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ABSTRACT

Students' experiences are important in shaping their subsequent practice of the teacher role, and teacher educators should look at the connections between life histories, beliefs about teaching, and classroom practice. Five undergraduate seniors and one graduate student (of various ethnic and racial groups) in preservice elementary education programs were interviewed about their cultural identity and personal history, and a brief biography was written for each person. The group then began to meet regularly, based on its interest in student identity and its influence on school experience. Analysis of the group's discussions reveals that the teachers struggle with how they can be inclusive in their classrooms by setting new standards which invite students to participate and succeed for who they are, rather than be denied because of who they are not; they respect student diversity and regard it as a strength rather than a barrier; they see passion as a force for change in their teaching; and they conduct an active search for tools, strategies, and structures to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. The more conscious individuals are about the decisions they have made in assimilating into mainstream culture, the less threatening are the differences of others. The significance of these findings for teacher education is discussed. (Contains 28 references.) (JDD)

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Cultural Identities and Their Impact on Classroom Practice

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Cultural Identities and Their Impact on Classroom Practice

The Impetus

As women who have been successful in school cultures, yet also estranged from it, we have grown into teachers who continuously ask questions about the impact of our stories on our teaching. Our work with students who have not identified with mainstream society has affirmed our belief in the impact and values of what we once thought of as "outsider" status, but now see as "double", and often "multiple consciousness" (Henry, 1992). Although our students' life experiences are different from each others' and our own, the intersections are important in the teaching and learning we share. This realization has led us to increase our knowledge about the diverse backgrounds of our students and how that diversity influences their experiences as students and teachers.

Three years ago we made a commitment to ourselves and to each other to work together, first as colleagues, then later with former students, to learn more about issues of equity and diversity in teaching. By looking at all of our autobiographies and by listening to and reflecting on these stories, we ask, "How do teachers' cultural identities and related school experiences affect their definition of themselves as teachers?"; and, "How do their identities affect their teaching?"

From Life Experiences to Teaching

When the identities of teachers are discussed, it is often in terms of the disparity between a working force that is primarily white, middle-class and female, and the need for a more diverse teaching population. (see, for example, Banks & Secada, 1990, and Trent,

1990). Common sense and democratic ideals dictate the need for teachers who reflect the cultural diversity of the student population. The current realization of the need for schooling and curriculum to be more inclusive if it is to meet the needs of all student, adds further impetus to our concern for a broader array of voices in teaching. Slowly, but increasingly, scholars have noted that school behavior, knowledge of community norms, and decisions about who and what should be included in curriculum can be influenced by the identity and experiences of the teacher (Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1992; De La Luz Reyes, 1992; Foster, 1990, 1993; Henry, 1992). Although there is limited, but growing, research on the presence of African-American teachers in schools, (see King, 1993 for a review of this literature) our understanding of what teachers from diverse backgrounds bring to their pedagogy is still limited. Life histories of culturally diverse students who become teachers offer the potential for understanding how these differences contribute to enhancing and, potentially redefining the role of teacher.

Teachers' autobiographies and their importance in teacher practice have been highlighted in research on teacher thinking (Abbs, 1974; Pinar, 1980; Britzman, 1986, 1993; Grumet, 1988). Prior experiences influence teachers, receptivity towards various teaching methods, the problems they identify as worthy of solving and the images they use to identify themselves as teachers (Knowles, 1993). We also know that teachers' knowledge and thinking is socially conditioned, and that they automatically shape teaching to account for cultural factors that influence or are thought to influence students (Avery & Walker, 1993; Hilliard, 1992; Elbaz, 1981). Regardless of the kinds of programs teachers-to-be experience, research-based, reflective or problem-centered, it is often the superior pedagogy of

experience (Knowles, 1993) that wins out in shaping future teachers. Experiences as students play the most important in the definition and practice of the teacher role (Lortie, 1975). It is therefore crucial that we as teacher educators look at the connections between life histories, beliefs about teaching, and classroom practice.

Both multicultural education and autobiography recognize the central position of self. Each acknowledges the myriad points-of-view and perspectives which students and teachers bring to learning experiences. However, there have been few studies which use the lens of culture to look at the intersection of teacher and student identities. Banks (1993) acknowledges the "rich diversity among the cultures of teachers is an important factor that needs to be examined and discussed in [education] classrooms" (p. 12). And Foster (1990) reminds us that the talk of Black teachers is the "missing voice" in teacher education programs. We take note of the fact that there are many missing voices. In a working force where 87% of American teachers are European Americans, the voices of the 13% who are ethnic minorities are underutilized resources to the discourse about classroom practices.

Feminist Research and Collaborative Conversations

The notion that individuals create or construct their own knowledge challenges the traditional view that there is a body of knowledge which is digestible by everyone in an identical way. It turns upside down the idea that we all share the same view of the world, and that learning and teaching translate into getting people to more efficiently understand or see that knowledge. If we acknowledge that people construct their own knowledge, then there is a pressing need to be able to come to intersubjective, (shared) meanings. Because the knowledge that we construct is heavily influenced by our positions within particular

social, economic and political systems (e.g. female, working class, lesbian, Latino), this positionality takes on real importance in teaching.

Modern feminist scholarship is compatible with the postmodern view of knowledge as socially constructed. Both question assumptions that researchers have traditionally had about the necessity of an "objective" stance, and the separation of the researcher and the "researched" (Banks, 1993). Both point out ways in which the gender, ethnic or cultural experiences of the teacher or researcher, as well as the student or research "subject", are significant since these factors influence the ways in which they have created knowledge, and thus affects their world view. Both acknowledge people, embedded in the social world, as individually defining and experiencing that world, while also being a part of the society that is defining them. This acknowledgement of multiple and common perspectives creates the need for researchers (as well as teachers) to come to some mutual understanding with the people or groups they are trying to understand.

The feminist research methodology which we used for this study can be described as qualitative inquiry, based on reciprocal and interactive relationships (Lather, 1991). Our approach is conversational in tone with an explicit intent to validate both rational and cognitive epistemology traditionally associated with academic (and male) research, as well as "the emotions, intuitive leaps, and less verbalized feelings that have been linked with woman's learning" (Hollingsworth, 1993, p. 376). Like the research of Janet Miller (1990), Sandra Hollingsworth (1993), and Michelle Fine (1993), we make no attempt to separate out (or bracket) our personal biases. We believe the result of this is the reconstruction of

knowledge which is "inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves" (Jagger, 1989, p. 145).

For our data collection process we use a feminist strategy of collaborative conversation. Hollingsworth speaks directly to the concept of collaborative conversation as "both a method of longitudinal research and a means of support in learning to teach" (1993, p. 374). She names this a feminist approach because of three defining characteristics: 1) asking questions which "lead to social changes in oppressed conditions...in underpowered life roles" (p. 376); 2) aiming this inquiry at the gender-based needs of elementary school teachers; and 3) making equally vulnerable the researcher and the people who are the object of the research.

Finding shared meanings and understanding takes time. Our meetings have extended into the third year and we have continued to negotiate and change the direction of the study as it continues to impact our lives and as we continue to become informed by each others' knowledge and experiences. What began as a clock-watching 45 minute "meeting" at a local teachers' center, has changed to longer and longer sessions in which we often lose track of time and other obligations. We end each session by asking what the focus of our next session will be. After each meeting, either one or both of us record the conversations from the meeting and send the notes out to all group members. These notes then become reference points during the subsequent meetings. Recently, all group members have begun writing about ideas or experiences which particularly interest us (e.g., "How does my identity influence my teaching?"), each shares it at the next meeting, when the writing is for an audience we also edit for each other. This, in a very real way, accounts

for the validity of the data collection and interpretation.

History of the Group

When we (Mari and Pat) began talking three years ago about our ongoing work on urban campuses, we immediately thought of our students. We share an appreciation for the opportunities available to us, through our diverse student populations, to expand our awareness and perspectives. Each of us began to identify particular students who, through discussions and journal entries, stood out as being aware of and articulate about the influence of race, gender, language, ability, and ethnicity on their lives. We asked six students, three from Roosevelt University and three from National-Louis University, if they would like to be involved in a research project focusing on the contributions minority teachers bring to classrooms. Five of the students were undergraduate seniors and one was a graduate student in preservice elementary education programs. The five undergraduates were scheduled to student teach in Spring, 1992 in urban public schools. All six agreed and we began by interviewing them individually about their cultural identity and personal history.

Using an interview protocol as a guide, we asked questions about personal information, teaching experience, diversity in their schools, multicultural educational practices, and teaching strategies. We then wrote a brief biography for each person, including ourselves, as we consciously began to move toward having a more shared equal status in the group as opposed to remaining in the role of researcher, apart and separate. We returned the biographies to the students, asked them for feedback and corrections, then

revised them, returned them to the owners. We also circulated copies of the eight biographies to all group members.

Our group members range in age from early twenties to thirty-six years old, with seven women and one man. The youngest member of the group, Anna Maria, is an Ecuadorian-American woman who teaches a primary, bilingual classroom in the Chicago Public Schools. The other five participants include: Milagros, a young Puerto-Rican-American woman who spent many years as a student in special education classrooms, and who now teaches in a public school with a large population of Spanish speaking students; Veronica, an African-American twenty-six year old who got an undergraduate degree in broadcasting and is student teaching in an integrated school in the city; Albert, a Chicano in his twenties, who is teaching African-American students in a poor, suburban school district; Kim, a multi-racial woman in her twenties who is teaching primarily Spanish speaking Mexican-American students on the west side of Chicago; and Debbie, a multiracial, thirty-six year old mother of two, who obtained a teaching degree two years ago and is teaching bilingual students in the Pilsen area of Chicago. We are both Caucasian-American, women in our forties; Mari is the mother of two teen-agers who started teaching in an urban classroom 26 years ago. Pat, who identifies as a Lesbian, is a grandmother who was originally from a working-class family and taught in rural and alternative schools.

As we read and reread the autobiographies, it became clear there were common experiences (e.g., the sense of being an "outsider" in school), and there were also conflicting issues (e.g., the importance of the retention of a non-English first language). We began to think about the value of bringing the students together to meet each other and share stories.

We thought there could be immediate gain to each individual by having the opportunity to talk to each other, and it seemed a more efficient use of time. It also provided a way to eliminate our role in the middle, carrying back stories and representing other people's ideas.

We began to meet regularly during the first year, while five of the students were still student teachers, and have continued throughout their first year and now into their second year of teaching. The group has taken on a new identity as trust has been established and power has shifted. One sign of these changes is the decision of group members to change the focus of the research from "minority teachers" to "culturally-aware teachers". We no longer meet at any institution but rather at a centrally located home where everyone brings "treats" and some group members bring their children. As our former students have gained more teaching experience and we, their former teachers, have articulated what we have learned from being participants in the group, there has been a shift for us to a role that is less central. But because we are the principal people who are interested in formally presenting this as research in the academic community, we retain primary responsibilities as researchers. The other six members of the group define their roles more in terms of participants in a dialogue which leads to support and sustenance for teaching, and has the potential to lead to social change in oppressed conditions (Hollingsworth, 1993). We make sure that the conversations are recorded through notes and tapes and are systematically analyzed. Together, we consciously make decisions about future directions for the group, what data is collected, and how it is presented.

We all agree that the group is now an important component in our professional and

personal lives. We not only discuss the impact of being culturally aware on the elementary school classrooms our students occupy, but also the college classrooms we all occupied. There has been a growing respect and concern for one another as the conversation become more personally and professionally revealing, as we've talked through conflicting viewpoints, and as there are more shared or common experiences.

The initial research focused on what minority teachers bring to classroom practices that is different because of their minority identification. When the biographies were written and discussed, we noticed the common theme of feeling like an "outsider", alienated from schools became evident. "Outsider" status, its causes and effects, then became the topic of discussion for several meetings. We next moved to discussions about "minority" teachers as role models. By this time, most of the group members were in their own classrooms in urban schools, and the immediacy of what was going on in their day-to-day professional lives became the focus of the discussions. Their identities were changing as they moved from student to teacher and they had a growing awareness of the potential for power and influence in their role. Meanwhile, we continue to become more and more aware of assumptions we'd made, and how much we had to learn. We talked about the expectations of us as teachers and professors, in terms of how dress, behavior, and language fit with self image and personal definitions.

As we write this paper, the conversation has moved to the personal experiences, as so-called "culturally-aware" people, which account for the ways we act in our schools and in our classrooms. We talk about the clash of cultures, identities, and roles with school cultures. There is a constant search for ways to have power and share power, to make

decisions in the best interest of our students and ourselves, and to come closer to what it means to be professionals in humanizing ways in institutions which make this often difficult and sometimes impossible.

Findings

This research and study group began because we believed we shared some commonalities: an interest in student identity and a belief that identity has shaped our experiences in schools. As the group spent more time together, we recognized the diversity of voices within the group. On the other hand there are apparent consistencies among us in the ways in which we attempt to enact our experiences and beliefs in our teaching.

The first is the idea that these culturally aware teachers are "gate-openers" as opposed to "gate-keepers". Because of an awareness of difference from white, male, middle-class norms of schools, these six teachers have felt responses of schools have kept them apart from the mainstream of school and, ultimately, away from access to a more privileged social status. Often this was done by disregarding or disapproving of their language, dress, skin color, and family connections. Ana Maria's story of the time she was told her mother was "of no use" to a high school counselor because she couldn't speak English is one example of this, and there are more. Now they struggle with how they can be inclusive in their classrooms by setting new standards which invite students to participate and succeed for who they are, rather than be denied because of who they are not. Ana Maria encourages her students to consider the variety of ways in which they can show appreciation for music (in contrast to another teacher at the school who reminds them of the "appropriate" way to show their enjoyment -- by "politely clapping their hands"). Kim

talks intentionally with her students about the importance of native languages and the profound loss to her of her parents' need to abandon their home language in the process of assimilation. For the women in the group, much of our discussion has focussed on how much to conform to the image of the normative teacher or professor. Conflicts about how to talk and how to dress and how much of our full selves to reveal to our students occupies our daily decision-making.

Another characteristic we share is our conscious work to affirm learners in their own right. Student diversity is seen, respected, and regarded as a strength rather than a barrier. Debbie talks of the preferential treatment often accorded to males, and guards against subtle gender bias that creep into her classroom. Albert, who teachers in a primarily African-American school, floods his classroom with materials which represent at least "some portion of the African-American experience", and augments his social studies texts with books written by African-American historians. Like Albert, all of the teachers in the group "try to make sure that at least [their] students will not have to wait til they are in college, like [these teachers] did, before [they] heard [their] culture recognized and validated in an educational institution." All of us feel lucky to be teaching diverse student groups and articulate the value of that diversity with colleagues, administrators, and our students.

We also see passion as a force for change in our teaching. For many of the women in the group the passion takes the form of anger: anger toward the way they were are treated; anger toward being marginalized and dehumanized in schools throughout their lives. For some, the passion is in the commitment to teach and in being able to change classroom experience for their students in order to provide them with experiences which are

different than what they had. For example, Albert sees the teaching of writing as a revolutionary act for his students, a way for them to have "a say in what they desire to write about, and respecting them as budding writers who write from their own experience and cultural background."

Because the teachers in this group are just beginning to teach in schools, much of our time together has been spent on trying to understand how to continue to be faithful to our identities (as reflected in language, dress, and interactional style) while being members of the "culture" of teachers. Consequently, we've spent relatively little time talking about how to teach. The early conversations on teaching that we have had begin to point towards a fourth finding: our active search for tools, strategies, structures, and other means to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. A starting point is often a serious look at both physical and psychological aspects of school and classroom environments. For example, this year Debbie has painted and decorated her room to reflect the care she feels for herself and her students, the people who will occupy it for the entire year. We attend to the emotional, as well as the academic needs of our students, and take their personal lives into account. Often the tools we use are literacy-related, as one might expect given the centrality of language to our lives. Kim is learning Spanish so she can better communicate with her students, and Ana Maria has transferred to a school which is supportive of bilingual education. We all use journals as well as our own autobiographies and the biographies of our students to inform practice and the choice of curriculum.

The final commonality that we note is that, apparently, the more conscious individuals are about the decisions they have made in assimilating into mainstream culture

(or not), the less threatening are the differences of others, such as students and parents. This group of "culturally aware" teachers accept their students, while holding high expectations for the learning they are capable of, because they do not see them as "deficient". They respect (and value) differences in non-judgmental ways, and work to maintain them while simultaneously teaching for access into the dominant culture. Ultimately we share the belief, stated by Bartoleme (1993), that "teachers must possess both content area knowledge and political clarity of consciousness to be able to effectively create, adopt, and modify teaching strategies that simultaneously respect and challenge learners from diverse populations and in a variety of learning environments" (p. 3).

Significance for Teacher Education

As teacher educators who are willing to be further "educated" or informed by our students, there are several insights we have gleaned because of this study (also see endnotes). These insights include: the implications of having access to multiple perspectives on the classroom; the need to make space for minority or culturally aware students in the classroom, along with the value of assuming an "ally" position with them; and taking responsibility, as white women of some privilege,

in working toward equity in both our classrooms and our larger institutions.

Through dialogue with these teachers we came to more fully realize that the "taken-for-granteds", of classroom experience must be examined, verified, and broadened. Over and over again, as we listened to our students describe their experiences in classes, we were surprised to hear accounts which differed significantly from our recollections.

One of the themes mentioned in the "findings" section was the role we play as gate-openers,

or people committed to inclusion versus exclusion. Understanding what this means in terms of multiple perspectives is to get at the heart of differences in roles and responsibilities. To be a gate-opener it is necessary for the teacher to be "politically conscious and aware of how a group's subordinate social status in the greater society may or may not get played out in the classroom setting" (Bartolome, 1993, p. __). It is also necessary to understand that there are varying perspectives or understandings of shared events, and more than one possibility for responding to them.

Another theme, looking for tools and strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy, implies the belief that student groups are not homogeneous in their strengths, needs, interests, or learning. Here again, different perspectives dictate that we search for ways to be successful since no one method of instruction will be best for every student to learn. Culture, as well as ability; and development, as well as the skill of the teacher, demand scrutiny in the process of curriculum creation.

The need to make space and provide access for all our students reiterates the theme of inclusion, but it also implies the teacher's responsibility to expand the space into which we are including students. We have found that students who see themselves as outsiders (because they have been treated as outsiders by schools) have often learned to be silent in schools. As teachers with greater access (in some ways), who are aware of the ways in which our own access has been limited (in other ways), we have an important role in helping students to make themselves be heard. We do this by first making race, class, gender, and other differences, and the status typically accorded them in society, explicit. We talk about the varied perspectives that exist in the classroom community, and how

looking through socially constructed lens colors the view. We speak what is usually unspoken, and examine the institutionalized effects of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homophobia.

It is imperative that we use our power as teachers to point out that there are a variety of perspectives, whether or not they are ones we often hear and see. We must then go on to ally ourselves with minority students in our classes. Sometimes this means opening the door so students who want to talk about their perspectives have time and space to do so (while not presuming that they will *automatically* do so). At other times it means repeating "stories" we've read that have been written by subordinated peoples. Often, in taking a stand, we become the lightning rod for angry responses and disagreement. But, in doing so, students with outsider status may see an opening to speak, in an environment that's safer than usual (although it may seem less safe for the "majority" students in our class).

Because of this work we have come to realize our current position of privilege as white, middle-class women. Often, the center of the "norm" seems familiar to us, although we have struggled to get there. At other times, we continue to feel outside of that norm. But we are obligated to be mindful that our position in life allows us the luxury of seeing ourselves and our experiences as the "given" for everyone, and to make explicit that which is inherent in our formal roles and status within the Academy. We know white culture. This is where we are the experts, and it is here that we need to be vigilant so as to make change happen. It then becomes our responsibility to be the voice of the outsider within our insider status, to challenge the status quo, the taken-for-granted, to talk about

difference, and to insist on equity and parity.

As teachers who want to change the way schooling, as both an institutional and a personal practice, has taken place, we must bring to it our full consciousness, our complete selves, and our passions. That energy and commitment will need to be nurtured, protected, and emphasized at a personal, professional, and political level.

Endnote

Our insights have been gained from both the stories (data) of the study, as well as the process of data collection. What we've learned from both of these sources -- our findings -- have transformed the way we teach.

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