"Ready for Change": Pre-service Teacher Perspectives on Diversity Preparation in Rural Appalachia

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ABSTRACT: Through the lens of transformative learning theory, this qualitative study examines how pre-service teachers (PSTs) in a teacher education program in rural Appalachia shared their perspectives on their preparation to work with diverse students. It examines how their lived experiences and their teacher education program impacted their approach to understanding and addressing diverse needs of their students. Results illustrate the unique way the pre-service teachers [re]imagined their program to better equip future PSTs for diverse classrooms. We argue for programmatic approaches to developing a teaching corps prepared for diversity in the classroom and challenging the shortsighted notion that students in rural Appalachia are unwilling to face the realities of diverse classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Multicultural education, teacher education, qualitative research, diversity, rural education

Through the lens of transformative learning theory, this qualitative study examines how pre-service teachers (PSTs) in a teacher education program (TEP) in rural Appalachia attempted to become adept at working with diverse students. More specifically, the study examines the desire for the PSTs to gain more cultural competence to meet their teaching goals. Further, it examines how their lived experiences and their TEP impacted their approach to understanding and addressing the diverse needs of their future students. The results of this case study

add to the extant literature examining the use of cultural competence in TEPs by exploring the experiences of PSTs at a regional institution in rural Appalachia.

The importance of developing culturally responsive educators has been readily established (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1999). The current study focuses on the perspectives of three students at a smaller, regional, and mostly white institution. Drawing on data from interviews with PSTs from the aforementioned institution, this research study answers the following question: What are the beliefs and attitudes of PSTs in a rural Appalachian teacher education program regarding cultural responsiveness?

Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

We approach this study using a transformative learning theory framework (Mezirow, 1978). Transformative learning theory fits within the constructivist tradition, where Freire (2000) underscored the importance of the meta-cognitive process of consciousness, where people "develop an awareness of socio-cultural realities which determine the context of their experiences" (Burden & Atkinson, 2008). Indeed, consciousness plays an important role in transformation, as individuals must identify their reality before working to transform it. Within transformative learning, individuals conceive of a problem and then confront and rectify concerns. Mere reflection without intervention does not constitute transformation (Jemal, 2017). Action is necessary.

Boyd and Myers (1998) illustrate three stages of transformative learning: receptivity, recognition, and grieving. By receptivity and recognition, individuals must welcome "alternate views" and accept that these approaches might be appropriate options (Burden & Atkinson, 2008, p. 111). In the stage of grieving, individuals "grieve for the notion that their previously held view is no longer tenable or at least is no longer assailable" (p. 111). Through these three stages, individuals will "engage with alternative perspectives" (p. 111) and imagine new possibilities through reflective and critical processes.

Following the participants' journey through these stages of transformative learning, this study closely examines their conceptions of issues within their TEP and how they can be transformative agents within their TEP and their future classrooms. We chose transformative learning theory because it provided a framework for challenging participants to consider their present realities within the TEP and consider and even adopt alternative possibilities that would improve teacher education at their institution.

While a goal of many TEPs is to cultivate teachers who can successfully work with diverse students (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2011; Gay, 2002; Rowan et al., 2021), past attempts were met with unique challenges. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period of commercialization in public education led by neoliberal influences moved these attempts to the margins of priority (Sleeter, 2018). Another obstacle such programs faced in their past attempts to

center critical diversity pedagogy was that education faculty and the PSTs in their programs were primarily white, middle-class, cisgender heterosexual females with limited understandings of cultural diversity (Sleeter, 2018). As such, sociological factors acted as barriers in critically examining and altering education curricula to meet the demands of diverse public school student populations (Grant & Gibson, 2011).

Though many TEPs have included courses with the aim of preparing PSTs for diversity, these courses have functioned as an addition to preexisting programs, rather than a central aim (Civitillo et al., 2018; Sleeter, 2016). Assignments often engage students in reflecting on their personal identities but rarely ask students to critically consider how change can be enacted in school settings (Gorski, 2019). Specific courses tailored to preparing PSTs for diversity also face challenges presented through discussion, whereby white students may resist uncomfortable topics and alternative perspectives (Amos, 2016; Crowley & Smith, 2015). This resistance is unfortunate considering the important role critical discussions and self-reflection play in preparing PSTs to analyze their own beliefs (Civitillo et al., 2018). Developing a culturally competent teacher corps will improve the likelihood that our teachers will, in turn, be culturally relevant educators and honor and promote their future students' cultural differences and help close opportunity gaps based on sociological differences (Nieto & McDonough, 2011).

Furthermore, educators face new fears and challenges with laws spreading from state to state that prohibit teachers from addressing topics of diversity, especially those that center on race, gender, and sexuality (Izaguirre & Farrington, 2023). Many educators are hesitant to address such topics in fear of retaliation from parents and legislators. Examples of educators facing retaliation for encroaching on topics deemed inappropriate by conservative groups include a Florida principal's forced resignation after receiving pressure from a parent group for showing students a picture of Michelangelo's "David" during a Renaissance art lesson (Bella & Natanson, 2023) and a Florida teacher being investigated and later resigning over showing her class Disney's *Strange World,* a movie which features a gay character (Edwards, 2023). Another teacher in the southern United States was placed on administrative leave, without pay, after a parent voiced concerns over her inclusion of the novel *The Hate U Give* in her lesson plans (Johnson et al., 2023). Although TEPs often share the goal of preparing teachers to successfully work with diverse students, they also must recognize the challenge of engaging students' fear of retaliation in light of the cultural landscape they face.

Contextual Considerations

There is a myth that rural Appalachia is static and resistant to change (Morgan & Reel, 2012). In reality, the region spans across 13 states and is home to over 25 million people from diverse backgrounds. For this study, we focused on a segment of rural Appalachia that is racially homogeneous. As teacher education writ large comes to terms with the ill preparation of a teacher corps prepared for

diversity, we chose to study PSTs within a region many view as a source of social resistance. This particular TEP proved an ideal location for this study, as institutional data show that practicing teachers who graduated from the program face challenges in differentiating instruction for culturally diverse populations.

PSTs from rural communities often enter TEPs with the assumption that they automatically know the best methods for teaching children of diverse backgrounds and communities (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). Rural-based PSTs often fail to see how "systemic inequalities [are] linked to disparities in achievement" (Karabon & Gomez Johnson, 2020). Such lapses in critical pedagogy, despite verbal expressions of support, emerge from ignorance and misunderstanding of the personal experiences and funds of knowledge of others with backgrounds that differ from their (Karabon, 2021). This isn't to suggest PSTs in rural TEPs are often unwilling to expand their understanding diversity. Rather, the preconceptions fostered by their racially homogenous upbringings are difficult for TEPs to combat (Skepple, 2015).

The two researchers, one a white, male teacher educator within a TEP in rural Appalachia and the other a white, male former teacher in an Appalachian K-12 school and doctoral student at a large university, are both intimately familiar with the geographical context of this study and devoted to the implementation of critical diversity pedagogy in both TEPs and K-12 schools. The university where this study was conducted is a predominately White institution (PWI) in rural Appalachia with a student body composed of 85% white students.

Methodology

To recruit participants, the authors sent an email with a recruitment script to students in a course focusing on diverse perspectives in education asking for interested participants to contact them via email. Addressing the research questions, we collected and analyzed qualitative data using two face-to-face interviews with the three participants (six interviews total) who volunteered. The course on diverse perspectives in education was the TEP's primary course that addressed the diverse needs of students and teachers in P-12 contexts. The first interview took place at the beginning of the semester so the students would be able to articulate their experiences before engaging with the course material. The second interview was conducted during the final two weeks of the course in order for the participants to apply what they learned in the course to their understandings of teacher education.

Seidman (2006) suggests researchers interview each participant on multiple occasions as "people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (pp. 16-17). As such, one meeting without context and connection between researcher and participant "tread[s] on contextual ice" (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Indeed, multiple meetings with the participants are important to build trust and

foster an environment where the participants are comfortable sharing their stories. During the first interview, we asked the participants to share the breadth of their past educational experiences from early childhood to present with regards to their experiences with issues of diversity. During the second interview, we asked the participants to "reflect on the meaning of their experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 18), combining their past experiences with their current understandings in light of information they learned in their course, clarifying the role diversity plays in their careers as educators. The questions from the second interview focused on what they have learned in their education program and how they envision that information affecting their future practice.

Examining the beliefs, attitudes, and lived experiences of PSTs in a TEP, this research is undergirded by social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985). This orientation argues that knowledge is "historically and culturally specific," meaning we must examine multiple layers of context to understand how people make sense of the world (Burr, 2015, p. 15). Social constructionism posits knowledge as something that is constructed between people through daily interactions in social life (Burr, 2015). This particular orientation argues that knowledge is "historically and culturally specific," meaning we must examine multiple layers of context to understand how people make sense of the world (Burr, 2015, p. 15). For this study, we incorporate the larger history of the Appalachian region, where the participants' lives are situated. Social constructionists generally pose questions that examine "relations among culture, power, and language" (Triplett, 2007, p. 96). While we were particularly interested in the participants' perspectives, we recognized how larger social and historical forces influenced the construction of their views. With the orientation that knowledge is socially constructed and greatly influenced by historical and cultural powers and contexts, we felt a qualitative study would best allow us to study multifaceted phenomena within the participants' daily environments.

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the data collected, we incorporated two strategies: independent coding of the transcripts and engagement with the participants over multiple interview sessions. We discuss the independent analysis spiral in the Data Sources section below. Our engagement over the span of a semester with the participants through the multiple interviews allowed us to build a relationship with each of the participants. During each interview, we overlapped some questions from the previous interview, allowing for the participants to restate some details and for us to check the consistency in their statements.

Data Sources

This study combines transcripts from six interviews lasting between 45 to 60 minutes each. The researchers recruited participants in the first semester of their junior year of the teacher education program. Students in that particular semester complete a course on differentiating instruction. An aim of this course is

for students to think about differentiating instruction for learners who may not have formalized Individualized Educational Plans (IEP). The course requires students to understand how institutional barriers, sociological factors, and acute events shape how K-12 students learn and asks the future teachers to consider such information when creating daily lessons and activities. As our research questions seek to understand PST cultural competence and ensuing understanding of culturally relevant teaching, this course was taken by many future educators who would be working with these topics for the first time. Instructors in each section of this course distributed a recruitment script asking for student volunteers for the research study. The three participants who volunteered were all juniors in the elementary education program. Participants came to the program from three different areas of the region, all with different backgrounds.

Mary, a white female, grew up in a rural, coal-mining community about two hours from the university. Charles, a white male, came to the program from a middle-class home in an area that has experienced large economic growth over the past two decades. Alice, a white female, grew up in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area in the region. She identified as a lesbian, while neither Charles nor Mary indicated their sexual orientation.

Data were analyzed using a data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013). Through this process, we individually read the transcripts and created open codes. Afterwards, we met and compared our codes. Together, we identified relationships between our codes and decided which of the codes should be either discarded or reconsidered in light of our shared analyses. These served as our axial codes. Finally, we engaged in selective coding, where we grouped the axial codes into the following themes: receptivity in conversations surrounding diversity, the recognition that the program must evolve, and the urgency they felt for change to occur. We read the transcripts using the lenses of each code and pulled statements that supported each selective code.

Results

As our results and the literature on transformative learning indicate, the PSTs went through three stages (receptivity, recognition, grieving) through their participation in a diversity topics in education course and their journeys to reimagine their TEP as a space where diversity and cultural relevance are centered. Each of the participants, though coming from different backgrounds, felt that their TEP did a substandard job of fostering cultural competency within PSTs and hindered their ability to meet their future students' needs. Without basic cultural competence, successful teaching for diversity may be impossible. While the lack of preparation corroborates the extant literature mentioned above, the findings from this study illustrate the unique way the PSTs in this study [re]imagined their program to better equip future PSTs for diverse classrooms. We illustrate the findings below in three sections, corresponding with the three stages of transformative learning.

Conversations on Diversity

Charles was initially receptive to learning about views that contrasted his life experiences, but qualified that his prior education in a "majority white, pretty much any school in Kentucky," had limited his prior exposure to diverse concepts. This however did not limit his desire to be receptive of diverse ideas and people. He explained, "I think it's wonderful when a professor would take an extension on not only the curriculum for the class to include [diversity]." In this first stage, Charles was receptive to learning about diversity and about pedagogical tools to reach all students, but saw these concepts as extensions of curriculum and not central to strong pedagogy. Outside of content knowledge, he noted, "The professors didn't speak about diversity very much." He often spoke of his TEP's programmatic approach of dividing issues of diversity and content knowledge.

Similarly, Mary said, "If you're from a place like I am, not diverse in the slightest bit, this is the first conversation that we've ever had about diversity. So, this is like a new thing to me." When asked about her prior discussions on diversity, she explained, "This was never discussed back home." Despite these being introductory conversations for Mary, she was open to learning more. She reimagined her TEP with "a class just telling us about… the specific cultures that we will probably have." Mary was receptive to alternative religions as well, but she grounded this openness specifically to the student populations she imagined herself teaching. In her reconstruction of the TEP's handling of diversity, Mary initially focused on the utility of learning about diversity topics, though later she would focus on the ethical implications. As with Charles, Mary desired the foundations of cultural competency, which could make it possible to be a culturally relevant educator.

Alice's prior educational experiences were different from the other participants. She was from a rural-urban fringe area outside a large midwestern city. She had prior experiences working alongside folks with diverse ideas and backgrounds. As a self-identified queer PST, Alice was receptive of change and felt that conversations surrounding cultural competence were necessary. During a class, she was a part of a group discussing case studies in classroom diversity. Her group's case focused on a student with two mothers. While she affirmed the conversations needed to happen, she felt initially "anxious" because she was afraid of how her peers would react to LGBTQ+ issues. After the discussion, she was "really excited about how open 90% of the class seemed to be." She and her "class wanted to know how to address this [issue], how to be a positive influence for future students." Not only was Alice receptive to discussions on diversity, but she was also receptive to her peers as they began their own transformative learning experiences.

Program Changes

After their initial interviews, the three participants began to emerge in the second stage of recognition that ways of knowing and being that do not align with their own are just as valid and as effective as their own (Boyd & Myers, 1988). When Charles was asked for examples of past experiences with topics discussing diversity in education classes, he recounted a negative experience from high school.

> We were talking about diversity. I don't remember the lesson in and of itself, but I do remember him [my teacher] calling out for three students in my class, all three of them being [from] outside the United States, from different countries. He made them feel embarrassed. He basically had them stand in front of the class and tell their life story.

Charles recognized the problematic behavior of his former teacher. The recounting of this event was not hypothetical or a case study but, rather, "vitally connected to his own history" (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 277). As Charles continued to acknowledge the experiences of others, he alternated from his initial dichotomized understanding of diversity issues and content knowledge. Indeed, he imagined professors devising courses with a new mindset: "diversity should be initially built into their curriculum."

Alice also expressed a recognition of other perspectives. When considering how she would develop her own curriculum as a professional teacher, she centered her answers around the question, "How are we going to address everybody?" Alice sought to ensure all cultures were represented and respected in her future classroom. She saw recognition and celebration of diverse cultures not just as an ethically sound action, but also a professional duty. She emphatically said, "It's my job to be aware of these issues." To Alice, recognizing the views of her future students and colleagues is required of educators. Alice also leveraged her professional experiences to recognize the viewpoints of others. Outside of one teacher, she explained she "never saw anything [in any course] that was addressed as far as diversity." As a response to this experience, she wanted to recognize how her future classroom could be a place where all viewpoints are acknowledged and respected.

Progression

The participants all expressed a sense of grieving, in relation to transformative learning theory. They accepted the notion that their prior understandings may have been shortsighted and were no longer tenable. Charles most directly grieved the loss of his old views when he said, "everything was so black and white and set in stone," when he discussed how his former views were easier to maintain than his new perspectives. However, not all expressions of grievances were as direct. Instead, grievance typically manifested itself in two main

ways: hesitancy and frustration from feeling underprepared, and fear of retaliation from a variety of sources.

Hesitancy and Frustration

The first way grievance manifested itself was in the PSTs' hesitancy to begin operating under their new perspectives and frustrations that they had not been equipped with necessary skills. When discussing potentially polemical issues in the classroom, such as race and LGBTQ+ identities, Charles said, "as a future teacher, I still wouldn't know how to handle that." He felt inadequate incorporating future K-12 students into discussions centering racial diversity and sexual identity. He said, "I barely scratched the surface" in regards to the development of perspectives and skills in diversity.

When asked how he would reconstruct the TEP to better equip future teachers for the very conversations he felt inadequate handling, Charles said, "one class is not enough." Instead, he argued, "We need more than one professor to give us more perspectives, to see not only their viewpoint but also to take in their ideas… but I believe that's one year more than the average college would provide." Where Charles initially thought of diversity issues as divorced from content knowledge, he came to understand that they were not embedded in course curriculum from the beginning. Referring to the necessary skills he said, "it's not something you can learn overnight. You can barely learn it through an entire college experience."

Charles, like the other two participants, expressed a desire to develop perspectives and skills on diversity issues accompanied by a frustration that their TEP did not address them. With this new knowledge, Charles explained that PSTs graduate,

> knowing that is going to be a lot of work. I know it's not going to be an easy field. But it turns [out there] really is a lot more to it than what I expected simply because of my experiences.

Like Charles, Mary also grieved that her TEP did not adequately prepare her. She expressed frustration that her program taught her to differentiate instruction for deaf and hard of hearing students and English learners, but not for racial, ethnic, or other kinds of diversity. On differentiation, she said, "I don't know about ethnicity. I don't think we go too deep into that." When asked why she felt her TEP did not prepare her for ethnic and racial diversity, she reasoned, "[Differentiating for English learners] is something we [legally] have to specifically address in our lesson plans." Mary noted that her TEP focused on the legal requirements of accommodating students but failed to prepare her and other PSTs for differentiation for racial, ethnic, religious, and other reasons. Mary recognized the importance of tailoring the classroom experience to meet the needs of all students, not only those with a required accommodation status.

Alice also expressed grievance through hesitancy and frustration. She expressed a genuine desire to use the diversity training in her professional praxis. She said, “I want to make it a part of my everyday curriculum. I want there to be books. I want kids to see that it is okay to be different and not to judge others.” However, when she was asked if conversations in the diversity in education course were carrying over into teacher practices, she said, “not that I’ve seen, no.” Of her fellow PSTs she said, “We need education, and it’s got to come while we are in school. We have to have resources.”

She was critical of her TEP when discussing the curriculum: “Why aren’t we having those conversations when they’re going to be a part of our daily lives,” she asked. Alice, like Charles and Mary, said of diversity topics, “We’re saying it needs to be there [in our curriculum], but we’re not really being told how.” She summarized what all three participants were expressing when she pointedly said, “We’re ready for change and we just don’t know how to be that change.” In this stage of grievance, participants blended an excitement for making a difference with the feeling of unpreparedness that culminated in hesitancy.

Fear of Retaliation

The participants also grieved through a fear of retaliation. Charles feared emotional retaliation from students as a response to his feelings of inadequacy in diversity issues. He imagined a situation in the K-12 setting where he was leading a diversity discussion, drawing upon his failed experiences as a student. When thinking about his future students and centering conversations on race and LGBTQ+ characters, he said, “[These topics are] not easy to talk about, it’s not easy to lecture about, it’s not easy to learn about.” He said he was afraid, “a student will hate you for the rest of the year.” Due to the feelings of inadequacy from the lack of instruction and modeling in his TEP, Charles feared failure would bring on retaliation. Despite this fear, Charles still wanted to be a successful educator for diverse students, which meant he would need to be more culturally competent. He reflected on his former perspectives on education and said, “That’s not teaching. That’s what we feel comfortable with.”

Alice expressed a fear of retaliation from future parents. Aware of graduation in less than a year, she said, “We’re not going to all stay in our one little bubble forever.” She imagined discussions around LGBTQ+ issues taking place in her class, and wondered, “Where do we begin so that we’re not stepping on the toes of others and fearing retaliation?” Alice had adopted a new mindset towards diversity issues but grieved that she could not live them into fruition without fear of parental retaliation. To Alice, keeping silent was the only way she could survive in a school system.

Mary held a fear of parental and community retaliation. She said, “I know in specific places there probably would be push back,” if she were to incorporate a specific text that she had been reading for her coursework. She went on to explain

an example in the United States where parents attempted to sue a district for incorporating this text into their curriculum. Mary feared, “I think that would probably happen in a lot of places too,” alluding to her future as a teacher in rural areas. Despite these fears, Mary still believed it was her responsibility to incorporate course texts and independent reading options that center characters of color and LGBTQ+ characters. When asked whether all teachers should incorporate texts centering diverse characters and storylines, Mary said, “we *should*.” The emphasis on “should” implied Mary’s understanding the necessity for diverse literature *and* the reality that many schools are not addressing this need.

Discussion

Researchers have shown that many TEPs fail to adequately prepare PSTs for the diverse realities of P-12 schools. Our research suggests that even in light of the rural whiteness of the PSTs in our study, there exists an immediate desire for TEPs to be culturally competent. Examining PSTs’ perspectives in rural Appalachia, we argue that PSTs desire to be able to work successfully with diverse students and desperately look to their educator preparation programs to provide them with adequate skills and resources for their future schools and students. As Alice stated, “All I have is my own experience.” She did not feel her cultural background and experiences as a queer educator would be enough to successfully address issues of diversity in schooling, nor did she see her experiences as positive.

Our recommendation points to previous calls for colleges of education to evaluate their curricula and consider how aims toward diversity are included. In particular, we charge programs to center a critical focus on diversity throughout all courses and all assignments. It cannot be set apart from the curriculum and introduced in independent modules or courses that many programs refer to as “the diversity course.”

The participants in this study, while desiring to be successful teachers of diverse students, did not feel they were prepared to be so nor were the communities they planned to serve be receptive to such teaching. In preparing future educators, we argue that critical diversity pedagogy must be implemented programmatically, as opposed to isolated in individual classes, courses, or units. Perhaps, more importantly, we also argue against the shortsighted notion that students in rural Appalachia are “not ready” to face the realities of diverse classrooms. In fact, as one of the participants stated, “We are ready for change! We just don’t know where to begin.”

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