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Personal Investments, Professional Gains: Strategies of African American Women Teacher Educators

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Abstract

As African American mothers and teacher educators, the authors' investment in teacher education is both personal and professional. The authors' build upon these personal and professional investments in their teaching practices with primarily White pre-service teachers, in the hopes of better preparing them to teach African American children. This paper outlines pedagogical and curriculum strategies including reflective activities, the use of Black English Vernacular (BEV), and theoretical orientations. These strategies emphasize the a) political nature of teaching and the ways in which teacher positionality matters; b) importance of interpersonal relationships based on care, respect, and recognition of humanity; and, c) experiences students of color have in school and community.

Introduction

As mothers of African American males who attend public schools and as teacher educators, we are very concerned that schools and colleges of education are not preparing pre-service teachers to teach *all* children. We come to this conclusion based not only on personal perspectives, but also from our professional vantage points. Both authors are former K-12 educators who embarked on careers in teacher education to address the systemic neglect and mis-education of students of color, in particular, African American children. Our concerns lay squarely in the perpetuation of stereotypical representations of children of color, their communities, parents such as ourselves, and the continual process that others our children and casts them as "different."

Moreover, as teacher educators, we are invested, equally responsible, and constantly questioning the ways in which teacher preparation programs replicate cycles of mis-education for pre-service teachers of color who must essentially get "on-the-job-training" at the expense of our children because their teacher education program did not adequately prepare them to teach *all* children. In other words, as authors of this paper, we are in no way objective or dispassionate about the topic of teacher preparation. For us, this paper extends beyond just a scholarly interest in the topic; it represents the multiple facets of our positionality as African American women, mothers, community members, cultural workers, and scholars.

In this paper, we are attempting to look broadly at both multicultural education and multicultural teacher education because we see these two areas as inextricably connected. While multicultural teacher education is but one segment of the larger project of multicultural education, it goes without saying that if teachers do not understand the philosophical, curricular, and pedagogical underpinnings of multicultural

education at the pre and in-service level the project of multicultural education is tenuous at best. Given that most teacher education programs are predominantly white, we believe that teacher educators of color (authors included) have a particular vantage point in preparing pre-service candidates to work with African American students. In addition to "the overwhelming presence of White teachers" (Sleeter, 2003) in the nation's public school classrooms, a majority of the students are children from a variety of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class backgrounds. This demographic imbalance presents challenges to not only teachers, but also students, parents, and communities. Thus, our work in teacher education is guided by the need to articulate the ways in which our positionality as professors of color informs our efforts to prepare pre-service teachers. In this paper, we draw upon this point, illuminating strategies and techniques we employ in our classrooms. We provide a context for our work, elucidating the challenges of working with a primarily White teacher education student body, in light of our positionality in predominately White institutions (PWIs). We then highlight the ways in which these contextual factors form a basis for practice, providing strategies for addressing such challenges yet, doing so in a manner that does not derail our primary concern—preparing teachers to teach *all* students. These strategies demonstrate attentiveness to teacher positionality, theory, and a belief that teachers are change agents.

The terrain of multicultural teacher education

In the time that we have worked with pre-service teachers and similarly in our own teacher preparation, we have become concerned about *how* effective the mostly monocultural environments, like most schools and colleges of education, are at preparing teachers for diversity and social justice? Teacher educators, as highlighted in a recent

Chronicle article, face increased levels of student resistance as conservative organizations challenge the use of “professional dispositions” in assessing pre-service teachers’ ability to create democratic, socially just classrooms (See Wilson, 2005). This is further exacerbated by the growing preoccupation with testing (high stakes, standardization) and content area standards that render students, particularly students of color, invisible; they are seen as flawed and incapable of meeting test and performance standards. Pre-service and indeed in-service teachers, who want magic bullet solutions, view the inclusion of multicultural materials in K-12 classrooms as a distraction to testing and standards. Moreover, when multicultural materials are introduced as curricular tools, the treatments by pre-service and in-service teachers tends to be very superficial and/or students are unwilling, unprepared, or both to substantively engage the material (Shujaa, 1995; Chapman, 2002). While volumes of scholarship on preparing White teachers to work with racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse populations exist, uncritical usage of such work exists. As Ladson-Billings (2005) reminds us, “racial texts” run the risk of becoming empty, if they are appropriated in a manner that proliferates color blindness and uncritical teacher practices amongst teacher educators. Thus, teacher educators must be mindful of how we play a significant role in silencing and rendering students of color invisible, while also contributing to resistance of pre-service teachers.

Student resistance is even more heightened for teacher educators of color, as demonstrated in negative evaluations, complaints to deans, provosts, and university presidents. Gender also contributes yet another layer to student resistance, as Harlow (2003) found that junior level Black females were most susceptible to student resistance, and thus, worked under social constraints in and outside of classrooms that White colleagues do not. Her work also highlights what she denotes as the “black tax” Black faculty incur on student evaluations, describing how student responses are consciously filtered through a racial (and I would argue, a gendered) lens (356). The work of Fries-Britt and Turner-Kelly (2005), Allen et al. (2001), and Thompson and Louque (2005) further describes African American faculty status, problematic interactions with White students, and the need to establish strong support networks with other faculty of color.

As Black female teacher educators, although we work at different PWIs (a private Northeastern institution and a large Midwest state institution), we face similar challenges in our work. Thus, we work collaboratively sharing course readings, co-constructing course syllabi and classroom activities. In the following section, we share the collaboratively constructed strategies that address student resistance, while keeping an eye on the larger goal of preparing teachers to work effectively with students of color. These pedagogical strategies emphasize the a) political nature of teaching and the ways in which teacher positionality matters; b) importance of interpersonal relationships based on care, respect,

and recognition of humanity; and, c) students of color they will encounter bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experiences that must be incorporated into their pedagogical practices.

The political nature of teaching

To help situate the nature and history of schools and curriculum as being inherently political, many of the readings challenge the traditional narrative of school and education as the “great equalizer.” In doing so, these readings challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and the common experiences our students hold as school as a place where everyone had the same opportunities. Indeed, many of our students are very adept at “doing school” and find it difficult to accept and/or believe that the very nature of schooling, as practiced in the U.S., is at odds with the notion of equal opportunity. Thus, many students fault faculty of color for presenting “grim” pictures of public education marred by racial, economic, and gender inequities. In our courses, a common question or comment on final course evaluations is: “Why do we spend so much time talking about race?” Many students enter teacher education programs with the conceptualization that teaching is politically neutral work, with limited understandings of the politically charged professional arena they are preparing to enter. Students’ comments in-class, on written assignments, during meetings with us, on course evaluations, or in conversations with department chairs and deans, describe the ways in which readings offend them and fail to provide them with methods and lesson plans for use in their future classrooms. Thus, attempts on our part to challenge students to consider their positionality, engage with the readings, and further their analysis are often viewed as hypercritical attacks of a personal nature based on the fact that they are white and we are African American.

After sensing students were challenged by the readings, yet, reluctant to share their feelings, Dingus implemented a weekly writing activity she called “Bag Teachers.” Dingus also sensed that students were having difficulty with some of the larger concepts of multicultural teacher preparation, including understanding the ways in which teaching is a political endeavor. As other multicultural teacher educators have experienced, when students encounter concepts such as race, privilege, social justice, and democratic classroom practices, they experience a certain amount of frustration, articulated as “not getting it.” Thus, Dingus implemented Bag Teachers, in which students can sort through concepts they feel comfortable with, those they feel they need to develop, and those that they continue to revisit across the semester in a series of brown paper bags. Students are provided cue cards on which to write their “baggage” they bring to the classroom, based on their understandings of schools, children, and their own experiences. The baggage includes issues in the readings they find most challenging, those that run counter to their beliefs and accepted ideologies of schools and learners. They are also given several open ended ques-

tions to respond to including: As a future classroom teacher, I fear...? I find it difficult to accept...? And, I do not want to deal with...? The first bag houses these cards, while the second bag holds issues they believe they have resolved, addressed, or have experienced some progression. Students are provided with cards each week, at the start of class. At the end of the semester, they are free to share these issues, speaking specifically about what cards remained in the first bag, what transitioned to the second bag, and the reasons for certain cards remained or shifted. Thus, the bags become a symbolic space to process themes, issues, and concerns they do not feel comfortable sharing publicly.

Similarly, Dixson found that students held a number of stereotypes of urban versus suburban (and rural) schools. Many of the students are from suburban and rural backgrounds and tend to hold negative stereotypes and beliefs about both urban communities and the children and families who live in urban areas. They perceive urban schools as dangerous, poverty-stricken and places where there is virtually no learning going on. Conversely, they see suburban schools as well-resourced, safe and intellectually rich environments. Rural areas are described as close-knit and focused very strongly on community. All of the students' narratives about these contexts—urban, rural and suburban—suggest that the environments are racially homogenous and culturally static. Thus, in an effort to help students understand the ways in which their beliefs affect student learning, Dixson created a different version of the “Bag Teacher” activity. She asked the students to get into groups based on their potential teaching context—urban, rural or suburban—list characteristics of each environment and create a list that describes the “typical” student, in each context. She then had the groups sort their lists to respond to the following question: “What impacts student success in urban/rural/suburban schools?” The groups sort their lists as those aspects of urban/rural/suburban schools that supported or challenged student success. They then take their lists and write them on index cards. The index cards with the challenges are taped to bricks. The students selected one of their peers to represent the “typical” student described for their context. The “typical” urban, rural and suburban students come forward and Dixson gives them an empty backpack. In the backpack, group members place the bricks with the challenges and explain each challenge. Typically, most groups place between six and eight bricks in their backpacks. Dixson engages the students in a discussion about what the bricks represent—the beliefs that they bring to the classroom about their students and the students' communities. The students who have the bricks in their backpacks feel the metaphorical weight of carrying others' perceptions. For all of the students, the activity demonstrates how teachers' beliefs can be burdensome for some students and represent the real challenge to their success in our classrooms. Across both Dixson and Dingus' courses, students' responses to these activities were mixed ranging from anger at being “tricked” to surprise that they hold beliefs that could impact their students' success.

However, on a majority of the evaluations, the students cite the “Bag Teachers” activity as having a profound impact on them understanding their positionality.

Interpersonal relationships

As Black women teacher educators, our pedagogical practices allow us to teach through our own positionality. In doing so, we are very deliberate in incorporating Black English Vernacular (BEV) into classroom dialogues, from our opening remarks, personal interactions, the inclusion of expressions into larger class discussions and in the interpretation of texts. We ask students if they understand what we meant in using certain phrases, what meanings were conveyed, and what misinterpretations can arise from the usage. Dingus draws on the notion of academic/marketplace discourse to highlight the ways in which language functions across communities, and moreover, the ways in which it privileges some while diserving others. We also make a point of describing the usage of BEV in terms of critical race theory (CRT), drawing upon the tenet of counter story as a means of articulating experiences which may differ significantly from their own. We further emphasize the ways in which language usage is erroneously equated with perceptions of intelligence. In doing so, we find that many students are willing to more critically examine classroom-based interactions with students and parents. Thus, by teaching students through who we are, students can gain a better understanding of how language functions, and moreover, an understanding of their ability to interact with students and parents from communities and backgrounds that differ from their own.

In one instance, students in both courses completed readings on womanism and Black women teachers' pedagogy. Based on the weekly questions students submitted in a prior Dingus' course and the reaction papers they write in Dixson's course, we sensed that they were struggling to understand concepts about pedagogical practices and philosophies that challenge and are different from their commonly held beliefs and experiences. Both of us draw on personal experiences to demonstrate concepts in the readings we assigned. In most cases, students come back to class to share that they have witnessed the manifestation of the concepts or themes in the course readings in their field experiences.

An additional example is the implementation of embedded cores in our courses, where we address underlying themes in a way that students may or may not be aware. While course readings cover the prescribed topics, there exists an underlying emphasis on care. Students are thus challenged to think of the ways in which care is manifested on individual, classroom, building-level, and systemic bases. If teacher education programs seek to prepare practitioners who are knowledgeable, reflective, skilled, and caring, then suffice it to say, discussion on constructs of care are critical. Thus, students read a number of texts (see for example, Sidle Walker's *Their Highest Potential* and Valenzuela's *Subtractive Schooling*) during the semester, on caring. These texts are coupled with readings that use caring as a filter for class-

room management, reflective teaching, and other topics across the semester.

Experiences of students of color

Many teacher education programs place particular emphasis on the idea that teachers are agents of change. Given this, it is particularly striking how “change” often errs more on the side of *fixing* students of color, as opposed to recognizing their abilities, and the wealth of knowledge and experiences they bring to school. While many of our students have urban placements, we cannot assume that they are engaging with K-12 students in meaningful ways that will inform their pedagogy, positionality, and ability to care for students of color. In fact, we still find that many pre-service teachers still do not utilize their pre-service experiences to challenge their notions of students of color, but instead, focus almost entirely on the technical aspects of teaching. Establishing relationships with students, listening to their concerns and social critiques, is perceived as unimportant, time consuming, or not thought of at all. Thus, their placements do not necessarily guarantee meaningful contact with K-12 students in ways that dislodge perceptions and preconceived ideas of who students of color are and know.

To counter this lack of attention to students, we seek ways to incorporate the voices of students of color in teacher education. Who better to describe the ways in which teachers can function as change agents? Dingus directed a community service project with a secondary student. Dingus invites the student to speak to the masters-level students about his experiences in school, community, at home and with peers. We used the occasion to describe ways in which pre-service teachers can engage students in meaningful conversations, learning about youth culture, and how best to reach students. On another occasion, students from a local high school came in to converse with pre-service teachers on the topic of youth violence. In course reflections and on-line discussions, students commented that these sessions were the most meaningful, challenged their perceptions of urban students, exposed them to new viewpoints, and allowed them to realize intellectually steeped social critiques Black children can voice.

Conclusion

In teacher preparation programs where there is one token course on Multicultural Education, “difference (be it racial, class, gender, or disability) or “teaching diverse learners,” it is exceedingly difficult to attend to these issues in substantive and meaningful ways that unpack social constructs of difference, the implications for teachers’ positionality, and learners. Thus, we find it necessary to utilize a variety of methods and materials to encourage students to critically examine their positionality. Additionally, with limited course offerings, classroom discussions can quite often be restricted to “theoretical” and/or “academic” discussions of race and racism. This limitation in course of-

ferings constrains the course schedule and thus devalues and limits time for students to share and give voice to the experiences they have had with these issues as a way of talking *to*, and *against* theories of race, race relations and racism. The challenge for teacher preparation programs, and what we have endeavored to do in our courses is to create environments that engage all of the students and attend to their engagement with these issues that does not relegate them to simplistic and relativistic reductionisms that perpetuate the notion that experiences are similar. In our experience, and in reading the literature on multicultural education, it appears that issues of race often get conflated with culture or socio-economic class at the expense of gender and vice-versa.

In programs where there is one course, these issues get lost when trying to cover everything in a semester. As professors we have had to make choices about which issues we will spend more time on and others we will merely introduce. This is painfully similar to what happens in schools with respect to the teaching of content. In terms of multicultural teacher education, breadth cannot be favored over depth. Thus, again, our use of activities helps underscore the issues that may not get as much focused attention in readings we assign. We hope our use of activities, strategically co-constructing courses, and attending to the larger themes of teaching as political work, interpersonal relationships, centering students of color provide a foundation for pre-service teachers to draw upon in working with students of color who fuel our imperative to prepare teachers.

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Call for Editors

Mid-Western Educational Researcher

Journal of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association

Proposals are currently being sought for the Editorship of the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. The *Researcher* is the quarterly publication of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association. The journal serves the dual function of providing MWERA members with timely information about the organization and of providing a vehicle for dissemination of scholarly work in education or education related fields. This dual mission reflects growth and change of the organization itself in recent years.

The appointment of the next editor or editorial team will be from January, 2008, through October, 2010, with duties commencing at the Annual Meeting in October, 2007. Proposals are sought from individuals or teams interested in assuming responsibility for the operation and direction of the *Researcher* for a three-year period. The format for proposals is open, but each proposal should include at least the following:

1. Name, institutional affiliation, address, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail address of each prospective editor;
2. A vision statement indicating the editor(s) intended goals for the journal, and an explanation of how this vision reflects the membership, perspectives, and direction of MWERA;
3. A proposed plan for promoting this vision;
4. An explanation of the expertise and qualifications of the editor(s) which are likely to encourage the continued improvement plan and development of the *Researcher*.

Questions may be directed to Dr. Sharon Valente at the address below. Proposals should be submitted no later than November 15, 2006, to:

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