"EVERYTHING THAT'S CHALLENGING IN MY SCHOOL MAKES ME A BETTER TEACHER": NEGOTIATING TENSIONS IN LEARNING TO TEACH FOR EQUITY

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Abstract

This paper responds to the call for further inquiry into the experiences of graduates of urban-focused teacher education programs. I present and analyze the experiences of Mia, a White, monolingual English female who earned licensure in secondary social studies through a graduate-level, equity-focused teacher preparation program before accepting a position at a large, traditional, diverse, underperforming, urban middle school. The paper explores how negotiating tensions in curriculum and interactions with colleagues in her school context contributes to her identity development with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy.

Keywords: Teacher identity development, culturally relevant instruction, teaching for equity, urban teaching, teaching context

The achievement gap between White middle-class students and poor and working-class students of color has been well documented in the literature (Williams, 2003). Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted that a significant factor in this achievement discrepancy is the cultural and linguistic gap between a teaching force that is overwhelmingly White, middle class, and monolingual and a public school student population that grows increasingly diverse each year (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Although the majority of teachers—84 percent in 2011—are White females (Feistritzer, 2011), many teacher education programs are working to bridge this cultural divide between educators and their K-12 students. Programs are bolstering curriculum and field experiences to help preservice teachers develop culturally relevant, equity-oriented instructional approaches and dispositions that will help students make academic gains and achieve robust educational outcomes (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, as Cochran-Smith (2004) noted, few empirical studies exist on the experiences of these "diversity-prepared" teachers once they are hired.

This paper responds to this call for further inquiry into the experiences of graduates of equity-focused teacher education programs. Its purpose is to present and analyze the experiences of Mia (pseudonym), a White, female, monolingual recent college graduate who earned her licensure in secondary social studies through a graduate level urban teacher preparation program (UTEP; pseudonym) and then accepted a

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position at a large, traditional, diverse, urban middle school in the western United States. The school serves a predominantly Latino community and is "on watch" and being audited by the state because of historically low test scores. This research focuses on determining how negotiating tensions in the school context contributes to the identity development of a novice teacher with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy. Specifically, I explore tensions within the curriculum and in interactions with colleagues.

Conceptual Framework

Two strands form the theoretical grounding for this paper: (1) the situated nature of purposive activity in cultural, historical contexts/activity settings and (2) identity construction from a sociocultural perspective. Development and learning cannot be separated from the activities and social contexts in which they take place. According to Mercer (1992), "All learning is situated, because any task or activity does not exist independently of the ways in which participants contextualize it" (p. 33). How people learn and develop, as well as the kinds of knowledge they develop, is intricately connected to the various activities and contexts in which the learning experience occurs. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, individuals and the contexts in which they operate are not viewed as separate constructs. The situated nature of development (Putnam & Borko, 1997, 2000) "suggests that the study of learning, especially in educational settings, must treat context and culture as part of what is being studied, not variables to be partialed out" (Mercer, 1992, p. 33). These theories are particularly relevant for studying how elements of the context in which Mia learns to teach have influenced her development and learning as a teacher for equity.

In addition, in sociocultural theory, identity construction is considered to be a form of human development that occurs by engaging in goal-oriented action within various social settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Similarly, Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) remarked, "As teachers develop identity, context matters" (p. 90). Smagorinsky et al. (2004) observed that "one's identity is not simply the emergence of internal traits and dispositions but their development through engagement with others in cultural practice" (p. 21). Negotiating tensions, for example, those between the context and one's identity, can contribute to identity development (Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

Methodology

This study, which represents a piece of a larger research project, used qualitative, interpretive, case study methodology. Data sources included (1) field notes, audio files, and videotape transcripts from 12 hours of observation in Mia's classes during a 6-month period; (2) transcripts from 22 hours of semistructured interviews (16 with Mia and 6 with her support providers); and (3) artifacts, such as course assignments, lesson plans, student work, and school-issued documents.

Data analysis began during data collection and was iterative and recursive. The process was inspired by Spradley's (1980) domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis and LeCompte and Shensul's (1999) stages of (1) isolating specific items and working to label them accurately; (2) looking for and articulating patterns and structures; and (3) clarifying meaning by "linking together or finding consistent relationships among

patterns, components, constituents, and structures" (p. 177). The validity and trustworthiness of the results were established through triangulation, adapting previously validated interview protocols (see Peressini, Borko, & Romagnano, 2004), member checking, and prolonged observation.

Participant and Setting

Like many who enter the teaching profession, Mia is a White, monolingual, English-speaking female. Mia grew up in the southern United States in a fairly sheltered environment "with a tight circle of friends who were all like me: None of our parents are divorced. We're all White. We all come from fairly middle class families. And we stuck together" (Personal communication, January 19, 2006). In her family, she was "taught to be a peacemaker in the sense of not causing controversy when there is no need to cause it" (Personal communication, June 11, 2007).

During data collection, Mia was a first-year teacher at South Hill Middle School (pseudonym). The school's demographics reflect nationwide trends of increasing diversity. Of the school's almost 800 students, approximately 75% are from low-income families, nearly 70% are Latino (mostly of Mexican origin), about 27% are White, and small percentages are African American, Asian, American Indian, or of mixed heritage. More than half of the students learned something other than English as their first language. The demographics of Mia's classes are comparable to these statistics.

Findings: Mia's Case Story

Tensions in Curriculum

At South Hill Middle School, Mia has a fairly prescribed curriculum in terms of the topics that must be addressed in her sixth-grade social studies courses, as the school is "on watch" and being audited by the state due to its historically low test scores. However, she generally has some freedom in how she chooses to address the topics and which materials and resources she selects. Mia's approaches to various tensions that arise in the curriculum at South Hill illustrate important aspects of her evolving identity as a culturally responsive educator.

Mia was initially excited about the mandated unit on Mexican history because she thought she would be able to make it relevant and meaningful for her predominantly Latino students. However, the content turned out "to be not really culturally responsive." She lamented, "What they ended up learning about was some guy who lived 200 years ago who wound up reforming the Catholic Church. I mean *that's* not what they're interested in." (Personal communication, April 14, 2006). The assigned textbook's portrayal of Mexican history contributed to the problem. The book's coverage of the topic was "not really inclusive; it's just about wars and men, and that just is not culturally responsive to me," Mia recounted. "I don't want the Mexican girls in my class to think, 'Where are we in this history? This is supposed to be our history and I don't see anybody like me" (Personal communication, March 3, 2006).

To balance out the textbook's "wars and men" perspective and generate more interest among her students, Mia developed a subsequent mini-unit on famous Latina women in the United States. Students had a chance to learn about women who had

successfully followed career paths in which the students themselves were potentially interested (e.g., lawyer, author, singer, painter, civil rights activist) through research, writing, and a class presentation. Mia hoped that the Latina women they chose to research would serve as role models for her students.

Although Mia acknowledged that the famous Latinas project could have gone further in helping students develop conceptual understanding about the historical significance of the women's contributions, the project did at least introduce students to the role of women in the history of Latinos, thereby filling in the blanks of the textbook's portrayals to some extent. Mia's observation of the textbook's limited perspective and her subsequent adaptations illustrate an important aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy: identifying when the contributions or perspectives of certain groups are absent from the existing curriculum and adapting it to reflect a more inclusive approach.

Another aspect of culturally responsive teaching is to explicitly address issues of race, skin color, class, culture, gender, and so forth. Doing so is never straightforward or predictable, and the ensuing discussions are often emotional, political, and value laden. During the Mexican history unit, for example, Mia wanted her students to understand that "many Mexicans today are a blend of Spanish and indigenous cultures" because Mexico was "basically a Spanish colony for awhile." She had noticed that her many students of Mexican descent seemed to "have this sense of 'We're just Mexican and that's what we are'—like they've always been Mexican and nothing else." Mia wanted to clear up potential misperceptions: "They need to understand that part of their culture comes from Spain, that there really is a mix of cultures in Mexico." To help them comprehend, she asked a few of the students, "Why is your skin color brown?" When they didn't offer much of a response, she told them, "It's because you're a mix of this darker Native American person and these light-skinned White people from Spain." She continued,

> And it was kind of shock to them that Spanish people are White people, too. They were like, "Really, they're White?" Yes, they're White. And then when Mexico originally became its own country, it was the White people, like Miguel Hidalgo who was born in Mexico, who were leading this movement. It was people of Spanish descent who no longer wanted to be a part of the Spanish crown… But, I didn't get that across.

When asked to reflect on why she thought she did not make her point understood, she acknowledged that she "felt uncomfortable…even talking about skin color." She questioned whether she should have asked the students to think about why their own skin color was brown, and she said the whole exchange "was very difficult." I asked her to say more about her discomfort:

> **Author:** You said you feel uncomfortable talking about skin color. Is that just with your kids? Or do you feel like, just in terms of the identity of who you are, that makes you feel uncomfortable?
>
> **M:** Yeah, I think in general I think it's something that I just am not totally comfortable with. Because like when I was growing up it was something that you

don't point out. Does that make sense? Because if you do, then that makes you not accepting?

Author: Kind of like the mindset of not seeing differences? Like, "Oh, we're all just the same?" Kind of like that?

M: Right. Obviously there are differences, and I think it's okay to say that. Because I did. I did say that to my students. But it wasn't something that I was totally comfortable with, which is probably the biggest part of the reason why it was hard for me to teach it (Personal communication, April 14, 2006.).

This passage illustrates one of the ways in which an aspect of Mia's identity—namely, how she was taught while growing up not to discuss people's skin color differences—shapes her approach to discussing this issue in the classroom. Addressing topics such as this one can be difficult and takes courage on the part of teachers, as reflected in Mia's comments.

These scenarios illustrate some of the effects of the mandated curriculum on Mia and ways that she responds to it. She attempts to make connections to students' background knowledge, culture, and interests so that they will be able to find more meaning in the content than they might otherwise. She said that these adaptations ultimately make her a better teacher. Thinking back on her first year at South Hill, she remarked that having to work within the constraints of the mandated curriculum "has really taught me a lot about culturally responsive teaching."

M: So I think that the curriculum challenges me to really understand what culturally responsive teaching is and to work really hard to become a culturally responsive teacher…It forces me to think of ways that I can be culturally responsive but still stay in line with the status quo—does that make sense?

Author: The status quo meaning the curriculum you're required to teach?

M: Right. And the way that it's normally taught, and having to fit in with that (Personal communication, June 22, 2006).

This passage alludes to an aspect of Mia's identity that is evident across many data sources - namely, the way she takes responsibility for ensuring that students get what they need to have effective learning experiences, no matter what constraints she faces within the context of South Hill Middle School. Her proactive approach to problem solving when faced with potential barriers contributes to her identity development. She is able to take many aspects of her school setting (such as prescribed curriculum) that could potentially constrain her equity-focused teaching and turn them into affordances.

Tensions in Interactions with School Colleagues

During one interview, Mia made the following comments, which characterize some of the tensions she experiences with her colleagues:

> Something else that I still need to learn how to do is—you need to know when to open your mouth with the rest of the staff and how to pick your battles. In my case, I need to be able to pick a battle to begin with because I normally just go along with the flow. But I'm recognizing that, if you just continue to go along with the flow, then that voice—that voice of social justice or cultural responsiveness or whatever—is not going to be heard. In my school, people are just not talking about the things that I think we should be talking about. And so I've been trying to coach myself on being more assertive (Personal communication, January 23, 2006).

Multiple data sources point to tensions in interactions between Mia and some of her colleagues at South Hill, mostly relating to viewpoints about diversity and equity. In fact, Mia succinctly stated, "I'm *about* something that other people in the building aren't" (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

Mia's responses to various tensions that arise illustrate other important aspects of her evolving identity as a culturally responsive educator. When asked about the extent to which the whole faculty had discussions about equity issues and the ways in which Mia perceived those interactions to mediate her conceptions of teaching for equity, her professional identity, and her practices, she responded,

> I just feel like it's a very missing piece. I think we talk about SIOP [an instructional protocol to assist English language learners] and how we need to be implementing SIOP, but it's always in a perspective of just "this is going to help our students be more successful on the tests," not that this is going to help our students maintain their language or help support them in learning a new language, that kind of thing. We just don't ever talk about how the students' culture affects our school. We just really don't - unless it's in a negative way (Personal communication, June 22, 2006).

Mia expressed concern that at least some of her colleagues "have a superficial view of what culture is and how it should be recognized in the classroom" and that sometimes her colleagues' comments seem deficit oriented. She explained,

> The team conversations about students' home life and cultural diversity always seem very negative to me. It was just very, like, well, "the parents aren't doing this for the kid and it's because they're—because they don't speak English, or because they're poor, or because they're working all the time"—or something like that. It wasn't really a lot about positive things that were going on in the home. Or about things that the kids were getting at home and bringing to school (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

On the other hand, Mia took a step back to reflect on the context of the differences she perceives between her stance and that of some of her colleagues:

> When I'm listening to other teachers I can see the difference in those viewpoints almost immediately when they start talking. And at moments I have to be very patient because I have to remember that, if I had not gone through this [UTEP]

> program, I would have thought the same way. I would be making the same comments (Personal communication, January 23, 2006).

When asked to reflect on how she thought all-faculty gatherings influenced her development as a teacher for equity, Mia remarked:

> It makes me want to be more clear in who I am. And like what I'm trying to accomplish. It makes me want to speak up more. But it hasn't got to the point where I feel like totally brave enough to do that in that huge room full of people (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

This disposition of learning to speak up in the face of biased, deficit-oriented comments is an aspect of Mia's identity that shows up frequently in the data. On the heels of these comments, she provided a specific example of a time during an all-faculty meeting when she tried on her emerging identity as someone who speaks up in the face of comments that have the potential to oppress others:

> We were having a discussion one day about high expectations, and someone made a comment like…"Well, *some* people need to work at Wendy's, so it might as well be our students" or something like that. And my response was, "*We* are not the people who choose what roles people go into." And my comment was totally misunderstood. [People thought I meant] "we don't choose it; some cosmic force chooses it, and we just sort of go with it." What I meant was: we need to empower all our students so that *they* get to make the choice. But that wasn't heard and I felt guilty because I didn't continue to explain myself. And I felt kind of silly because I was like, this is not what I want to say (Personal communication, February 1, 2006).

These passages illustrate how Mia refines her identity by negotiating tensions that arise within her interactions with colleagues. Mia stated several times that the context of the UTEP—with its clear goal of developing in its participants both awareness of and strategies for ensuring equitable educational experiences for *all* students—influenced her concepts and helped her become more aware of equity and social justice issues. Now, when she encounters comments that she finds inappropriate based on her newly developing understandings, she does not feel right not saying something to interrupt the practice of using language that constitutes oppression to some degree. However, as seen in the passage just quoted, perhaps she has not yet developed the language with which to explain exactly why the remarks seem offensive to her. She is apparently much more aware about inequities in society than she was prior to her UTEP participation. However, she is still developing the concrete tools to describe the ways in which systemic factors in society advantage and disadvantage certain groups and to take social action toward reducing prejudice and inequity.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

In this paper, I set out to explore how negotiating tensions in the school context contributes to the identity development of a novice teacher with respect to culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy. Mia's case story presents various tensions that she experiences both within the school curriculum and with her colleagues.

One might think that these potential limitations of the school context would constrain Mia's overall experience of learning to teach for social justice. In some ways, they do serve to confine. However, these tensions forced Mia to engage in problem solving, a process which contributed to her identity development and her adoption of certain conceptions and practices of culturally responsive teaching. As sociocultural theory suggests, negotiating tensions can be productive (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). In Mia's situation, she had to negotiate tensions between her evolving identity and the context of her school. She pushed back on the potentially limiting aspects of South Hill Middle School and accommodated them in ways that were better suited to her identity. For example, she pushed back on her colleagues' practice of using deficit-oriented language about students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Negotiating this tension mediated changes in her identity in terms of clarifying her own beliefs and learning to "find her voice" so she can speak out against bias and negative language. Because of Mia's disposition of taking responsibility and making the best of potentially difficult situations, she claims that these perceived limitations actually make her a more effective teacher. She even commented, "I think everything that's challenging in my school makes me a better teacher (Personal communication, June 22, 2006). "

Mia's case story presents an example of the potential effects of equity-focused teacher education. Like many other White, middle-class women who enroll in teacher education programs, Mia entered with an open disposition, a willingness to accept and explore her potentially sheltered viewpoints, a naïveté about culture, and a curiosity to learn. The combination of her teacher education focused on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice in urban schools and the learning opportunities afforded her by encountering tensions in her curriculum and in interactions with colleagues helped Mia begin to shift her beliefs, attitudes, and practices about culturally responsive, equity-oriented pedagogy.

Perhaps this case story will provide ideas or inspiration for novice teachers who face some of the same challenges that Mia did, either in their school context or in their own identities as teachers. Perhaps this story will also inspire teacher educators to realize that their efforts in guiding candidates to learn to teach for social justice and equity do, indeed, make a difference. Such effects might not be immediately evident. As Darling-Hammond stated, "Learning to teach for social justice is a lifelong undertaking" (2002, p. 201). Indeed, Nieto concluded that "Becoming a multicultural teacher entails becoming a multicultural person" (cited in Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996, p. 529).

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