

Teaching College Students to Teach: Reflections of an African American Professor

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In my journey as an African American professor in teacher education I have become increasingly distressed over what I believe to be lacking in our teacher education programs. Across the country colleges and universities rhetorically proclaim the importance of multicultural education in the preparation of preservice teachers so they will understand and celebrate the diversity of the children they will one day teach. In particular, teacher education programs recognize the importance of preparing teachers to work in urban districts. Some programs have begun to implement courses that examine critical race theory and the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, urban schools across the country continue to struggle to meet the academic needs of many of the children in their districts. Data continues to show that children of color and children from low socio-economic backgrounds lag behind middle class European American children on standardized measures. It is my contention that one of the reasons for this discrepancy is that teachers who educate urban children are often unable to make a cultural connection with their students. A second reason for the discrepancy may be that many urban teachers are culturally and linguistically insensitive to students of color and may need to deal with stereotypical views they have about their students which stem from hidden racism within themselves. This type of racism is referred to as dysconscious racism (Gay, 2000).

It is critical that in our teacher education programs conversations about race and racism are not silenced but explored when examining educational outcomes of African American students (Williams & Winters, 2005). Howard (2003) notes that teacher education programs must be able to help prospective teachers critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture, and recognize how these important concepts shape the learning experience for many students. This means more than “peppering” the discussion of race across curricular and or instructional topics (Cross, 2005). Teacher education programs must commit to the study of racism and White privilege and challenge the “ideology, values and practices which are assuredly reinscribing White privilege, power, and racism” (Cross, 2005, p. 266). Part of this learning requires prospective teachers to make a cultural connection with their students, but to do this they must first reflect on their own personal biographies

and the impact their life experiences have had on how they will view the students in their future classrooms.

Ladson-Billings (2005) discusses the “cant” that students in education programs experience. She defines cant as “expression or repetition of conventional “trite. . . especially the insincere use of pious phraseology” (p. 15). Some examples of cant are: “good teachers are created as a result of (preservice) teacher education”; “student failure typically results from student, parent, community or cultural shortcomings, and/or dysfunction”; and “it is enough for some students to have a ‘good experience’ in the classroom” (p.15). In this sort of cant, teacher education discourse itself may inadvertently perpetuate a racist ideology. Because of this cant, preservice teachers may believe that the admittance into a program and taking all necessary courses will help them become good teachers. Little attention is given to the disposition that these preservice teachers bring to the classroom and how this affects student learning. Further, preservice teachers are required to take diversity courses that may in fact teach them about students of color in a way in which the child’s culture and learning is perceived to be one of a deficit that “may substantiate teachers normative positions” (Ladson-Billings, p. 19). Finally, education programs generally operate on the assumption that having students observe and practice in urban classrooms gives them the skills that they need to be successful. These “good experiences” are typically centered on classroom structure and the rapport with students with little concern for student achievement.

In this paper I will share my journey as an African American teacher educator, with emphasis on my efforts to prepare preservice teachers to work in urban settings, as well as what I perceive to be a weakness in our current educational programs.

The Ivory Tower

While teaching in academia I have had the opportunity to work with both graduate and undergraduate students in teacher education. Some of my students were classroom teachers while others were either at the beginning of their program or one semester from student teaching. At the beginning of each class I would always ask my students with a show of hands how many wanted to teach in an urban district. Typically one third of the class would raise their hands. We would also go through a list of what they expected to see

when going to an urban school. Again the responses would be such things as more diverse classrooms, dilapidated buildings, behavior problems, parents who didn't care and the list went on. Rarely did they make mention of teachers who didn't care.

Through these conversations and class discussions and assignments it became evident that students minimized the importance of understanding the cultural background of their students, typically stating that they were "color blind" and that "children are children; they're all the same." They felt that the most important component of the teacher education program was learning the curriculum and knowing behavior management strategies. This became particularly evident as we turned our focus to working in urban schools. Most of the preservice teachers viewed parents as the reason for student failure and other outside distractions (i.e., violence in the neighborhood, poverty) as the reason for the low academic achievement. I became discouraged by what I heard and witnessed, and at the same time passionate about reshaping the structure of my classroom and our teacher education program.

In many teacher education programs preservice teachers have early experiences in classroom settings. In our program these settings are in urban districts, so by the time preservice teachers have their student teaching experience they have had several field experiences at urban schools. The placement of these students in urban schools in and of itself is not a solution to helping them appreciate and celebrate diversity. In many instances these "snapshot" experiences perpetuate stereotypes about the schools and the students within them. Cross (2003) examined graduates of a teacher education program with respect to field experiences and what they understood about race as they prepared to teach in multiracial classrooms. Her findings revealed that in spite of the exposure and courses that dealt with diversity, the teachers in this program were unable to make connection to theory and practice. Race and culture were observed without reflection upon their own identities and how that influenced their view of the children that they worked with. Cross noted that "the curriculum taught them that race and culture are something you observe for your own benefit and that teachers were not required to do self exploration on their positions in society and how their positions relate to racial minority groups which resulted in an act of 'White power'" (p. 208).

In addressing similar concerns, I utilize culturally relevant pedagogy in my classroom to counter these possible stereotypical views. I saw my role as an African American professor in teacher education working at a predominately White institution with predominately White preservice teachers as one of an advocate for the children of color in these urban districts where my preservice teachers may one day work. In developing my courses I utilize Ladson-Billings' (1994) notion of culturally relevant pedagogy, which is a pedagogy that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 382). Further, one of the main principles of culturally relevant pedagogy is an authentic belief that students from culturally diverse and low-income backgrounds are capable learners. To become culturally relevant, preservice teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection that challenges them to see how their position influences their students in both positive and negative ways (Howard, 2003). It is a critical component in helping my students understand the importance of the prior knowledge that their students bring into the classroom and children's ability to make connections between this knowledge and the curriculum. This was the philosophical base upon which my courses were developed. Further, I asked students to do self reflections on their own beliefs about what urban students are capable of achieving.

I have introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy to both graduate and undergraduate students. For graduate students this notion either seemed foreign to them or they already learned it in undergraduate school and their attitude demonstrated that they felt that the material was irrelevant to them. No one seemed to utilize it as a teaching style that they employed. Furthermore, by the end of the semester I was met with such hostility and resentment, accused of talking about "too much black stuff." One student came to me at the end of the semester and voluntarily offered to write a letter of support on my behalf because she said it was so obvious that the students "resented" the information that I was trying to deliver to them.

In my undergraduate classes I required my students to write reflection papers on what they expected to see prior to their experience in the school and then a reflection paper after the experience. Student's reflections were very insightful and gave a clear indication of how they perceived the children in urban settings. In initial reflections most writers thought schools would be run down and students would be uninterested. They also spoke of parents who didn't value the importance of education for their children. As one student stated,

these people “were culturally deprived” and “not capable” of succeeding in school. She went on to state that she learned this information in one of the courses that she took at the college.

In final reflections students often spoke of the experience as being positive, but most noted that they would not want to teach in an urban setting due to the bureaucracy of city schools and the lack of resources. A few stated that they would like to teach in an urban setting because they would “be able to help these children”, and they felt that they “would be appreciated”. All of the writers talked about the cooperating teacher’s attitude and how “they were so traditional”; students weren’t allowed to interact with each other, and there was so much hollering in the classrooms. When I inquired about this and why they thought the teachers felt the need to speak to children in this manner, most of the students felt that “this is what the children are used to” because it reflected their home life and therefore the teachers had no choice. If students encountered behavior problems they typically blamed the child and would note that in their other field experiences (typically in suburban schools), behavior was never a problem.

It was expected that at the end of the course the students would not only understand the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy but they would also be able to demonstrate this understanding through their teaching and interactions with the children in the classrooms where they were doing their field experiences. What reinforced my notion that I had not been as successful as I would have liked in pushing all of my students to a “different place” was when one of my students came to me at the end of the semester crying about something she had witnessed during her participant experience.

This student was working in a pre-kindergarten classroom with a veteran teacher of 25 years experience. She explained that on many occasions she witnessed her teacher speaking harshly and negatively to the children in the class. In one particular instance when one of the children in the class was misbehaving the teacher grabbed the little boy by the arm and pulled him so hard that he began to cry. The veteran teacher then began to holler at the boy and verbally berate him. The student was very upset about this and at the same time felt that there was nothing she could do. She went on to say that she shared this experience with her fellow students, and what upset her the most was that their response was, “Well what do you expect? These are city kids and they’re used to being talked to

and treated like that.” Her concern, as was mine by this time, was that if classmates think like this and don’t care, then who will be the advocates for these children? What hope will these children hold if the teachers who are currently working with them and prospective teachers don’t value who they are and don’t believe that they should be treated with respect? As she related this story to me, I couldn’t help but wonder where I had gone wrong and what had I not done that left students believing that this type of behavior on the part of teachers was okay. I would like to note that when I introduced the students to the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy they spoke of how they truly appreciated learning about this because prior to my introduction of this information, students had never heard of this approach to teaching. However, in the end, while they were thrilled to be introduced to this information I felt that none of it resonated with them. They intellectualized the information but did not internalize it and make it a part of who and how they would teach.

“Now What?”

Through this journey I have come to realize that there’s no “quick fix” and that biases and prejudices can be deeply rooted and not easily removed. While I know that institutionalized racism is at the core of social and educational inequalities that people of color experience, somehow I felt that my “message” was still not reaching my students. I wanted to find a way to take students out of their comfort zone and push them to a different place. White students must recognize “the invisible system of unearned privilege and power that operates to maintain institutional racism in schools and to assure its cultural agents (teacher educators and teachers) carry out this function” (Cross, 2005, p. 266). However, as an African American teacher educator I knew that delivering this message would be a challenge to say the least, not to mention that being non-tenured further exacerbated the situation. However, I felt as though I had an obligation to make this paradigm shift in my own teaching if I truly wanted to have an impact on my students. I also decided that if I only reached a few students it would be better than none at all.

Through diversity workshops that I attended I stumbled upon the opportunity to develop a course with a White colleague. After weeks of planning, he and I taught a diversity seminar during a summer session. The participants were graduate students who were all classroom teachers. The class consisted of ten students who identified themselves as White, one student of Latino descent, and an African American student. We developed the course

around a race conference that was taking place on our campus. We also had two experts on diversity training do a two-day workshop with the students, and we invited Peggy McIntosh to facilitate a morning workshop with the students on White privilege. As instructors of the course we decided to be participants in the workshops so that our students would also see us as people with common issues and concerns.

This course got at the core of student understanding of race, racism and White privilege. By the end of the course students talked about the fact that we explored areas and unveiled realities that they never shared before. They felt that while they had taken multicultural courses before they all stated that they never experienced this type of discourse in their classes. They were required to keep journals which were also very revealing and enhanced my understanding of where they were in processing information on racism and White privilege. While I have not spoken to the students since this course I do believe that during the experience we all learned much from each other. It also reinforced my belief that pushing students to have that uncomfortable conversation on race is absolutely critical if we are going to get them to understand how their biographies have shaped who they are and how that affects the children they will be teaching.

The Road Less Traveled

It is my contention that prospective teachers continue to struggle with the idea of teaching in urban schools and have stereotypical ideas of what the children and the parents in these schools want and need. Bollin and Finkel's (1999) findings indicate that teacher preparation programs should be reorganized to accommodate the complexity of the process of changing intensely held beliefs. They should also be explicit and carefully sequenced in ways that encourage teacher candidates to critically assess themselves and their beliefs, attitudes and understandings (LeCompte & McCray 2002). I further believe that anti-racism topics should be at the core of all teacher education courses, not just a topic reserved for a multicultural course. Students should reflect on their own lived experiences, opinions, and values about racial identity and this reflection should better inform preservice teachers on how to translate reflection into practice (e.g. culturally relevant teaching) (Howard, 2003).

Schick (2000) confronts the notion of whether White teachers are even conscious of their racialized status. She suggests that White teachers must become aware of the significance of their racial identities and how this understanding impacts their role as

classroom teachers. Marx (2004) notes that the cultural, racial, and linguistic positionalities of teachers and an exploration of their whiteness should be critical components of teacher education programs (p. 32). She states “even the most loving teachers can still be racist. Moreover, despite altruistic hearts and efforts to ‘hide’ one’s own White racism, it is still possible for a teacher’s White racism to hurt the children they teach” (p. 40). Cochran-Smith (1995) defines the current education system as “deeply dysfunctional” and believes that “the system needs teachers who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of the job” (p. 494). Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2005) suggest that teacher educators must first deconstruct whiteness in the academy and society in general. They believe that it is important to help teacher candidates explore their personal attitudes and understandings of the ways in which their racial ascription and social positioning inform their actual practices and interactions with students (p. 149). Teachers need sufficient in-depth understanding of their students’ backgrounds to select and incorporate into the education process those forms of cultural knowledge and competence that facilitate meaningful, transformative learning (Gray bill, 1997).

While students in my courses were required to reflect on their own personal biographies, little time was spent on White privilege and what this means when White students are working with children who are of a different ethnic background. Exploring White racial identity “has socialized Whites to conceptualize their world in ways that favor their positions within it”. Solomon et al. (2005) state that “the failure to examine notions of whiteness facilitates the maintenance of its incorporeal nature thereby reinscribing its dominating power” (p. 148).

I believe that teacher education programs must continue to make a place for preservice teachers to examine issues of race and White privilege if we are to help them understand how to work in urban settings. This examination “interrogates the connection between race, power and education and also edifies the links to oppression” (Solomon et al., p. 149).

The research shows that many urban teachers leave the field by their third year due to the lack of preparation for working in such settings (Haberman, 1990). The academic achievement gap between White students and students of color continues to be a large concern for teacher educators as well as society as a whole. I argue that while we place

students into urban settings, and provide them with multicultural courses, adequate time has not been spent on the topic of race and what role racism places in the classroom. Typically this type of discourse creates discomfort and therefore may be avoided. Further examination needs to take place to address the possibility of whether “who we are contributes to the underachievement of students who are not like us” (Howard, p. 4).

I believe that cooperating teachers have a great influence on prospective teachers, and thus serious consideration must be given when placing students with these teachers. Students have often commented on how certain teachers would inform them of the children and their parents and what it consequently takes to teach them. Many of these teacher theories were racist and stereotypical in nature; however, students believed that because of the teacher’s experience they were accurate and, on top of this, many times these teachers’ comments confirmed notions they had learned from the media or their own personal biographies.

Courses which require intense reflection may address the idea of whether preservice teachers consciously or subconsciously subscribe to deficit-based notions of culturally diverse students. This type of reflection may be a painful process but a necessary one if we are to address the needs of all learners. Nieto (1999) notes that “the way students are thought about and treated by society and consequently by the schools they attend and the educators who teach in them is fundamental in creating academic success or failure” (p. 167). I contend that there is no better way to explore these ideologies than through anti racist courses.

Anti-Racist Education: Exploring the Heart

In order to address the deficits in our teacher education programs I believe that at the core of the conversation is the movement towards social justice. Further, because of the predominately White middle-class female demographics of our teacher education programs and the predominance of students of color in many public schools, (Rasky, 2000) suggests “framing whiteness as the appropriate locus for understanding education inequity as a systemic problem” (p. 272). McIntosh’s (1992) groundbreaking work explores White privilege and the “invisible knapsack” that is carried daily, which affords Whites certain opportunities and unearned assets of which they are totally oblivious. Howard (1999)

believes that Whites have seen the problem as one that does not involve them, but one which is attributed to “helping minority students” and not one in which they examine their role in the “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Friere, 1992). Howard goes on to state that for “White educators, it is especially important that we lift the curtain of ignorance and denial that has protected us from understanding our location on the broader stage of hierarchical social arrangements. We need to see how the lives of our students have been scripted by their membership in groups differing in degrees of social dominance and marginality” (p. 31).

Helms and Carter (as quoted in Howard, 1999) suggest that any comprehensive theory of White racial identity must explore the following three developmental tasks:

1. Acknowledging the reality of White racism in its individual, institutional, and cultural manifestations.
2. Abandoning racism and engaging in active resistance to its many forms.
3. Developing a positive, nonracist, and authentic connection to White racial and cultural identity.

As Marx(2006) suggests, when “whiteness is deconstructed it clearly can be discerned that racism is at its heart” (p. 46). Teacher educators must first examine their own ethnic information and the manner in which by virtue of their insertion in White supremacist discourses , they benefit daily (King & Castenell, 2001).

The quandary that I struggle with as an African American professor is how I would be able to explore this topic with my predominately White middle-class female students without being subjected to “backlash of Whites,” as noted by Marx (2006). She acknowledges that even as a White professor this can be very difficult. Even if the topic of whiteness is introduced, it is still possible for Whites to exercise the privilege of choice regarding whether or not they will attend to their own identity as racial beings (Howard, 1999; Hytten & Adkins, 2001).

To address the issue of whiteness and White privilege these difficult discourses must take place. I would also contend that the beginning dialogue must first begin with the faculty within the teacher education programs. One cannot assume that a terminal degree indicates

an understanding of whiteness and privilege.

I would also suggest that once the proper courses have been developed within the program, a close examination be taken of students' field placements and experiences. Students must not go into these urban experiences closely examining the "other" with out self-reflection. We need to also carefully assess the placements of our students and the cooperating teachers that they work with. It is imperative that students are working with exemplary teachers who are social change agents with a true understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. "Teacher education students are influenced by their own school experiences and the teachers with whom they work, perhaps even more strongly than by the teacher educators who teach them. A teacher's or program's negative assessments of a student's language skill, culture, and home life readily rub off on apprentices" (Marx, 2006, p. 164).

The first step toward culturally relevant pedagogy is self-knowledge on the part of the teacher. "Breaking the silence involves confronting White student teachers with their complicitness in the social construction of their own racial identity and economic status through construction of inferior racial others" (King & Castenell, p. 63). Student teachers must address the racial stereotypes that they have of students of color and understand that they are not the "rescuers" of these students. They should "immerse themselves in the culture and community of these students and in fact become learners rather than authorities" (Marx, 2006, p. 165).

Creating a dialogue on the role of racism, whiteness, and White privilege as it impacts our educational system is critical in our teacher education program. We all argue that we are working towards equal educational opportunities for all students and have concerns about the current educational structure. In order to address these concerns we must be willing to move teacher education to a different place by "helping students to move beyond viewing racism as an act perpetuated primarily by individuals to seeing it as something embedded within institutions and social systems" (Hyttén & Adkins, 2001, p. 444). As teacher educators in higher education it is our responsibility to take our students to that place.

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