

CULTURALLY DOMINANT PRESERVICE TEACHERS IN THE USA: HISTORICALLY AND POLITICALLY ETHNIC SELF-IDENTITY DISCOVERY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY TO DELIVER MORE SENSITIVE AND EFFECTIVE MULTICULTURAL INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Through the process of generations of assimilation, culturally dominant native English speaking preservice educators in the United States have lost their own cultural identity. Reconnecting to their cultural roots can assist them in understanding their own cultural self-identity, which will engender more empathy towards their students of other cultures. With a better vision of the benefits of a multicultural approach to classroom instruction, preservice teachers will be more inclined to implement multicultural instructional strategies into their own planning for daily curriculum. Advances and applications in technology can provide multicultural educators with tools to assist preservice educators in discovering their own ethnic roots. Becoming more knowledgeable about one's own culture and identity will encourage future teachers to be more cognizant of the importance of including similar tactics for their own students.

Keywords: ethnic consciousness; technology; preservice education

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INTRODUCTION

At this large university in South East Florida, USA, our teacher education program offers a critical course in the foundations and goals of multicultural education. Although the population of this state (Florida) consists of a high number of minorities, students in our own preservice teacher education university program are typically white, native English speaking, and come from a mainstream culture with an underdeveloped ethnic consciousness of themselves, and consequently, of their future students from other cultures. The purpose of this state mandated course is to assist the preservice educators in developing an awareness of multiculturalism, particularly in the concepts of alienation, separation, and nativism. Through the learning processes, the preservice educators realize that they have lost much of their own ethnic identity, thus creating an illusion of equality for all people. This illusion conflicts with the reality of non-dominant ethnic groups who are also struggling for equality and freedom.

To develop ethnic consciousness of mainstream American preservice teachers, the instructor should create an environment that allows, promotes, and encourages the preservice educators of this majority ethnic group to explore their own ethnic heritage. This paper defines the process involved in the development of said ethnic consciousness and provides suggestions as to how technology can further enhance these preservice (culturally mainstream) educators in the development of their ethnic consciousness in ways traditional books cannot. The quantity of available primary source material on the internet is ubiquitous and ever increasing, with sites and applications that allow users to develop and

publish their own discoveries about their historical and political ethnicity. At the same time, the preservice educators demonstrate what they have learned about their own ethnic consciousness and preserve their ethnic history for future generations.

Developing Ethnic Consciousness

Public school educators in this South Florida area teach students from over 100 different cultures. To assist in the preparation of future educators, the foundations of North American education from a historical perspective are taught. Through this learning, the preservice educators develop an understanding of the influences of social and political forces upon education and the types of education children received based upon race, class, and gender. Class activities allow examination of the arrival of different ethnic groups to North America, how these groups became assimilated into society, and how the stages of cultural identity developed for them. These experiences provide a context for their roles as educators with culturally diverse classrooms.

Once the preservice educators develop the understanding of how the present education has evolved, they can begin to comprehend the importance of multicultural education and how their own cultural awareness impacts the activities within the classroom as well as the need for cultural sensitivity. Due to the diversity in the South Florida classroom, these preservice educators inevitably will be placed in classrooms with students from different societies from around the world with ideologies that are not concurrent with, and are sometimes in conflict

with their own world view. The class attempts to support preservice educators as they develop an understanding of the interrelationship between multicultural education and global education. The preservice educators are also encouraged to examine the nature of multicultural curriculum in the context of the new immigrants' microculture with the dominant macroculture, as well as the societal assumptions for these groups.

The process for developing the ethnic consciousness begins on the third week of the course. The preservice educators assemble into groups of five and are assigned a task which must be completed during that day's class period (approximately three hours). Participants are presented with key concepts listed below from Banks (2006) to guide the study of ethnic and cultural groups. Students are asked to:

Point 1: List these concepts: Nativism, immigration, assimilation, Americanization, melting pot, and cultural pluralism

Point 2: Discuss the significance of the concepts from their own perspectives as current preservice educators

Point 3: Examine the importance of the concepts to the creation of a multicultural-multiethnic education curriculum

Before beginning the exercise, the instructor sits with each group to discuss the participants' concerns about the topic of multicultural education. The participants in each group answer why they are taking the course. The majority of the participants have indicated that the course is a requirement for their teacher certification as education majors.

As previously noted, more than half of the preservice educators are Americans from historically northern European backgrounds,

who belong to various white ethnic groups in South Florida. A *European American*, pursuant to Campbell (2000), is classified as being descended from the languages, common law, and Protestant faiths of Anglo-Saxon and English cultures. However, European Americans are a divergent group of people that includes those from the Jewish religion, the Catholic Church, and cultures such as the Irish, the Scandinavians, the Greeks, and the Polish.

In the ensuing group discussions (again, the majority of whom are white European American) the participants can easily respond to Points 1 and 3. However, they usually can see no personal relationship with Point 2. For these preservice educators, the study of ethnic cultural groups is not about them. It is about "others." Inevitably, "the others" are people of color.

Within the groups, thought-provoking discussions transpire during which the preservice educators often make statements, such as, "It is good to know about African Americans and all other cultural groups." Nowhere in the discussions can these preservice educators see how important it is for them to have knowledge of their own ethnicity in the context of teaching students of different ethnic backgrounds. This knowledge appears to be far removed from their consciousness and experience, both as pre-professional educators taking the course, and as citizens of this country. Throughout the remainder of the class period, we continue to hear comments such as, "We are Americans; why would we want to look at our ethnicity? We have never been taught to do that. Knowing about one's ethnicity creates alienation and separatism." One typical startling response is: "If my great-grandparents

made it, why can't they?" "They," of course, are people of color whom these preservice educators perceive as not having "made it."

Throughout the years there remains the question: How important is it really to have knowledge of one's historical and political ethnicity if one is going to be a teacher? Specifically, the concern is with the European American preservice educators who are being prepared to teach culturally and ethnically diverse groups of students in their own classrooms. Particularly when the ethnic make-up of the teaching force in the United States is predominately European American and female, it is important that this ethnic group recognize their own historical ethnicity (Ordovensky, 1992). What is often missing from the social science literature is the diversity of religion, social class, region, and ethnic origin within European Americans as an ethnic group (Alba, 1990).

Although European American preservice educators in the nation's schools perceive themselves as a "homogenous group," their ethnic background is just as diverse as that of the ethnically diverse students they will be teaching. Realizing this, the following three questions necessitate answers: (1) If the majority of educators who teach in an environment of ethnic and cultural diversity have no knowledge of their own ethnic diversity (and/or have adopted norms unknowingly) to what extent will they understand the needs of their own young students to maintain their own ethnic heritage? (2) To what extent will the teachers relate to their students and to their own ethnic heritage? (3) How successful will they be in attempting to integrate multicultural-multiethnic content into their curriculums?

It is troubling to acknowledge the alienation and obliviousness of these European American preservice educators as they relate to their own ethnicity and, particularly, to those whom they perceive to be ethnically different. In many cases, these new preservice educators see no relationship between the ideology of multicultural education and multiethnic education to their own lives and professions. In teaching the philosophy of multicultural education, many times, it becomes an "us and them" scenario. These experiences force us to recognize that in order for these European American preservice educators to become participants in this transformative process of multicultural-multiethnic education, they must also be engaged in a critical examination of their own historical ethnicity in the context of the growth and development of the United States. Multicultural education has been concerned with addressing the ideas of ethnic minority groups (Banks, 2006). However, research (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009) has shown that although major attempts are being made to include minority groups in the curriculum, not much research has been undertaken to understand the ethnic diversity of European American preservice educators who will be teaching students.

To target these concerns, an additional project is added to the course curriculum to assist the preservice educators in rediscovering their own ethnicity. The participants conduct research pertaining to their own ethnic groups or to an ethnic group that is present in today's society. Using the internet, the students are able to use primary source material that has been preserved into digital formats and develop an in depth understanding of their ethnic group. They then

share their research using a variety of Web 2.0 technologies to present the information about that ethnic group. With each member sharing about a different ethnic group, the class develops perspectives from a variety of groups that will be represented in their future classrooms. The presentation includes the history of the ethnic group, how that group came to North America, and the group's purpose (push and pull factors) for immigrating. The presentation also describes: the assimilation process; the discrimination and hardships that ethnic group encountered; the path and pattern the group followed towards upward mobility; the group median of present SAT scores (i.e., Scholastic Aptitude Test, a standardized test for college entrance); college entrance statistics of the particular group; and finally, which group/s obtained or achieved the "American Dream." Participants must also share what the "American Dream" represents to them (e.g., a house, car, career, wealth, etc.)

What is Ethnicity?

The definition of *ethnicity* takes into consideration people's national origin, religion, race, and any combination thereof. Attributes associated with ethnicity include group image and sense of identity derived from contemporary cultural patterns; shared political and economic interests; and involuntary membership, although individual identification with the group may be optional. The extent to which individuals identify with a particular ethnic group varies considerably, and some may identify with more than one. Strong ethnic identification suggests a sharing and acceptance of ethnic group values, beliefs, behaviors, language, and ways of

thinking. (Manning M. L. & Baruth L. G., 2009, 26)

Perceptions of the preservice educators (as to who an American is) have overshadowed their ethnic culture, which can be detrimental not only to them but also, eventually, to their future students. A lack of ethnic identity has allowed many preservice educators to perpetuate the ideology that all people living in the United States are Americans in the true sense of the word, that the rights of democracy exist for all, and that all people are equal and free. What has been upheld, however, is a lack of true conceptual knowledge of these ideas as they relate to other cultures besides the dominant culture. This lack of true conceptual knowledge can create a disjointed approach to teaching minority history and fragmented methods in teaching the dominant history.

Ethnicity, Immigration, and Teaching Implications

In studying the historical immigration patterns of different groups (besides European Americans) one notices that all ethnic groups within the white ethnic culture encountered difficulties with racism and nativism when they first came to North America (Bennett, 2006). Like the oppressive conditions that many people of color experience today, many ethnic groups who have come to the United States after those who emigrated from Northern and Western Europe, have experienced blatant nativism in American society (Banks, 2006).

Implied in this realization is the fact that the majority of the European American preservice educators descended from ethnic groups which had been discriminated against when those groups came to North America.

It is vital that these European American preservice educators understand the patterns of discrimination and nativism in order to arrest these debilitating attitudes. The future students of these preservice educators will be predominantly children and young adults of color. They most likely will be coming out of other cultures that would cause them to be oppressed and victimized in North America by nativist and discriminatory attitudes. Their treatment would be similar to the immigrants of the past who came from one culture into another, only to feel oppressed, victimized, and excluded.

When preservice educators are grounded in a firm sense of their own history and then enlightened with an accurate sense of the history of their students, they will develop sensitivity toward other perspectives brought into their own classrooms by their own contemporary students. One way in which professors at the university level can help European American preservice educators acquire this sensitivity is to help them to understand and to acknowledge the historical pain and loss their ancestors experienced when they came to the United States.

As an example, Campbell (2000) noted that “from 1840 to 1920, there was an enormous influx of immigrants from Europe to the ‘New World.’ They came in hopes of building a new, more prosperous life. Poor, hungry, adventurous, and at times desperate, they fled European poverty, wars, and oppression” (77). Furthermore, according to Campbell, “this massive influx set off in current citizens waves of fear and concern about immigration similar in many ways to those of the present” (78). Moreover, Campbell (2000) argued that by 1890, as the immigrant white population grew (Poles, Italians,

Greeks, and Slavs), the assimilation process became more difficult for them. They were usually in “desperate economic straits, and often poorly educated” (Campbell, 78).

Through the knowledge of historical ethnicity, combined with a necessity for multicultural education in their classrooms, it is hoped that the preservice educators will not shy away from helping their students find their niche on the American landscape. Campbell (2000) suggested that “multicultural education offers an alternative worldview, an alternative ideology. He argued that schools, along with church and family, are potential sources of knowledge and are thus sources of power in a democratic society” (87-88). By acknowledging their ethnic diversity, European American preservice educators will urgently request that their schools promote and encourage the concept of diversity and will implement a multiethnic-multicultural curriculum in the schools which is reflective of that diversity.

If these preservice educators do not see the relationship between themselves and their future students, it is more than likely that they will not understand the ideology embedded in multiethnic education. “An accurate and comprehensive understanding of history and current race relations will help teachers and this generation of students to build a more appropriate curriculum and more supportive classroom relationships” (Campbell, 2000, 87). The possibility exists for much resistance to the implementation of this curriculum in these preservice educators’ own classrooms. It is important, therefore, that as preservice educators are educated, they are helped to understand concepts of a curriculum that include nativism, difference, and equality as they relate not only to people of color, but

also to their ancestors who were white, but who were culturally different from the dominant group.

As the early immigrants tried to find a place in American society, they attempted to both understand the language of the dominant culture and to find a balance of assimilating to the culture, while holding onto their old ways of life. These struggles were important to the early European Americans as they adapted to their new country. In fact, their struggles were similar to the daily struggles of present-day immigrants and to people of color as they adapt to the dominant society. Campbell (2000) put it this way:

The dominant ideology in our society supports the present social structure and the resulting stratification of opportunity... Since present U.S. society is stratified by race, gender, and class, schools tend to legitimize the present racial divisions as normal and natural, even logical and scientific... Multicultural education is a school reform process that challenges the continuing domination of inherited privilege. (Choosing Democracy: A practical guide to multicultural education. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 87)

What is interesting is that for many of these European American preservice educators, because of their “inherited privilege,” certain ethnic-associated struggles have not been part of their world. Without historical knowledge of the hardships of their ancestors while creating a place for themselves in the early American landscape, many see no need to comprehend or to implement the ideology of the multicultural-multiethnic philosophy in the classroom.

Race, Preferential Treatment, and Teaching Implications

It is also very important for European American preservice educators, when studying their historical ethnicity, to understand how preferential treatment was given only to certain groups who were culturally similar to the European American. In an attempt to explain the ideology of differences, nativist beliefs, race, and assimilation, Banks (2006) argued that, in many instances, the English denied societal participation to white ethnic groups that differed from Anglo-Saxons. The newly immigrated groups were not allowed to participate in decision making and their acceptance was dependent upon their being culturally and racially like Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, if any of the ethnic groups were not a member of one of the Germanic peoples, the Angles, the Saxons, or the Jutes, who settled in Britain in the fifth or sixth centuries, they were not accepted.

Furthermore, according to Banks (2006), the Greeks, the Italians, the Slavs, and the Polish, groups who arrived in the United States in vast numbers in the late 19th century and the first few decades of the 20th century, were victims of discrimination. Primarily through acculturation and cultural borrowing, a significant number of immigrant groups lost much of the characteristic quality of their original ethnic heritages. Some groups surrendered extensive interests in their ethnic cultures and became Anglo-Saxonized in return for the privilege of societal participation.

It is evident here that being white at the turn of the 20th century did not affect one’s total acceptance into Anglo-Saxon society. Additionally, it is clear how preferential treatment based on skin color and cultural

differences allowed some groups to be assimilated into society and others to be excluded. The price for societal participation depended upon how much the new immigrant groups could give up their ethnic culture to become Anglo-Saxonized.

Knowledge of their historical ethnicity should help European American preservice educators to understand how assimilation and acculturation have provided Anglo privilege to them and to many white ethnic groups who were not previously accepted by the Anglo-Saxon groups with whom they now identify. This knowledge of their families' historical alienation from the dominant group should also help students and educators to understand that some minority groups, because of color, have not yet been given free access (or they have been given limited access) to participate in American society. Embedded in this knowledge should be the recognition of how one's race and ethnic identity can ease racial tension. Also imbedded in the knowledge is the importance of multicultural education programs.

Manning and Baruth (2009) contended that "racism is an ideological system used to justify the discrimination of some racial groups against others" (42). In the United States, "socioeconomic and societal inequities, racism, prejudice, and ethnocentrism continue" (Manning & Baruth, 42). A significant number of minorities are still confronted with inequities and inequalities, which can result from overt racism and discrimination. While minorities endure the disparities, whites enjoy the benefits that accrue on their behalf because of their status in society. Having knowledge of their racial history with regard to racial preferences should help preservice educators as they

begin to formulate curricula that will reduce racism in their school environments.

With this new knowledge of their ethnic history, preservice educators should begin to engage in recognizing new learning, which should enable them to reduce racism and ethnocentrism in their classrooms and at the same time, prepare their students to participate in a global society. Teaching white ethnicity may cause alarm for many of these preservice teachers. It is important to assist the preservice educators in recognizing the importance of their ethnic origins and how their origins influence their decisions in the classroom. By exploring primary source documents preserved in digital formats, the preservice teachers will realize the challenges their ancestors faced as they became acclimated to their new home and begin to make connections to their future students' present experiences.

Strategies for Developing Ethnic Consciousness

The first strategy in the preservice educators' development of ethnic consciousness is to provide a theoretical background for the information they will be exploring. Banks (2006) is an excellent place to start. The discussion of the foundation of multicultural education provides an opportunity to present the processes of assimilation and acculturation that immigrants experience in their new homes.

The second strategy is for the preservice educators to explore the history of immigration to the United States. Banks (2006) advocated for explorations of history to occur through the eyes of the different groups that created the historical events. The exploration of the history of immigration,

allows for the exploration of viewpoints by different ethnic groups as to why the different groups came to the New World and their experiences as they become part of the American fabric. This exercise facilitates (1) the recognition by the preservice educators of the different kinds of education offered over the years for the different groups of immigrants, (2) the identification of the impact of the different white European immigrant groups on the United States, and (3) the understanding of the rise of nativism and anti-immigrant feelings against the different whites of European descent who came to this country in the latter part of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. From these new understandings, the students are then able to compare those experiences with the experiences of people of color and how the concepts of racism relate to multiethnic education in the United States.

As a further part of their class research experiences, the preservice educators explore their own ethnic heritage by conducting research about a white ethnic group that has migrated to North America. For the students to maximize their research experience, they should answer questions as to why that particular group decided to leave their home country. Were they victims of oppression due to religion or politics? What types of obstacles did that group face when they arrived? What did they have to give up, and what harm, if any, ensued as a result? What challenges did that group deal with as they became assimilated into the dominant culture? As the class participants share their research, they should begin to (1) notice patterns across the groups of how race, ethnicity, or gender became factors in alienation, separation, and nativism; (2) understand what it means to live where one's

ethnicity is not understood; and (3) comprehend concepts of justice, freedom, and liberation from the viewpoint of an oppressed ethnic group.

Using Primary Source Material to Discover Ethnic Consciousness

Exploring different perspectives of immigrant groups as suggested by Banks (2006) is now possible with the explosion of information available on the internet. Personal accounts of immigrant experiences have been preserved through diaries, photographs, and newspaper clippings and are now digitized and available through personal family websites and museums. These primary source artifacts are accessible to anyone interested in reading firsthand accounts of the events that, before now, were only available through the perspective of textbook writers. Groups create primary source content to preserve their cultural heritage, giving web surfers rich detailed accounts of the personal reasons why people came to the United States, their experience in assimilating into the dominant society, and how they dealt with oppression, victimization, and exclusion upon arriving in America.

Irish Views of the Famine website (n.d.) is one example of access to personal accounts of past events that can be brought to life through digitized primary sources. The website itself is not professionally designed. Rather, it contains a simple compilation of resources, including personal diaries kept by Robert Whyte, *1847 Famine Ship Diary*, and Gerald Keegan, *Summer of Sorrow*, which describes the typical journey across the Atlantic Ocean. To assist in putting the diary entries into perspective, the site also has links

to newspaper articles during that period of time detailing the effects of the potato famine upon the country from social and political points of view. Reading the news clip descriptions of food riots and the massive death counts of the citizens of Ireland allows the students exploring their Irish background to realize why their ancestors chose to come to the United States. These simple links provide a context to understanding the motives and the challenges the Irish faced as they began their new life in the United States.

Museums are using new technology to design highly interactive sites to simulate stories from different perspectives and experiences of immigrant groups. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum's (2015) official website provides several interactive features. The museum is a restored tenement building. One page called the *Urban Log Cabin* has a photograph of the building. By clicking on the windows, a surfer can learn about the family who lived in that apartment. *The Excavation* page has clips of the different types of wallpaper used to decorate the apartments and the different floorboards used throughout the building. The *Tenement VR* page has a panoramic movie of re-created apartments with a link to the story about the family. Another portion of the website simulates the journey from the Old World to the New World. That page allows the surfer to select different choices, including name, originating country, profession in the New World, and video clips presenting firsthand accounts. The interactivity of the website draws preservice educators in as they develop a broader understanding of the new immigrants' lives in New York City.

History.com (A&E Television Network, 2015) also has a great example of an

interactive website that allows for the exploration of the immigrant experiences through original film footage converted into a digitized format so that it can be viewed on the internet. Original movie footage from the early 1900s provides the preservice educators with an introspective view of what it would have been like arriving to the United States through Ellis Island. Other video clips provide historical context for the preservice educators through the inclusion of images of the restored buildings enhanced by park employee narrative. Embedded within the video clips are original photographs and writings by individuals who convey their experiences immigrating to America and passing through a federal immigration station.

Web 2.0 Tools and Social Media for Presentation

Alternative methods are available for presenting the historical research findings of the preservice educators. Through wikis, the preservice educators are able to post their papers online for everyone in the class or from other sections. Through their postings, these preservice educators can create an online book of numerous cultures researched by the class or across many classes. Wikis also promote collaboration with classmates through editing the content contributed by classmates.

Another way of publishing the historical reviews is to have the students create a blog in which they post their papers. Through the blog, classmates can comment on each other's papers without changing the content of the paper. The blogs allow an in-depth examination of information in the papers that PowerPoint presentations alone cannot provide due to time constraints.

Exploring Personal Cultural Heritage

As part of their exploration, preservice educators can also explore their own genealogy by tracing family connections and learning when their families immigrated to North America. Websites such as *Ancestry.com* have numerous tools to assist in searching for students' ancestors. These sites are country specific as well as global to search the home country of one's ancestors. The website offers advice on how to access old government records such as the censuses, cemetery ledgers, and library files to build a family tree. The site provides ways for relatives to connect with each other, known and unknown, to compare stories that were handed down through different family members. Once the family tree has been established, the preservice educator can search through newspaper clippings to learn more about their different ancestors and what their lives were like. The website also assists with the identification of the age of old photographs based upon hairstyles so that the preservice white European American educators can build context from the old photographs they may possess. Students of genealogy may purchase their own account, or access can be gained free of charge by using a local library website.

The preservice educators can also create digital narratives. Digital narratives are collections of stories from elder members of a family that have been recorded in either an audio or video format. The purpose of the digital narratives is to preserve the memories of those families for future generations. Grandparents or other relatives could be the first or second generation immigrants. Their

stories often contain the cultural traditions from the old country. If they are not first or second generation, their grandparents or relatives may have stories that were handed down to them by their parents or grandparents. The preservice educators can create their own digital narratives to be posted to one of the many social networking sites such as *iTunes* (<http://www.iTunes.com>), and *Facebook* (<http://www.Facebook.com>). For those wanting more privacy, *SchoolTube* (<http://www.schooltube.com>) accounts can be set up for sharing only within class groups. *VoiceThread* (<http://www.voicethread.com>) is a social networking site that allows audio comments to be posted on the original digital narratives. *Vobbo* (<http://www.vobbo.com>) is similar to the *VoiceThread* site in that it allows the preservice educators to post video blogs rather than audio recordings.

CONCLUSION

We believe that all preservice educators should understand their historical ancestry in the context of the students they will be teaching. More specifically, this knowledge should be made available to preservice white European American educators who currently represent the majority of the educators in the teaching system. Inherent in this belief is the assumption that when preservice educators connect to their own history, they will not only understand the goals of multicultural education, but they will successfully implement these goals in the classrooms. Advances in technology have opened access to primary source material which can facilitate the development of cultural identity for preservice white European American educators and can

provide different ways in which to share the information they have learned with preservice educators in other classes.

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