Engaging Secondary Postbaccalaureate Teacher Candidates in Dialogues about Diversity: Creating a Cultural Self Portrait

Susan D. Myers
Assistant Professor
Texas Tech University

Connie Wilson Anderson
Assistant Professor
Texas Tech University

ABSTRACT

This article examines one component of a fast-track teacher certification program designed for postbaccalaureate preservice teacher candidates recruited to teach in high need secondary schools. While the authors feel the integrated nature of this particular program is unique, this article describes how one activity, the cultural self portrait assignment, was developed to prepare new teachers for diverse classrooms. This descriptive account documents the details of the assignment and how it is implemented within the context of a one-semester long program that combines pedagogical coursework with intensive field-based experiences. We also address how the cultural self portrait assignment engaged all five of the university instructors in the program in dialogue about our cultural identities and how that impacts our practice. Finally, we share our lessons learned and implications for future practice in the desire to encourage meaningful discourse among faculty members who prepare new teachers for diverse classroom settings.

Introduction

Although the number of culturally diverse students in public schools is steadily on the increase, the number of teachers preparing to teach who are ethnically and culturally diverse continues to decline (Brown, 2004). These highly diverse schools also typically
have a greater percentage of teachers who enter teaching through alternative routes to certification. Many of these new teachers are predominately from White, middle-class backgrounds (Shinew & Sodorff, 2003). In essence, teachers recruited to teach culturally diverse students find that they feel unprepared to handle the added challenges associated with poverty, student motivation, and meeting the instructional needs of culturally diverse students (Dong, 2004; Marx, 2002; Morales, 2000).

Large-scale efforts have been initiated nationally to prepare and place highly qualified teachers of record in an expedited time frame. Many of the schools where the recruitment of new teachers is the most evident are those schools identified as high need, often located in urban districts. Programs such as Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, and other teacher preparation entities have been instrumental in providing a myriad of opportunities referred to as alternative routes to teacher certification (National Center for Education Information, 2005). However, while the number of newly certified teachers increases, indications are that those who exit from alternative certification programs do not necessarily remain in the profession any longer than their more traditionally prepared counterparts (Freeman, Brookhart, & Loadman, 1999). Interviews of beginning teachers indicate several reasons for this trend. One finding often reported is the lack of preparedness many beginning teachers feel in addressing the needs of diverse student populations. This occurrence appears to be especially prevalent in teachers recruited into teaching as mid-career changers. While their enthusiasm and content area knowledge may be extensive, transferring this expertise into daily classroom instructional practice many times eludes this population of teacher candidates (Morales, 2000).

### Theoretical Context of Cultural Awareness

The need for preservice teachers to have an understanding of the cultural differences they will encounter when teaching culturally diverse students is reported in current research on culturally responsive teaching. Brown (2004) describes culturally responsive teaching as:

...Purposively responding to the needs of the many culturally and ethnically diverse learners in classrooms. It involves implementing specifically student-orientated instructional processes as well as choosing and delivering ethnically and culturally relevant curricula. (p. 268)

Since many new teachers continue to begin their careers in schools with large minority student enrollments, designing activities that highlight aspects of cultural diversity are often a good starting point to engage teacher certification candidates in dialogue about their own cultural backgrounds and how this impacts instruction. Postbaccalaureate students, particularly those who are mid-career changers, may not have been in a secondary classroom since they were last high school students themselves (Shen & Palmer, 2005). Therefore, the secondary students they encounter today are quite different from what they may remember as students. This transition
into classrooms that are decidedly more diverse makes it even more imperative that beginning teachers feel equipped to address challenges of differences other than their subject area.

Fast-track and other forms of alternative routes to certification provided the impetus for the college of education in a large southwestern public university to design an innovative program for postbaccalaureate teacher candidates. The structure of the program includes five university faculty members teaming together to implement one semester of pedagogy coursework. Working closely together as team members, this group has expended a great amount of effort to align the content of the five required teacher certification courses.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this article is to provide a descriptive intrinsic case study of a course assignment, the cultural self-portrait, for researchers interested in the process we used to align and integrate cultural pedagogy into our teacher certification program and for practitioners interested in initiating a similar assignment within the context of their own programs. Our intent is to reveal the details of the cultural self-portrait, works and to offer what we perceive are the benefits for both teacher candidates and teacher educators alike.

While the authors feel all of the components of this teacher preparation program are unique, this article explores how one activity, specifically, the cultural self portrait, can be incorporated into coursework to engage participants’ in increasing their self-awareness about their personal cultural identities (Bennett, 2003). We propose that the student products resulting from this assignment can serve to create an increased awareness about the cultural voices of the teacher candidates by explicitly examining the connection between their life stories and how this influences their culturally responsive instruction (Bennett, 2003; Lea, 2004). Furthermore, this type of endeavor can also be used as a vehicle for professional conversations about the personal biases and resistances to culturally responsive instruction that may be revealed as a result of self-examination.

Methodology

While other studies document the results of this course activity and other aspects of our program, the purpose of this article is twofold:

1) To provide others with a description of a specific assignment within our larger program, and
2) To propose how this assignment allows for a greater awareness and an understanding of cultural identities for our students.
We frame this work as a descriptive intrinsic case study, as a way to provide an account of the processes, strategies, and implementation of one component of our program for postbaccalaureate teacher candidates (Merriam, 1998). Yin’s (1994) descriptive case study approach provides a framework for the description of the program itself. At the same time, we recognize this as an intrinsic case as described by Stake (1995), there are cases that present themselves to us, not through a desire to understand some larger question, “…but because we need to learn about that particular case. We have intrinsic interest in the case…” (p. 3). The work presented here has evolved out of our desire to understand the potential of creating a cultural self portrait as a vehicle to engage preservice teachers in conversations about cultural diversity. We bounded the case by examining the course documents, the cultural self portraits submitted by our students, and data from personal discourse and journals of the authors.

However, before presenting the information about details of the cultural self portrait assignment, we will provide a brief description of the program to establish context, followed by a description of the cultural self portrait assignment. We conclude with a discussion about how this type of assignment benefits teacher candidates and faculty members and propose our future plans to further develop this activity into our overall program.

**Program Description**

The program, entitled Project REAL (Recruiting Educators through Alternative Licensure) is the result of a Transition to Teaching grant awarded by the Department of Education to the authors in 2004. The project is housed within a teacher preparation program in a public university located in the northwestern region of a large southwestern state. The primary objective of Project REAL is the recruitment of mid-career professionals and recent college graduates who commit to teach science, math, English, social studies, or foreign languages in secondary schools. Additionally, these teacher candidates also have expressed a commitment to teach in culturally diverse classrooms for a minimum of three years. The goal of the program is to prepare beginning teachers by incorporating extensive practical experiences with veteran teachers and secondary students. The program is considered as an alternative route to certification as the participants complete teacher preparation courses in one semester, making them eligible for securing a paid internship and becoming a teacher of record in less than one year.

The participants in REAL are enrolled in a fast-track teacher certification program specifically designed for postbaccalaureate students. The program is designed so that the participants complete the certification courses in one semester while simultaneously observing assigned veteran classroom teachers four days a week. While numerous teacher preparation programs exist that provide field experiences, this program blends course contents, assignments, and classroom experiences together with an emphasis on diversity and student learning. Project REAL participants receive approximately one-half of the scheduled class time, or six hours each week, assigned to classroom teachers in their content areas. The pairing of preservice teachers with a classroom teacher allows for extended opportunities to become actively involved with secondary students in relevant, practical teaching activities. These teachers reinforce concepts
such as lesson planning, instructional management, classroom environment, and assessment that are presented and discussed within their university pedagogy courses.

This particular program configuration includes a team teaching approach by five university faculty members as well as practicing teachers. The courses are offered on-site at the two secondary schools four days each week during the semester. The courses include pedagogy and practice related to curriculum planning and development, cultural and ethnic diversity issues and perspectives, educational psychology, instructional methods and assessment of student learning, and content area literacy. Three of the assignments for the semester have been integrated in such a manner that core objectives from all of the courses are addressed. The course that included the cultural self-portrait assignments and was the focus of this article was the cultural diversity course.

The Cultural Self Portrait Assignment

The cultural diversity course, titled ‘Issues and Reform in American Secondary Schooling,’ is designed to assist post-baccalaureate preservice teachers in acquiring a perspective and understanding of teaching dealing specifically with culturally and ethnically diverse students at the secondary level. The primary focus of the course is to examine historical educational reform and current issues, while developing awareness of affect and effect that these have on classroom teaching.

This course assists preservice teachers in identifying personal biases (based on perceptions, expectations and prior experiences) and challenges these in context to undergirding philosophical orientations of education. Preservice teachers are able to apply knowledge of the variety of critical perspectives of education, which underline broad-based contemporary learning theory and influence educational practice. This course also identifies and applies the various principles of communication and negotiation to enhance the learning environments for secondary school contexts and demonstrates an ability to perform critical analyses of existing reform literature based on the differentiated needs of teacher and students. Preservice teachers share thoughts and reactions through dialogue and self-reflection, enabling them to critically analyze their personal experiences to theory and practice and how they shape them and their actions in and out of the classroom.

One of the assignments of the course is the development and oral presentation of a cultural self-portrait (Bennett, 2003). Based on similar activities from other researchers, the assignment is designed to help preservice teachers navigate and understand their personal ‘stories’ of the cultural histories (Lea, 2003). The cultural self-portrait assignment asks that the teacher candidates think about their cultural identity and important individual characteristics as a structure for creating.

One specific objective of the cultural self-portrait assignment is for the teacher candidate to examine her ethnicity and things she values. She can select to include in the completed electronic presentation items such as photos, symbols, and text that create a montage of the person and conveys a visual representation of her beliefs and about how she views herself. The montage includes subsections titled: Family History, Stages of, Aspects of Ethnicity, and
Significant Individual Differences. Each of these subsections was to be explored, examined, and defined by the preservice teacher.

For example, when researching the component about their family histories, teacher candidates were encouraged to discuss areas they may be uncertain about or have little knowledge of with family members who might have more information. Likewise, the section titled “Aspects of Ethnicity,” included topics such as social values and communication structures the participant associated with their specific cultural backgrounds. Additionally, participants explored an area identified as the “Home/School Match/Mismatch” where they reflected on any discrimination they perceived during their school-age years and how they resolved these issues.

Once each of these areas are examined and then presented, the final portion of the portrait is to synthesize the separate parts and connect the components of their cultural past to the classroom students they will be teaching during the ensuing semester of coursework. This reflection is included under a section called Teaching Implications, and provided additional insight about cultural responsiveness and classroom diversity.

The completed cultural self portrait is then converted into an electronic presentation and shared with the class as an individual descriptive representation. The student can elect to use whatever media format she prefers to complete the final submission of the assignment. A majority of the students choose PowerPoint™ as the primary vehicle for the presentation, although other types of media presentation software have been used. As described earlier, students are provided a general guideline as to the design, selection of artifacts, and other visual representations each chooses to include to accurately portray the different components of the assignment.

Implications for Our Practice

Developing a sense of cultural self-awareness can provide opportunities for teacher candidates to examine and unpack their personal biases about diversity. Additionally, it allows preservice teachers to explore how their personal backgrounds impacted what they bring to the table as teachers. Additionally, information gathered from this cohort as well as those cohorts who follow will help document to what extent these new teachers feel prepared for diverse school contexts and to what extent they remain in teaching.

Future Directions

The information obtained from this project provides insight as to how preservice teachers can become explicitly engaged with meaningful dialogue about cultural differences. The cultural self portrait assignment provides a rich visual context for students to present their personal narratives. As presented earlier in the description of the cultural self-portrait assignment, a component of the activity is to develop a personal connection between the preservice teachers’
cultural and ethnic background and how this would impact them as teachers in classrooms with highly diverse student populations. Each teacher candidate is directed to include a section in their presentation addressing their perceptions of culturally responsive instruction.

Benefits to Preservice Teacher Candidates

Observing each of the cultural self-portraits during the first two class sessions provided valuable information about each of the preservice teachers’ prior cultural experiences and awareness. The teacher candidates’ ability to examine this topic before beginning their official classroom observations allows them an opportunity to view themselves and each other through a slightly different lens. Discovering that many of the preservice teachers also had diverse backgrounds themselves increases their subsequent connections between the course content of the diversity course and the teaching practice they were observing.

The students also post a separate paper on WebCT® reflecting on their perceptions about this assignment. By incorporating written reflections, discussions topics derived from course readings, and connecting their beliefs to classroom observations, the preservice teachers can build upon their increased knowledge base primarily in two areas; how their awareness leads to greater cultural responsiveness in teaching, and how this type of activity translates into creating a culturally responsive classroom environment.

Providing this cultural background information can be instrumental in forging a connection between their ethnic identities and relating to the cultural diversity in the classrooms they observed. Specifically, students from diverse backgrounds have an opportunity to articulate personal struggles within the framework of this component of the assignment. Additionally, students who have not previously experienced much diversity within their communities are able to unpack some of the preconceptions they inevitably hear from others in the community about “that side of town”, ‘those kids’, or other negative connotations directed specifically toward one of the schools participating in our project.

Benefits to Faculty Members

As faculty members, we also gain valuable information about our students as well as how our courses are strengthened through integrated assignments in the program. Viewing the cultural self portraits with our preservice teachers provides significant insight about the cohort before we began the semester. This one activity allows for multiple opportunities for each of the five faculty members to engage in thoughtful conversations with our teacher candidates, each other, and the classroom teachers involved in the program about cultural diversity issues. Furthermore, having a cultural background on each preservice teacher proves immensely helpful in creating an understanding of how their personal narratives impact them as students and individuals.

One outcome from this experience is that the faculty member who initiated the assignment invited the other four instructors to construct and present our own cultural self portraits. While we had on previous occasions viewed the students’ portraits as observers, we now actively participate in the discussion about our past experiences and how this impacts our instructional and personal philosophies. We now include time to present our portraits at the end of each day’s presentations once the students have completed their presentations for that class period.

The benefit that has emerged from adding our own voices about cultural differences within this framework is that our students are eager to see our cultural portraits, as it provides them information about each of us. Furthermore, although we have worked together for several years,
we also learn new information about each other as a result of this activity. This additional knowledge about our backgrounds, similarities, and articulation about our philosophies enables us to establish deeper collegial relationships and insights about our practice.

Becoming active participants in this project allows us greater opportunities to experience a deeper connection between the theoretical framework of each of our courses and the teaching practice our students observe within the context of the classrooms. As a result, we are able to use this project as a reference point throughout the semester in our courses when class discussions, readings, and specific observation activities involved culturally responsive teaching.

Providing this cultural background information is instrumental in forging connections between their ethnic identities and relating to the cultural diversity in the classrooms observed by the teacher candidates in our program. Specifically, students who are from diverse backgrounds are able to articulate personal struggles within the framework of this component of the assignment. By revealing aspects of their cultural identities through this type of activity, as well as engaging in group discussions and then making explicit connections through written or electronically posted reflections provides a variety of ways where an awareness of their ethnic identity helps to equip them for the complexities of teaching and enhances their ability to communicate with diverse student populations.

Concluding Remarks

The outcome of our experience with this project guides us in determining how we can provide optimal practical teaching experiences for preservice teachers participating in fast-track teacher certification that address culturally and ethnically diverse learners. Additionally, information gathered from this cohort as well as those cohorts who follow will help document to what extent these new teachers feel prepared for diverse school contexts and to what extent they remain in teaching.

In addition to preparing new teachers to teach in settings that are very different from their own personal perspectives and backgrounds, is the necessity to provide opportunities to explicitly examine how cultural self-awareness impacts teaching practice. The authors feel that including specific activities, such as the cultural self-portrait assignment is one way to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The ensuing activities that result after the completion of the self portrait; class discussions, reflective writings, and partnering with mentor teachers in diverse classrooms, all serve to provide preservice teachers opportunities to articulate cultural responsiveness.

It is critical for new teachers to have an understanding of the cultural differences they will encounter when teaching culturally diverse students. Research on culturally responsive teaching presents the value and importance of engaging preservice teachers in activities that actively cultivate cultural awareness; not only of themselves, but also of the students they encounter (Brown, 2004). The cultural self portraits created by this cohort of participants appeared to have increased their awareness and knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. Expanding this activity into an assignment that is woven into the other courses for the semester
informed our practice for future cohorts of teacher candidates who exit from our certification programs.

1 This article is part of a larger study resulting from a grant awarded in 2004 by the Department of Education Transition to Teaching program.

References


Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS, Houston, Texas. www.nationalforum.com