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ABSTRACT

This study followed six "culturally aware" teachers through student teaching and their first three years of teaching. It looks at how their life experiences or life stories affect classroom practices. Using collaborative methodology, the findings suggest the role of "gate opener" which represents the common as well as the diverse ways all the participants see themselves. All the teachers, including the researchers/teacher educators, can be seen as keeping watch at the "gates" of schooling and educational opportunities (in the traditional sense). As "gate openers" they look for ways to let students into success in school and access to middle class. They also see the need to change the perceived norm for acceptance. This has particular significance for teacher educators reminding them of the opportunities to be informed by their students who have alternative perspectives. It points to the need to make room for culturally aware students perspectives in university classrooms and to take seriously the responsibility to work toward equity in universities as well as elementary and high school classrooms. (Contains 43 references.) (Author/ND)

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From Student to Teacher to Student:
Cultural Awareness and Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This study follows six "culturally aware" teachers through student teaching and their first three years of teaching. It looks at how their life experiences, their life stories affect classroom practices. Using collaborative methodology, the findings suggest the role of "gate opener" which represents the common as well as the diverse ways all the participants see themselves. All the teachers, including the researchers/teacher educators, can be seen as keeping watch at the "gates" of schooling and educational opportunities (in the traditional sense), but may look for ways to let students into success in school and access to middle class. They also see the need to change the perceived norm for acceptance. This has particular significance for teacher educators reminding them of the opportunities to be informed by their students who have alternative perspectives. It points to the need to make room for culturally aware students' perspectives in university classrooms and to take seriously the responsibility to work toward equity in universities as well as elementary and high school classrooms.

"I was aware, at a very young age, that who I was became defined by where I was. In South Carolina, I was the darkest child in the class and I was treated accordingly. In Brooklyn I was the lightest child and I was treated as if I had somehow developed more intelligence." Debbie[1]

If education is to meet the needs of all students, the ideas about, goals, and strategies of schooling and curriculum must be more inclusive. The quest for inclusivity in order to educate all children adds an urgency to the call for a broader array of voices in teaching. School behavior, knowledge of community norms, and decisions about who and what should be included in curriculum are influenced by the identity and experiences of the teacher (Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1992; Hilliard, 1992; Henry, 1992; Foster, 1993; King, 1993; Sadker and Sadker, 1985). School systems are actively recruiting "minority teachers" because common sense and democratic ideals dictate the need for teachers who reflect the wide cultural diversity of the student populations. Yet our understanding of what teachers from diverse backgrounds bring to their pedagogy is still limited. Life stories of culturally diverse students who have become teachers offer the potential for understanding more fully how their identities contribute to enhancing and, potentially, redefining the role of teacher.

From Life Experiences to Teaching

Teachers' autobiographies, and the influence they have on teacher practice, have been highlighted in research on teacher thinking and practice (Abbs, 1974; Pinar, 1980; Britzman, 1986; Grumet, 1988; Schubert and Ayers, 1992). Prior experiences influence teachers' receptivity toward various teaching methods, the problems they identify as worth solving, and the images they use to identify themselves as teachers (Knowles & Ems, 1990; Koerner, 1992; Hulsebosch, 1992; Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1994a). Regardless of the kinds of programs teachers-to-be experience --research-based, reflective, problem-centered --it is often the superior pedagogy of experience that wins out in shaping future teachers (Lortie, 1975; Elbaz, 1981; Avery and Walker, 1993). It is therefore crucial that teacher educators look at connections between life histories and stories, beliefs about teaching and classroom practice.

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, the quotations from participants are from oral interviews or transcriptions from group discussions.

Both multicultural education and autobiography recognize the central position of "self." Each acknowledges there are myriad points-of-view and perspectives which students and teachers bring to learning experiences. Constructivist theories of learning teach us that individuals see the world from his or her own perspective, based on a particular set of experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, our positions within particular social, economic, and political systems (e.g. female, working class, lesbian, Latino) take on central importance since each is a lens through which we see the world, in-and outside the classroom.

Although the "self" is strongly embedded in culture, there have been few studies which use the lens of culture to look at the intersection of teacher and student identities, their stories and how they see the world. Banks (1993) cautions us that 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, Michelle Foster's studies of African-American teachers (1990) reminds us theirs is one of the "missing voice[s]" in teacher education programs. In a work force where 87% of American teachers are European Americans, the voices of the 13% (Banks, 1993) who are ethnic minorities are underutilized resources.

As female teacher-educators who had been successful in school cultures, yet also, in some important ways estranged from them, we wanted to explore the impact of life experiences on teaching. Our work with students who have not identified with mainstream society has affirmed our belief in the impact and value of what we once thought of as "outsider" status (Collins, 1991), but now see as "double" or even "multiple consciousness" (DuBois, W.E.B., 1903). We knew if we listened carefully to our students' narratives of their lives, we could expand our perspectives. This paper describes what we've learned from three years of consistently meeting with a group of six elementary school teachers to talk about the intersection of identity with schooling and teaching. And what we learned about our teaching from them, so to impact our university classrooms.

Feminist Research and Collaborative Conversations

This study is 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 (1994), and Michelle Fine (1993a and 1993b), we make no attempt to separate out (or bracket) the influence of our identities, our personal biases (Schultz, 1944). This group has been meeting across a "rupture point" in the lives of many of its members, as we move from one role to another: student to teacher, teacher-educator to student. One of the defining qualities of the group has been our attempts to make sense of who we are: our shifting and stable identities, and the areas of overlap and difference among and between group members and fellow educators. Another defining quality is our efforts to take what we learn through the study group back into our classrooms in elementary schools and at the university. In these ways our research approach is feminist (see Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1994b for a fuller description of key values we label as "feminist").

Our interest is in the role of self-conscious autobiography in teaching. Although most of the students we teach would be termed "minority" students, they differ in the degree to which they think about the influence of racial, ethnic, gendered, and other cultural identities on their lives. Through student teaching journal entries and seminar discussions we identified students who stood out as being reflective and articulate about the influences of race, gender, language, ability and ethnicity in their lives. We asked six students, three from each of our respective institutions, if they would participate in a research study focusing on "the contributions minority teachers bring to classrooms." Five of the students were undergraduate seniors and one was a graduate student. All were in elementary education preservice programs, and would be student teaching during 1991 school year in urban public schools.

We interviewed the six students individually about their family and schooling histories, and the influence of cultural identity on their lives and the lives of their students. We also asked the students to respond to vignettes which described challenges presented by diverse classroom populations: e.g., racist name-calling among students; a new student who speaks fluent Russian and little English; lesbian mothers. The interviews ranged from 60 - 120 minutes and usually took place in the homes of students or professors. We taped interviews, then wrote topical biographies for each person, including ourselves. Our intent, in adding our autobiographies to the stories of the students, was to reduce the distance between "researcher" and "researched" in a process of collaborative self-study.

We returned the biographical narratives to the students for comment and correction, and, after receiving feedback, we analyzed them for patterns and themes.

As we read and reread the autobiographies, it became clear there were common experiences (e.g., the sense of feeling like an outsider in schools), and there were also experiences about which we had differing perspectives (e.g., the value of speaking a non-English first language in the classroom). With permission, all students received copies of the eight biographies, and we began to think about the value of bringing everyone together for group interviews to compare and contrast experiences. We met as a group for the first time in the Spring, 1991, while five of the students were student teachers. We continued to meet bi-monthly throughout their first, second and third years of teaching (1992-1994). We stopped meeting regularly as a group during Summer, 1996. As with the individual interviews, we take notes or tape the group interviews, transcribe, and distribute meeting notes between interviews. Each manuscript we have written and submitted for publication or presentation has been reviewed by the participants and given approval, earmarking the validity or our work.

The overarching question guiding the group discussions has been, "What impact does your cultural identity and autobiography have on your teaching?" Each meeting also had a specific focus, usually one generated from the previous meeting. Over time, the discussion topics evolved and changed, often in keeping with the development of group members as teachers. For example, when the initial biographies were written and discussed, 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 noted that we sometimes wore an "outsider" role as a badge of honor, and wondered how much this was helpful or a hindrance to our teaching. For example, being an "outsider" can be an impetus to change the status quo, but can also interfere with making connections that could enhance our teaching.

By the second year, most of the members were in their own classrooms in urban schools, and the immediacy of their day-to-day professional lives became the focus of the discussions. Their identities were changing as they thought of themselves more as teachers, while their awareness was growing of the potential for power and influence in their roles. Gradually, as the students moved through their first year of teaching, the amount of talk about children, classrooms, and teaching increased. Next, the discussions alternated between a search for ways to make our classrooms more inclusive, and the effects of "culturally aware teaching" on interactions with parents, colleagues, administrators and our own families. The discussions continued to describe the intersection of the stories of all of our lives with all of our students lives in the culture of the school classroom.

The Personal is Professional

All group members share a belief that identity has played a central role in our lives, especially in our schooling. Beyond that, group members share several other commonalties: all are either married, or engaged; each is of the first generation in our families to achieve a college education; all grew up in working-class homes; each has a "rebellious," or at least outspoken, streak; and all of us want to teach in urban settings with diverse student bodies. But our autobiographies also tell the stories of a varied group of people. We range in age from early twenties through mid-forties, with seven women and one man. Five of us have children, and one has two grandchildren.

The youngest group member, Ana Maria, began teaching in a primary bilingual classroom in the Chicago public school she attended as a child.[2] In remembering her early schooling she says, "I am an 'outsider,' not only in regards to my education, but in life itself...As a student [in an elementary school] with a predominantly white faculty in a white community [it] made me feel as an outsider"(Orbe-Lugo, 1993). As an Ecuadorian, Ana Maria also felt "outside" the "two Latin American countries recognized by the majority," Mexicans and Puerto-Ricans. She also describes herself as "outsider" with regards to the Ecuadorian culture "due to an inadequate bilingual program." And, finally, she says she "cannot claim to be ‘American’ because society will never allow me to, due to my physical features."

Like Ana Maria, Milagros is the only person in her family (of seven children) who was born in America. And like Ana Maria, she was "outside" the school system because she attended a "quote" special education school first through sixth grade. "They sent me there to be around other children with disabilities...I was born with scoliosis." And, like Ana Maria, she was the only "minority" in her neighborhood: "We were accepted by some but not by many...the only thing that saved me was my light skin."

Debbie describes herself as "Filipino-Irish-Dutch-German-Cherokee-American," and says, "My parents did not cultivate either of their respective cultural traditions in our house as I was growing up and so, I feel, if pressed for a cultural identity, I must identify myself as 'American'...I wear blue jeans; eat hot dogs; I go to church only during a crisis, otherwise I work. I grew up wanting a house with two bathrooms and a big lawn, an American-made car and to be president of the United States (even though it dawned on me early that this was impossible for a girl, I still secretly harbored that desire)" (Menchaca, 1993). In fact, the identity that Debbie talks about the most these days is that of being a female. Of gender she says, "I could hide race, but I could not hide sex."

When asked to describe herself, Kim begins with what she calls the "most obvious part," being Asian, "my ethnic culture." She says that she's most aware of that identity when an American person bashes her native country. Kim adds that she feels because she is a woman and an Asian, it equals being a minority which equals oppression. Kim, like many of the group members, has given a good deal of thought to identity and its implications for a number of years. She goes on to describe herself as "lower- to middle-class, of the drug culture, of the new divorce culture, from a dysfunctional family, who is now upwardly mobile."

Much of Veronica's discussions describe a struggle with identity, a struggle which became obvious to her in September of 1990, when, she says, she realized she was black. "I have always known the shade of my skin...but I was lost in knowing the color of my culture" (Johnson, 1993). She elaborates, "For a long time, I have been what America and its educational system has wanted me to be - a black person who thought their blackness did not matter and should be forgotten, or at the very least camouflaged. It was made very clear that there was only two things a person could be - white or wrong. I was determined not to be wrong. So I assimilated the white culture."

Albert describes himself as a "Chicano by choice." When asked what he means by that, he goes on to say that his identity is a political decision. "I am one Chicano among many. To say that I am a Chicano should not lead one to think that I have restricted who I am to a mere label. I'd rather see myself, as the universal person, taking the idea from the Mexican philosopher Vasconcelos" (Delgado, 1993).

When asked about who she is, Mari talks about her experiences "as a child growing up in a working-class, first-generation Italian family on the West Side of Chicago." For her, those experiences "center around being an integral part of the family," from which she took "a real sense of belonging and being valued" (Koerner, 1993). She also identifies as a teacher...she has taught her entire adult life, in and outside of schools, married a Chicago Public School teacher and is surrounded by friends who are professional educators.

Pat's identity has been shaped by two key elements: place (growing up a shrimper's daughter in Texas, later moving to urban Chicago), and time (a Catholic childhood which was overtaken by a feminist adult life). Growing up, Pat wanted to be either a nun or a cow-girl, until she realized that society's rewards were most likely to come from filling more traditional roles. Nowadays she labels herself a "39 year old lesbian mother and grandmother" (Hulsebosch, 1993).

Our stories reflect successes in the public schools because we had all persisted and gone on to receive college degrees. However, within these successes, what struck us were the lack of expectations that we would achieve great things, while ironically, at times, the seemingly insurmountable obstacles and painful experiences. For example, there is the time Ana Maria's mother was asked to come to the high school because Anna's grades had dropped, only to be told by the school counselor that her Spanish-speaking mother was "useless." Ana Maria dropped out of school that day, eventually returning to the system, but not to the school in which her mother was insulted. Several of us have talked about how it wasn't until college, or graduate school that we learned about the contributions of people we could identity with: women, Chicanos, working-class people. Although each of us eventually mastered the work of schools, each of us also felt disappointed in what we had, and had not, learned. In many ways it is this disappointment that pushes us to look for different ways to teach our students

Ideas and Possibilities

A common theme which repeatedly occurs in all of our stories is the idea of "gate opener." "Gate opener" represents the common as well as the diverse ways we see our experiences as culturally aware teachers. As gate openers, we see ourselves in contrast to teachers who act as gate keepers. "Gate keeper" conjures up the image of people who stand at the door of schooling armed with standards and norms, methodically sort through the "smart" kids and the "dumb" ones. A "gate opener" is someone who keeps a watch at the "doors," but looks for ways to let people in; perhaps, opening up the routes to success in school, access to middle class, finding a route to teacher certification.

There are several ways to look at what a gate opener does: recognizing and legitimizing individual children and their life experiences, looking at what it means to be "normal" in school, providing resources and experiences so students (who have traditionally met failure in school) can meet existing standards. Many of the teachers in this "culturally aware" group hoped that this opening of the gates could eventually lead to access to middle class status and more choices in students' lives. There is also hope that, along the way, gate-openers will have opportunities to redefine the standards, which often have their roots in white, male, middle-class norms of behavior and achievement. Being a teacher who is a gate opener also involves making curriculum decisions, looking at labeling and tracking, strategizing to be successful in the school culture and investigating what it means for teachers to be accepted members of the school community while being change agents as well.

In the following sections of the paper we look more closely at the ways in which students are kept out of the mainstream of school by well-meaning teachers, and at the ways that these teachers attempt to keep the "gates" open for all students.

Outsiders Within

One of the most consistent memories of the first day of school is the desire to impress everyone with a new set of clothes. Teachers and students alike make judgments about students, parents and each other based on how they look, act, and sound. It is therefore not surprising that a key concern among most members of this study group was how to be faithful to our identities (as reflected in language, dress, and interactional style) while being members of the "culture" of teachers.

In one discussion we asked, half seriously, if it is necessary for all elementary teachers to wear denim skirts because Veronica's mother had actually bought one to begin her daughter's teaching wardrobe. Ana Maria talked about the problems she had with colleagues telling her how to dress professionally. "It seems like I'm not a teacher to the rest of the teachers because I am young and because I [look like someone] from the neighborhood. I am judged by different standards than the white teachers." She was told by another Latino teacher, "Our bodies have form, so we cannot wear the same clothes [as other non-Latino teachers might]." The teacher was telling Ana Maria she must be careful to dress in a conservative way and wear her long hair tied back. Ana Maria recounts another incident at her school in which a middle school student helped her carry boxes to her car. When he saw her car, a "low-rider, beater" with huge speakers in the trunk, his reaction was, "Hey, teachers don't drive cars like that!" When Ana Maria asked him what his definition of a teacher was, he responded, "Someone who's white, lives in the suburbs, and drives a plain car." With her hand on her hip she asked, "Well, what about me. I'm a teacher. Is that what I am." The student walked off, scratching his head in puzzlement over the apparent conflict between his image and the reality Ana Maria presented.

The significance of all these identifiers seemed to trigger recollections of factors which had separated us from other students throughout our schooling. Veronica talked about how she has felt her appearance has been judged with special scrutiny because she is African-American, and how she now believes it is crucial that she think carefully about how she presents herself in school. She wonders if her decisions on how to dress and act are an effort to "look white" in order to be accepted in the school culture, or is it simply that she likes to look a certain way. At times she says she also feels alienated from African-American teachers in that they seem to dress too sophisticated for her style. And gender is a complicating issue for all of us. Veronica elaborates: "In black schools, [in Chicago] people dress like they're going to a party. I'm black and I don't dress like that. [Sophisticated clothes] sets up a distance between the teachers and the students. But for men, it doesn't matter. They are not judged by how they dress in schools in the same way women are." Debbie talks about "having to wear a dress...being taught to be `ladylike,' which translated into demure, non-assertive, subservient, attractive and pleasant." She is conscious of women in her school dressing in a "feminine" way in order to fit in.

These stories show how the teachers in this study (our six students and us as teachers/researchers), keenly aware of the power and responsibility that accompanies our roles as culturally aware "minority" teachers, still work within a system governed by majority rules and norms. For us, an important aspect of "gate-opening" is the attempt to broaden the definition of what's acceptable and appropriate, in dress, language, and demeanor, for themselves, as role models, as well as for our students.

Expanding Standards

In order to be successful, it is necessary to learn how to be successful in a predominantly white, middle-class, male dominated world. We share a belief that we are obligated to our students to teach them the skills that will enable them to "code switch" between home and family cultures and the dominant society culture.

Like Cummins' framework for "empowering education" (1993), we believe that while teaching students dominant society cultural skills, it is equally necessary to affirm their identity or home cultures. Thus, our goal is to be inclusive in our 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, herself a mother, welcomes parents of her students and, if they prefer, speaks to them in Spanish. She encourages her students to learn and express themselves in multiple ways which may be broader than the norm of the school culture. For example, at an assembly a colleague was reprimanding children for applauding too loudly and acting "wild." Ana Maria saw her students' responses (i.e., moving to the music) as "normal" ways to show appreciation for music, and talked with them about this. Kim talks intentionally with her students about the importance of maintaining native languages and the profound loss to her of her parents' need to abandon their home language in the process of assimilation. Veronica does not make assumptions about the children in her classroom based only on other teachers' impressions or how children act in other situations in school. When the school spelling bee came along, Veronica had a spelling bee in her room to determine the children who would represent the class in the school contest. When the winners of the contest became the representatives of the class, the mother of another little girl came to school to tell Veronica she had mistakenly chosen the wrong student. Veronica was informed that this mother's child had been in the school contest since first grade and the child who was Veronica's "choice" was not smart enough. Veronica held her position and the mother went to the principal to complain. Teachers came to tell her about her obvious mistake and attempted to persuade this very new, young teacher. Veronica refused to reconsider because "what's fair is fair." As it turns out, the newly selected child won the primary spelling bee title. No assumptions about either child were going to interfere with what Veronica believed to be a fair selection process.

Disabling Labels

Among this group of teachers, many remember being labeled as different, and therefore inferior. When Milagros went to a special school for children with physical disabilities, she remembers being required to stand up and introduce herself by stating her name and her "condition." She says, "It was sickening." Veronica talked about the devastating effects the absence of affirmation brought to her experience. "For a long time, I have been what America and it's educational system have wanted me to be--a black person who thought their blackness did not matter and should be forgotten, or at the very least camouflaged....I spoke white, dressed white, dreamed white....So, I followed the rules, but who was I? Where did I fit in?" There is a thought-out desire to look at children and affirm them as people. They do not have to conform to artificial, culturally biased standards in order to succeed. Veronica vows, in a passionate voice, "Never again will I allow my culture--or the culture of non-white children whose ancestors gave us so much--to be overlooked, downplayed, misunderstood." For Kim, language is an overriding issue especially since it is a concern to the children she teaches and their parents. If a student speaks Spanish in the home, he or she is not regarded as "lacking" or "inferior." Remembering her parents had to change who they were in order to assimilate: "My father bleached his hair blond, gave up language, his culture. My [Anglo] grandmother used to walk with my [Filipino] mother who looked more Asian. And when people would stare [at us children] she'd yell back, 'They're half white, too.'" Kim now feels cheated that she is a monolingual person who has been robbed of a rich cultural heritage. She says, "I mourn the loss [of my parents' native language] and I don't want to be responsible for encouraging my students to give up their language."

This lack of affirmation for all of our identities leads to our effort to see the full spectrum student diversity, within and among students. Once we recognize and value the presence of difference in our students, we then feel obligated to understand the meaning of these identities for them. Kim is taking lessons in Spanish so she can convey the message to her students that they don't have to abandon their native language in order to succeed. Pat realized a few years ago that most of the literature and magazines she read were for and about white-class women and has since opened up her world a little by reading the works of Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, Christina Garcia, and each month looks forward to her issue of "Essence." Mari incorporates autobiography into the curriculum of the class and explicitly uses what she learns about students' past experiences in schools as the centerpiece of discussions. Like Albert, all of the teachers in the group "try to make sure that at least their students will not have to wait till they are in college like us, before [they] hear [their] culture recognized and validated in an educational institution." This also leads to a wholeness that transcends difference and can help us to discern similarities as well.

Access to the Mainstream

In the quest to affirm children as individual people and provide support for them to be successful in the mainstream of educational institutions, we seek out tools, strategies, structures, and other curricular means for a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1992). We attend to the emotional, as well as the academic needs of our students, and take the narratives of their lives into account. Kim has kept her students for two years so she can get to know them and their parents well.

Many of us use autobiography and journals in our classrooms. In fact, the tools we use are often literacy-related, acknowledging the centrality of language to our lives. Albert is passionately committed to preparing his children to be successful in society by stressing writing process. He feels that "learning to read and write Spanish opened up a whole new world" when he worked in a cross-cultural missionary experience. Albert sees writing as a revolutionary act for his students, a way for them to escape illiteracy, and a way for them to validate their own life experiences.

Additional strategies center around explicitly teaching students how to use appropriate tactics which will help them to understand and be successful in the white, middle-class culture of schools. For example, Veronica talked about how she teaches her second graders why the principal wants the classroom to be very quiet, and how they can talk and work cooperatively and still meet the principal's standards. When they were having a spelling bee, the principal came in to ask what all the noise was about in a disapproving way. After she left, rather than mustering up all her teacher power to tell the students they better behave, Veronica explained how the principal's standard for noise in the classroom differed from hers and they had to figure out together, how they could work toward that standard while still being able to have the spelling bee. Debbie talked about how her students were working together on projects and the principal came in and expected the children to collectively greet her. When they didn't, she admonished them and Debbie. When the principal left, Debbie, like Veronica, used the opportunity to discuss what it means to work within a system and the kinds of behavior that are expected in order to be successful. Rather than a typical teacher lecture, it was, intentionally, a dialogue about learning how to be included without being co-opted. Debbie and Veronica are teaching their students to "code switch." They're teaching that different people and different cultures define different behaviors and skills as acceptable and appropriate.

Driving Forces

What drives our search for ways to be inclusive, for ways to be gate openers? We all see passion as a force for change in our teaching. For many of the women, the passion takes the form of anger; anger toward the way we were (and are) treated; anger toward being marginalized and dehumanized; and anger toward the expectations (to be nice, pleasant, and to get along -- at all costs) that we've encountered our entire lives. Mari struggles with her need to sometimes be an unpopular voice that is not silenced, on one hand, and then is equally sure she needs to be accepted and liked as well. Often, women who are assertive and have strong, clear ideas cannot have both voice and acceptance. That seems unfair and often feels difficult. Kim questions her intense feelings when she says, "Why do I have all this anger?" But Kim answers her own question when she adamantly states, "I'll take on your culture, but what I won't give up is my culture." The passion is in our excitement to teach and potentially be able to change the school experience for students so as to provide them with something different from what we have had.

Another motivation is brought up by Debbie when she talks about being able to almost "relive" experiences as an adult and make them turn out better. For example, Debbie talked about a little girl, Maria, in her class whom she was trying to help pronounce a word correctly. After several attempts, Maria became upset and started to cry. Debbie saw herself in this little girl who thought she was the object of disapproval and disrespect. Debbie, in comforting her, and explaining that this was only an attempt to show Maria another way to say something, was able to relive her negative and unjust experiences in school and, in a sense, make them positive. Debbie comforted herself through being a teacher to Maria. She calls it going back into the future. We all recognize that teaching provides us with opportunities to not only make it better for the students we teach, but also for ourselves; to become different and better people in the process of providing positive and legitimizing experiences for children.

Along with this passion there is a sense of moral imperative. Debbie says, "A caring teacher is in a powerful position. I am aware of how influential I am in molding my children's characters and future perceptions and behaviors." Pat looks for ways to use her privileged position in academia to support the ideas and efforts of teachers and students who have less access to resources. And we explore feminist pedagogy as an avenue for developing more collaborative classrooms at the university (Hulsebosch and Koerner, In Press).

But there is a toll the work takes. Milagros, who is teaching in a school in the neighborhood in which she grew up, says she cannot stay there too long without exhausting herself. She has become a magnet for students, parents and community members who want to talk about their concerns with the school system, and see her as a hero because she has "made it" as a teacher and can now make a difference. Often discussions center around how much more or exactly what it would take to change jobs, to leave teaching because of the frustration in working in institutions, schools, which do not seem to always have students' best interests at the heart of decisions.

We see culturally aware students and teachers as gate openers. We believe and act upon the value that affirming individual students, while teaching them skills which the dominant society demands, helps them to be successful in schools. Being gate openers makes us question: question standards of behavior and standards of excellence; question curriculum and teaching methods; question how children are labeled and tracked and how that sorting positively affects children's academic success. We also bring a passion and moral commitment to teaching. We see this commitment as one that speaks to democratic ideals and one that recalls John Dewey's (1916) imperative that education is the route, the way to democracy. We see ourselves as activists, as agents of change for ourselves and our students.

The Beginnings of Transformation

As teacher educators who want to be "educated" by our students, we've gained several insights from this study. These insights include: 1) the implications of having access to multiple perspectives on university classroom experience ; 2) 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 3) our responsibility, as white women of some privilege, to work toward equity in our larger institutions, as well as our classrooms.

Through dialogue with the teachers who were our students, we've come realize that the "taken-for-granteds," of classroom experience must be examined, verified, and broadened. Again and again, as we listened to our students describe their experiences in university classes, we were surprised to hear accounts which differed significantly from our own recollections. We now look for ways, both informal and formal, to ask our students about their experiences with the classes we teach. We solicit weekly written feedback on what was helpful (and not) in this week's class. We stay after the class has finished to chat with the students in small groups about the class, and we invite individuals who see us for advising to talk about their experiences in classes. "Gate-opening," or a commitment to inclusion, is built upon a foundation of multiple perspectives of shared events., and varied possibilities for responding to them. It means listening with respect and the intent to act if necessary.

The need to make space and provide access for all our students reiterates the value of inclusion, and 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 and society) have often learned to be silent. 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 make themselves 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. We make rules for discussions, so the class is safe from harm, but also safe for expressing ideas which may make the majority of students uncomfortable. It is important that we take a stand and feel the obligation to respond, so that when or if unacceptable things are said (name calling, accusations), we are not charged by students with "saying nothing" (Fine, 1994).

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 are careful to not put minority students or students who have minority viewpoints in a place where they are the spokespeople for that view, especially since these are positions which are sometimes unpopular or at least unfamiliar. We want the responsibility and burden of speaking from these positions to be shared. 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). It also means all the students in the class will be able to learn, to exchange ideas, to grow and change through the educational process.

We take seriously Banks' (1994) reminder that "e pluribus unum" calls to mind that an imposed "one" does not work and that it is only through recognition of the "many" that we can come to an authentic wholeness. It is through shared power and negotiation, especially in classrooms, that we can incorporate all students into the community. This then connects to a larger vision, Dewey's (1916) vision that schools are the means to forming and keeping a democracy.

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, while 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.

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