Challenging Pre-service Teachers' Understanding of the Intersection of Disability and Cultural Diversity

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Despite America's increasingly diverse classroom membership, new teachers, who continue to be primarily Caucasian middle-class females, are provided with few opportunities to develop a depth of understanding of cultures other than their own. To further complicate matters, many P-12 students are students determined to have disabilities. Since the inception of special education legislation in the 1970s, concerns were raised about the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Dunn, 1968) and these concerns persist today (Donovan & Cross, 2009). In an effort to address these issues, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Standards (NCATE, 2008) and individual state agencies such as the Colorado's Department of Education (CDE), have outlined a number of performance-based standards and professional dispositions required of educators. This paper explores and evaluates a variety of learning activities we have used in teacher preparation with the intended outcome of developing our students' culturally responsive teaching and supporting their understanding of the complexities involved with the overrepresentation of students of color in special education.

Despite America's increasingly diverse classroom membership, new teachers, who continue to be primarily Caucasian middle-class females, are provided with few opportunities to develop a depth of understanding of cultures other than their own. The outcomes for students of color are bleak. For instance, a new report based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010) indicates that less than 50% of American Indian/Alaska Native students graduate high school. What is most troubling is that this situation is not new for minority students, suggesting efforts to change the negative outcomes have been largely unsuccessful. To further complicate matters, many P-12 students are students determined to have disabilities, another group with grim outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Our interest is in the intersection between the misunderstanding of cultural differences between teachers and what is referred to as the overrepresentation of students of color in special education. Overrepresentation means that a disproportionately high number of students are being determined to have one of thirteen disabilities recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). What we would expect is students in various disability categories would be commensurate with their natural proportions in society at large. Recent analysis of demographics and disability categories, however, show an overrepresentation of children of color in categories of behavioral

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disorders, learning disabilities, and mental retardation (also referred to as cognitive disabilities) and an underrepresentation of children of color in gifted programs (Donovan & Cross, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2009). Since the inception of special education legislature in the 1970s, concerns were raised about the overrepresentation of children of color in special education (Dunn, 1968) and these concerns persist today.

In an effort to address these issues, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Standards (NCATE, 2008) and individual state agencies such as the Colorado's Department of Education (CDE), have outlined a number of performance-based standards and professional dispositions required of educators. For example, the CDE Standard Six states: "The teacher is responsive to the needs and experiences children bring to the classroom, including those based on culture, community, ethnicity, economics, linguistics, and innate learning abilities" (CDE, 2009). Similarly, the NCATE challenges teacher preparation programs to help candidates "develop proficiencies for working effectively with students and families from diverse populations and with exceptionalities to ensure that all students learn" (NCATE, 2008, p.37). This paper explores and evaluates a variety of learning activities we have used in teacher preparation with the intended outcome of developing our students' culturally responsive teaching and supporting their understanding of the complexities involved with the overrepresentation of children of color in special education.

Context

We presently teach in the College of Education at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS) where we are charged with a similar task: to prepare teachers of preschool through twelfth grade students to teach students with disabilities (the first author) and students who speak English as their second language (the second author). One reason given for the overrepresentation of children of color in special education is "misunderstanding cultural differences" (Salzman, 2005). In a newspaper article describing the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic children in special education in Connecticut, civil rights lawyer John Brittain referred to the issue as "Connecticut's dirty little secrets in education" (Salzman, 2005, p.1). Across the country similar situations are increasingly being acknowledged and in some cases districts face sanctions as a result. For instance, in one Northeastern community where Hispanic students made up 58% of the student population, they represented 64% of the special education population and almost 70% of students considered to have a speech or language impairment. Similarly, in Norwalk, CT, though only 25% of the student population was African American in the 2004-5 school year, they made up 36% of the population in special education. Reports from other

states around the country echo these findings, which is one reason the Reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 specifically called for states to investigate identification processes that might lead to overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

In Colorado, in spite of an increase of students from diverse backgrounds in schools, students of color continue to be "over identified in special education" (Adams & Beatty, 2010.) The Language, Culture, and Equity Unit of Colorado's Department of Education report the two categories of disability in which most English Language Learners in the state qualify is Specific Learning Disability (formerly Perceptual Communicative Disorder), and Speech/Language (Medina, 2008). In their presentation to teachers of English Language Learners and Special Education teams, Adams of the Colorado Department of Education and Beatty of Project Act (2010) report that from 1980 to 2000, Colorado's Hispanic population has doubled and the Asian population has tripled in the school population. However, the Colorado's State of the State Report (2008) indicates there are just over 1,000 qualified teachers of English Language Learners (Medina, 2008).

Teaching Strategies

If the overrepresentation of children of color in special education is in part a result of cultural misunderstandings, it is reasonable to think education practitioners need opportunities to explore their own cultural biases and examine the ways in which school culture seems to create conflict with students' own cultural identities and histories. This is the challenge of institutions of higher education, as per the accreditation process. One recent study of how preservice secondary teachers "take up culturally responsive pedagogy" (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009) combined direct interactions with high school students in urban and under-resourced schools with reading and journal writing responses to multicultural literature. Despite being committed to the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, the college students in this study struggled with race-based tension. One White female college student described how difficult it was for her to adapt or "code switch" between her experiences with students of color at the high school and in her interactions with peers at the predominantly White college. An African American student said "I feel like I have the weight of all the Black people…whenever I open my mouth" (p.828). Gere, et al (2009) contend more time is needed for open and honest discussion and they emphasized the importance of "valuing [the] long-term processes" (p.842) that are necessary for beginning teachers to become culturally responsive.

Critical Delineation and Examination of Unconscious Beliefs

One of the more challenging aspects of teaching aspiring teachers about language is the fact that most are already fairly adept at using language. The topic itself is, on its surface, as plain as water and air. That they are training to specifically teach the English language to learners is complicated by their ability to use the English language. If you speak it, you can teach it, or so many think, and thus they may infer that students' difficulties arise from lack of effort rather than lack of exposure or ineffective teaching. "The student was lazy. It was obvious they hadn't worked very hard to learn the grammar lesson being taught." It's not uncommon for teachers from the dominant culture to refer to learners from another culture as "lazy", "arrogant", "dull" or "stupid". These perceptions are not limited to student teachers; it's not unusual for students speaking English as a second language to experience prejudice and discrimination on the college campus as well (Zamel, 1995). Throughout our courses we emphasize the importance of the language we use as a reflection of underlying assumptions. The language we use in class discussions and in written papers or on class discussion boards reveals habits of conversation, or our "storylines" (Gee, 1999); these are what people refer to as they interpret and interact with their world. For instance, the objectification of students whereby they are viewed as "Other", or not "one of us," is revealed through the use of labeling students such as "ELLs" for English Language Learners and "SLIC kiddos" for students served by special education in the category of "significant limited intellectual capacity". Gee (1999) suggests storylines are much like the mental movies people have, providing the person with a "cultural model" or framework from which she believes or anticipates interactions will unfold.

Early each term we make use of the American Psychological Association's Guidelines for Non-handicapping Language in APA journals (2008) for examining the historical and cultural reasons such guidelines were written. Some classes engage in a lively discussion questioning aloud about how words describing people with disabilities have changed over time, but they realize, the meaning behind the words as derogatory or stigmatizing persist. They often give examples such as "SPED kids' is no better than 'retard.'" One college student who was concurrently teaching in an urban middle school caught himself using the word "retard," quickly interrupting himself and apologizing. In teaching classes with teachers of students who are learning English as a second language, similar issues emerge. What at first glance might appear to be benign – using descriptive words such as "ELLs" in reference to English Language Learners – the context in which they are used denotes condescension. In the chapter about reducing bias in language, the APA Guidelines explicitly prefer using person-first language.

At a recent conference held at the UCCS, keynote speaker Geneva Gay described a number of ways educators might teach in more culturally responsive ways (January, 2010) and thus model for preservice teachers effective approaches. Gay began by describing one activity in which she engages her preservice teachers in order to examine their own beliefs. She suggested college students write a poem using the framework, "I believe…therefore, I will…" indicating the relationship between one's beliefs and how they inform our own behaviors. In a similar effort, the first author begins the first Introduction to Special Education class by having students draw a self-portrait and use descriptive words and sketches to describe his/her vision, interests, strengths and needs for support. We refer back to these repeatedly throughout the semester to facilitate discussions around 1) how some of us can choose what to reveal about ourselves where others do not share the same luxury whether it be disability or racial or gender status; 2) self-perception versus perceptions by others of us; 3) and how portraits can be used to learn about similarities and differences between peers in the college class and between the college students and the P-12 students with whom they work as part of their field hours. In discussions of the use of language it has been helpful to return to the self-portrait and ask, "Did you portray yourself by first declaring your own needs for support (seen as a weakness, similar to a disability), or did you use person-first language?" It appears especially important to turn issues back into questions reframed in personal ways.

Social Justice and Cultural Understanding

Gay (2010) also explained the importance of viewing culturally responsive teaching as a social justice issue. Like the preservice teachers in the Gere, et al study (2009) who did not always view race as a factor in social injustice, many of our students seem to grapple with the realization that culturally responsive teaching is a social justice issue. After reading an historical analysis of intelligence testing illustrating efforts to dehumanize certain races (Autism National Committee, 2007; Patterson, 1995), one student described her rethinking, or learning a different perspective from what she had known previously this way: "It blows the mind." Online discussion boards provide students with an invaluable opportunity to process content they have read that creates cognitive dissonance. We find students who might be reticent in face-face discussions in the classroom, utilize online, asynchronous discussions to communicate more openly about difficult topics, perhaps because they feel less threatened by societal taboos that would stifle honest discussion of race and prejudice. In one online discussion about the overrepresentation of children of color in special education a college student of color wrote, "There is no discrimination among boys and girls in either race or ethnicity [at my school]."

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The comment provided insight into the student's perception and prompted a lengthy in-class discussion between my colleagues from different disciplines and my students about various interpretations of discrimination.

Online discussion participants have the space to thoughtfully respond. The instructor facilitating the discussion has the benefit of wait time, not the three or four seconds common in the fast paced college classroom discussion, but minutes and hours that allow for reflection, research and patient response. In one online discussion the students were asked, "What is one thing you've had to unlearn in your teacher education training?" A student responded,

> I'm racking my brain here. What have I learned, that is not already unlearned, that I need to un -learn and then re-learn? Only one thing has come close so far and that was in class when we touched on MRs[1], that was learned and unlearned decades ago though. Boy, the good thing may be that it is easier (I believe) to learn things as opposed to unlearning and relearning.

These remarks illustrate the dissonance student teachers experience when challenged to reexamine their assumptions about their students who might differ from them in culture, race, language, or perceived ability. Time and the ability to reflect without the pressure present in a live group interaction allows for deeper reflection and consideration of a personal response to a question, opportunities that may lead to greater cultural understanding.

Another way in which we engage students in learning about the relationship between the experiences of people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups is through direct interaction. One activity involved bringing together faculty from various disciplines (Applied Linguistics, Education, Sociology, and Women's and Ethnic Studies) and posing the following questions for an informal discussion:

- What is culture?
- How might students from various cultures behave differently from the dominant American educational expectations?
- Teachers (and other practitioners) are expected to communicate and collaborate effectively with the families of their students; what have we found to be "good" or "bad" practices when engaging families from backgrounds different than our own?
- How might culture or language diversity play a part in the identification, referral, and provision of special education services?
- Why is there a disproportionate minority representation among special education students, particularly those labeled with an "emotional or behavioral disorder?"

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[1] Mental retards

- Why might there be an underrepresentation of minorities in Gifted & Talented programs?

One professor from the Women's and Ethnic Studies department who is of American Indian descent shared how the historical treatment of American Indians through the educational assimilation informs her approach to schools today in a negative way. An African American professor in the Sociology department explained experiences with "red lining," a practice involving the discrimination of people of color in purchasing homes in certain neighborhoods that directly impacts the demographic map of school populations. Responses to the discussion elicited student comments indicating surprise as well as appreciation for faculty's disclosure of personal perspectives and differences of opinion.

A related activity involves students examining the demographics of the schools where they teach, observe, or volunteer and how it compares with national data. In reviewing local school district's ethnicity reports, one college student of color indicated he was not surprised by the high proportion of children of color in certain schools, but he was surprised to see the "preponderance of Whites" in Charter Schools. This led to further discussion about issues related to an increase in Charter Schools and what some view as a form of resegregation (Donovan & Cross, 2009) in schools through the placement of students with disabilities (who are ethnically diverse) into classrooms separate from their non-disabled peers.

A Socratic Approach

"How many vowels are there in the English language?" Student hands shoot into the air. "Five… and sometimes Y." "Ok, let me clarify. How many vowel sounds are there in the English language?" Slightly fewer hands, but a persistent chorus of "Fives" and "Sixes". (The actual answer ranges from eighteen to twenty six, depending on how diphthongs are counted). "What is the difference between a vowel and a consonant?" This time no hands go up; the students are genuinely curious about an answer to a question they would have been certain of moments earlier.

Difficult questions with apparently obvious answers do two things. First they point out the persistence of spelling rules introduced early in these teachers' learning experience. The deficiency of these phonics standbys as an explanation of the phonological complexity of the English language is readily apparent when students are asked to generate words with similar spelling, i.e. using the same letter, but in different contexts. When 'bath' and bathe' are presented, students begin to see that the letter 'a' has a different sound depending on the complex context it finds itself in.

More importantly, the student begins to understand that what was thought of as 'something known' is now solidly in the realm of 'something not yet known.' To paraphrase Plato's Socrates in the Apology, human wisdom is knowing that we don't know. This is the starting point for both learning and teaching; we have to come to grips with the idea of our ignorance. From this starting point in the classroom, we all begin to realize that this English thing isn't as straightforward as we thought it was. From this starting point of not knowing, the instructor can begin to build not just a base of knowledge, but the even more crucial component of empathy new teachers will need to successfully interact with their students in a diverse classroom.

Teaching Empathy

In debriefing with the guests from various disciplines and ethnic and racial backgrounds, we, as Caucasian professors of Northern European cultural heritage, questioned ourselves, our own experiences, and how we came to develop our understandings of people different from ourselves. Our colleagues wondered aloud about how our experiences living abroad in Africa and Europe, along with teaching in a bilingual school on the Navajo Reservation, contributed to our understanding what it might be like being in the minority (though also acknowledging these were situations resulting from choice rather than societal norms). Though we encourage our students to travel and put themselves in situations that might make them uncomfortable, we continue to contemplate which activities might serve to bring about our students' empathy toward their students and future colleagues who are at times chastised for their differences, whether those differences be differences of ability, culture, race, or socio-economic status.

One way in which the first author attempts to develop students' empathy is through understanding the history of court cases. In the Introduction to Special Education course students are introduced to relevant legislation through case law. This provides both historical context and social/personal context in which students discuss the laws using specific court cases brought about by individual families on behalf of their children with disabilities. In this way we discuss "Amy's schooling" or "Danny's difficulties" rather than simply referring to "Public Law 94-142." Also, we refer to direct quotes from the legislation to get at the idea that differences become disabling in certain contexts. For instance, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 recognizes disability as "a natural part of the human experience" and one which ensures every person's right to "contribute to society, and experience full integration and inclusion into all aspects of society." If we are able to grapple with the natural variance in humanity, and see "others" as sharing the same vision of engagement in society at large, it seems student teachers have a greater chance

to make personal connections with their students and families which we hope will lead to greater understanding.

We encourage students to try to understand the perspectives and experiences of a variety of people in an effort to become more empathetic. One way we do this is through reading autobiographies, such as those written by Temple Grandin, Donna Williams or coauthored with Douglas Biklen in his book Autism and the myth of the person alone (2005). Another way is to have students interview parents, teachers, people with disabilities, and others with direct experiences working in schools or in general community settings. College students are introduced to a qualitative research approach designed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) called portraiture in their attempt to develop a portrait of one person on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team in a way that utilizes narrative to paint a picture, so to speak, using words. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) describes the portrait as "written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the "subjects" (p. 6). While spending time with their research participant, the college student collects artifacts, observations notes, and transcribes an interview where they ask open-ended questions such as the following used with a parent:

1. Tell me about your child.
2. Can you describe what has gone well in school?
3. Can you tell me about any struggles you have had?
4. What do you wish everyone would know about your child and your family?
5. What suggestions would you have for pre-service teachers?

In some instances the college student and the subject of the portrait co-construct the narrative and the subsequent presentation to the class. The sharing of the portraits seems to be making an impact on the students' understanding of perspectives other than their own.

Since the first author's connections with local families thus far have been with predominantly white, middle-class women, we have elicited and secured a small amount of funding to recruit families that reflect more diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds with whom our students can connect. Their involvement will help address the need for pre-service teachers to more fully understand the complexities involved when collaborating with families who represent a more diverse range of cultural and social perspectives and become more culturally responsive in their subsequent teaching.

Practical Ideas for the Classroom

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We have focused on several classroom strategies that appear effective in transforming the perspectives of our students, oftentimes much more effective than the traditional lecture and note-taking format commonly found in teacher education classrooms. It is clear that we need to examine these strategies with greater scrutiny and more rigorously planned structure, something we are just beginning to plan for as part of the process for our College of Education's Diversity Committee's assessment plan. Following are a few additional ideas for activities we have either tried or read about that seem promising for developing the college student's understanding of culture and disability as well as some practical directions suggested for their instructors.

BaFa'BaFa': A Cultural Simulation Activity for the Classroom

Not everyone can choose to live on the edge of the Kalahari Desert for several years in order to grow their appreciation for another culture (although the authors highly recommend it). One option for the teacher is to run a cultural simulation in class. The Peace Corps has been using one particular simulation, BaFa'BaFa' (Simulated Training Systems, 2008) for many years, providing Peace Corps volunteers with a preview of the cultural dissonance they would soon experience in their placement. Essentially the game sets up two cultures, the Alphas and Betas, with two different identities. One culture favors individual competition, the acquisition of resources and does not differentiate between the sexes, the other values group interaction, story telling, and a strict, male-dominated hegemony. The simulation first trains the separate culture and then carefully exposes individuals to the foreign culture. A guided dialogue afterwards explores the differences between the two groups and the personal feelings experienced by both the group and the visitors.

Videography

The second author worked with French political science students studying the political systems in Iowa. These students would arrive in the dead of winter, live with a host family and work on their research for their Master's thesis. After the first group was on site, it quickly became apparent that the strictly academic focus of the program needed to be expanded to include opportunities for the students to process the cultural issues they were experiencing in the American classroom, family and broader social settings. A video project was added to the curriculum. Students were asked to produce a short film about one incident of cultural misunderstanding they had experienced since their arrival in the U.S. During the last week of the course, students presented their films to the college community and their families as a film festival. The experience of planning, writing and filming their pieces was

cathartic, a chance to process their experiences as a group, gain some metacognitive distance from their strong feelings and use humor to soften the often sharp edges of their culture shock. A further benefit was the cross-cultural education of the American host families, many of who had never traveled outside of their own culture.

Community Events

Local events in and around university campuses often provide students with a wide variety of opportunities to experience cultural activities their p-12 students and families might regularly engage in. Many texts about culturally responsive teaching and ways of understanding societal structures of oppression suggest making face-to-face contact (Gay, 2000; Ashmore, 2009). In her piece "Is your world too White?" Ashmore (2009) offers a list of activities, including "Learn about another culture", "Keep up with the media aimed at people of color", and "Visit the church of another culture" (p.640-642). Student teachers are encouraged to read a variety of news sources and share current events regularly where they might go "out of their comfort zone;" even the process of sharing news can garner interest and conversations about the intersection of disability and culture. We develop and update a menu of possible activities for students to pursue outside of class.

YouTube Videos

There are numerous free and easily accessible videos on the Internet that we have utilized for engaging students in discussion around the issues described in this paper. One powerful example shows a woman with autism challenging the hegemony of those who use the spoken language (Baggs, 2009). Baggs types using an augmentative communication device to explain her perspective:

> The way I naturally think and respond to things looks and feels so differently from standard concepts or even visualization that some people do not consider it thought at all, but it is a way of thinking in its own right. However, the thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language.

In a course evaluation one student commented, "It was very powerful and moving to see the world through Amanda's eyes." Another video that provides historical context to the negative influence of segregation and extensive related materials for discussion is "A Class Divided," the 1968 Frontline documentary of a third grade teacher in Iowa who divided her class by student's eye color to illustrate the power of discrimination.

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Discussion

If teachers are to become more culturally aware of their increasingly diverse student body, it behooves teacher educators to continually explore a variety of activities that might support students' greater understanding of cultures, languages, and beliefs different than their own. This paper presents an initial effort toward describing some teaching strategies we have found useful in this endeavor. Some general approaches we found useful include an examination of our unconscious beliefs as reflected in our everyday discourse, the historical treatment of difference through case law, and opportunities to develop empathy through face to face interaction with people from a variety of cultures. More specifically, we shared strategies such as using the Socratic method for leading in class and online discussions which seemed to provide students with the time they (and we) needed to make thoughtful responses to readings, experiences, and videos. Our challenge is to help teacher candidates "develop proficiencies for working effectively with students and families from diverse populations and with exceptionalities to ensure that all students learn" (NCATE, 2008, p.37). It seems important to begin by examining one's own beliefs and assumptions and find the shared humanity in "the other".

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