"So, Like, What Now?": Making Identity Visible for Preservice Teachers

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on Vygostky's zone of proximal development this study explores the ways preservice teachers engage with The Human Bean Activity that was designed to make visible the abstract idea of identity and community. This qualitative narrative analysis explores the talk produced by 47 predominantly White, straight, and female preservice teachers as they talked with each other about race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and their own identity in a multicultural literature class. Findings show students' use of song lyrics, humor, and shared laughter to relieve tension, build solidarity, and avoid stress. In addition these students challenged themselves and each other to better understand their own identities and communities. Some students were able to connect the activity to their own reading and begin to enact a new awareness and appreciation of diversity.

Key words: Multicultural Literature, Preservice Teachers, Diversity, Teacher Education

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Teacher educators who focus on aspects of multicultural education strive not only to improve the school experience for underrepresented students, but also challenge the established White, middle-class power structure embedded in the American education system (Castagno, 2013; Johnson & Atwater, 2014). Taking on the role of teacher educator has made me aware of the delicate and dubious tension of working with preservice teachers who reflect and, often unknowingly, reify a White, middle-class, heteronormative power structure (Sleeter, 2001). Many educators share the same frustration with preservice teachers' hesitancy to talk about difficult topics such as race, ethnicity, and sexual identity. It is imperative to provide experiences that encourage preservice teachers to stop avoiding these issues and do the hard work of engaging with ideas and people that do not align with long held beliefs or familiar settings. Experiences such as reading multicultural literature that reflects authentic representations, watching movies made by underrepresented people, going to galleries or museums that feature underrepresented artists, or attending public events such as Pow Wows and Pride parades are such opportunities. But, simply having the experience as a protected outsider may not be enough to challenge long held views. Instead, we as teacher educators must encourage our students to talk and intellectually engage with these issues.

Sleeter (1993) asserted the importance of Whites talking about race in the following excerpt: "We semantically evade our own role in perpetuating White racism by constructing sentences that allow us to talk about racism while removing ourselves from discussion" (p. 14). In response to the well-established problem of preservice teachers avoiding difficult conversations (Gomez, 1996; Terrill & Mark, 2000; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006), I developed *The Human Bean Activity* (see Appendix A). The activity is designed to help students realize their own identity/ies, their communities, and, most importantly, to help them develop ways of talking and listening to each other as they struggle with issues of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and their own communities of choice.

Prior to developing the activity, I taught a multicultural literature class designed to acquaint students with a sampling of literature by and about underrepresented races, ethnicities, and cultures. The goals of the course were stated in the syllabus: "The course provides authentic literature that respectfully represents the experiences of underrepresented peoples in the United States of America. We will guide student responses to the reading, and allow them to discover and appreciate the literature for diversity of experience" (Children's Literature Team, 2006). Although the stated goals were clear, I was often frustrated with what I perceived to be the students' disengagement with the literature, their inability to see outside their lived experiences, and their insistence that race no longer mattered in the United States of America.

More precisely, I was mystified by the energy the students put into resisting the characters and events in the books used in the course. The books themselves reflected an array of races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations (see Appendix B). At the end of the semester, I saw no evidence of growth in the students' written responses, and class discussions. I only saw an unwillingness or inability to read the literature from anything other than a Eurocentric, heteronormative view of the world that reflected their lives and experiences. For example, a typical student response from the beginning of the semester to *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2003) read, "I don't see race. All I ever see is human beings." And here is one from the end of the semester in response to *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2005): "In the end after all of the running the judge saw the truth of the matter, we are all just human beings no matter what. Age, language, heritage does *[sic]* not matter as much as love." Students often relied on this color-blind or humankind ideal, perhaps believing that recognition of differences of color leads inexorably to racism. Beach (1997) found similar responses to multicultural texts, but as most research in multicultural education has found, this color-blind view of the world often shelters students from seeing and appreciating difference and diversity (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007).

Considering why this color-blind stance was preferred by the students in my class when addressing issues of race, ethnicity, language, and even sexual identity, I realized that they perceived recognition of difference as an act of racism/ethnocentrism/homophobia. It was as if the act of speaking about differences had become synonymous with being racist. I cannot know if this was a conscious choice on their part, or if it was a subtle lesson they had learned over time; but I did know that *not* talking about these issues was not going to change anything.

The failure of the students to connect with, discover, or even to recognize the alternative realities presented in multicultural books was my failure as an instructor. Many teachers recognize the failure of students, but it is imperative for educators to recognize when we have failed our students. Upon reflection, I realized that I entered into the semester harboring unreasonable and, more importantly, unexplored expectations. The students were supposed to enjoy the challenge of literature that was new and unfamiliar, but I had not provided a point of departure for the readings. By having these students read particular books, I was sending them into the wilds of literature where they would experience a multilingual/multiethnic urban high school one week, a high school with openly gay and transgender teens the next, followed by a junior high filled with American-Indian kids trying to make their way along with openly racist White kids. After that, they read novels featuring families dealing with disabilities, addiction, and adoption. I also gave them novels where the instigators, bullies, misunderstanding teachers, and unhelpful friends were predominantly White. In short, these preservice teachers were not only being asked to reflect on very different life experiences, but also they were being asked to see their own culture (White, middle-class, and straight) as at fault for traumatic experiences in these novels. These preservice teachers were expected to take all of this in and then reflect on it without first having a working understanding about their own Whiteness and their own communities. This was an unreasonable expectation on my part.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of existing research around teaching (mostly) White preservice teachers to function and thrive in ever-changing, complex, and diverse classrooms. The current study was built upon the important work around White teachers recognizing their own identity, the importance of reading and contemplating challenging texts, and group thinking in classrooms.group thinking in classrooms.

White Teachers in America

The experience of teaching a multicultural literature class to a predominantly White student body is not unique. The research on preservice teaching programs showed that diversity, multiculturalism, or anti-racist curriculum often conceptualizes White, middle-class identity as a deficit or as a problem to be solved (Castro, 2010; Lowenstein, 2009). The solution often entails degrading Whiteness and White students by claiming that White students "bring exactly the wrong stuff" to the dialogue (Lensmire & Snaza, 2010, p. 414). Whiteness is often portrayed as an insurmountable problem (Lensmire & Snaza, 2010), a problem to overcome (Conklin, 2008), or a danger (Gomez, 1996). There is no doubting the negative effects White privilege has in education but all the blame and shame may merely serve to unintentionally perpetuate the problem (McCarthy, 2003). Blaming these preservice students for being White and not providing them with ways to engage with these difficult topics makes them more likely to disengage and avoid these topics (McCarthy, 2003; Ullucci & Battey, 2011).

Because taking a deficit view of White preservice teachers may not help with the underlying problems that multicultural education seeks to remedy, it is necessary to change the ways we view White, middle-class, straight preservice teachers. With that in mind, Sleeter's (2008) meta-analysis of the views that White preservice teachers tend to hold is especially informative: (a) a lack of recognition of the "pervasiveness of racial inequity"; (b) "deficit views about and lower expectations for students of color"; (c) "a colorblind approach to teaching, denying the very significance of race in their practices"; and (d) a lack of "a sense of themselves as cultural beings" (p. 198). If teacher education scholars wish to ameliorate

these very real issues, we must investigate how specific experiences within teacher education programs provide or deny opportunities for these students to critically examine and engage with issues of race, Whiteness, and sexual identity.

Engaging with Challenging Texts

Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) suggested that prior knowledge, emotional connections, and knowledge monitoring all contribute to a reader's comprehension and understanding of a text. A reader's engagement with text is often mediated either by the way she makes connections to the text, or by the way she relates to the characters, the story, or other elements perceived as part of the overall context of the act of reading (Smagorinsky, 2001; Turner, 1995). When a reader interacts with a text in a multitude of complex ways, the reader gains more from the text, and it becomes more likely that the reader will utilize new knowledge in future reading experiences. It also becomes possible that the reader may bring the experiences of reading that particular text into other environments (Stanovich, 1986).

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Literature is often used as a tool in multicultural education to encourage students to explore and consider events, cultures and histories that fall outside the students' normative experience (Beach, 1994, 1997). Dewey (1938/1997) argued that experiences that activate critical engagement with difficult subjects is an effective way for students to build schema, make meaning, and develop understanding. In my own practice, I tried to create a safe classroom environment where the students explored and critically engaged with difficult topics such as racism, homophobia, ableism, and their own role in supporting or changing the education system.

One major issue often cited by scholars is a reticence by students to engage with their own identities, and the false security of color-blind worldviews (Gay & Howard, 2000; Villegas, 2008). According to Barst (2013), teaching literature that highlights issues of diversity, power and privilege can often be a significant challenge because students often resist open and honest discussions. This reluctance can develop for a variety of reasons, including preconceived stereotypes, lack of previous instruction, and students' personal beliefs, experiences, or family backgrounds. In order to avoid the uncomfortable subjects in class discussion, students often express an ideal best described as "color-blind," but this view also excludes recognitions of differences in class, ability, culture, sexuality, and all manner of social constructs.

Group Thinking in Classrooms

Scholars in multiple fields of study observe that conversations have an established flow with predictable beginnings, expected responses or turn taking, and foreseeable end points (see Bakhtin, 1986; Schegloff, 1999; Wortham, 2005). Mercer (2000) and his colleagues (Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003) found common conversational processes when they observed participants thinking and problem solving in groups. The research found that when individuals partake in group thinking or problem solving activities, they shared responsibility for the progress by referring back to common experiences, eliciting information, offering new information which then becomes a shared resource, evaluating contributions to the conversation, and repeating or reformulating statements (Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003). A key to the design of *The Human Bean Activity* and this study was Mercer's (2000) view of individuals thinking together to scaffold and challenge each

other. It became clear that Mercer's ideal could only take place in a truly collaborative classroom.

When considering how to create a collaborative classroom where the process of constructing knowledge was as valued as the products associated with learning, Forman and Cazden (1994) stated, "When we try to explore Vygotskian perspectives for education, we immediately confront questions about the role of the student peer group" (p. 156). Education often enacted with a teacher delivering content to a passive group of students. Forman and Cazden explained that peer collaboration is made difficult because collaboration requires a different kind of classroom environment. A collaborative classroom values academic products created by the group as well as those created by individuals. Perhaps more important to the current study, the process of thinking and talking together is a valued commodity. The teacher in a collaborative classroom must be willing and able to encourage students to speak, to ask each other questions, and to do the work involved in answering those questions. The teacher in this kind of environment must listen to students, monitor miscues, wrong answers, or mistakes but refrain from immediately stepping in to correct. The students in a collaborative classroom must be engaged and empowered enough to challenge and work through conflicting ideas together as a community (Forman & Cazden, 1994).

The current study was designed to address both what is possible when preservice teachers are given the opportunity to explore and talk about difficult topics, and to provide an activity that can be used and replicated to encourage this kind of talk in other spaces. Georgakopoulou (2006) provides a structure for reporting the data in what she referred to as "small stories" (p. 122). Using small stories as a method to show how these preservice teachers talked about issues of identity helps to illustrate the flow of conversation seen across multiple classes.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provided the lens for the development of the activity and for the methods used to consider and examine the talk produced by the students. Drawing specifically on Vygostky's zone of proximal development (1978), this study explored whether providing individuals with questions that challenged them would assist in making visible the abstract idea of identity and community. Vygotsky emphasized the ways in which we learn by engaging in talk with people around us—by doing so we clarify our own understanding and influence each other's understanding. The orchestration of the activity acted as a reciprocal scaffold for these students in the following way. The cues (see Appendix A) acted as mediators for a talk about difficult subjects such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The talk acted as a way to mediate and challenge the ways these students think about their own identity and others' life experiences. Together the talk, the interaction, and the objects acted as a scaffold to promote meaning making around difficult subjects.

Perhaps more exactly, the study relies on critical sociocultural theory (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), which encompasses the tradition of sociocultural theory along with the power dynamics at work in "issues of power, identity, and agency" (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 2). The current study was directly situated within this intersection, where these preservice teachers were invited to actively engage in examining their own place of privilege, either known or unknown, within society as a whole, but especially within the classroom. This theoretical lens helped frame the importance of issues of identity such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as these preservice teachers reflected on the ways they experienced their own culture in the past and how they might imagine experiencing it in the future.

By taking a critical sociocultural stance, I was able to design the activity with the students' meaning making as the focus. In turn, I functioned as a guide but not an intermediary or focal point during the activity. This teaching experience was not about me leading the class to the knowledge, or transmitting the knowledge to a set of passive students. Instead, it was a way to engage and scaffold students in their own individual meaning making process.

Method

Participants

Students from two sections of the multicultural literature classes that I taught (a total of 47) agreed to be included in this qualitative exploration of student talk (see Table 1). The class was an elective offered in the college of education for elementary or secondary preservice teacher candidates. The majority of the students were juniors in elementary teacher education, with the remaining sophomores and seniors (no freshmen in either class). Each class met once a week for three hours during the fall semester and the activity took place at the beginning of the second meeting.

In addition, I watched two other multicultural literature classes taught by two different instructors complete the activity during the second meeting of the spring semester of the same academic year. I interviewed these instructors and relied on them to review the data and the findings. I was also able to interview a third instructor at length about her experience using the activity with her other multicultural literature class. These different perspectives on the same phenomena provided the opportunity for triangulation (Denzin, 1970) of the data. This article reflects the small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) told and the work these students produced when given the chance to speak, to be heard, and to hear each other.

Researcher Positionality

I am also a participant in the current study, and my positionality is an aspect that needs to be addressed in order to understand when and how my own biases impacted the students and this activity. During this study, I was a graduate student instructor pursuing a PhD in Language and Literacy. I identify myself to my students as a lesbian, a Latina, and the mother of two young boys on the first day of class. These self-disclosures are purposeful on my part as I am aware that without laying claim to these identities, the assumption is often that I am White, middle-class, and straight. I choose not to be complicit in perpetuating assumptions about my own race, culture, or sexual identity.

Data Analysis

The primary data sources used were (a) the separate audio recordings from small groups and a master audio recording from the whole class discussion that followed, (b) field notes taken by an observer during the activity, and (c) my own analytical memos written following the activity. By using constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an initial coding scheme was realized. This initial coding identified keywords in the student talk and the utterances in which these keywords occurred. Further analysis within these themes resulted in a

Table 1
Student Demographic Information

Race	3 African American or Black	1 Latina	1 Mixed-race (Asian and White)	42 White
Gender	43 Female	4 Male		
Sexual orientation	1 Bisexual	2 Gay or lesbian	44 Straight or heterosexual	
Mother's level of education	8 Some college, no degree	20 Completed BA or BS	8 Some graduate, no degree	11 Completed graduate degree or better
Year in program	27 Junior	11 Senior	9 Sophomore	

Note. All demographic information is self-identified by the students.

more nuanced coding scheme (see Table 2) in which talk about race, culture, identity, similarity and difference was explored. The themes found in the student talk across groups included race, culture, sexual orientation, judgment, quotations, paralinguistic productions such as sighs or other sounds, emotive, and question.

In addition, isolated transcripts were created to focus on specific elements across groups or classes. These transcripts offered a way to isolate specific facets of the data. For example, a transcript that tracked one individual's utterances across the entire activity was compared to another's isolated transcript to find common discussion elements and keywords. Another set of transcripts was made isolating nonverbal sounds such as rustling of objects, tapping fingers, laughter, sighs, and humming. These nonverbal transcripts were synchronized to match the timing of the activity and then were compared across groups and classes.

A third analysis explored if the talk these students engaged in during *The Human Bean Activity* was in evidence in the work they produced after the activity. This student work included individual essays, responses in blog posts, in-class discussions, and short written reports on extracurricular activities that centered on different races and cultures. These data were analyzed for evidence of the themes realized in the initial analysis. This process was iterative in nature, and a few additional codes were realized from the written data and were reapplied to the transcripts.

There are many ways to display and report qualitative data in narrative analysis. Using small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) is fairly new. Small stories offer immediacy to the emotions and realizations explored by these preservice teachers as they talk to each other. Giving an account of the activity in this way reflects the chronological unfolding that occurred across the small groups, as well as the ways students reacted, reflected, and showed fleeting glimpses of the tension they experienced.

The Human Bean Activity As It Unfolds

The classroom was already set up; each table had an audio recorder, see-through bags that held different kinds of beans or candy, and a small pile of empty plastic bags for the students. Displayed on the screen in the front of the room were the instructions: "Please sit at a table with people you do not know well. The first person should press **record** on the tape recorder. When a table is full (4 to 5 students) introduce yourselves to each other." Some students

Table 2
Selection of Coded Words Heard in Student Talk

Race words	Quote	Paralinguistic production	Judgment	Emotive	Question
White	Song lyrics	Oh	Racist	Feel/feelings	Authentic asked/no answer
Black	Movie/TV title	HA!	Horror/ Horrible	Depressing/depressed	Authentic asked/answered
Asian	Named movie/TV character	BAM!	Bad, really bad.	Happy	Rhetorical
Brown	Movie/TV dialogue or reference	<laughter>	Stupid	Scared	Direct (to a specific other)
Race		<sigh> Huh	Yeah! Great!		

began predicting the nature of the activity before any other instructions were given, saying, "Then we'll have to fill our bags with what we think classes typically are, or what an ideal classroom would be," or "Oh man, we did something like this is TE 250 [Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions] and I felt like crap for days." Although all groups hypothesized what the supplies were for, none predicted the activity was about themselves or their own identity. Predictions were based on other experiences in the college of education and were about how the students might see the world, not themselves.

The room was filled with a flurry of activity as the students found seats, read the instructions, turned on audio recorders, introduced themselves, and asked questions. Several students voiced assumed knowledge about the activity, saying, "This is obvious, everyone here knows what's supposed to happen." In response another student said, "Yeah, time to talk about race." In addition, one student complained, "Oh! Again? Why does it always come down to this?" These utterances illustrate the familiarity these students had with this kind of classroom activity and their reluctance to waste time on something they already know. This kind of reluctance might be attributed to the blameful messages these students had already encountered during other classes or, perhaps, fatigue from hearing the same message.

My role during the activity was to redirect questions back to the group, to take notes, and to move them forward to the next category. When disagreements around procedure arose within the group, they would look to me for guidance. Each time a student or a group asked me to make a decision or solve a dispute, I responded, "I don't know. What does your group think?" This cycle was repeated until the class understood that I was not going to help them make decisions. It was important that the results of the activity, including the choices, the discussions, and the eventual product, could only be attributed to the students. If I answered their questions, it would have been as if I knew more about their personal experiences than they knew. It was crucial for the students to do their own discovery; they needed to trust themselves to do the work, and that meant that

as the teacher, I could not be the one to answer their questions. This may not appear like a pedagogical move on my part as the instructor, but I knew it was crucial for the students to realize that they were responsible for making sense of their own cultural experiences. They could not see me, the teacher, as the person in the room holding the knowledge, even though this structure contradicted normative student and teacher roles.

The third, but least prevalent, strategy was to purposefully not fall into nor push against the perceived notions of matching visual characteristics of the objects to people, "I think we should pick randomly," and "Maybe one person closes her eyes and just picks one from a pile." This was an interesting approach that proved to be worthy of much discussion later on in the activity. Without the visual cues to remember the connection, each of the groups that elected to use this particular strategy realized that they could not remember what object stood for which group of people.

Each group eventually decided on a method, and the class moved on to the second phase. One important note on this stage of the activity—the method each group decided on was less important than the process of students engaging in discussions about what it means to place a label or to assign objects to represent people. The specifics of their decisions were not as important as the active, engaged conversation, in which they were asking questions, considering ramifications, and deciding together.

Making Community Identity Concrete

The second phase, using the assigned objects to represent 14 people that make up part of the individuals' community, began with more trepidation across groups. Some common sentiments were, "I'm scared about this" and "I guess … I mean, like, I guess this is what we do a lot anyway, right?" The first person on the list to be represented by an object was "yourself." Some students were uncomfortable with representing themselves: "This is sort of shitty. I mean, I'm more than a big white blob, right?" and "Oh my god, I'm huge and white and a total pudge." Each of these groups selected dried lima beans to represent White people. This mention

of the visual properties of the large white bean and the way it dominated the visual aspect of this activity was also seen as the activity progressed.

This second phase also saw a shift in student attitude. There was more laughter heard throughout all the groups as compared to the first phase. When asked to consider a boyfriend or girlfriend (the second person on the list) students asked, "What if I'm not dating?" or stated: "Depressing! I just broke up." Or, "Yup, single for too, too long, ladies." In several different groups someone sang Beyoncé's lyric: "All the single ladies, all the single ladies," with a quiet but easily heard chorus of, "Now put your hands up!" At that, the groups laughed, sharing a moment of common levity. These students used a popular cultural icon to express their dating status, and in doing so, demonstrated their shared musical culture. This kind of shared laughter, almost self-deprecating, can be interpreted in many ways.

There are a few notable scholars who researched how and why White men and women laugh when talking about race, ethnicity, or issues of sexual identity. Lensmire's (2011) work exploring the ways male subcultures reward scapegoating and subversive storytelling is one such piece. His findings indicate that some White men tell stories wherein non-Whites and lesbians are the butt of the joke in order to reify their own superiority at the expense of others.

Although the laughter heard was shared laughter, it did not appear to be at the expense of any underrepresented group. It did serve as a way to calm and mollify built up tensions. The ways these students used commentary to elicit laughter seems more in line with Haviland's (2008) observations of one teacher's 8th grade language arts classroom and her university seminar. Haviland (2008) found that although White teachers stated their desire to upset the status quo around race and racism, they used a series of intricate rhetorical moves to avoid and protect themselves and each other using "White educational discourse" (p. 43). She points out that the use of "joking, agreeing and supporting, and praising and encouraging" are all ways of maintaining White power by "creating classroom feelings of closeness, comfort, safety,

encouragement, and sameness" (p. 43) instead of engaging in the uncomfortable work of challenging commonly held views.

The ways the students in the current study used shared laughter is more reflective of this protective move. They sought a relief from the tension of the activity. However, this raises the following question: Why did they need to defuse tension? Haviland's statement provides one possible explanation: "The behavior of laughing also interrupted the flow of difficult discussions, diffusing tension and preventing questions or challenges from being taken up" (p. 48). These students used a community building technique—laughter—as a way to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that the activity was bringing up for the group.

Inter-Group Disagreements

Disagreement emerged early on in the activity, often over the issue of how to deal with multiple best friends. One student (White) suggested, "I think we should just choose the most dominant culture of your best friends, like if you have four best friends and three are White, and one is Black, then you'd use a white one." Another student (African American) in her group refused, stating, "I have a best friend who's White, and if I didn't put her in, she'd have a heart attack if I didn't put her in. So, I put a White one and three itty-bitty black beans." The rest of the group evaluated the solutions, and after a short discussion the second solution won out. They agreed to use multiple objects to represent multiple people when needed. This short discussion is important because of conversation around *dominant*. The students had to engage with the idea that using the dominant representation might not be the best method. In a larger context, these students were considering the representation of nondominant people within fairly homogeneous communities. This is a difficult topic to broach in general, and these students were discussing it with relative strangers in a classroom context.

Seeing the Community

At the midpoint of the activity, the students had been asked to consider seven out of 14 people in their

lives. For many, it had become clear that their communities were predominately monochromatic. The visual effect of seeing their community represented as the clear plastic bag sitting on the table in front of them, which was overrun with a single color and shape, cannot be overstated. These students saw the people they surrounded themselves with represented in concrete terms. Overall, the mood shifted in the room, and much less laughter could be heard. The visual representation of the beans in the bag was difficult to deny or excuse.

At this midpoint, several students begin to select people solely based on their ability to provide diversity to the bag in front of them. Some examples of this selection process were: "I'll pick Kelly. She's Columbian," or "Oh, one guy I work with is like Chinese, but not really Chinese, but I'll pick Chinese for him," or "I know I know someone who isn't straight. I mean, even if I don't KNOW-know, I bet I know someone, so I'll pop a skittle in there to liven things up a bit." These students' life experience, media experience, and college experience afforded them the knowledge that diversity should be embraced, but they saw direct evidence to the contrary within the plastic bag in front of them. This is an interesting phenomenon and one that has been repeated each time this activity has been used. The participants wanted to distance themselves or deny the reality of their own community, and so they changed the representations of the people they knew in order to confirm the image they wanted to emerge. By enacting a personal quota system, they were avoiding representing and confronting their lived experiences.

As an instructor, I was happy to see the obvious discomfort with the activity and the resulting ever-increasing monochromatic bag of beans. The students were fishing for diversity, and they were talking about their realizations. They expressed frustration with the results in front of them and told each other their solutions. These students realized that the lack of diversity in their lives was a real issue that was shared with most of their peers. This was a point of growth for these students. It became harder and harder for them to ignore or excuse the landscape in which they lived.

As the activity progressed, some students begin to show genuine frustration at the results, as demonstrated by the following sampling: "I should just make up some shit," and "Man, I cannot believe this. I look like a freakin' skin head." One student expressed her realization by singing Frenzal Rhomb's song lyric: "Oh baby, it's a White, White world" but in contrast to the reaction elicited by the Beyoncé song reference earlier, there was no laughter in response. Although they were sharing the experience and again calling on pop culture to express their feelings, they were no longer making light of the experience. Instead, the concrete representations they were confronting and seeing others confront impacted them. They were not happy or comfortable with the ongoing results.

Wrap-up as a Beginning

After all 14 categories were listed (see Appendix A), I asked the students to take a moment and look at their own community representation and consider what it meant. This was a way to begin the whole class discussion. Within this transition from small groups to whole class, many students spoke about their dissatisfaction with the activity. One student spoke up to defend her representation (which was predominantly White): "If there were guys, I would be way ahead. I have a lot of guy friends." Another student responded to her statement, saying, "But they'd still be White." One group in particular typified the kinds of talk that emerged at this point: "I think, though, like a lot of it isn't really our choice necessarily. Like, I don't get to choose my doctor, I don't feel like." A group member extended this idea: "Like the fact that my dentist is White is just the way it is, that's not really my choice, or the same thing with my hairdresser, or whatever." A third chimed in to support these statements, "I'm White, so yeah, all my friends are, like, White, too. That should be okay." At this point there was a pause, and the first student sighed, "Yeah, but it kind of isn't okay, is it?" These students were doing the hard work of wresting with ideals that were in direct opposition to their reality. These students elected to take a class on multicultural literature, and they wanted to be culturally responsive teachers, but the reality of their lives was that they were sheltered and isolated in their racial, ethnic, and heterosexual communities.

When asked to reflect about the first phase of the activity, assigning objects to represent different groups of people, student responses were varied, but eventually, the idea that a system was needed inserted itself into the conversation:

> It seemed, like, really obviously *[sic]* ... this group is this and that group is that (she picked up bags of beans from the middle of the table). But then he (motioning towards a male group member) said, "Why don't we just grab a bag and go with it, like, random. Which was, like a radical idea because we felt like you or the assignment or whatever wanted us to assign things based on stereotypes."

A few groups considered using the same "random" method. One group admitted they considered the method but concluded it was easier to stereotype: "Yeah, we thought of that too, but if we had made them random it would have made the sorting activity harder because we would have had to think about it, so stereotyping them made things easy." This confession by one individual, shared with the whole class, provided an important opportunity for these students to understand how easily the status quo was upheld and highlighted why stereotypes are so persistent.

In each class, at some point during the whole-class reflection, one or two students voiced what many students were thinking:

> It's uncomfortable to say these things to other people, but it's easy to do. Humans love to categorize, this whole process was so natural. To say them out loud to other people ... *that* was hard. Like, you don't want other people to think the same thing about you, that *you* stereotype.

After this revelation a female student said, "You know, I'm Black..." she paused and there was laughter, "but my bag looks just like theirs (the other members of her groups were all White) except it's all black." Another student extended this observation: "Yeah, and to realize we...no, I mean me... I am really, really White." Students agree and she continues: "So there is a whole bunch of us who probably aren't comfortable with a lot of people."

In order to draw them out, I asked again, "Okay, but why this class?" More quiet talking, and finally another student stated, "Being cognitive, like really thinking, about us and who we are ... or who I am ... and the stereotypes we have and stuff, as we are reading these different books might make us read the books, like, differently." These students had begun to think of themselves as individuals and to take an active and critical stance. The discussion ended with a White student saying, "This makes me feel pretty bad, it caused all of us to, like, accidentally stereotype without even knowing it ... So, like, what now?"

Discussion

What these students accomplished while talking with each other in small groups was to realize their own community and to begin to be aware of the culpability of White privilege in education. This collection of small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) about race, ethnicity, and sexual identity reflect one event from a Midwestern college campus. This work provides three points of discussion for teacher educators: (a) the need for teacher educators to conscientiously resist a deficit view of the overwhelmingly White teacher population; (b) the need to provide time in class for preservice teachers to talk through difficult issues with each other; and (c) the empowerment that is possible within this kind of supportive environment that students take with them into the world. It is my belief that teacher educators must provide multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to construct an awareness of their own ideas about race, ethnicity, and culture in order to facilitate a change in awareness or behavior.

Resisting a Deficit View of White Teachers

The population in this study reflects the population of teachers in the United States of America: predominantly White, middle-class, female, and heterosexual (Gay & Howard, 2000; Lawrence, 1997; Lowenstein, 2009). Again, it is important to point out that these preservice teachers elected to take a multicultural literature course and may be more likely to engage in these topics. Brown (2004) studied the implementation of different instructional methods with the same stated message in four separate multicultural college courses, all in the same college of education. Brown measured students' exhibited resistance and cultural diversity awareness. The students in Brown's study were White, predominantly female, and much like the students in the current study, elected to take the class. Brown (2004) concluded that although the message was the same across the four courses, the methods used were quite different. The most effective instructional method included an early focus on providing opportunities for self-examination while respecting the students' frame of reference. Multicultural teacher educators must balance a consciousness of the stated and unstated goals of a course and a respect for students' cultural identities and experiences in order to achieve cooperation from students on talking and engaging with difficult issues.

In other words, teacher educators cannot expect preservice teachers to come into the class with the knowledge and understanding of an expert on any subject. The students in this study brought a wealth of knowledge into the course. They all successfully completed a children's literature course as a prerequisite, were students in a good standing in a high ranking elementary teacher education program, and were committed to the work. It was as if I expected, through the magic of transfer, that these students would be able to use their academic and literary skills and engage with issues of race, culture, and sexual identity that were embedded in the class.

> It is my belief that teacher educators must provide multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to construct an awareness of their own ideas about race, ethnicity, and culture in order to facilitate a change in awareness or behavior.

Valuing Time, Valuing the Task

Students participating in this activity were given a place and time to begin the process of challenging their own and each other's assumptions about race, ethnicity, culture, and heteronormative identity. Beach (1994, 1997) showed evidence of disconnect between students' perceived need to discuss issues of race, power, and privilege and the availability of forums for these discussions to take place. These preservice teachers were directed to build a visual, concrete representation of their community that was not easy to ignore, nor keep private. They were also given the opportunity to engage with the meaning behind their own monochromatic communities and to challenge each other's perceptions. The classroom environment for this kind of open and potentially vulnerable kind of discussion, where students collaborate to build meaning, is not normative (Forman & Cazden, 1994). The need for students to hear from peers and to develop and be challenged in this way is one method that shows promise in multicultural education.

Outside the Classroom

The pedagogical decision on my part to openly challenge the existing deficit model of White preservice teachers as incapable or unwilling to engage with, examine, or even challenge themselves led to the development of *The Human Bean Activity*. For many, this activity was a starting point that enabled them to recognize their own misconceptions. More importantly, these students began to recognize their own lack of knowledge as

not simply an insurmountable *truth*, but rather as a gap in their knowledge that could be remedied. After implementing the activity, I saw a strong commitment on the part of these preservice teachers to engage with the literature but beyond that I saw some students take charge of their own learning. These students went into communities in which they were the outsiders in order to understand issues that were brought to their attention through literature. In order to provide a context for this kind of empowerment, I will outline two very different student responses.

Megan. She was White, middle-class, and straight from a rural town with a small high school. She had never knowingly "even talk[ed] to a gay person" before attending college and did not have any friends who were "anything other than 100% straight." After reading *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003), participating in a book discussion, and researching issues of gay history such as the Stonewall Riots, she was still very confused about transsexuals, cross-dressers, and drag queens. Although there was no extra-credit or class assignment involved, she and a group of students decided to attend a local drag show. After the show, she wrote in a response for the class: "I just don't get it. I know why I love to get dressed up, wear pumps, and a LBD [little black dress] but why would a man want that? Just why?" She took it on herself to contact one of the performers from the drag show, Audrey Hemp-Burn (Both Audrey Hemp-Burn and Andy are pseudonyms chosen by the participant). Megan met Andy who performed as Audrey Hemp-Burn for coffee, and went out with Audrey after her show.

Eventually Megan wrote, "I'm not sure I'm ever going to really understand how Andy discovered Audrey, but I am happy he did. She is amazing when she sings, and she does her own vocals! She still respects good lip-syncing. Andy is a great guy, and he's dating a guy from engineering which is good because neither one of them have a ton of time or money." She went on to detail the differences between drag queens, cross-dressers, and especially transsexuals, stating, "It has got to be frightening to finally find the courage to live a true life. Although Andy isn't trans, his roommate is and he (FTM) is progressing with his transition without his families *[sic]* support.

He's a brave, brave man." Megan's interest and pursuit of knowledge was met with kindness and respect from her peers and from the community. The most important aspect of her growth was her pursuit of knowledge coupled with humility.

Sarah. A White, working-class student from a suburban area, had a gay brother and an African American roommate. She was aware of her own White privilege and was often a voice of challenge for the rest of the class. For example, a discussion about *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2003) brought about by a classmate asking "How is this diverse when there are hardly any White characters?" Sarah respectfully but forcefully challanged the student to notion of balance or equal treatment. But, after reading *Heart of a Chief* (Bruchac, 2001), she was more than a little defensive about the central message of the book. She wrote, "I just can't accept what Bruchac says about native logos and mascots being disrespectful. At my high school, we meant it as a way to honor the Indians that used to live in the area, and we felt pride flying the colors!" After the book discussions and written reflections, she still felt torn on the issue.

I received an email from Sarah almost six months after the course was over. She included an email exchange she had with a nationally known book leveling company about their website. In part Sarah's email read, "On your … [web] page you reference the text *Alligators All Around* as a nonprose text. I find the image of alligators 'imitating Indians' offensive because it is my impression that Indians are much more than the images of them during Pow Wows or other celebrations. I feel this image continues a stereotype that children hold that all Indians always dress this way all the time." The image was from Sendak's 1962 alphabet book showing a young alligator dressed in stereotypical feathered headdress with a tomahawk in his hand. A representative from the company wrote back to Sarah, thanking her for bringing the image to their attention, expressing regret at any unintended offence, and most importantly, included a link to the page with a different Sendak image. Sarah recognized the issue of using an outmoded and offensive representation of Native Americans and felt personal agency to act.

The ripple effect of these preservice teachers' actions as they took ownership of their own place in education as change agents cannot be measured. Primarily this study contributes a new way for teacher educators to re-imagine guiding the predominantly White, middle-class, and female preservice teacher population to better understand their own identity and to value diversity. Future research should investigate how educational experiences can affect classroom practices. My own research will continue to focus on developing and carefully examining pedagogical decisions made with the intention of providing preservice teachers ways to address issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual identity in education.

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Appendix A

Prompts for Bean Activity

Getting Started

1.   Please sit in groups of 5 with people you do not know. When you are settled, start the recorder and introduce yourself.
2.   Take a bag, write your name on it.
3.   It is important for your group to come to all decisions as a group.

Groups to objects

1.   Please consider the list of races, ethnicities and cultures.
2.   Assign one object (bean, etc) to stand for each group.
3.   Make sure you write down which object is standing in for which group of people.

Groups to Objects

African-American/African
Asian-American/Asian
Gay, Lesbian, bisexual, transgender
Latino/a
Middle Eastern
Multi-racial
Native American
White

People

1.   Please consider the list of people that follows.
2.   Place a bean that represented the person's racial/culural identity in your bag. Remember, all questions should be addressed by the group.
3.   List of people to consider

Yourself
Boyfriend/Girlfriend
Best-friend
Roommate(s)
Favorite co-worker
Boss
Next door neighbor
Hair dresser/barber
Academic advisor
Favorite teacher
Dentist
Doctor
Favorite singer
Favorite actor/actress

Discussion Questions

How did it feel to assign groups of people to the objects?
What was the decision process like?
What does your bag not represent about you?
Why did we do this activity, in this class?

Appendix B

Class Novel List

- *Heart of a Chief* by Joseph Bruchac (2001)
- *Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye (1999)
- *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2003)
- *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Muñoz Ryan *(2005)*
- *Project Mulberry* by Linda Sue Park *(2007)*
- *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko (2004)
- *Confessions of a Closet Catholic* by Sarah Darer Littman (2004)
- *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2003)