Utilizing Feminist Pedagogy to Foster Preservice Teachers’ Critical Consciousness

Manya Whitaker
Colorado College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a longitudinal case study investigating the use of feminist pedagogy to foster preservice teachers’ critical consciousness in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. Courses in the program were revised to intentionally employ the feminist pedagogical elements of personal experience, power awareness, community-building, identity awareness, and intentional reflection. Coursework, focus groups, and interviews from three cohorts of teacher candidates were analyzed for dimensions of critical consciousness according to Freirean principles. Across cohorts, students demonstrated a deep awareness of racialized systems of power that affect educational processes. Most students were able to decode educational rhetoric and challenge the assumptions and biases embedded within. While all students expressed a deep commitment to inclusive teaching and could articulate multicultural teaching methods, most admitted to not yet having the depth of knowledge necessary and/or the emotional fortitude to combat systems of inequity beyond their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

As the public school student population shifts to a racialized minority majority, teachers must eschew outdated instructional practices aimed primarily at students’ content acquisition, and revise curriculum to decenter hegemonic white ways of being and knowing. Toward that end, national teacher quality standards—for both preservice and in-service teachers—now state that teachers “must have a deeper understanding of their own frames of reference (e.g., culture, gender, language, abilities, ways of knowing), the potential biases in these frames, and their impact on expectations for and relationships with learners and their families” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019, p.4).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-5098-4.ch004
This change is especially important to teacher educators at Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) where 74% of teacher candidates are white (United States Department of Education, 2015) and may display dysconscious racism—“the uncritical habit of mind, such as attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs, which justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p.135). This is most often reflected in teachers’ reluctance to acknowledge race as a political, economic and social force in education. For example, in Buchanan’s (2015) study on preservice teachers’ beliefs about race, over 90% of participants viewed race as a controversial issue that shouldn’t be brought up in school. Further, Kreamelmeyer and colleagues (2016) found that preservice teachers’ explanations of their diversity attitudes revealed strong themes of intentional colorblindness and conscious bias. Such dispositions explain the overrepresentation of minoritized students in low academic tracks, the under-identification of giftedness among students of color, and the cultural conflict that motivates the school to prison pipeline.

Fortunately, research demonstrates that such problematic perspectives can be changed through multicultural coursework during teacher training (e.g., Bodur, 2012; Goldenberg, 2014; Rodriguez, Adams, & Zimmer, 2016). Unfortunately however, there is still little agreement among teacher educators about what multicultural education is, nonetheless how to teach it. To address this knowledge gap, this paper explains the philosophical foundations of multicultural education, including its intended learning outcomes, while also offering teacher educators an instructional model to achieve them.

BACKGROUND

James Banks (1994) suggested that multicultural education can take four forms: contributions, additive, transformative, and social action. Contributions is what is often referred to as ‘feasts and fiestas’ where one or two people from a minoritized group are celebrated for their contributions to society. This approach can reinforce stereotypes and foster misconceptions about minoritized peoples’ histories, thus strengthening the dominant white narrative. These negative outcomes can be exacerbated by the additive approach that appends a single text—often a biography about the same celebrated minority in the contributions approach—to the curriculum. This is done with minimal effort to integrate an alternative viewpoint into the larger curricular framework. Students in these classes have little context for understanding the complexities of diversity issues nationally or globally.

Conversely, transformation and social action are the preferred multicultural education approaches because in the former, students are asked to interrogate how different groups’ experiences, knowledge construction processes, and cultural functioning (mis)align with the Eurocentric representations most often found in standard curriculum. Social action takes this a step further by engaging students in ‘think projects’ where they devise hypotheses for why different people often have conflicting views of the world. The goal of social action is ultimately for students to be able to identify injustices and to want and be able to take action to address them.

The few reviews and meta-analyses of multicultural coursework in teacher preparation programs reveal that most teachers experience contribution and additive approaches, with some attempts at transformation. For example, Gorski (2009) found that more than half of the 45 syllabi analyzed in his study stressed the celebration of differences rather than the interrogation of systemic inequalities. Only 29% of the courses examined issues of oppression, racism, and power relationships. McDonald (2008) nuances these findings with her analysis of social justice coursework in teacher preparation programs (TPPs).
Related Content

Constructing Identities in Online Encounters: A Study on Finnish and Greek Young Students’ Digital Storytelling Practices
www.igi-global.com/article/constructing-identities-in-online-encounters/217456?camid=4v1a

A Head-Start to Teaching: Exploring the Early Field Experiences in Pre-service EFL Education in Turkey
www.igi-global.com/article/a-head-start-to-teaching/233503?camid=4v1a

Meaningful Language and Cultural Experiences for Future Teachers in Puerto Rico
www.igi-global.com/chapter/meaningful-language-and-cultural-experiences-for-future-teachers-in-puerto-rico/141075?camid=4v1a

Blended Learning Strategies for Engaging Diverse Student Cohorts in Higher Education
www.igi-global.com/article/blended-learning-strategies-for-engaging-diverse-student-cohorts-in-higher-education/204532?camid=4v1a