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College of Education and Human Development



Maine Schools in Focus: I feel like I've had a bag over my head – New teachers explore issues of diversity, power and justice

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Over 80 percent of teachers in the U.S. are white, despite an increasingly diverse PK-12 student population (Barnum, 2018). This demographic imperative has prompted teacher education to respond in two diverging ways. The first is to diversify the teaching workforce by increasing the

number of teachers of color (Neal, Sleeter, & Kumashiro, 2015). The second is to better prepare a mostly white teaching workforce to work with a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse student population (Zeichner, 2009).

This is an important part of teacher preparation even in a state like Maine, which is often referred to as the whitest state in the nation. Firstly, the population here is also diversifying; immigrant and refugee communities are growing (Taylor, 2019). Secondly, teachers must prepare their students to live and exist in an increasingly diverse society; one that is currently contending with the ways that power has been unequally distributed based on issues of race, class, and gender. Attending to these disparities requires both a broad historical examination of the relationship between power and diversity as well as a personal and internal exploration of how that social reality has shaped each of us individually.

This requires teachers to critically examine their own identities and how they relate to their future students. For the past three years, faculty members in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine have been investigating how our pre-service teachers develop understandings of whiteness, diversity, cultural identity, and power as they engage with a multicultural novel. We have focused on how they develop a sociocultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), or a deep understanding of their own sociopolitical location in society. This demands that pre-service teachers explore questions regarding how their own racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds have both positioned them in relation to others and shaped their personal experiences. Over the course of one semester in a multicultural education course that all pre-service teachers at UMaine take, we present them with readings and experiences that repeatedly ask them to step out of their cultural comfort zones. We also ask them to examine their own cultural heritage, communities, and practices in an attempt to unearth the pervasive myth that only *non-white* people have *culture*. Questioning this trope requires students to assess the ways that their own experiences intersect with what is considered “normal” in mainstream American society, which serves to privilege some identities and marginalize others.

As they explore these issues of justice, equity, and diversity in relation to their own lives, pre-service teachers also read a novel about a teacher going through a similar process (Sleeter, 2015). In this novel, Jessica, a young, white teacher, working with a significant number of immigrant, Latinx students begins exploring her own ancestry while also inquiring how to better connect with and support her students. Jessica provides a useful example of what this process can look like and offers someone for our pre-service teachers to both identify with and analyze. We have collected data on their written reflections of the novel, where they respond to prompts about how they are similar to Jessica and what they learn about multicultural education practices. Two rounds of analysis of student reflections demonstrated that they did connect personally with the text, but tended to highlight their connections to Jessica’s personal life — identifying or contrasting themselves with her marriage, level of confidence, or crush at work, rather than examining their own racial and cultural identities in relation to hers. They frequently avoided what we termed, the “discomfort zone” rarely exploring whiteness or white privilege. However, they did frequently turn to Jessica for pedagogical advice, citing inclusive techniques that she used in her teaching that they might apply in their own classrooms.

These findings prompted us to redesign the discussion guides that students use when interacting with the text, in order to facilitate deeper levels of engagement. In order to explore this interaction, last semester we also collected video data of pre-service teachers’ conversations about the text. Analysis of these videos has demonstrated how students build off of each other’s thinking, draw from their personal experiences, and develop localized small group interactional patterns that shape the ways they make sense of Jessica and her experiences. The content of these interactions rarely made it into their written reflections, whose more formal tone may encourage a kind of assignment performance that discourages risk taking and discomfort. However, in their group discussions pre-service teachers explored Jessica’s complex identity negotiation, connected the text to broader social issues, and made sense of their own personal schooling experiences in relation to hers. These conversations demonstrated the ways they were developing a sociocultural consciousness in relation to the class and to each other. As one student put it:

Until this class, I feel like there was a bag over my head. Because I grew up in a world where this wasn’t a thing. If someone told me back in high school that racism and all this stuff is still so prevalent, I would have been like *‘What are you talking about?’* I wasn’t exposed to any of this.

Our research demonstrates how collaboratively analyzing fiction writing can be useful in supporting new teachers in the development of a sociocultural consciousness as they inquire into the ways their own identities intersect with issues of diversity and equity. This process, which is rarely straight forward or linear, is key to creating multicultural educators who can teach in ways that create a more just society for historically marginalized students and communities.

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