

Achievement Gap and Developing Cultural Competency Skills for Post-Secondary Teacher Education Program Faculty

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Abstract

The emphasis on multicultural education and cultural competency has been a popular subject among teacher educators and scholars (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Ladson-Billings, 2003, 2006; Perry, Moore, Acosta, Edwards, & Frey, 2006; Sleeter, 2008, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Sleeter, 1991, 2001, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Lindsey, R., Robins, K., & Terrell, R., 2003). Teacher education programs in the United States (U.S.) are struggling to prepare competent teachers especially to teach underprivileged minority children mainly in urban areas. The argument of this paper is that the emphasis on or struggle for, if you will, a multicultural education is leading to significant handicaps within the education system in the U.S. One reason is that university professors are not necessarily taking responsibility for failing to educate culturally aware teachers for these classrooms. What we need to do is, not to associate failure with color, ethnic and cultural background but accept failure with an open heart, looking deeper into the practices of teacher education programs rather than pointing out fingers at others while distracting the whole education system. That is, we do not need to explain the failure and underachievement by the weaknesses of classroom teachers, but confront it.

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Introduction

The emphasis on multicultural education and cultural competency has been a popular subject among teacher educators and scholars (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Ladson-Billings, 2003, 2006; Perry, Moore, Acosta, Edwards, & Frey, 2006; Sleeter, 2008, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Sleeter, 1991, 2001, 2008; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Lindsey, R., Robins, K., & Terrell, R., 2003). Teacher education programs in the United States (U.S.) are struggling to prepare competent teachers especially to teach underprivileged minority children mainly in urban areas. Teachers have been held responsible for the achievement gap present in the education system. One of the key reasons for this achievement gap is that new teachers are not skilled enough to teach minority children, referring mostly to African-American children (black children) in certain States (i.e. Missouri) and Hispanic and Latino students in others (i.e. Texas, Miami) (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000). The Federal government then steps in and implements new strategies, places new regulations, and pours money into universities that are promising to help the new teachers with their challenges in teaching these children. This 'new' strategy of the federal government helps produce more literature exploring the multicultural education and offers programs to train culturally competent teachers. However, even with multiple pre-service and in-service training programs, further widening of the gap still becomes a fault of these new teachers. The responsibility for the achievement gap stays with the new teachers that are ignorant about how to function in so-called multicultural classrooms. The purpose of this study is to explore the issues with teacher preparation programs in the U.S., and provide recommendations for developing cultural competency for teacher educators. This study further intends to provoke a discussion to

help us understand how the teachers are prepared and why teacher educators should take a bigger responsibility in the widening of the achievement gap.

Rationale

It has been recognized that for students to become successful in a diverse world, they need to have the ability to communicate and negotiate among diverse cultures (Banks, 2001) and this could be achieved through adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) with trained instructors facilitating it (Nieto, 2000). When the cultural diversity and global tolerance are promoted within multicultural education, traditional elitism and its shortcomings would be overcome (Schugurensky, 2002). That is, multicultural education is important for students to be successful in a diverse world, and the sole responsibility lies with the classroom teachers.

Scholars usually agree with the necessity for an education system to emphasize multicultural education. One argument of this paper is that the emphasis on or struggle for, if you will, a multicultural education is leading to significant handicaps within the education system. University professors are not necessarily taking responsibility for failing to educate culturally competent teachers for these classrooms. Insisting on the current methods and strategies for multiculturalizing the education will not eventually make it work. Therefore, the solution that the current literature suggests becomes obsolete for it is misguided and presents only partially factual information, thus creating a partial truth. To reach to a finding close to the truth currently being offered, we need to ask several questions:

- Who teaches these teachers that are sent into urban schools without necessary skills?
- Are these university professors aware of the presence of students from diverse backgrounds in their classes?
- Are these university professors qualified and skilled enough to train culturally competent teachers?

The 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty identified that the largest proportion of full-time faculty and instructional staff were White (80 percent), compared with Asian/Pacific Islander (9 percent), Black (5 percent), Hispanic (3 percent), and other racial/ethnic groups. That is, the demographics of postsecondary education faculty members are not conducive to training multicultural teachers. Given these facts, it is reasonable to assume that these faculty members had little exposure to diverse cultures themselves.

Another significant finding was that full-time faculty and instructional staff were more likely to be male than female. Indeed, the field of education was reported to be the only field with a dominance of females (58 percent were female, 42 percent were male). Adding to this, when the average age for an assistant professor is 42 and the average age of an associate professor is 47, we can further assume that these professors were not necessarily exposed to multiculturalism during their formative years. With this in mind, not having a diverse composition of faculty members in the field of postsecondary education, it is questionable whether a multicultural education is indeed possible in the near future.

This study does not argue against the necessity of a multicultural education and for major reforms in the current teacher education system but intends to bring new insights into the discussion of multicultural education. Do teacher educators know who they are as individuals?

Do they acknowledge their weaknesses in cultural competency before pointing the finger at the “other”? Why do we avoid the discussions of white supremacy and Eurocentrism?

This paper first explains how achievement gap is tied to the lack of understanding of the multicultural education by current scholars and practitioners. Then ethnocentrism is explored in the context of acknowledging the ‘self’ in multicultural education. Next, why a lack of sincerity and appropriate emphasis cause dysfunctionalities in the current education system is discussed. Finally, the researcher argues that how socially just teachers of teachers are born out of white guilt and the attempt to create a socially just curriculum and instruction is rather a shallow attempt to multiculturalize the education in the U.S.

Achievement Gap and Multicultural Education

Despite increasing ethnic diversity in the United States, many educators do not seem to understand that the multicultural education is the broader understanding, involvement, and appreciation of more than two cultures. Jay (2003) explains that “Despite a tendency to equate ‘Americanness’ with ‘Whiteness’ by individuals both outside and inside the United States, the United States is comprised of many different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups” (p. 3). For example, King (1991) argues that culturally relevant teaching that is successful helps produce a relevant black personality. His argument is relevant in the sense that culture is significant for individual and group identity. It “gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave and of what they should not be doing” (Harris & Moran, 1991, p. 12).

Garcia (1994) argues that research on African American students tends to focus on dropouts, literacy gaps, and educational delinquency. Another example to arguing the

dominance of the White race is Critical Race Theorists' argument that official school curricula are designed to maintain a "White supremacist master script" and they are "culturally specific artifacts" (Delgado, 1995, p. 21). Regarding instruction, Delgado suggests that the "current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient" (p. 22). When African-American students are given tests, Gould (1981) argues, that it is a movement to legitimize African American students' deficiency. Tate (1997) argues that the current multicultural paradigm, currently popular in the U.S., exists to benefit whites. The question Bell (1980) poses is whether whites are promoting advancing blacks when only blacks promote White interests.

Whatever the real reasons behind the so-called achievement gap between the European-American and minority student population in the U.S. are, the lack of a multicultural curriculum and monopoly of middle class European-American, mostly female, teachers living in the suburbs are considered to be the underlying causes. However, neither whites nor non-white minorities necessarily take responsibility of failure. One thing is for sure: It is never "I" but always the "other" that are responsible.

In order for learning to occur in classrooms, we need to examine a wide variety of perspectives, including our own (Curtis, 1998). Lawrence (2005) claims that for an antiracist multicultural education to be more than superficially effective, it must go beyond the lack of multicultural ingredients in the curriculum, policy and structure issues within schools and how school personnel, specifically teachers, interact with students and with each other (see also Banks & Banks, 1995; Lee, 1995; Nieto, 2000). It is the innate rejection of culture difference as threatening as it is because "it challenges an individual to reconsider ethnocentric views of the

world and negotiate each intercultural encounter with an open mind and as a unique experience” (Mahoney and Schamber, 2004, p. 312).

Through this study, the author postulates that the solution to the challenges of establishing a multicultural education lies in the understanding of the relationship between the individuals rather than implementation of a policy model or educational reform within an educational system. An education system, which does not recognize its problems and challenges as they are, rather than creating superficial challenges and solutions, is bound to fail in the long run. Therefore, a realistic approach to why a 30 year old multiculturalization of education attempts cannot offer a practical solution may help explain the reasons behind a failure in an educational system. It is not necessarily the “other” that are not able to achieve to close the achievement gap in urban schools, but the real achievement gap is among university professors’ (mis) training of these future teachers and then distancing themselves from the failure, while also ensuring that they have enough classes to teach for coming semesters. If classroom teachers are not culturally competent, teacher education programs are to take the largest responsibility for not ensuring that their students are indeed ready for diverse classrooms before they certify these teachers. Smith (2009) asserted that success or failure of multicultural education depends on the effective preparation of teachers and administrators. When the teachers and administrators understand the learning needs of students and recognize how these needs can be different than the needs of the students from the dominant culture, then the actual learning occurs. That is, when “we really see, know the students we must teach” (Delpit, 1995, p. 183), we start making a difference in the lives of these students.

Ethnocentrism

Banks and Banks (1993) use the term “ethnic encapsulation” to refer to the cultural deprivation that results from the limited knowledge of any culture other than one's own. Not knowing other cultures significantly handicaps the attempts to help them. More importantly, misconceptions and stereotypes about other cultures limit the solutions. Antal (2002) argues that misunderstandings and conflict occur when people interpret and judge what they see, the tip of the iceberg, according to their own norms, values, and assumptions. Thus the behavior of others may seem strange, illogical, or “barbaric” (Barnlund, 1998, p. 39).

The National Geographic - Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study assesses the geographic knowledge of young American adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (Roper Poll, 2006). In this report, the researchers found that knowing about foreign countries and languages were seen as less critical skills as “slightly over a quarter (28%) say that it is necessary to know where countries in the news are located. Half of the respondents say that it is important but not absolutely necessary and a fifth (21%) say it is not too important” (p. 15). It is further explained that young Americans have limited contact with other cultures outside the U.S.:

- Three-quarters (74%) have traveled to another state in the past year, but seven in ten (70%) have not traveled abroad at all in the past three years.
- Six in ten (62%) cannot speak a second language .fluently..
- Nine in ten (89%) do not correspond regularly with anyone outside the U.S.
- Only two in ten (22%) have a passport. (p. 9)

In the light of these findings, teachers, students, and administrators who have limited (and are often misinformed and stereotyping) knowledge of other cultures are part of the problem rather than part of a solution. If the young Americans do not have a broader understanding of different cultures, it is partially the fault of professors teaching these students. Undsey (2005) explains that when students live in and observe a different society than their own with different concepts of social justice where the dignity and worth of individuals and human relationships are more highly valued, it helps U.S. students develop a deeper sense of appreciation for these values. If this is true, for example, teacher educator programs should encourage study abroad programs to expose their students to different cultures.

Sincerity

An essential part of intercultural communication is sincerity. When in-group interaction differs from out-group interaction in a way that it goes out of the honesty limits, then, it becomes an issue. Poskanzer (2002) claims that “we live in a litigious age, one in which faculty conduct (or misconduct) is increasingly likely to be challenged by students or colleagues, perhaps to become the subject of institutional discipline” (p. 2).

The United States, for the sake of democracy and freedom, has become a society where people are scared of being labeled as “racists” and, “discrimination” has been a very thin ice to walk on: “Boon, bane, or something in between, legal considerations now exert an enormous impact on the day-to-day work of colleges and universities (Kaplin & B. Lee, 1995, quoted in Poskanzer, 2002, p. 1). In this, it is important, for all the races within the U.S. educational system, to exercise their rights to freedom of speech. However, intercultural communication requires a great deal of accountability between what we say and how we act. A big step is how

close these two are to each other. Teacher education programs, while acknowledging the legality and other realities of post-secondary education, need to be sincere in their discourses.

Unfamiliar Seas

Once we place a young female European American teacher in a classroom where she is called 'White' rather than 'Madam', or 'Miss', it is rather unfair to expect her to disengage her from her convictions about the race relations. That is, calling the teacher "White" enforces the difference and widens the gap. Educated in a system where there were only similar cultures, we cannot expect her to grow as a teacher, while also disregarding the behavior she is receiving from students and teachers of color. Rather than blaming the 'young female European American teacher of suburbs,' we need to understand that with the education and life experiences she had, more help needs to be extended to her especially during her first few years in the profession. If white students label their teachers as "Black", their Hispanic teachers as "Brown", and Asian teachers as "Yellow", it is as unacceptable and discriminatory as labeling the students of color labeling their white teachers, as "White".

Furthermore, once we add the pressure of being a new teacher to the pressure of maintaining racial sensitivity, it is therefore natural for any color [teacher] to be less effective. Macphee (1997) posits that rural children do receive images of socio-cultural diversity mostly through the media, but these images alone cannot provide a complete or accurate portrayal of any cultural group. Barta and Grindler (1996) explain that despite the teacher's best intentions, cultural differences are not always perceived positively. This is particularly true when viewed from the perspective of the mainstream culture and bias against diversity, not diversity itself,

becomes the cause of the turmoil. It is their responsibility to make sure that the students are informed about what they will be facing when they enter diverse classrooms.

Socially Just

It is in the human nature to justify the behaviors through various situations that they have encountered. It is the selective perception and acceptance of the partial truth as it is psychologically comforting. It is the avoidance of acknowledgment of the ‘self’ and accountability that it brings along. Since our childhood, we have been blaming others - our sister or brother for breaking mom’s most valuable vase - . When we are young, it is our siblings. When we are older, it is other people, but it is never “I”. While an advocate of the popular discourse, Lewis (2001) explains, “Color-blindness enables all members of the community to avoid confronting the racial realities that surround them, to avoid facing their own racist presumptions and understandings, and to avoid dealing with racist events” (p. 801). It is rather questionable whether such attributes can be expanded to the overall society. Sonio Nieto (2000) argues that multicultural education “challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts” and “affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect” (p. 305). She does not argue that multicultural education “rejects racism”, but rather confirms the importance of teachers’ cultures in the learning process. When we are emphasizing social justice within the society, we need to have an operational definition of social justice, while also putting it into context. If not, social justice simply becomes a tool for guilt-driven professors, who are playing the role of saviors, to collect the social, economic, and political benefits. This further creates a model minority when whites elevate some non-white

groups or give them ‘honorary white’ status so as to create a middle level buffer (Tuan, 1998; Wu, 2002).

White Guilt

Someone has to take responsibility for the achievement gap. Parents, poverty, culturally irrelevant pedagogy, or the fact that white supremacy gives whites greater protections and material advantages than other races (Lipsitz, 1998; McIntosh, 1997) can help explain the achievement gap to a certain extent. The achievement gap between, for example, blacks and whites is not a direct result of unskilled, white, young, suburban (middle class), female teachers as argued by Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005), Ladson-Billings (2001), U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004), and Nieto (2004). Even though Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (2001, 2005), Lazar (2004), and McIntyre’s (1997) argument that race has had a central part in the education of students of color is certainly correct, however, their further argument that well-intentioned yet misinformed prospective and current classroom teachers integrate racist pedagogies in their teachings is not necessarily complete.

What does not make sense is why the students of color are more segregated now than ever before (Orfield, 1988; Bell, 1983; Hawley, 1988; Schofield, 1989) with all the emphasis by scholars, practitioners, and federal funding of teacher education programs in the U.S.? Is it indeed the marginal benefits of white guilt, where blacks and as well as whites, through capitalizing on white guilt to achieve some sort of political and ideological gain, collecting the fruits of white guilt (Steel, 2002)? Is color being a credit to institutions as they provide the moral authority? Is America moving from the dark ages of racism into an age of white guilt

where both sides have marginal benefits without significant consequences of long term spillover costs?

This is how white guilt starts: Whites (and their institutions) first acknowledge the presence of historical racism. However, once they acknowledge it, they lose the moral background and authority, creating a necessity to gain back the ground to hide their vulnerability. Then, promoting white guilt becomes their stance, which then eventually becomes a mirror reflection of black power. McIntyre (1997) and Titone (1998) argue that we should not be surprised that white educators working in urban communities act out roles as white knights, whose mission is to rescue people of color from oppression. This generosity of the whites with white guilt merely stays as attempts to redeem themselves of the wrong doings of the past.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, it is argued that the university professors should redefine multicultural education, self-explore, and open their eyes on the upcoming danger of racializing the education system. Postsecondary education faculty members see themselves as the saviors of minorities, however, oppressors do not wish to see themselves as an oppressive class because “discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed” (p.31) as Freire (1993) stated. Academic elitism and ethnocentrism is a significant limitation for teacher education programs. The discussion of social justice does not go beyond providing a race surplus, and as “strategy for securing to some an advantage in a competitive society” (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 1) under the leadership of mostly white males.

What we need to do is, not to associate failure with color, ethnic and cultural background but accept failure with an open heart, looking deeper into the practices of teacher education programs rather than pointing out fingers at others while distracting the whole education system. Of course, white people do not necessarily reinforce whiteness any more than heterosexuals promoting hetero-sexualism, or men are necessarily sexist (Bonnett, 1997). That is, we do not need to explain the failure and underachievement by the weaknesses of the classroom teacher, but confront it, as Ray McDermott (1987) stated:

[Failure] is a culturally necessary part of the American school scene. We do not need to explain it; we need to confront it.... [T]he ethnographer's work might be better focused on how Americans have become so preoccupied with failure, and how, being so preoccupied, we have found ways to make so constant the attribution of failure to particular children or particular kinds of children. (p. 364)

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