schools give preservice teachers a close-up view of how inequality impacts students, their communities, and teachers. Teacher educators can heighten preservice teacher insights into oppression by using ethnic specific literature in the classroom presented with the voices of the oppressed. Teacher educators can also assign social justice course readings to help preservice teachers gain insight into the purpose of schooling for ethnic minorities and low income students in urban, suburban, and rural school districts across America—and know that there is a formal and hidden curriculum that differs among socioeconomic and cultural groups (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990).

Passion and Commitment: Preservice teachers show conscious commitment to marginalized students. They demonstrate awareness of their own stereotypes and commitment to change self, and look beyond an oppressive society and ask, "What can I do to learn more about

my students' cultures?" and "How can I make a difference?" They see themselves, as well as their students, benefiting from diversity in their teacher education program.

Teacher educators can reinforce passion and commitment by encouraging preservice teachers to confront stereotypes held by friends and family, and to use self-reflection as a tool for continual examination of their knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Preservice teachers should be introduced to multicultural issues early in their professional program, at least as early as sophomore year. This initial professional experience can serve as a support for continuing multicultural coursework and field experiences through student teaching and into full time positions in the field. In the following section I discuss the role of self-reflection as it supports becoming culturally responsive educators and present implications for a curriculum that is culturally responsive.

Implications for Teacher Education

Self-reflection is a tool that can be used to help teachers 'name' their own stereotypes and assumptions (Phuntsog, 1998). Part of this process involves tracing where the stereotypes came from by identifying their roots. Both Ambrosio (2003) and Jackson (2003) agree that to bring sociopolitical understanding to our lives it is necessary to probe deeply into other cultures beyond making dream catchers, African masks, or Kachina dolls, or merely teaching in an urban classroom. For example, in order for educators to be culturally responsive (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003) in their teaching of Indian cultures, they must be knowledgeable about native history and customs and willing to engage in a process that exposes learned stereotypes. Both educators (Ambrosio & Jackson) advocate designing ways for students and teachers to examine and appreciate their own cultural heritage. The process Jackson describes requires preservice teachers to generate their own biographical histories (Hajela, 1997; Hollins, 1996; Howard, 1996) to make connections to others' experiences of bias and discrimination and to project what challenges they expect to face teaching in a culturally diverse classroom.

Teacher education programs that bring cultural perspectives and traditions that are sometimes unfamiliar (Gray, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Ambrosio, 2003) to their undergraduate and graduate preservice and inservice teachers prepare culturally responsive teachers who:

- a) promote sociocultural and political understanding by bringing the experiences, contributions, perspectives and cultural traditions of ethnically diverse groups into the curriculum.
- b) infuse ethnic specific research and literature into the curriculum and prepare their students to participate in informed conversations about topics such as, why national symbols elicit different responses from different ethnic groups.
- c) create networks of support with colleagues in their building or district by joining/creating multicultural book clubs that help its members stay current in the field.
- d) build on learned practices of getting to know their students as individual learners and participate in community-based cultural events and family rituals.
- e) reflect on their own teaching and re-examine personal beliefs and understandings on an ongoing basis.
- f) mentor preservice teachers by example.

There are many culturally responsive teachers in the field who already do these things, and are also alert and ready to act upon teachable moments – those times when racist insensitivities (however hidden from the individual who becomes the source) reveal themselves. Teacher educators can use these practices to prepare preservice teachers to create a respectful and inclusive classroom and to recognize and confront racist insensitivities when they arise.

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