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Preparing Culturally Responsive Educators in the 21st Century: White Pre-service Teachers Identification of Unearned Privileges

Abstract

This qualitative /quantitative investigation highlights the analysis of preservice teachers' responses to an end of semester writing prompt in a diversity course requiring them to identify an unearned privilege that they may have benefitted from. Data were analyzed using qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies. Qualitative analysis revealed a range of privileges that pre-service can rely on when they reflect on the structured nature of privilege within our society such as socio-economic status, race, education, American citizenship, gender, parental support and language. Quantitative results, which focused on descriptive statistics, revealed that Whiteness and social class were privileges that they benefitted from the most.

Keywords

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Power/Privilege, Diversity, Whiteness

As teacher education programs prepare teachers for the challenges of the 21st century classroom, they must first re-examine the changing demographics of our schools and the racial make-up of the teaching population. Research indicates that the majority of teachers in our school system continue to be white middle-class females, who students of color may view as privileged. According to Bell (2002) many of our White teacher education candidates lack consciousness with regard to their “racial positioning” in a society that is stratified by race. Cochran-Smith (2004) posits that because of the growing number of white teachers and the racial inequalities in society, we should critically examine “Whiteness” and its relationship to teaching, particularly since the demographics in our classrooms have changed tremendously over the years. Teacher education programs that strive to prepare students for culturally responsive classrooms should help students understand how the inequitable distribution of power and access to educational opportunities are in our society. In doing so, it is very important to examine privilege and the interconnections of power and opportunities within our society (Gorski, 2013; Wilbur and Scott, 2013). Likewise, research (Kozol, 1991; Nieto & Bodie, 2012; Tatum, 1997) suggests that any attempt to address multicultural education from a caring perspective must address issues of oppression power and privilege within our schools. According to Johnson (2005), privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of group membership and not based on what a person or group

has done or failed to do. Privilege also includes unearned advantages that are highly valued but are confined to certain groups. On the other hand, unearned advantages are those that someone receives by identifying or being born into a specific group. It is also important to recognize that privilege is a part of the reality that helps some while impeding others. McIntosh (1989) posits that white privilege is an invisible knapsack of unearned privileges possess by whites that they can benefit from on a daily basis. According to (Wildman & Davis, 1996), white privilege has no existence apart from Whiteness. Giroux (1997) suggests that white privilege is theoretically located within the framework of Whiteness, while McIntosh (2001) suggests that white privilege is the conferred dominance of Whiteness which is based on skin color and unearned privileges.

In today's society, there are various schools of thought as to the existence of white privilege. Some individuals acknowledge the existence of white privilege, but argue that by making it an issue may lead to divisions within our society. Others argue that we should abandon the concept and focus on more diversity and inclusion within our society. Finally, there is the belief that there is no such thing as privilege.

Nieto and Bodie, (2012) argue that our society is deeply rooted in racism and in most cases, there is silence and denial. Because of this attitude, racism and white privilege are permitted in education institutions. This means that whites have the advantage in succeeding in schools, while people of color are at a

disadvantage. Educators and students of color are required to adjust to the standards and educational expectations based on a Eurocentric model or risk being seen as a failure (Gay, 2010; Lund, 2010). Harper and Davis III (2016) suggest that students of color are faced with racism, stereotyping and other racial biases by teachers in the classrooms instead of embracing the diversity and rich histories that they may bring to the classroom.

Many privileges enjoyed by whites aren't necessarily things that can be earned, but instead are benefits they possess virtually by being born white in a white majority society. White students also have the privilege of not having to overcome racial stereotypes, misconceptions and biases in the classroom. On the other hand, students of color often feel as though they have to work especially hard to disprove negative assumptions made about people of color.

Sullivan (2006) argues that the idea of whiteness and white privilege are invisible and non-existent; she argues that it takes more than a conscious effort to combat it, and the unconscious works against any conscious effort to change the habit of white privilege. Bowser and Hunt, (1996) suggest that the invisibility factor of Whiteness/white privilege is critical because the inability of whites to see privilege seriously compromises efforts to end race privilege successfully, which requires that whites first see it as a problem of themselves.

On the other hand, research indicates other privileges that may exist within our society apart from white privilege. Some types of privilege may include male privilege, racial privilege in general, privilege based on attractiveness, privilege based on gender, and privilege based on social class and education. Privilege is a crucial phenomenon in society. Privilege groups benefit substantially from society, while underprivileged groups are perceived as disadvantaged.

For teacher educators who work with students who may be privileged by race and social class, providing a critical multicultural education is of great importance. It is important for them to understand how race, power and privilege are embedded within our society, how they influence their lives, and the impact they might have on schools. Working toward this would help pre-service teachers reflect on their own circumstances with reference to how race, class and privilege can influence the process of schooling, and strive toward making a difference in our schools and society.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

As the population of school children of color increases, the number of ethnically and linguistically diverse teachers is growing smaller. As the demographics of our public school continue to change, it seems evident that the majority of teachers are still predominately white females, middle class and monolingual, (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). According to (Nieto & Bode, 2014), the minority population in our public schools has increased over the years while the

teachers remain white middle class females. This is also evident in our teacher education programs where the majority of students are white middle-class females.

Therefore, teacher educators in these programs must prepare pre-service teachers to work with student of color and design programs that will prepare these future teachers to meet the needs of these students when they go into the classrooms. Pre-service teachers must understand that students of color bring different backgrounds, culture and history that may be different from themselves. Therefore, they must use these differences as part of their pedagogical approaches in order to meet the needs of the students as recommended by (Gay, 2000), who defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Gay (2010) also suggests that culturally responsive teaching engages students in instruction that utilizes the cultural backgrounds and histories that they bring to school, as tools for teaching/learning. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1994) articulates that culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical strategy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. She suggests some of the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching which includes:

- Student-centered instruction
- Communication of high expectations

- Learning within the context of culture
- Culturally mediated instruction
- Reshaping the curriculum
- Teacher as facilitator
- Positive perspectives on parents and families

If pre-services teachers are prepared with these factors in mind, they will be better able to meet the needs of their students and become more effective culturally responsive teachers.

According to (Nieto & Bodie, 2014) many students of color perceive white teachers as privileged who lack understanding of their perspectives. Therefore, if teachers are going to be culturally responsive in the classroom, one of the areas that would be of significance to them would be to have a good understanding of how race and privilege can impact the teaching/learning process. In this article, the idea of privilege as it relates to teaching/learning and being culturally responsive educators are discussed. It examines the significance of how pre-service teachers view themselves with regards to unearned privileges as seen by society and how this may impact their views of being culturally responsive educators. This was done after preservice teachers had completed a course in cultural diversity studies where the concepts of power/privilege as they relate to being culturally responsive teachers were discussed.

Course Description

This course, “Cultural Diversity in Educational Settings” is one of the courses designed to meet the diversity requirements at a Mid-Western University as required by the state. All students majoring in Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Middle Childhood Education and Montessori Education are required to take this course to meet the requirements for graduation. In this course, students explore areas pertaining to race/privilege, class/privilege, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, religion, stereotyping racism, and discrimination and the impact on the process of schooling. They also engage in various exercises and discuss concepts from a racial/cultural perspective to better understand the concept of diversity and how it can influence the education process.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 50 students, 43 of which were white students, and 7 that identified themselves as persons of color. From a gender perspective, they were 41 females and 9 males included within the group. Most students were undergraduates/graduates specializing in Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Middle Childhood Education and Montessori Education. For all students this was the first required course taken in cultural diversity.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a cultural diversity course in the spring and fall semesters of 2017 were asked to respond to a prompt as part of their final class assignments. The prompt required them to identify an unearned privilege, reflect, and analyze how it has influenced their lives.

Data Analysis

Data from students' responses were collected and analyzed using quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies. Using qualitative methodology, data were analyzed using a system of open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) in which the data was deconstructed and categorized to identified reoccurring themes. As themes emerged, common themes were grouped into categories that would be specific to students' responses. The quantitative analysis was employed using descriptive statistics to identify percentages for each category as identified from the qualitative data.

Findings

In this analysis, students were required to respond to a prompt based on identifying an unearned privilege and reflecting and analyzing how this has influenced their lives. Qualitative analysis revealed the following themes: Socioeconomic Status, Race, Education, American Citizenship, Gender, Parental

Support and Language. Analysis of the quantitative data using descriptive statistics, revealed the following results as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of Qualitative/Quantitative Data for Pre-service Teachers

Categories	Total	Comments
Socio Economic Status (Social Class)	17 (34%)	Financial support
Education (Social Class)	9 (18%)	Being able to attend good schools
Race	14 (28%)	White and Privileged
American Citizen	4 (8%)	Freedoms within US as compared to others
Gender	3 (6%)	Comparison to other minority races
Family Support	2 (4%)	Social/cultural capital needed for success
Language	1 (2%)	Being able to communicate as compared to Non-English speaking Individuals

Social Class

In the data analysis, most pre-service teachers suggested socioeconomic status (34%) and education (18%) were the privileges that made the greatest impact on their lives. For these purposes, socio economic status and education are grouped under the category of Social Class (52%).

In paraphrasing some of the students' comments, one student stated that she was lucky enough to have financially stable parents who were there to help

and continue to help in many ways. These included sending her to the best schools and taking numerous vacations. She also stated that being able to attend the best private schools has taught her responsibility, kindness, respect as well as many other attributes she may have. Another student mentioned that her education was one of her unearned privileges. She stated that she was able to attend a good school district and had access to all necessary resources needed to be successful in academics such as highly qualified teachers, technology and a variety of extra-curricular activities. The student indicated that she was well aware of how privileges have influenced her life and understood that many people do not have the same opportunities that those privileges awarded her. Yet another student commented on education as being an unearned privilege. She stated that having a great education system provided her the opportunity to attend great schools that had many resources that allowed her to reach her full potential. Without this quality education, she would not be as successful as she is today. The excellence that surrounded her and the standards that she needed to live up to each day gave her the ability and confidence to become a lifelong learner.

Race

Fourteen pre-service teachers' responses (28%) identified being white was as an unearned privilege that they have been afforded. Their responses signify that these privileges were awarded based on the perception of whiteness within our society. The idea of Whiteness was also not only associated with society, but also

the process of schooling. One pre-service teacher commented that her race was one privilege that she has enjoyed throughout her life. She indicated that she was white which makes it a privilege in American society. She also stated that the most profound way she has benefitted because of her race was her education. Whiteness was reflected in the public school she attended. Her AP classes were more likely to be white, which was not a true reflection of the school population, while students of color populated the lower tracks. The over placement of white students in AP classes and other advanced programs was well known by school officials but nothing was done about it. Another student said that her race was her biggest privilege and because of her Whiteness, she was afforded many privileges that others did not have. She also suggested that her Whiteness has allowed her attend great schools, be part of the upper tracks academically, and be socially accepted wherever she went in society.

American Citizenship

Four white pre-service teachers (8%) identified being born in the United States, or being a naturalized citizen as an unearned privilege. These white students recognized that US citizenship affords them much greater privileges that others may not get to enjoy. One pre-service teacher commented on how privileged she was and did not even realize it. She suggested that being born in the US is a spectacular privilege that not many people acknowledge, and she was blessed to live in a country where your rights are protected under the law. Another

student acknowledged being born in the United States as a great privilege. She compared living in the United States to third world countries with respect to the freedoms that exist here. She was very appreciative for the quality of education as well as access to health care.

Gender

Six percent of pre-service teachers identified gender as an unearned privilege. Although the majority of pre-service teachers involved were females, it was surprising that only (6%) identified gender as a privilege. This was argued from the perspective of comparison to people of color where discrimination and inequities are prevalent. One student suggested that being a white woman today has given her many privileges that men and people of other races are not able to say they have. Another pre-service teacher suggested that her gender had a big impact on her life with reference to her personal life, education and work.

Family Support

Family support emerged as a theme from pre-service teachers' responses. Two students (4%) identified this as a privilege that has helped them to become the persons they are today. Reference was made to the family being supportive of them in their education through academics and extra-curricular activities. One pre-service referenced the love her foster parents provided her after being removed from an unsupportive environment. Another student mentioned the love and financial support her grandparents provided her that helped her to have access

to the best schools, and to take part in several educational opportunities in the United States and abroad.

Language

Only one pre-service teacher 2(%) identified the ability to speak the English language as an unearned privilege. Her arguments were based on her ability to live her life without any language challenges as being a citizen of the United States where English is the standard language. For example, she mentioned how she can walk into any room and understand the conversation that was taking place, and be able to communicate with the audience unlike people who may have a different language. In addition, she cited how she is able to use her language to advocate for various causes in society and help to make a difference.

Results in this study seem to be consistent in categories with the work of Whiting & Cutri (2015). Social class and Race seemed to be that privilege that had influence preservice teachers the most while language seemed to be the least. However, there were certain categories identified by pre-service teachers in their study which were not found in the study mentioned above.

Discussion

The findings that emerged from this study clearly showed that pre-service teachers clearly acknowledged that they are many privileges possessed by individuals that were unearned or merited based on who you are in society. Some

research suggests that privilege is a crucial phenomenon in society, and many privileges apart from white privilege are prevalent within our society. White privilege is always at the forefront in the field of multicultural education when issues of privilege in our society are being discussed. Nieto & Bodie (2014) argue that students of color may be at a disadvantage because of teachers who are white and privileged, and whose Whiteness may have a negative impact on students. However, pre-service teachers in this study named other aspects of unearned privileges that could be of importance. Of particular interest here is that pre-service teachers in naming unearned privileges and articulating the rationale for being important in impacting their lives seemed to see being white as the privilege as most important. In observing their responses, socio-economic status (34%), education (18%) and race (28%) which had the highest percentages are all embedded within the framework of Whiteness, power and privileged. According to (Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1992; Morrison, 1992; Winant, 1997) the construction of Whiteness is linked to race, power and privilege.

In naming socio-economic status as a privilege, pre-service teachers connected it to Whiteness and their ability to have parents that can afford them life's necessities, and show them how to utilize the social and cultural capital that are afforded them by society. In the area of education, Whiteness was also embedded within the conversations. Pre-service teachers commented on the importance of being born into a white family and the opportunity to live in

predominantly white neighborhoods with access to high quality schools with all the necessary resources needed. Some responses highlighted the fact that being white was an asset when it came to tracking students in the classroom. Being white provided them with a better chance of being in honors, AP or college prep courses than if they were students of color. This is consistent with the research (Banks 2015, Nieto & Bodie, 2014) that suggests that in our schools today, the upper tracks consist of white students and the lower tracks students of poor students and students of color. Race was evident when the academic opportunities provided them were compared to students of color who do not have the same opportunities because of the color of their skin, and the lack of resources in the communities in which they reside.

Conclusion

As pre-service teacher educators, it is our responsibility to help students to understand that the demographics of our school system have changed over the years, and students should be well prepared to work in diverse school settings. We must create opportunities to allow pre-service teachers to engage in self-reflection and more dialogue in order for them to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to work with students of color. They must also be aware of the significance of race, class, power and privilege and how they are manifested in society and in the process of schooling. Naming and discussing various

unearned privileges at the end of a course multicultural education seems to be a great way for pre-service teachers to reflect on themselves with reference to race, social class, power and privilege to see how they view themselves with respect to how society perceives them. This is of importance if they are going to be culturally responsive educators in our school system.

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