College Students' Myths About Diversity and What College Faculty Can Do

By Hala Elhoweris, Gowri Parameswaran, & Negmeldin Alsheikh

Introduction

In the last two decades the proportion of children of color in public schools in the U.S. has increased to about 40%. However, this has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in teachers of color. Many college and university teaching institutions have attempted to deal with the increase in the number of students of color in the public schools and the lack of minority teaching candidates by increasing the number of courses offered on diversity as part of their teaching programs.

Students entering teaching programs have had prior experience with issues of diversity either through personal experiences or exposure to popular media. Sometimes, their own school curriculum introduces them to issues of diversity. The popular discourse on diversity issues whether in public schools or in popular media is fraught with problems regarding both the conceptualization of what diversity is and

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the framing of the problems surrounding issues of diversity. Students also come with pre-conceived notions about the role of schooling in society and the goals of education in the development of a person. Many of these ideals may conflict with the goals of a multicultural education program that truly leads to the empowerment of all children.

The aim of this article is to discuss the myths that have been encountered by the authors in their personal teaching experiences with college students, and the impact of these myths on student teachers' understanding of their roles in classrooms. The authors hope to introduce readers to other writers who have commented and studied the myths. Finally we attempt to offer some suggested teaching tips as part of teacher education courses that will help clarify some of these issues for student teachers in their effort to be effective allies to underrepresented and marginalized students in their own classrooms.

Myth# 1:

Multicultural education reinforces barriers between various cultural groups.

In a class discussion about multicultural education, several student teachers in our classes stated that multicultural education is divisive and racist. Some even stated that the infusion of multicultural education in the school curriculum and the inclusion of school celebrations like Black History Month create more barriers between the various racial and cultural groups

because it focuses on one group while excluding others. This argument seems to be founded on misunderstanding of the goal and practices of multicultural education.

According to Sleeter and Grant (1993), the goal of multicultural education is to promote "equal opportunity in the school, cultural pluralism, alternative life styles, and respect for those who differ and support for power equity among groups" (p. 171). Banks (1994) also defined multicultural education as "a way of viewing reality and a way of thinking, and not just content about various ethnic and cultural groups" (p. 8).

Multicultural education is for all cultural groups and it is about bringing all groups closer together. A class on multicultural education should include issues related to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, religion, age, language, values, geographic origin, ability, and other differences. Multicultural education is also about developing positive attitudes toward individuals from various racial groups. Indeed, multicultural education can help us to create a more understanding, inclusive, and equitable society (Ravitch, 1991/1992).

The belief that multicultural education is divisive and racist is a myth that must be dismantled because it may discourage student teachers from teaching about cultural diversity that can foster an appreciation and respect for all students. Educators need to understand that the goal of multicultural education is to provide all cultural groups with equal educational

opportunities. To address this, multicultural education must take into account the history of immigration in the U.S. as well as the inequality and exclusion throughout the years (Nieto, 2000).

Teaching tips: To correct the student teachers misunderstanding of the goal of multicultural education, class discussions need to examine the goals and the definition of multicultural education. For instance, the class can examine the seven characteristics of multicultural education; namely, it is antiracist, basic, important for all students, pervasive, includes social justice issues, emphasize process, and critical pedagogy (Nieto, 2000).

Student teachers should know that multicultural education must reflect the experiences and the needs of many different groups including women, minority religious groups, and individual with disabilities to strengthen and value the diversity in American society. Student teachers also need to recognize that multicultural education is not only preparing student teachers to work effectively with children from diverse backgrounds, but it could also prepare school children for the richness of living in a diverse society.

College faculty could also construct activities that enable student teachers to reflect on the curriculum bias. Student teachers need to recognize that a mono-cultural curriculum gives students only one way of seeing the world. Therefore, multicultural education is imperative for students to be active in a democratic society.

Myth # 2:
Cultures are static, unchanging and have core characteristics that can be identified and studied.

Student teachers often expect to be handed information that looks at cultures as if they contained discrete, static elements that are quite unconnected to other contexts and global events (Zinn, 1995). Such an orientation leads college teaching students into positions of extreme cultural relativity or, to valuing some cultures as better than others.

For example, a student in one of our classes asserted that the Hispanic culture demands that girls not be treated as equal to boys; therefore it is not appropriate for teachers to empower Hispanic girls. These expectations are based on a mistaken notion of cultures that has its origins on a biological, essentialist model.

Student teachers were found to believe that as people respectful of diversity among cultures they ought not to do anything that

would in any way change the *essential nature* of these cultures. Students expect to understand cultures as if frozen in time. They expect clear boundaries and singular identities among their students (Sleeter, 1991). It is important for college faculty teaching diversity to address these misconceptions of diversity among student teachers.

Cultural writers have emphasized that change is an enduring element of cultural identities (Solarzano, 1989; Weiler, 1988; Wertsch, 1985). For many cultures around the world, the impact of globalization has meant a death knell or at the very least, a dramatic change to their way of life. It is important for college faculty to enable student teachers to examine the impact of these events on cultures, especially with regards to who benefits from these changes and who pays the price.

Student teachers in diversity classes should be helped to facilitate their own students to talk back to power both within and outside their communities. Often adults underestimate the power of children and youth to resist the forces of commercialization and market hegemony. It is important to help children articulate this resistance and feel empowered to express their deep desires and hopes in the face of exploitation and oppression.

Teaching tips: College faculty could construct activities that enable student teachers to reflect on the changes in their own culture. One activity involves talking to parents, grandparents, and other community members about visible changes in the physical and cultural environment in a neighborhood. The students could then explore macro-cultural and social forces that lead to these transformations and the impact of these changes on the lives of individuals living within a community.

Another activity involves introducing pieces of writing in the English language from different times in history. Student teachers will be amazed at the transformations in a language that they had thought to have only one correct form. The teacher can then explore the dynamic nature of spoken and written language reflecting changes in the social conditions around the writer.

Myth# 3:
A discussion of educational inequities in multicultural classes is sufficient to create a more just society.

Many student teachers often expect to examine issues of minority cultures in multicultural classes. For instance, many

students in our classes believed that multicultural classes should focus on children of color because they were victims of societal inequities. Some even assumed that a discussion about educational inequities in multicultural classes is sufficient to make them active promoters of equality and social justice.

The discussion of societal inequities may provoke the feeling of guilt about racism, which is not a sufficient factor to make student teachers active promoters of equality in their own classroom. Student teachers need to examine in depth the issues of educational equity for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Despite the education reform efforts, students of diverse backgrounds continue to experience educational inequities within the educational system. For instance, children from diverse backgrounds were found to be overrepresented in special education programs (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998; Salend, Garrick Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002) and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs across the nation (Ford & Webb, 1994; Maker, 1996).

Several researchers attributed the school failure of children of color in the U.S. public schools to the societal inequities (see for example, Delpit, 1995; Grossman, 1995; Nieto, 2000). To discuss the societal inequities for diverse learners as the focus of study of multicultural classes alone cannot solve the problem of educational inequities. We need to go beyond the discussion of past and present oppressions to focusing on how we can establish a more fair society where all children can succeed.

An important point that needs to be considered is that people of color have little power or voice in American society. Without the support of critically conscious people from dominant cultures, we can't achieve this goal. Indeed, Tatum (1999) discussed the need of white allies to stand against societal inequities.

The dominance of white culture as one of power in the United States is not a new phenomenon. It has been a persistent force throughout the U.S. history (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 1999). Therefore, multicultural programs must examine the role of 'white privilege' and culture of power in creating a more just, democratic society.

Teaching tips: College faculty can construct activities to enable student teachers to closely examine the imbalances of power, voice, inclusion, and access. To address this, college faculty can group their students into four or five groups to discuss the following questions: (a) How and why have educational inequities emerged and persisted?

(b) How do educators respond? and (c) what can educators do to empower students who have been historically marginalized?

Delpit (1995) asserts that inherent in issues of race and culture are issues of power. "Those with power are frequently least aware of — or least willing to acknowledge — its existence," while members of subordinate groups are acutely conscious of the disparities (p. 26). College faculty, therefore, can create a class discussion about the existence of the culture of power and the need of white allies to stand against societal inequities. College faculty also needs to teach their students the necessary skills to become socially active in creating the necessary changes to establish a more equal society.

Myth # 4:
Racism ought to be treated the same as interpersonal prejudice.

Student teachers often treat racism as nothing but random feelings of superiority exhibited by one person against another (Marable, 2002; Wise, 2001). For example, students in one of our classes were overtly upset that we were talking about 'white privilege.' One student exclaimed that she has faced racist attitudes from black people and we should spend talking about that as well. Most student teachers view racism as acts of bias and chauvinism at an interpersonal level and therefore resolvable by simply correcting individual attitudes.

The solution that is most appealing to students in terms of race related issues is to simply learn to get along and be nice to each other. In another class discussion, students were appalled to find out that there were many African American leaders who think that race relations in this country cannot be improved without the issue of reparation being resolved. They were used to thinking about racism solely as an interpersonal event and had not explored the institutional aspects of racism.

If these expectations are not addressed, students begin to be lulled by the impression that racism and racial inequality belong in the past and are not as pertinent to current discussion on diversity and teaching (Marable, 2002). The litany of racist aggression is sufficiently encapsulated by narratives of slavery and lynching in the past (Weiler, 1988; Zinn, 1980). However, few student teachers discuss the impact of racist institutions in the lives of diverse students today, or how racism functions to keep oppressed groups from organizing into a collective force for change.

Racism involves a "systematic discrimination against or exclusion of a group based upon an accidental quality, as in skin color and should be distinguished from chauvinism which is an attitude of superiority" (Daniels, 1996, p. 2). Racism has to do with long-term systemic discrimination that results in vastly different life and occupational outcomes for the disadvantaged and under-represented groups in a society. Teaching about the institutional aspects of racism is bound to induce discomfort at the very least, as potential teachers attempt to understand all the various factors like class and gender that privileges some and disadvantage others.

Teaching tips: Class discussions need to examine the invisible effects of 'white privilege' and how new immigrant groups change the boundaries of their ethnic group to fit into the mainstream, the impact these changes have on group cohesion as well as on community health. Class readings should involve the many ways in which racism functions — at the individual, interpersonal and at the institutional levels.

It is important to bring in statistical data from the census bureau and other data gathering agencies that reflect the deteriorating conditions of some marginalized groups in the last four decades and discuss how accumulated privileges over generations can serve to maintain the caste-class system in society. The readings could reflect the assertion that "Privilege, to us, is like water to the fish: invisible precisely because we cannot imagine life without it" (Wise, 2002, p. 4). In this connection, readings on widespread racial profiling by law-enforcement agencies, the unfair criminal justice system, lack of equal access to decent housing and healthcare are appropriate.

Myth # 5:
Specific pedagogical skills are the major pillars of culturally responsive instruction for diverse learners.

A myth related to what college-teaching students need to learn to work effectively with children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is the belief held by student teachers that culturally sensitive pedagogical skills are all that need to be learned to work successfully with diverse learners. However, the mastery of culturally sensitive pedagogical skills do not guarantee that teachers will use these skills with diverse learners.

Research indicates that teachers usually use strategies to fulfill their expectations (e.g., Gay, 2000). So if teachers hold low expectations of their students, it is less likely that they will use these skills to accommodate the individual differences in their classrooms. Indeed, Gay (2000) stated that teachers who expect more of students generate higher levels of success than those who do not. According to Gay (2000), students who are perceived positively are at more advantaged in instructional interactions than those who perceived negatively.

Previous studies have shown that teachers have negative perceptions of the abilities of children from different cultural backgrounds (Delpit, 1995; Grossman, 1995; Jensen & Rosenfield, 1974; Ogbu, 1992). For instance, earlier Rist (1970), in a three-year study, concluded that a student's achievement was closely tied to his social background because teachers' expectations for children's academic potential, as early as their first year in school, were based almost entirely on racial and socio-economic facts about the children.

Cooper (1989) also stated that "teachers' expectations of students' performance may vary as a function of students' social class" (p. 1763). In another study, Boyce (1990) concluded that teachers in high socioeconomic status schools had higher or greater expectations for student academic achievement than did their counterparts in low socioeconomic status schools.

More recently, several researchers also indicated that teachers have negative attitudes and/or expectations of children from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000). The findings of these studies are disturbing. Since the number of students of diverse backgrounds is increasing in the public schools. According to Merton (1948), what teachers expect of students' influences what students come to expect of themselves. Therefore, college faculty may need to focus on changing teachers' attitude toward children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Teaching tips: One of the implications of this line of research is that college faculty needs to promote positive teacher attitude toward children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Changing teachers' attitudes and expectations is imperative to the design and implementation of effective culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2000). To address this, college faculty can create an opportunity for their student teachers to examine periodically their attitudes and expectations for children of diverse backgrounds.

Changing teachers' attitude toward children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds can also be accomplished through continual meaningful exposure to and experience with children

from diverse backgrounds. For instance, asking students teachers to reflect on the "insider/outsider" aspect of a cultural event that they attend can give them an opportunity to experience things from a multiple perspectives.

Research also indicated that community-based service learning could provide student teachers with an opportunity to make real connections with students and families from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, which is not feasible within classroom-based experience (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000).

Myth # 6:
The locus of responsibility and change for individual underachievement lies within the minority child.

Student teachers often place the onus of change on the minority student who seems to be lagging behind the rest of the class. They want techniques to enable the child to "catch up" with "normal" students. Students in our classes have emphasized the importance of the attainment of traditional goals in classrooms as the only route to success in life. The onus of change in their minds rests on the child and not in the context of a lack of empowerment within which these children are expected to function in schools. This leads students to seek magic remedies that would shape the mind of the individual child to look and function more like those of children of privilege.

Studies however document the futility of such an expectation in the context of the inequality that students live in (Freire, 1992; Lazare, 1992). There are a number of studies that demonstrate the numerous challenges that minority children have to surmount as they go through their school day (Kozol, 1997).

At the institutional level, there is extensive social stratification through the tracking system rampant in schools, the labeling of some children as burn-outs and dumb, providing an environment where jocks are rewarded while others are ignored, and most important of all, daily rituals that reinforces heterosexism, sexism, classism and racism.

At the interpersonal level bullying, harassment and discounting of children who come from social groups in the margins has been consistently documented in the public schools system. At the individual level, children from less privileged homes come to school less prepared to deal with the de-contextualized nature of traditional schooling (Eder, Evans & Parker, 1995; Perry, 2001).

Research has demonstrated schools tend to involve parents and caregivers of White and middle-class children in positive constructive activities and take their suggestions more seriously as compared to parents and families from lower-class backgrounds. The latter are invited mostly in negative contexts where the child has got into trouble. The parents are reprimanded and lectured to, and their suggestions for change are not taken very seriously (Reay, 1996; 1998).

Thus college-teaching students should explore the importance of school-community relations and the benefits of better communication with parents in the margins. The onus of change should not be place on the child but on the entire web of relationships that exist between the school administration, teaching faculty, staff, and families.

Change cannot simply reside in one individual child or family, who is nudged to change by schools, but must involve transformations in the world-view exhibited by school personnel and reflected in individual families. The adults closest to disenfranchised children must feel invested in the process of schooling as well as change in society.

Teaching tips: There are many personal narratives of lives in the margins reflecting the loss of power experienced as the narrators enter traditional schools. The many ways in which the stratified social hierarchy in middle and high school social environments, functioning to keep students in their place must be explored. Often the stratification follows race, class and gender lines. It is important for college faculty teaching diversity to examine how the various strengths that minority children come into schools with are undermined and discarded as unimportant for success by teachers.

Examining the impact of 'Ebonics' or African American Vernacular English on the modern adolescent experience provides a valuable context for looking at culture and change. One form of English alone is considered standard in traditional schools, thus negating the richness of the cultural life of children in the margin. Similarly, the dominance of masculinity, heterosexism, Judeo-Christian ideology, and the extolling of middle class life over others must be examined as part of the classroom experience of students. All of these issues could be connected to the bullying and harassment that students in American schools undergo regularly.

Myth# 7:
Learning styles of children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds must be a core theme for teacher preparation programs.

Many student teachers in our classes believe that learning styles of children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds must be a core theme for teachers' preparation programs. They also believe that they need to know the different learning styles of the different cultural groups in order to work successfully with students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

However, research has not fully supported the theory of learning styles. Learning styles is based on the theory that an individual will respond consistently to all educational experiences. Additionally, many researchers question the learning styles instruments (see for example, Tiedemann, 1989).

Learning styles of different cultural groups should not be the prime concern in working with children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Student teachers need to understand that culture is not the primary variable that impacts the students' learning styles and that not all students who are coming from the same cultural group will share the same learning style. Hanson (1992) argued that students may share the same cultural backgrounds and behave in different ways. Nieto (1992) also stated that children raised in the same home can have different learning styles.

Student teachers believe that teachers' instructional methods and teaching styles should be consistent with the students' learning styles. Although this is a very important point to consider, college professors may need to address the danger of relying on learning-style research, which may trivialize and stereotype cultures by emphasizing learning styles while avoiding the individual differences among each cultural group. For instance, students thought to be visual learners may be discouraged from participating in activities that focus on auditory skills.

The focus on learning styles research may hurt many students who don't have the same learning styles as their cultural norm. Because teachers will be teaching to meet the needs of the cultural groups' learning styles rather than teaching to meet the needs of individual student.

Teaching tips: The best implication of learning styles research is that college faculty can create activities that enable student

teachers to examine their own learning styles. Then students could explore the differences in their learning styles. College faculty can also provide their students with an opportunity to examine research on various learning styles and to compare what they read to their own personal experiences.

Student teachers also need to know that learning style research highlights the importance of culture, which is an important factor for teachers to consider while working with children of diverse backgrounds. However, race or ethnicity cannot be the determinant factor of how children can learn. Relying on learning styles research may create stereotyping which could be damaging for students of diverse learners.

Myth # 8:

Teaching to diversity simply involves helping students from diverse backgrounds achieve traditional goals in education.

In our classes, many student teachers were found to believe that teaching to diversity mainly involves helping students of diverse background to meet the traditional goals of education. Most student teachers have not been allowed to engage with the question of the fundamental inequality embedded in societal institutions that favor dominant groups over the marginalized.

Thus, for them, teaching to diversity is all about helping students from all backgrounds do well on assessment instruments on topics that have been conceived in traditional ways (Kohn, 2000; Lee, Menkart & Okazawa-Rey, 2002). They see the nature of the curriculum as unrelated to the unequal access to resources in society. Most teaching students believe that if given the right information everyone has equal access to a good life and professional advancement (Delpit, 1995).

When diversity issues are addressed at all it simply includes "fiestas and parties." Since this is looked at as simply frills on essential education, diversity education is the part that is the first to be cut from school budgets. As Lee, Menkart, and Okazawa-Rey (2002) put it, what we need is "new information that transforms the way we look at each other and ourselves and gives us the skills to deal with racism, and other forms of oppression" (p. 23).

Many researchers have documented the unequal nature of the schooling process and the disengagement that students in the margins feel in traditional schools. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. These include unequal funding for schools and curriculum that is not related meaningfully to students' lives. In regular classrooms there is a lack of a forum for students to express their own concerns, anxieties and aspirations. Most important of all, there is a little opportunity to engage in a socially and politically empowering curriculum that helps students become agents of change (Freire, 1992; Kozol, 1997).

Much of the typical teacher's engagement with diversity is about experimenting with the methods of delivering traditional information. The potential student teacher seeks information on how to make use of modern information processing literature and ways to make often socially benign (ones that do not challenge the status quo) text more interesting so students would complete their assigned work.

Paulo Freire (1992) asserted that cultural workers had to facilitate the process whereby students begin to look at themselves as subjects of history and not simply as objects. The traditional curriculum does not enable students to realize their own potential for social change. Teachers can open up possibilities of change by challenging some of the traditional goals of education. It is important for teachers to make evident the political nature of schooling.

Teaching tips: Class activities can involve interviewing teachers and identifying the unarticulated underlying goals of education that teachers hold. The students can then discuss the impact of the different philosophies of education on children from varied backgrounds. College teaching students must be helped to clarify their own philosophies of education based on their new understanding of the roles of school in social change.

Groups of students can role-play debates surrounding school activities and administrative decisions, i.e., introducing gifted, vocational training, school to work programs. Different students can view the issue from the viewpoint of community members situated at different places in the school community hierarchy.

Conclusion

We explore in this article some of the myths that plague student teachers and prevent them from viewing multicultural education in a fresh light. Student teachers often fail to see education as a political enterprise of reproducing the dominant ideology and appropriating and legitimizing one type of discourse. They sometimes fail to recognize that they don't teach history, math or reading but they teach a student who comes to school as an ethnic being, cultural-being, gender-being, and religious-being. They often overlook the crucial and dynamic relationship between the text and context and often fail to recognize the multiple discourses within which schools operate.

There are, no doubt, many other myths about diversity. These eight represent those encountered in the authors' personal experiences. As have many student teachers, we have also participated in some of these myths. Therefore, we believe that as educators we all need to continue to examine our own myths about diversity.

The implications of this article are that multicultural courses should be open for more scrutiny and discussions. The emphasis on these courses should be on the classroom discourse, which generates consciousness through social practices, and multicultural education should encourage in a broader sense the creation of a democratic classroom that promotes a collective conscience (sharing voices) and individual subjectivity (addressing the self).

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