Invisible Differences:
A Pedagogical Approach to Personalizing Diversity for Pre-service Teachers

Nancye E. McCrarya *

a319 Dickey Hall, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY  40506-0017, USA

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Abstract

This paper draws from 336 pre-service teachers’ multimedia family history projects. It examines the efficacy of a pedagogical approach designed to move pre-service teachers from spectators to participants in an increasingly diverse society. It details a theoretical foundation for using family histories to move apparently homogenous cohorts of teacher education students to personalize issues of diversity by examining their own differences. The Invisible Differences Project engages pre-service teachers in critical examination, reflective thinking, and dialogic interaction as they present multimedia family histories to their peers.

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1. Introduction

The Invisible Differences Project is a collection of multimedia family histories from a diversity signature assignment in an elementary social studies methods course. The assignment involves investigating one’s own family history, creating a multimedia presentation and writing a reflective paper on ways such an assignment can be adapted for elementary students. It entails hearing and interpreting family stories, exploring historical resources and perspectives, and selecting artefacts and original documents to support the family story one chooses to tell. The term invisible refers to unacknowledged differences that are often masked by attributes widely accepted as normal for which all else is measured and privilege and power are assigned. Preparing homogenous cohorts of pre-service teachers to teach in increasingly diverse public schools requires reaching beyond external characterizations of cultural and ethnic distinctions to inspire teacher education students “to think about their own thinking and become conscious of their own consciousness (Greene, 1995, p. 65).”
2. Background

Family history projects have been used extensively in P-12 social education in the United States. In many social studies classrooms, children investigate their family histories and present findings through symbols, artefacts, and family stories. Teacher education courses sometimes include family history assignments to teach pedagogical content across social studies disciplines. The educational benefit of investigating one’s family and/or community history has been well demonstrated (e.g., Hickey, 1999). The pedagogical value of family history projects in early primary grades has been framed by some as a way to personalize history and mediate awareness of self in relation to others (Parker, 2003). Investigating the history of one’s own family is an established and relatively popular learning activity in history education (VanSledright, 1998). Building on this rich legacy, the Invisible Differences Project provides a vehicle for dialogic interaction on diversity among pre-service teachers by materializing their own distinctions. The majority of these teacher education students have limited experiences with human diversity and appear culturally and economically homogenous. While this may not be the case for all teacher education programs in the United States, having little apparent diversity among pre-service teachers in this program has raised serious pedagogical and recruitment concerns.

3. Conceptual framework

While embracing human diversity, civic responsibility, and social justice may seem fundamental to public education in the United States, the purposes of public education have often been contested. Much of the conflict regarding the aims of public education surface in social education, where acknowledging multiple perspectives is essential to understanding democratic citizenship, historical accounts, and political movements (hooks, 1990; Howard, 2004; Ladsen-Billings, 2002; McLaren, 1989; Nieto, 1998). In fact, some of the most impassioned debates about public education focus on who should decide what and how we teach children about their society and the world at large. Such debate is ideological or a collection of beliefs and representations that may serve to sustain and justify current power relationships. Dominant groups often seek to naturalize and universalize such beliefs as self-evident, while denigrating ideas that challenge conventional power structures (Eagleton, 1991). Ideology, in this sense, can obscure social realities and suppress the kind of dialogic interaction that acknowledges multiplicity and inspires reflection.

4. Rapidly changing demographics

Currently, in the United States at least 40% of the overall public school population are students of colour (Howard, 2005), while 90% of their teachers are White (Banks, 2004). This cultural disparity between teachers and the children they teach too often leads to pedagogical approaches that limit human connections and subvert the kinds of understandings that promote effective teaching and learning. A major barrier that exists in preparing teachers to be effective in highly diverse public schools is a tendency to view what is most familiar as normal and to conflate normal with acceptable, desirable, or worthy. Such tendency appears to exist with our teacher education students more often on an unconscious level that is difficult to access for critical and reflective examination. There is also opposition, among some educators, to discourses that avoid an examination of privileged positions, arguing that such avoidance is complicit in preserving systems that are inequitable (Choules, 2007). Tierney, for instance, suggests that accentuating human differences assists in understanding invisible norms that account for viewing “...one group as mainstream and another as odd (1997, p. 8).” He emphasizes the importance of understanding that in “truly multicultural (p. 30)” groups, points of view will exist that may be different from our own. Understanding how the dynamics of power, privilege, and social agency operate in society to maintain established norms may be fundamental to effective teaching in diverse public schools. The point, says Tierney, “is not to argue that my differences from yours are so great that dialogue is impossible, but rather to consider how we might engage in dialogues of respect that honour difference (p. 54-55)”.
5. Dialogues of respect

Dialogue, according to Freire (2002) and others (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981) requires: (a) critical thinking, (b) expectation of understanding, (c) a sense of equity, (d) mutual trust, and (e) faith in the potential of the interaction to produce deeper understandings. Freire (2002) articulates the value of dialogue as a means to human connection, understanding, and bridging the distance created by social class. He addresses the sociopolitical nature of democratic education through what he calls the banking method of education, where teachers fill the minds of their students with content framed in values and perspectives that may be alien to students’ own experiences. This banking method of education usually occurs when teachers are mindless of the conditions in which their students live and learn. Such teachers may unconsciously employ words to impose authority, perspective, and their own privileged realities, leaving students little opportunity to examine their own values.

Such dialogic interaction requires equitable contexts where authoritarian and hierarchical positions are diminished to create the possibility of understanding others’ perspectives. Setting aside one’s authority or privileged position requires consciousness of the ways privilege and authority are assigned. Awakening such consciousness may entail deeply personal interactions with long held beliefs and dispositions. According to Darling-Hammond, learning to tolerate the ambiguity of rethinking one’s perspective is sometimes quite difficult and requires instructional experiences that are structured to inspire personal reflection and practice critical thinking (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Without such instructional opportunities to critically examine one’s own perspectives, pre-service teachers may be left to look on changing school populations as spectators, more or less removed from the students they are preparing to teach and the contexts in which they will work. Viewing difference as spectacle can serve to sustain existing social positions and create barriers to the kind of dialogic interaction that promotes understanding. As spectators, pre-service teachers judge others against a perceived norm in which they are members and they are unlikely to personalize or embrace issues of social justice, civic responsibility, and diversity.

6. Methodology

This study relied, in part, on Vygotsky’s (1978) criteria for higher mental functioning as a fulcrum for examining students’ multimedia programs, presentations, written reflections, and summary discussions. It primarily focused on evidence of consciousness of one’s own mental processes and recognition of the social origins of mental functions. Visual elements or signs that stimulated audience interaction were noted and compared to students’ written discussions of the social and familial origins of their own thinking. Multimedia histories were examined for points of conflict that stimulated students to think critically about how they conceptualize human differences. This investigation relied largely on narrative inquiry, broadly defined as the examination of stories lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). It focused in particular on evidence of new perspectives on economic, ethnic, familial, religious, or racial differences in the multimedia family stories.

7. Findings

Being audience to these family histories evoked strong emotions, as evidenced through an initial inductive analysis of recorded observations during the multimedia presentations (Patton, 1990; Dey, 1993). In the analytic context of deepening human connections and broadening community, students’ tears, laughter, and loud applause is attributed to personal connections that may have been sparked by aesthetic elements in the multimedia presentations. For example, while seeing the image of a frail elderly man may illustrate a story of someone’s grandfather before his death, it can also be a sign or symbol that stimulates deeply personal memories of a range of human conditions and events. Through further examination, it was apparent that the random sequence of students’ presentations illuminated differences that stimulated both internal and external dialogue as students worked to resolve cognitive dissonance. For example, as students presented their multimedia family histories one after the other over several class sessions, the photograph of the last slave in one’s family history was juxtaposed with another presentation that included ancestors who owned a plantation in the same geographical area of the Southern United States. One showed a map of the state of Mississippi delineating segregated communities and spoke about the abandoned school where freed slaves built their own community. The other student presents her family history by showing the plantation in Mississippi, once owned and operated by her ancestors and now a tourist attraction. Connections are
made between descendants of slaves and slave owners and the history of slavery in the United States becomes personally relevant in ways it had not for the majority of students who are privileged by being White. Questions are asked and conversations on race unfold in deeply personal ways that otherwise might have been more polite than authentic. Another student begins her family history with a photograph of her parents, her mother who is White and her father who is Black. She tells a story about recently meeting her White grandparents for the first time and how little she knew of them because they had disowned her mother for marrying a Black man. Whether the contrast is between descendants of slaves and slave owners, coal miners and coal mine owners, or college graduates and high school drop-outs, illuminating divergent backgrounds stimulates students’ to think and talk about human diversity in more critical and generative ways. As such, these presentation sessions provide a personal context for students to articulate divergent cultural perspectives in dialogic ways. In the reflective papers, many students’ noted that they became “more aware of” their own beliefs and realized that they could “grow and learn from each other” through their differences. As one commented “…just because students talk, act, or look the same, they are all unique.”

A student addressed her family’s perceived abundance while growing up in an isolated farming community in the Appalachian Mountains. She prefaced the following statement by saying she had never considered her family as living in poverty until she contrasted her own family history with those of her peers.

My family is connected by one thing, farming (tobacco, hay, vegetables, animals for food, and animals as farming tools). Each head of household is in charge of one aspect of farming, but everyone helps and shares. Papaw raises animals (hogs) and vegetables. Great Uncle Charles [grows] hay for animal use [and] my Dad [grows] tobacco. The men of my family are remembered because of the role they take on and what they contribute for family use. Farming was very important to our ancestors because it was the only way they knew how to survive. As a result, the members of the family all dropped out of school after 8th grade because they were needed on the farm. All the females would later get their GED, but I am the first female to graduate High School and the first person ever to go to college. A high school diploma and a college degree are not given the same praise in my family as buying a plot of land and starting a farm. The land in my family has been passed down from generation to generation [and] the people in my generation have caused a lot of controversy because none of us want to farm (Pre-service Teacher, 2008).

8. Discussion

The findings of this investigation underscore the complexity of preparing predominately homogenous cohorts of pre-service teachers to teach in increasingly diverse schools. They highlight the need for instructional experiences that reveal social origins of thought, stimulate consciousness of one’s own mental processes, and promote voluntary regulation of the ways they conceptualize human differences. In other words, the difficult task of embracing human differences, without opportunities to interact with diverse individuals, may necessitate personal examination of assumptions, uncovering the origins of those assumptions, and acting to liberate oneself from such preconceptions. This is unlikely to occur individually without social interactions that provide opportunities to interact with multiple ways of being, experiencing, and perceiving. While many teacher education students live and learn in highly diverse communities that challenge them on a daily basis to question what they consider as normal, there are those, like many of the participants in this study, who remain geographically or perceptually insulated from different others. For them it is not enough to learn about attributes or cultural values that differ from their own as such learning about others, without serious self-examination and dialogic interaction, can fuel the spectacle of difference and have little personal consequence or generative potential.

Indeed, a long history in teacher education in the United States of characterizing students against a background of what is considered normal has not led to inclusive classrooms, higher achievement across school populations, or instructional equity. Instead, describing classes or groups of others situates the problem of changing school populations with them and misinforms us to think we can understand their learning needs without knowing them. Were this country, or the world for that matter, a level playing field regardless of culture, economic circumstance, gender, or race, then identifying common characteristics of cultural or racial groups might be of use in teacher preparation. Without such equity, however, describing the attributes of others in diversity education reinforces a
false and rapidly changing norm. It subverts the need for self-reflection, becoming aware of our own stereotypical biases, and dialogic interaction. When people who are African American are followed suspiciously in stores, see someone clutching her purse, or walking more quickly when encountering them in a dark parking lot, they know it is a fear response based on stereotypical characterizations of people who look like them. Try as they may, they cannot change internalized biases and fears of others. Ultimately, the spirit of citizenship in a pluralist and participatory democracy revolves around acknowledging our own privileges and acting for equity. While not always easy, the need to awaken to one’s own privileges is not an indictment, as some fear, but rather a call to consciousness that can be sparked by instructional approaches that engage learners in examining and representing the origins of their own perspectives on human difference.

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