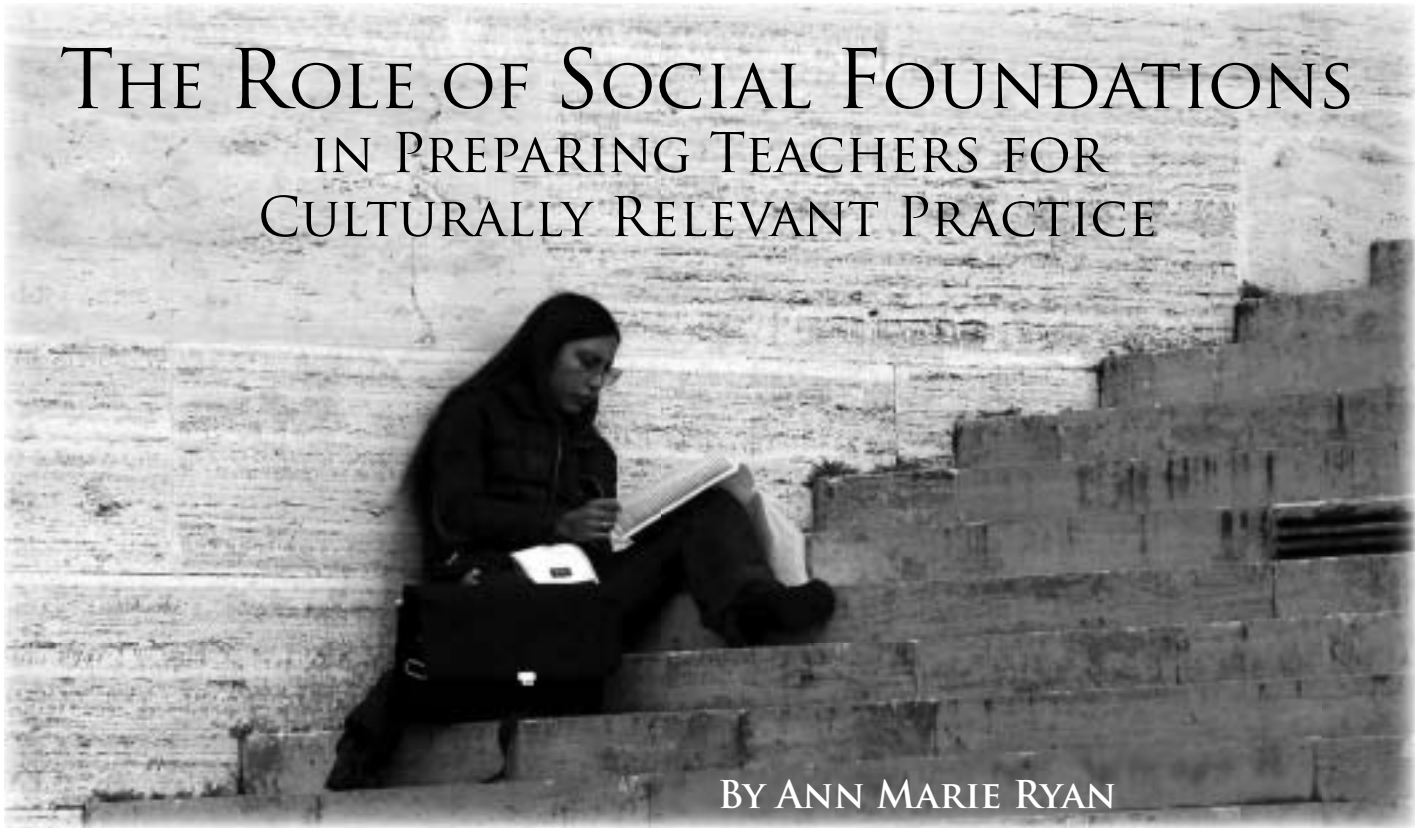
The Role of Social Foundations in Preparing Teachers for Culturally Relevant Practice



By Ann Marie Ryan

The 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress fourth grade reading results indicate that while 75% of white children across the nation read at or above a basic level—partial mastery of knowledge and skills required for grade level work—only 40% of African American and 44% of Latino fourth graders do (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003a). Results were similarly discouraging for children from low-income families of whom 45% scored at or above a basic level, while 76% of those not eligible for free/reduced-price school lunches scored at or above a basic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003b).

The entrenched social inequities responsible for this crisis of access and equity in education are historically rooted in broad social and institutional issues that influence the pedagogical practices of schools and teachers. They play a significant role in shaping teacher beliefs, teacher attitudes, and teacher expectations of students of color and those in poverty and how they should be taught.

To leave these socialized beliefs unexamined can produce devastating consequences, as evidenced by the over-representation of African American children placed in special education. In 1998, while representing only 17% of the total school enrollment, African American children accounted for 33% of those labeled mentally retarded (Losen & Orfield, 2002, p. xvi). In a qualitative study of the special education referral process in a particular district, Harry, Klingner, Sturges, and Moore (2002) found that teachers referred children seen as behavior problems and oftentimes blamed that behavior on what they perceived to be dysfunctional families (p. 78).

In this process, teachers often made "implicit or explicit references to ethnicity, culture, and/or socioeconomic status of the families" in explaining the reasons for students' behavior (Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002, p. 79). Many preservice teachers hold similar beliefs about students of color and those in poverty. Bondy and Ross (1998) found that these misguided beliefs contribute to a notion that many African American children require special education.

These myths held by teacher candidates include believing that poor African American students fail because their parents do not care about their education; that they are unmotivated and uncooperative; and that they have grown up with few literacy experiences (Bondy & Ross, 1998, pp. 243-246). These notions, derived from social stereotypes of African Americans and low-income families, perpetuate low teacher expectations and intensify an already disturbing picture of over-representation in special education and low student achievement in general education settings.

Addressing the issue of teachers' low expectations of students of color and those in poverty poses significant challenges to teacher education. The growing body of research focused on this issue documents ways teachers can make a real difference in the educational lives of children. Ladson-Billings' (1992; 1994; 1995) and others demonstrate that teachers can work with students to challenge socio-economic inequities, succeed academically, and retain pride in their cultural backgrounds.

Based on a review of literature about preparing culturally competent teachers, this article argues that social foundations courses, especially courses in the history and sociology of education, are critical for teacher candidates to understand the power of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic inequities and the relationship of these factors to the pedagogical practices of schools and teachers in order for teachers to engage in culturally relevant practice.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Much of the literature addressing the challenges of preparing teachers for teaching students of color and those in poverty is increasingly focused on culturally relevant

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pedagogy.[1] Ladson-Billings (1992) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as that which empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (p. 382). She argues that it urges collective action grounded in cultural understandings, experiences, and ways of knowing the world. Culturally relevant teachers treat students as competent and provide instructional scaffolding so that students can use what they know to access what they need to know (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 123-124).

Shujaa (1995) asserts that the intent of culturally relevant pedagogy is to increase student achievement, to help students develop the skills to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and to develop citizenship skills based on a realistic and thorough understanding of the political system (p. 200). Mehan, Lintz, Okamoto, and Wills (1995) argue that when culturally sensitive teaching is not accompanied by an academically rigorous curriculum, minority students will most likely not benefit from it (p. 141).

Therefore, culturally relevant pedagogy works to assist students from marginalized communities by focusing on academic achievement toward political and economic access. This requires teachers who possess in-depth knowledge of students, subject matter, pedagogy and the social implications of education.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

The complex and substantive demands of culturally relevant pedagogy pose urgent challenges to teacher preparation programs, especially since the demographic reality is one of an increasingly diverse student population and a considerably homogeneous teaching population. In 1999, 63% of all elementary and high school students were white; however, in that same year one out of every five elementary and high school students had one foreign-born parent (Jamieson, Curry, & Martinez, 2001).

The demographic background of teachers in the same year was 84% white and 16% minority (Hoffman, 2003). This trend shows little sign of changing since the majority of students enrolled in teacher education programs continue to be white. In the fall of 2001, white students represented 78% of all those enrolled in teacher education programs (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2002). As a result, teachers are more frequently being asked to teach students who have different backgrounds and life experiences from their own. This demographic reality makes it necessary for teacher preparation programs to better prepare their teacher candidates for the diversity of students they will teach.

Exploring the connections between racial and ethnic identities and pedagogy is essential for all teachers, since teachers and students belong to a host of microcultures (Gollnick, 1992). Zeichner (1996) argues that even if efforts to recruit and retain students of color in teacher preparation programs are successful and there is an increase in their number, the need to bridge cultural knowledge and pedagogy is still of great importance (p. 133). This also holds true for teachers who share a significant part of their cultural background with students.

It cannot be assumed that teachers can easily translate cultural knowledge into culturally relevant pedagogy (Montecinos, 1994, p. 41). Although a teacher may share many cultural aspects with his or her students, including racial or ethnic background, other differences, such as socio-economic status, can create challenges for teachers. Hence all teachers need to become aware of the many cultures they are a part of and how it might affect their teaching and their students' learning.

Making Race and Class Matter

Teachers holding high expectations, scaffolding from home to school, and involving parents and community members in schools are essential to increasing teachers' effectiveness with students of color and those in poverty (Villegas, 1991; Zeichner, 1996). However, an increased emphasis on the importance of teachers having a clear sense of their own cultural identities and their relationship to teachers' understanding of socio-economic inequities is evident in recent literature (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, pp. 27-35).

Thus, successful teaching of students of diverse backgrounds calls for teachers who understand relationships between racial and ethnic identity and pedagogy and are aware of how schools can perpetuate socio-economic inequities. These elements are critical in preparing teacher candidates to effectively teach students of color and those in poverty.

Addressing relationships of race, ethnicity, and pedagogy and issues of socioeconomic inequity and schooling connect the more personal and social dimensions of teaching. An examination of these important dimensions in social foundations courses complicates and sophisticates teachers' understandings, resulting in less paternalistic and more authentic engagements with students. It allows teachers to see that they are socially constructed beings and that schools and classrooms are microcosms of larger societies. This elevates critical elements of culturally relevant pedagogy—high expectations, scaffolding, and parent involvement—to more than educational buzzwords with predictable and measured outcomes.

Teacher candidates become aware that their expectations of students are affected by the ways they have been socialized as individuals *and* as teachers. This then allows them to appreciate that their ability to scaffold students' learning is dependent on a deep understanding of their students, beyond what they have come to know through socialized and filtered means.

Effective teachers of students of color and students in poverty have an awareness of the social construction of their identities and those of their students and what those identities represent in broader social contexts.[2] These teachers are aware that identity is shaped by cultural experiences and that both the individual and the cultures they represent have an impact on teaching and learning. This becomes especially poignant in the case of white middle and upper class teachers, where there is a need for them to recognize what they symbolize. Their whiteness, along with the power and privilege it embodies, will be a defining characteristic in a classroom.

These teachers will need to understand issues of representation and how their whiteness shapes the way they see students of color and those in poverty. Consequently, not only do teachers need to be competent in their subject matter and teaching methodologies, but they also need to address the personal and social realties of race and class and their pedagogical implications. This will require middle and upper class white teachers to acknowledge that social systems and specifically schools are inequitable and that in many cases they have personally benefited from this inequity.

There is powerful evidence demonstrating how social class shapes schooling and how teachers play a role in this process. In a review of literature on social class and schooling, Knapp and Woolverton (1995) assert that teachers' social-class identification is critical to understanding how they see themselves as teachers and how they understand their students. This conclusion is supported by Shujaa's (1995) study of several initiatives in U.S. school districts to integrate African and/or African American content into the curricu-

lum to make instruction more culturally relevant for African American students.

Shujaa (1995) contends that in order to support culturally relevant teaching, professional development must be directed toward enabling teachers to focus on their conceptions of themselves and others, their cultural knowledge, and their classrooms' social structure. Shujaa (1995) further argues that culturally relevant pedagogy is more than an infusion of content; it requires teachers to recognize who they are racially, culturally, and economically as individuals and how they have learned to view others who are racially, culturally, and economically different from themselves in order to effectively implement culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Teachers

Recent research on effective teachers of students of color and those in poverty illustrates that teachers can make a difference and assist in increasing their students' academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1992) found that those teachers most successful with African American students, encouraging children to choose academic excellence and maintain their cultural identity, are aware of the position of African Americans in society and how it affects expectations of students (p. 389).

These teachers are concerned about the inequities in society and schooling. They see their role as helping students become aware of these inequities and use pedagogy that is liberating, rather than maintaining the status quo, by explicitly teaching students how to gain social and political access (Ladson-Billings 1992, p. 388). From additional research on successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) found that these teachers encourage individual achievement and help students develop a broader socio-political consciousness allowing them to critique cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain socio-economic inequities (p. 118).

Villegas (1991) found that although successful teachers of culturally diverse students are aware of the institutional obstacles that many of their students face, they do not adopt a pessimistic outlook toward their students' ability to achieve (p.18). On the contrary many of these teachers explicitly work with students to understand these obstacles and acquire strategies to deal with them.

According to Haberman (1995), successful teachers of students in poverty see how education, schools, and teachers contribute to the failure of students and work against perpetuating these practices and policies (pp. 52-53). Effective teachers of students in poverty believe that regardless of the life conditions their students face, they as teachers bear the primary responsibility for sparking their students' desire to learn (Haberman, 1995, p. 53).

A strong sense of efficacy on the part of a teacher is vital to the academic achievement of students. The belief that one has or can acquire the skills and resources to teach a child regardless of race or class is an essential quality that includes relying on personal and professional experiences, as well as students, parents, and communities as resources for teaching. Teachers need to demonstrate that they believe all students are capable of learning and that they believe they are capable of making a difference in the educational lives of children.[3]

Building a Foundation for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Prospective teachers' beliefs have a great impact on their attitudes and behaviors towards culturally different students; therefore teacher educators need to make beliefs an important feature of preparation programs and legitimate sources of inquiry (Sia & Mosher, 1994, p. 2). Courses in social foundations provide opportunities for such examinations and can scaffold teacher candidates from their own experiences and beliefs to complex understandings of educational access and equity.

Teacher candidates need to be familiar with the critical discourses of social foundations, examining the historical and sociological aspects of education, to heighten their awareness of their socialization and foster an understanding of how instructional methods are shaped by these forces. Teacher education can sometimes be a series of isolated courses rather than a program reflecting the integrated nature of teaching, lacking explicit connections between the social contexts of schooling, the actual content taught, and the methods used to teach that content. Social foundations courses can provide an integrated experience where content is wedded to the practice of teaching in such a way that students can see how individual and social issues have real implications for everyday pedagogical practice.

History of American education courses, a common requirement in teacher education programs, often focus on understanding how education has been shaped by broader historical, political, economic, regional, and social forces. In the case of the over-representation of African Americans in special education described earlier, teacher candidates would examine historically how such beliefs came to be and what forces were at work in shaping those beliefs. Examining the expanded access to formal schooling for African Americans as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era and the limitations to that access in the late nineteenth century as a result of Jim Crow laws and the "separate but equal" Supreme Court decision in the 1892 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* are critical in this process.

Alongside that, the study of movements in the early-twentieth century that led to the introduction of IQ testing further complicates students' understanding of how racial stereotypes combined with institutional barriers resulted in grave misconceptions of African Americans and in particular the intellectual potential of African American children. The rigorous examination of such equity issues over time has the potential to challenge the validity of current beliefs and perhaps dispel dangerous myths.

Through historical and sociological inquiries into education, teacher candidates have the opportunity to raise their awareness of past and current social inequities and the role of schools and teachers in perpetuating and resisting them. While teacher candidates may assume access to universal public schooling is a given, courses in the social foundations allow them to examine the gradual and oftentimes reluctant move toward this reality by focusing on the evolution of public schooling and the educational experiences of diverse groups at various points in the history of the United States. Teacher candidates begin to distinguish between historical and contemporary perspectives on access to schooling and come to understand the efforts that led to wider educational access and the challenges that remain in providing educational equity for all.

These types of understandings are critical in preparing teacher candidates to practice culturally relevant pedagogy and begin to address the long-standing crisis of achievement for students of color and those in poverty. Addressing this crisis requires a considerable amount of flexibility and sophistication on the part of teachers. It calls for a strong sense of self, an awareness of how broader social and historical issues affect teaching and learning, a thorough understanding of subject matter and pedagogy, and a commitment to learning from students and their communities. Such a complex outcome can only be met with a concerted and coordinated effort by social foundations and teacher preparation faculty.

Notes

[1] For examples on how to prepare culturally responsive teachers and how to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy into teacher preparation programs see Gay, 2000; Villegas and Lucas, 2002.

[2] The importance of teacher self-efficacy is examined in Banks and McGee Banks, 1995; Bondy and Ross, 1998; Canella and Reiff, 1994; Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; Kailin, 1994; Lawrence and Tatum, 1997; Mazzei, 1997; Montecinos, 1994.

[3] This is especially important given that studies have shown how powerful social class is in determining the types of education children are provided. Metz (1998) studied the affects of social class on five high schools from different classes in 1985 and again in 1995 and found that "… even where classes were task-oriented, the level of discourse and the kind of discourse was noticeably more advanced the higher one went in SES among these schools" (p. 28). Anyon (1981) found, "… that even in an elementary school context, where there is a fairly 'standardized' curriculum, social stratification of knowledge is possible" (pp. 3-4).

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