

The Demographic Imperative: Turning Deficits into Assets

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Abstract

This paper outlines a White middle class female teacher educator's changing orientation toward preparing White middle class women for diverse classrooms as a result of looking at her practice over 10 years. It employs an autoethnographic approach that seeks to critique the ways in which she, and presumably other teacher educators, has developed a deficit perspective about preservice teachers. It offers new ways to think about the ways "typical" teacher candidates are prepared.

Despite the fact that the K-12 student population is becoming increasingly diverse, the demographics of teachers remain largely unchanged. The majority of teachers and teacher education students continue to be White, middle-class, monolingual females who often come from small towns or suburbs with very limited intercultural experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The number of male teachers is the lowest in 40 years (NEA, April 28, 2004). This demographic imperative “has been defined repeatedly as the disjunction between the sociocultural characteristics and previous experiences of the typical teacher candidate and those of many of our K-12 students” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 166). Additionally, most teacher educators have a background in K-12 teaching, and the cultural homogeneity of the teaching force is perpetuated in higher education (Zeichner & Hoefft, 1996; Hodgkinson, 2002). It follows that professors of education often lack the same kinds of intercultural experiences as their preservice students (MacDonald, Colville-Hall, & Smolen, 2003).

This marked racial and gender homogeneity in the teaching profession as well as in teacher preparation programs presents a pervasive challenge. Given that many teachers have not experienced significant marginalization within the public education system, how do we prepare teacher educators to support preservice teachers in transforming schooling into a just and equitable learning experience? I contend that the discipline of self-study of teacher education practice is at least one way to reflect on and learn from these inequities, and it benefits both teacher educators and those they teach. Engaging all teacher educators in this transformation work can potentially change the demographics of teaching and thus improve the experiences of all K-12 students.

The Typical Teacher

Most of the literature about transforming teacher perspectives centers around the typical population of teachers, that is white middle class women (Lowenstein, 2009). The number of White teachers described as being highly successful with students of color is still much smaller than is necessary to reform our schools (Wideen,

Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that it is more difficult for these teachers with “typical” backgrounds to be culturally responsive in the classroom. However, studies also show that teacher education programs are a weak intervention in transforming preservice teachers’ beliefs (Zeichner & Gore, 1990; Wideen et al., 1998). Zeichner and Hoeft (1996) noted that even when it is possible to provide profound experiences within education programs, there is little research indicating how much of an impact they have long term on teachers’ values, dispositions, or practices. Darling-Hammond (2006), in an analysis of seven effective teacher education programs, concluded that critical reflection on one’s own cultural competency was an essential feature. It is assumed that engaging in this reflection leads to other intercultural competencies related to meeting the needs of diverse learners. However, similar to previous reviews, Darling-Hammond’s study did not seek to confirm if teacher education candidates had learned to maintain this self-reflective posture.

Of the research on transforming preservice teachers’ beliefs, many studies have suggested strategies that essentially respond to the deficits that young White women bring to the program. For example, Zeichner and Hoeft (1996) recounted several specific strategies that involve teaching prospective teachers to have high expectations for the learning of all students; increasing the knowledge of prospective teachers about themselves and their place in a multicultural society; providing prospective teachers with cultural knowledge about the experiences, lifestyles, and contributions of various groups in society; and providing teachers with opportunities to develop competence in building relationships and in teaching strategies that will help them to succeed in schools serving children and families with backgrounds different than their own (p. 529). Wideen et. al. (1998) conducts one of the few studies that suggests programs are more successful when designed to build upon the preservice teachers’ beliefs as opposed to trying to replace them.

“The legitimacy of the demographic imperative seems to serve as license to apply a deficit view to all White teacher candidates”

(Lowenstein, 2009, p. 167). Although it is true that the demographics of teachers in the United States describe a majority of teachers as White middle class women, I am not so naïve as to think that the problems of education are confined to this statistic. Nor do I believe that all White people or women are defined by these characteristics alone. Most important, I do not wish to perpetuate the deficit model and “homogenizing lens” that has been created about these “typical” teachers (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 168). I seek to examine my own practice and disrupt the ways in which my own development as a teacher educator for social justice may cause me to see my students as having culturally deficits, even the ones who look like me.

Beyond a Deficit Model

Throughout my development as a teacher educator, a question I often hear from other teacher educators is, “How can I get my White middle class students to not have a deficit perspective about their students?” Of course, this begs the question: What deficit models do we as teacher educators hold for White middle class students? Generally speaking, those who complete teacher education programs who fit the “typical” teacher characteristics lack significant experiences with diversity and these students often do not even realize they are lacking in these experiences or see their value. However, if teacher educators are to prepare teachers to understand multiple ways of being in the world, then we need to approach our students as we want them to approach their students. When I instruct preservice teachers about how to avoid a deficit model when learning about students, I encourage them to focus on the strengths that the student brings to the class and to the teacher-student relationship. I also suggest that they build upon those strengths to develop additional skills necessary for success, and honor the child for who he or she is while challenging him or her to grow.

Even some well-intended approaches to multicultural education may allow a deficit perspective to persist. For example, in the Teaching the Exceptional and the Culturally Different approach (Grant and Sleeter, 2003), as the teacher helps marginalized students to ad-

just to and learn dominant norms, it may not necessarily disrupt a teacher's deficit view of a child. Similarly, Teaching For the Other is an anti-oppressive approach that focuses on improving the experiences of students who are Othered (Kumashiro, 2000). Kumashiro (2000) notes that a limitation of this approach may be that "by focusing predominantly on the negative experiences of the Other in schools, this approach implies that the Other is the problem" (p. 30).

Culturally responsive pedagogy supports a view of teaching that honors students for their cultural backgrounds and incorporates some of their own experiences into the practices of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This approach to teaching suggests that teachers should begin to see students' cultural differences as assets and opportunities for scaffolding skills and knowledge that are necessary to be successful in the world.

I believe that a similar asset model might be applied to the approach for teaching White female teachers. It is well documented that those who come from a culturally privileged experience often have difficulty in understanding, let alone acting against, oppression. However, these difficulties do not make up the whole of that person. In addition to these limitations, certainly there are personal resources that those who are more privileged in society bring to the transformation process that can be drawn upon to scaffold an understanding of Others and oppression. Many classrooms typically have been designed to serve White middle class girls (Grant, 2004). I argue that we should continue to be responsive to White women, to draw on the characteristics that these students bring from their life experiences as assets, but move toward a purpose and outcome that furthers their understanding of social justice and prepares them to be transformative teachers.

I am aware that in suggesting that teacher education should focus on the strengths of White women I risk a critique of centering the work of multicultural education on Whiteness and ignoring the institutional contexts of racism (see Hernandez-Sheets, 2000). Hooks (1994) reminds me that it is my responsibility to examine within my position of power the degree to which I rely on "con-

ventional paradigms of domination to reinforce and maintain that power” (p. 105). But this is my experience. I am a White woman teaching primarily White women to teach diverse populations and I am, in that respect, typical of many teacher educators. Therefore, my goal throughout my work is to, in essence, use my power to disrupt inequities. This must be done by accepting responsibility to interrupt my own perpetuation of privilege, to respectfully engage a range of voices in the process, and to challenge others who hold similar privilege (especially other White teacher educators).

The Autoethnographic Study

This paper primarily outlines the theoretical development of my changing orientation toward preparing White middle class women for diverse classrooms as a result of looking at my practice over 10 years. Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography when she writes, “I use what I call ‘systematic sociological introspection’ and ‘emotional recall’ to try to understand an experience I’ve lived through” (p. xvii). From my perspective, an autoethnographic approach to self-study requires that the researcher specifically focus on the telling of her personal story as a way of better understanding the professional practice.

Perhaps Simpson (2006) best describes autoethnography as it relates to own my process of teaching and learning about diversity when she says, “Autoethnography is a way to think about power and knowledge in the classroom” (p. 72). Within her article, Simpson describes and analyzes a particular racially-charged classroom discussion and explains that, “This interaction and my telling of it serve as a way to ground theoretical and practical questions, and as a way to situate the discussion of race, cultural studies, and pedagogy in the contexts in which we live” (p. 72).

My data analysis involved multiple sources including journal analysis, critical friend dialogue, and a survey of teacher educators. My journal has been part autobiography, part field-notes, part self-psychoanalysis. In it, I have developed questions or concerns about how to do my job better. What has evolved is a documentation of

the journey of how I came to know my student teachers as well as helped to question my own preconceived notions about them. I began to see my journal as witness to my own personal and professional transformation, a physical record of my evolution.

Within most of my journal entries, some typical themes were revealed. I often wrote about the ways in which Whiteness, ambiguity, and perfectionism hindered my ability to assist students in challenging their own perspectives. These obstacles were reflective of the teacher education research referenced above. In retrospect, I believe I was developing a perspective about my White middle class female students that was mirrored in much of the research I was reading about how to transform their perspectives. In other words, I was beginning to see my students for their deficits and responding primarily in ways to change those parts of their identity. A few of my later journal entries show that I began focusing on affirmation of teacher candidate beliefs that I had, in prior incidents, viewed as hindering their transformation.

Ongoing dialogue with professional “critical friends” (Costa & Kallick, 1993) is a regular part of my practice. In the last few years, I have had two active critical friends: one who had identified with the “typical” teacher attributes as a beginning teacher (e.g. White middle class and female) and another who did not. Conversations with these critical friends served to help me in three ways: 1) they problematized the ways in which this approach might perpetuate privilege, particularly of students who regularly experience societal privilege; 2) they helped me to both clarify and decontextualize my ideas from my own identity as a White middle class woman; and 3) they encouraged me to continue exploring these ideas, even when it felt that doing so risked re-centering Whiteness and promoting “conventional paradigms of domination to reinforce and maintain that power” (Hooks, 1994, p. 105).

Finally, as a way to reflect on my ideas outside of my regular process, I conducted a survey of a small group of teacher educators from across the country about their perception of ideas related to this asset-based teaching approach. I was seeking to know how teacher

educators from a background similar to mine (“typical” White middle class female) perceived the research about transforming teachers as well as in what ways teacher educators differentiate their instruction with respect to these aspects of the preservice teacher’s identity. In my survey I learned that a large majority of the respondents agree with the research conclusions (that preservice teachers continue to be White, middle-class, monolingual females who often come from non-urban communities with limited intercultural experiences) and that their students mirrored these populations. The few who disagreed with this perception of the research primarily taught a more diverse and/or non-White population of preservice teachers.

When asked if teacher educators differentiated their instruction with respect to their students’ backgrounds, a majority of “typical” teacher educators did not differentiate their instruction based on the preservice teacher’s identities. On the survey, differentiation was often interpreted as something to be done for “atypical” teacher candidates. For many of the “typical” teacher educators, their shared background and need for transformation served as support in preparing their “typical” preservice teachers. Two teacher educators indicated their shared “typical” background was an obstacle.

Transforming Deficits Into Assets

Culturally responsive pedagogy supports a view of students whereby their cultural backgrounds and life experiences are incorporated into the practices of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Irvine, 2003). Although the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy is traditionally an anti-hegemonic response for meeting the needs of students from “diverse” backgrounds, I will suggest that overcoming the challenges to transformation could be more successful if teacher educators use the concept of cultural responsiveness to draw on the assets of White female teachers. If good pedagogy dictates that all teachers should differentiate instruction in ways that best meet the needs of students, then my sense of integrity requires that I do the same with the preservice teachers who are in my classroom.

Given this framework, I ask the following questions about my “typical” preservice teachers: What personal strengths and life experiences do middle class White women bring to the profession? And in what ways can transformative teacher education programs draw on those strengths to give them the skills to be successful teachers of students from diverse backgrounds? How can teacher educators honor preservice teachers for who they are, while challenging them to see beyond their own perspective?

In addition to aspects of identity such as race, gender and socio-economic status, my preservice teachers often share other qualities. For example, a large number of my students identify as Christian, some more conservatively than others. Perhaps because I teach predominantly people who want to be elementary teachers, I regularly have students who come to teaching because they “really love kids.” Finally, a large number of my students exhibit characteristics of “good students,” meaning that they are highly conscientious, always seeking to please the teacher and get good grades. Many of them identify as “perfectionists.” Given these common features among my groups of students, I have begun to try to draw on these characteristics to serve my goal of transforming their approaches to teaching.

I Don’t Believe in That...

Many times, I find the most difficult oppression to discuss usually stems from beliefs or values grounded in religion. Although the large majority of my students were raised in Christian households, they do display some diversity in the extent of their convictions. I find a large number of them have actually felt persecuted in the university setting for their fundamental religious beliefs. As we discuss different types of oppression in class, I ask students to reflect on what their upbringing taught them about these different identities. I do not think I can change a belief system that stems from a lifetime of religious ascription. In attempting to do so, I would violate one of my goals, which is to honor students for who they are. Yet, the type

of oppression that may result because of some of these beliefs must also be addressed.

I once heard someone say, “You do not make someone more by taking something away from them.” I try to keep this in mind when students present religious convictions that appear to be in conflict with the ideals of anti-oppressive education. Rather than tell students that what their religion has taught them is discriminatory, I try to find other aspects of their belief system upon which they can draw. I recognize that these beliefs are a central part of who some of my students are, and I strive to not negate their religious identity. Rather than characterizing these beliefs as something they have to give up, I try to offer another framework for incorporating their ideas or scaffolding new information.

An example of this happened when I invited lesbian parents to my class to share with my students their experiences of having children in the public school system. I asked the guest speakers to share some common assumptions that teachers have made and provide suggestions for how these preservice teachers might create a community that is inclusive for all students. One student, who had demonstrated conservative and Christian beliefs throughout her assignments, asked that I excuse her from this class period and provide her an alternative assignment. My first reaction was not shock but disappointment. I arranged to meet with the student to clarify what she thought would happen in the presentation and to ask her to tell me more about why she was uncomfortable. Throughout this initial conversation I drew on our previous class discussions where we talked about how discomfort can lead to learning. I suggested she might have LGBT colleagues or students. I asked her if she understood how hearing these parents’ stories might help her to better meet the needs of students in her classroom who might come from families with same-sex parents. She continued to explain that her convictions made this too uncomfortable for her. Over the course of our continued conversations, I encouraged her to share some of her values with me and to draw on religious teachings such as those

related to compassion or “loving thy neighbor” that might provide her courage or strength in attending to these issues.

Although the student did show up for class that day, my speakers cancelled at the last minute. I never knew if the student would have opted to stay for the speakers at the end of class, but I did see growth in her perspective over the course of the semester; she began to indicate more curiosity about difference rather than judgment. Perhaps most important for me, however, was that these conversations felt more respectful than they had in the past; I was focused less on changing her beliefs and more on developing her skills of perspective taking. I felt as though I was trying to honor and develop where she was coming from rather than “fix” it.

In addition to acknowledging religious values as part of an anti-oppressive practice, I might attempt to distinguish it from values in teaching. I teach preservice teachers that they need to be aware of and reserve judgment (related to religious beliefs or not) because their students have little or no control over their life circumstances. Children do not choose their religion, their economic status, their parents’ sexual orientation, etc. Instead of debating whether particular ways of being are good or bad, or if parents are right or wrong, I ask them to acknowledge that it is what it is. And what it is often comes with political, social, and cultural consequences. Given that these are the facts of our students’ lives, how do we achieve our purpose in light of this information? How do we affirm all children as equally worthwhile regardless of their life circumstances?

I Just Really Love Kids!

A significant number of my preservice teachers have told me that the reason they want to become a teacher is because they really love kids. Most experienced teachers will tell you that just loving children is not enough to be a good teacher, and Haberman (1987) might suggest that a preoccupation with loving children might even preclude teachers from being effective. When teachers express this oft-cited impetus for their career choice, instead of rolling my eyes at their motivation for teaching, I have begun to try to capitalize on

this depth of commitment in order to promote a more transformative perspective of schooling. All of my preservice teachers accept that the needs of all children should be met, but many of them do not realize the additional knowledge necessary to do that effectively within an institution that does not “love” children adequately. It is my job to prepare teachers to love children within a new framework, toward a socially just purpose. I still believe that just loving children is not enough to be an effective teacher, but I no longer dismiss it as a legitimate reason to want to teach.

On a related note, many people who become teachers felt loved by their teachers, or at least by one really memorable teacher. This way of experiencing school is something that many of my students share; to oversimplify, I believe many preservice teachers want to experience that type of relationship both as a student in college and as a future teacher. Part of my strategy to expose the students to new perspectives is to begin by loving them in a way that they recognize. I praise them for being willing to share how they feel about some of the more controversial issues, for engaging with the topic instead of turning themselves off to it, and for taking new risks. I regularly affirm them for their dedication to being the best teacher they can be for all students. This approach has been seen as “coddling” by one of my colleagues. However, I believe this method is very effective for many of my students who were enculturated into this nurturing approach by their teachers. It is a familiar pattern of relating, but what is different is that I am loving my students in this familiar way so that they may embrace more readily this transformative approach to teaching for which I am advocating.

The Good Student Syndrome

A challenge to transforming preservice teachers’ beliefs, usually related to the privileges of being White middle-class and female in the American school system, is what I call the “good student syndrome.” In general terms, good students enjoy school, follow the established rules, are rewarded by the school system, and are

socialized into achieving in traditional ways. They often seek out praise and reassurance to verify that they are meeting expectations for achievement. Some of them identify as perfectionists or over-achievers. Good students often describe “playing school” when they were children, lining up their stuffed animals, their siblings, or the neighbor kids and giving them worksheets to complete. These stories provide insight into how these preservice teachers have conceptualized the work of teaching and how enamored they are by the rituals of the profession.

Girls, more than boys, behave in ways that are traditionally more acceptable for school and experience less discipline referrals (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). They learn a particular pattern of behavior that conforms to the institutional norms and experience success as a result (Grant, 2004). I describe this as the “gold star” experience. For example, I grew up reading the textbook, defining the vocabulary words, answering the questions at the end of the chapter, getting an A (or a gold star) on the test, and feeling very, very successful. As a White girl, most of how I learned was in a predictable environment with accepted routines that made sense to me and, on many levels, this worked for me. One might argue that I am privileged with my students in this way. At first glance, I fulfill many of their expectations of how a teacher acts and this may afford me some amount of trust or latitude from the outset. However, it also encourages their assumptions about who I am as a teacher and it has the potential to seduce me into more culturally shared oppressive practices rather than disrupting them.

Many of my preservice teachers want to do well in my class and some might be labeled a teacher pleaser. I believe I am able to engage them in potentially risky activities because they trust that I will make it meaningful for them. I draw on their desire to achieve by defining the greatest achievement as being a good learner about diversity. I reward them with the metaphorical gold star when they have demonstrated a level of comfort with the uncertainty, rather than when they attempt to have all the answers. I praise them when

they allow themselves to be vulnerable which they may view as imperfect. I do not dismiss their need for validation from the teacher, I attempt to use it to develop habits of mind that serve a more just classroom.

Toward My Own Transformation

So much of my early development as a social justice teacher educator had centered on helping my White female students to overcome their deficits. I began to see these students primarily for what they lacked, and I was even a bit judgmental about the fact that they were “so typical.” I had adopted the deficit perspective I was accusing them of having. I cannot ignore the fact that many of my students come from backgrounds of privilege and lack extensive experiences with people who are culturally different from them. However, my own perspective on how to address these needs has changed. I have learned to differentiate my practice for all of my students, including my “typical” students, and to see them for who they are rather than only who I think they need to be.

One of the ways this change in perspective has impacted my course curriculum is that I have turned the focus of the study even further inward, placing the preservice teachers at the center of the content. For example, one of the assignments I use (that also meets a state teacher education standard) is designed for students to learn about the history and traditions of the major cultural and ethnic groups in California. Previously, I had viewed this assignment to be what Kumashiro (2000) calls Education About the Other. It was primarily an opportunity for my students who were unfamiliar with cultural groups to research their history and cultural beliefs. Unfortunately, I was experiencing a limitation of this approach which was promoting a binary of “us” and “them,” and I was seeing that “teaching about the Other does not force the privileged students to separate the normal from the self, i.e., to acknowledge and work against their own privileges” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35). In fact, having the preservice teachers (“us”) learn about “them” was a part of

the script I had learned that said White women were lacking this knowledge and it was my job to fill in that gap.

I refocused the specifics of the assignment to require preservice teachers to juxtapose their own cultural perspectives to those of the members of the culture under study. It now requires that the preservice teachers first reflect on what and why they grew up believing about religion, forms of communication, discipline, gender roles, etc. Then, as they study a cultural group that is different from their own, they can examine the ways in which they might share particular beliefs or how, even if the beliefs are different, they often develop in a similar process to their own. In my experience, this change minimizes the potential for preservice teachers to essentialize a cultural group and reduces the number of stereotypes they report. It was as if it became an assignment where the “us” were learning about how other “us’s” view “those” ideas. It also invited my White middle class students to view themselves as cultural beings – part of the discussion about diversity, not just a voyeur of it.

I want preservice teachers to become culturally self-aware by carefully examining their perspectives and actions in reference to others’ cultural experiences and backgrounds. If they can combine this understanding of the complexity of the impact of culture on experience with a profound care (yes, love) for and belief in all children, then regardless of how inexperienced they are in particular culturally responsive techniques, they can approach teaching as an opportunity to learn. In order to encourage this, preservice teachers need to feel successful at accepting the ambiguity of both teaching and culture as complex and constantly evolving.

My hope is that my students will be so satisfied with and inspired by a transformative approach to teaching that they will be dissatisfied with any way that is less than authentic. I want them to use their drive to achieve (to be a good student) to accomplish the work of social justice. I also caution them that it will not be easy, they will not be perfect, and their ultimate goals will always be ideals (I would do well to head this caveat myself).

This is not easy work. On one hand, I am challenged just with disrupting my own cultural assumptions about those who are different from me that attempting to do it with others can cause me to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. I regularly question whether or not I am the best qualified to do it and how I determine if I'm being successful. Perhaps this is a product of having internalized the script of the demographic imperative. On the other hand, I firmly believe it is the responsibility of privileged persons to challenge oppression. And, primarily working with students who are culturally similar to me has allowed me to have many mirrors, reflecting back values and beliefs that were a significant part of my own upbringing. I can begin to see my own "cultural deficits" as a teacher educator as assisting me in continually reflecting on my own assumptions and biases. Perhaps my quest to transform preservice teachers will serve my own transformation.

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