

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Removing Our Masks: Using the Visual and Performing Arts to Promote Deep Reflection in Pre-service Teachers

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The role of reflection is central to teacher preparation. As individuals integrate new information within their existing schema, they refine their practice (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983). Another view of reflection suggests that as individuals have new experiences, they frame and re-frame issues within their own actions and also in the broader socio-political context (Hatton & Smith, 1995). We learn by reflecting on what we do not just by doing it. Through reflection we examine, evaluate, and adjust. It is both an assessment of our performance and also of our selves. Yet, the practice of reflection is rarely explicitly taught. Often as teacher educators, we found our students aligning their written reflections with what they think we want to hear rather than what they themselves think. Disconcerted by the censoring that occurs in writing, we chose the visual and performing arts as alternative media for student reflection. Using the arts involves the artist who creates the performance, the audience that personally responds to it, the shared experience between the artist and the audience, and the intersection of all three. We offer students the opportunity to reflect using a creative method that liberates them to honestly examine their personal belief systems including their biases and share them.

Discussing the value of the arts in education, Eisner (2005) offered that the arts create three unique possibilities:

First, they develop the mind by giving it opportunities to learn to think in special ways. Second, they make communication possible on matters that will not take the impress of logically constructed language. Poetry, after all, was invented to say what prose can never say. Third, the arts are places and spaces where one can enrich one's life (p. 8).

Our students use the arts as vehicles to express the inexpressible.

In doing so, our students thought deeply and critically about whom they are and the implications of their work with children and families who have diverse backgrounds.

The products included in the accompanying video were created by our students, pre-service teachers in special education courses taught at a large Southeastern urban university. This is a small sample of the pieces our students have produced over the past several years. Their responses stemmed from a variety of activities including reactions to guest speakers, course readings, field experiences, and culminating activities. Surbeck, Han, and Moyer (1991) provide a three-tiered framework for reflection. The first level, *reacting*, involves reflecting on a specific experience. Level two, *elaborating*, attempts to situate the new feeling by comparing it with other occurrences. Finally, *contemplating* causes individuals to focus on issues of importance, including their attitudes, goals, and ethical and moral dilemmas. These products were selected to exemplify these three levels of reflection. Their individual and collective work represents their awareness of issues of inequity and awakened a sense of advocacy in addressing these issues within their classroom.

As America becomes even more culturally and linguistically diverse, so will the needs of students in schools. Data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) showed that over three decades, the racial make-up of K-12 schools changed by 20% (i.e., the percentage of White students decreased from 78% in 1972 to 58% in 2005). Projections suggest student demographics will continue to diversify based on the overall population shifts that are occurring and have been referred to by Johnson (2009) as the browning of America. Scholars in mul-

ticultural education refer to this shift as the "demographic imperative," a call to action to ensure all teachers are able to meet the academic and social emotional needs of all students and collaborate with their families (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Pre-service and in-service teachers must be prepared to teach in a variety of settings and cultural contexts. In fact, teachers will need to be knowledgeable, skilled, reflective, and most of all amenable to effectively teach all students. Novice teachers are often employed in high-poverty, hard-to-staff schools, with high teacher turnover rates (American Federation of Teachers, 2007). The majority of students in these settings performs below their more affluent peers, experiences high transiency rates, and is at greater risk for identification of disabilities (Artiles, Aguirre-Munoz, & Abedi, 1998; Margai & Henry, 2003). Their experiences differ from those of the average teacher who remains predominately White, female, and middle class. Prior to entering their own classrooms, teacher candidates benefit from various opportunities to understand the realities of their students and families. This informed perspective is essential to their sense of teaching efficacy and professional commitment (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007).

Reflecting is a conscious act. In addition, reflecting is not intuitive; it is a learned skill requiring instruction and practice. It involves knowledge and skill as well as the disposition to do it. Dispositions are complex and difficult to assess. As a result, deep critical reflection becomes more of an afterthought or burden than an essential characteristic of praxis (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003). Thus, preparing teacher candidates with sound content and pedagogical mastery coupled with the ability to critically reflect is essen-

tial for them to teach all children well.

Several strategies for improving meaningful reflection in pre-service teachers include action research, ethnographic/case studies, field experiences, and writing exercises (Cruikshank, 1985; Ross, 1989; Zeichner, 1986). Other methods commonly used in classes involve small group discussions, journaling, discussion boards, and exit cards. While all useful, these approaches are not the only ways to get pre-service teachers to critically examine institutional structures and personal behaviors that impact their and their students' learning. Therefore, we offer the arts as vehicles to deepen our teacher candidates' personal and professional identities. Removing their masks is the first step on a long journey.

To watch the 18-minute video to which this article refers, please go to the Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education website at <http://urbaned-journal.org> and click on the Watch Video link next to this article in the Table of Contents. You will need Quick Time player in order to watch this video.

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