A Critical Look at Four Multicultural Reform Efforts in One Urban College of Education

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different projects that were implemented we took to our college. What was found is that these discussions were interconnected. The projects taken by this group were similar to putting Borax on a cat with fleas. We quickly discovered that the students and classes were ever-present but invisible, ignored, and/or denied. All of the initiatives created through this self-study group opened up space for discussion and we were able to identify what we called trailblazers in the effort to reflect on the issues through collaborations within the college. This analysis encompassed four different projects that were implemented as reform initiatives at the college. Our collaborative work and this subsequent analysis have drawn on insights from Cochrane-Smith (2004) who describes teacher education as both a “learning problem and a political problem” (p. 1) that involves the creation of inquiry communities. Grounded in a critical perspective, our work and the projects described in this paper involved critical sociocultural theory (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), critical race theory (LaDous-Billings & Tate, 2008), and a critical literacy perspective (Shannon, 1990).

Following the descriptions of the individual projects below, we jointly analyze the projects through a lens created by four dimensions of a critical perspective (Lewis, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewis, & Flint, 2006). Sticking to Cochrane-Smith’s (2004) challenge, we then “work the dialectic” (p. 3) by generating both theory and practice from local knowledge that advances our college’s mission relating to diversity.

The four projects in question are:
1. Analyses of student responses from an evaluation form about their placements in urban schools;
2. Lessons learned from discussions of the faculty diversity self-study group; and
3. Teaching and learning issues related to culturally responsive pedagogy in an early childhood methods class; and
4. Teaching and learning issues related to critical literacy in professional development sessions conducted at a local elementary school.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Pedagogy

Critical perspectives on pedagogy examine many ways that unequal relations of power and privilege are entwined through interactions of teachers, parents, children, teacher educators, and pre- and in-service educators in school contexts and beyond (Apple, 2010). This requires a critical examination of perspectives and ideologies, both invisible and visible, frequently identified as “natural” (Anderson, 1989; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). The role of the teacher/researcher is to “connect the dots” (Tatum, 2007, p. 39) by exploring the integration of outside forces at play in everyday interactions as well as the agency of participants on the inside to affect change (Moje & Lewis, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007). Equally relevant to critical pedagogical perspectives is the practice of self-reflection that is engaged by all participants. Children, pre- and in-service teachers, and teacher/researchers should interrogate their histories, practices, and beliefs as well as those of others (Leitayna & Woodrum, 1996, Rogers, 2003). Such self-reflection is co-constructed and provides a basis for deeper learning, the introduction of previously-silenced voices, and the opportunity to extend beyond the personal in order to take action in pedagogical and political realms, thus moving toward social justice (Kubota, 2004; Nist, 1999; Rhin, 1992).

This movement is not linear or prescribed but is an unfinished and emergent process (Luke, 2004; Nieto, 1995), suggesting that each instantiation of a critical pedagogical approach is also unique, co-constructed, and situated in local events and knowledge, which shapes and is shaped by the larger context of critical pedagogy (Leitayna & Woodrum, 1996).

Four Dimensions of a Critical Project

Research on critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewis, & Flint, 2006) provides a framework of inter-related dimensions for understanding varied critical approaches. In this article, we use four such dimensions to illuminate our critical analyses of the four projects.

1. The first is termed disrupting the commonplace, a process of providing new lenses to consider taken-for-granted occurrences by problematizing them and raising questions.
2. The second, interrogating multiple viewpoints, provides a means to hear and consider the multiple and contradictory voices that are typically critical for those often excluded from interactions in which decision-making and other activities of the powerful may dominate.
3. The third, focusing on sociopolitical issues, draws attention to outside forces in society that are typically invisible by revealing the ways such forces are often embedded in learning interactions.
4. The fourth, taking action and promoting social justice, addresses the idea of agency, through which participants use knowledge and understandings generated by collaboration, activism, critical reflection to create greater equity.

Local Contexts of a Critical Pedagogy

The four projects took place in our college of education, whose mission stresses the creation of inquiry communities and organizations. All education students in the college are required to take a course in diversity and the course is situated in an urban setting. Education students in the college are required to take a course in diversity and to complete an internship in an urban setting (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, pp.117-118). The first project, which describes the fourth category of the projects, was described but is an unfinished and emergent critical analysis of the four projects:

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We were told that our cat had fleas. I had never seen a flea in our place, ever. But once you had the Borax down, then sud- denly, every now and then, you could see fleas hopping…

—Edward, Faculty Member

The urban college of education where we teach has a strong mission statement that is concerned with diversity. In 2007 a group of education faculty formed a diversity self-study group that engaged in discussion around diversity issues as they occurred in our lives, our teaching, our research, and at our college. What was found is that these discussions of diversity and race were ever-present but invisible, ignored, and denied. All of the initiatives created through this self-study group opened up space for discussion and we were able to identify what we called “trailblazers” in the effort to reflectively examine our issues through collaborations within the college.

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The four projects in question are:
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1. The first is termed disrupting the commonplace, a process of providing new lenses to consider taken-for- granted occurrences by problematiz- ing them and raising questions.
2. The second, interrogating multiple viewpoints, provides a means to hear and consider the multiple and contra- dictory voices in an effort to make these particular for those often excluded from interactions in which decision-making and other activities of the powerful may dominate.
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Local Contexts of a Critical Pedagogy

The four projects took place in our col- lege of education, whose mission stresses education for urban and cultur- ally diverse students. Over 83% of respondents identified their race as White. Pre-service interns were measured using the Intern Evaluation Mentor Teacher Survey, which were analyzed using the Intern Evaluation Mentor Teacher Survey, which were analyzed using a major field experience in an urban set- ting. Some perceived the urban placement as undesirable. A

Emerging Themes

After analyzing the results, it was concluded there were no statistically signifi- cant differences between interns’ positive ratings of experiences in urban and sub- urban placement sites. However, interns’ negative comments concerning urban placements contradicted the favorable numerical ratings concerning their experiences in classrooms. From the interns’ comments, three overarching themes emerged:

Urban placements are undesirable. Although students are required to complete a major field experience in an urban set- ting, some perceived the urban placement as punishment for attending a university in an urban setting. A typical student expressed this in this response, “I just because we go to college in [the city] means we get stuck teaching in the [city] school.”

Racializing of urban placements. Interns believe they are entitled to receive a suburban placement for one of their expe- riences. In this response, “Even though I requested to do student teaching in a suburb… I was about one day from being placed in an urban high school… again, I stopped it just in time.”

Although interns in the literature consistently report being inadequately pre- pared to teach in urban schools (Dana, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2000), interns in this college expressed disdain about not being prepared for suburban settings. One wrote, “I am not applying to ANY urban schools for employment. I am not interested in working in one and do not feel that placement would be best for me. So pretty much… the university did not help me prepare for the setting I want to be in.”

Although the university’s policy states that to receive a major in education, all must be in an urban setting, there is no mention of guaranteeing students’ subur- ban placements. One student summarized the thoughts of many:

I feel the Office of Field Service did not try as hard as they could to find me a non-urban setting for my student teaching. I there- fore was FORCED to spend BOTH of my teaching experiences (urban and student teaching) in a [city] school… My placement was not ideal. I do not appreciate that other interns were allowed a more enjoyable and profitable experience.

Intern bias. One student wrote,

My parents and I drove past the school and none of us felt comfortable with the school and the area it is in. The parking area has a low fence with no apparent security. The neighborhood did not look very safe. My parents are concerned for both my personal safety and the safety of my students in this school.

Another intern argued that since she was not from Ohio, she trusted her church members when they warned her not to risk her life in such a bad area. Though she had requested the site on her application, she later wrote, “I request 1 request to go to the ghettoes of [the city].”

Sometimes intern concerns were about racialized issues. Some students, as in this request for a place- ment change, “I don’t want to teach Black
children." Another requested a change stating, "Black kids want to be taught by White teachers." Thus, state- ments of intern concerns often lead to the field placement office changing placements and restructuring the policy of responding to student statements. In summary, the most encouraging finding of this project is that overwhelmingly interns’ on-line evaluations indicate satisfaction with their experiences in the field and a desire to work again with the same group of kids. Many also agree their mentor teachers helped prepare them for careers in education. In spite of positive numerical ratings about their experience in urban classrooms, negative comments written by interns about urban school placements remain a cause for concern. Research provides evidence that students’ attitudes and perceptions about working with culturally diverse groups can change (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007).

Project #3: Interrogating and Culturally Responsive Teaching: An Action Research Project by Dina Volh

This project investigated whether a kidwatching assignment would facilitate students’ ability to practice culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002). We were interested in providing opportunities for students to develop culturally responsive teaching. In this assignment, students were required to kidwatch two or three children during the first four weeks of the school year.

Interrogating multiple perspectives was an ongoing process in this group. Participants described students as lacking dis- crimination unaware, and culturally insensitive. However, they also noted that through the concept of “visibility” (Gee, Bue- llar, & Dallavis, 2009), kidwatching children’s strengths visible and valued, helping education students “see” race and other aspects of diversity as teachers; and helping them to reflect on their beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices. The process allowed students to learn about their own preservice teaching trajectories. Students in an Early Childhood methods class with 30 undergraduates and eight gradu- ate students were required to “write to describe one child of another skin color” and to “learn about the child’s learning trajectory.” Students in the class were required to kidwatch a primary child in an urban classroom setting.

The definition of kidwatching was ex- panded to “taking note of what [children] know and can do in school, at home, and in community settings,” “attempting to understand how they are constructing and expressing knowledge alone and with others, in all three settings,” and “using what we learn about them to shape our instruction” (Owokol, Grover, & Saxe, 2002, p. 3). All students got to know two children through conver- sation, observations, and writing. Students conducted “family and community engagements,” “taking a learner’s stance vis- à-vis the child,” and “doing a literacy inventory” (Owokol, Grover, & Saxe, 2002, p. 3).

Data collected included responses to questionnaires, audio recordings of discussions with the children, written reflections, and students’ work. A multilayered pattern analysis identified themes and situated students’ develop- mental trajectories of children, students, and instructors.

A Priori Themes

The self-study group, designed to disrupt the commonplace, examined mem- bers’ practices by challenging views and bringing about new lenses through which to analyze. Participants identified a gap between the college’s urban mission and faculty’s urban practices, despite the col- lege’s positive evaluation following a recent accreditation process. These statements of intern concerns often lead to the field placement office changing placements and restructuring the policy of responding to student statements. In summary, the most encouraging finding of this project is that overwhelmingly interns’ on-line evaluations indicate satisfaction with their experiences in the field and a desire to work again with the same group of kids. Many also agree their mentor teachers helped prepare them for careers in education. In spite of positive numerical ratings about their experience in urban classrooms, negative comments written by interns about urban school placements remain a cause for concern. Research provides evidence that students’ attitudes and perceptions about working with culturally diverse groups can change (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007).

Therefore, colleges of education like ours working with culturally diverse groups can bring about new lenses through which to understand developmental trajectories of children, students, and instructors.

Project #4: Teach Reflect Teach: Process (TRT) Teaching: Teach Reflect Teach Practices for Nurturing Critical Literacy by Mary K. Goss & Kristine Still

This was a multiyear project involving the Teach Reflect Teach Process (TRT). The TRT process was designed for the Professional Development of kindergarten, first grade teachers and one literacy coach in an urban school to help teachers learn about multicultural literacy and help children in expanding literacy skills. This project involved intensive monthly on-site professional development opportunities consisting of focused group work sessions. These sessions targeted a variety of topics including “best practices” in literacy instruction as well as specific instructional activities encouraging the use of authentic picture books. The goal was to bring their experiences with teachers through team-based action research studies with their current students involved. The goals were then researched through the research- ers as the TRT Process.

The goal of this professional develop- ment was to create learning opportunities for teachers focusing on the sociopolitical and capturing authentic literature while reflecting on practice through the TRT Process. In so doing, it was expected that teachers would incorporate appropriate classroom texts focusing on themes of citizenship, diversity, multiculturalism, and the environment. The process aimed to build capacity within the district by fostering teacher leadership.

Data analyzed included teacher action research projects, related student work projects, and observational data. The analysis was qualitative and employed constant comparative data analysis (Merr- iman, 1983) finding a predominant theme from the Lewiston, Flint, and Van Sluyt (2002) paradigm.

Discussion: Four Projects Related

The analysis offered in this article

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The particular texts presented gener- ative themes leading to dialogue designed to disrupt the commonplace. An example of this was when a student was representative of the status quo was expressed by two teachers in an initial professional development ses- sion. In response to the comment, they verbalized they would not incorporate books like The Other Side by Woodson, since the story of the interaction between a White girl and an African-American girl over a fence separating the two communities is expressed that their first and second graders “loved each other” and they did not want to dis- rupt their students’ perceptions.

Analyzing the teacher action research projects, we found an instance of disrupting the commonplace; one team read Grand- father’s Journey by Allen Say to a class of special education children. Students identi- fied with the story and it became an event that was not an everyday notion that a person could move from one country to another and yeo in both places. This experience is far from commonplace in the lives of mainstream U.S. children, especially those special education students.

We found an instance of considering multiple viewpoints when one team used The Color of Home by Allen Say and Angel Child, Dragon Child by Surat and Mai, both about children displaced to the United States. The books brought the attention of non-immigrant second graders a new viewpoint. The 2nd grade class of Somali 3rd grade schoolmates; this pro- ject involved intensive monthly on-site professional development opportunities consisting of focused group work sessions. These sessions targeted a variety of topics including “best practices” in literacy instruction as well as specific instructional activities encouraging the use of authentic picture books. The goal was to bring their experiences with teachers through team-based action research studies with their current students involved. The goals were then researched through the research- ers as the TRT Process.

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Project #3 Investigating Kidwatching and Culturally Responsive Teaching: An Action Research Project by Dinh Volk

This project investigated whether a kidwatching assignment would facilitate students’ ability to practice culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay (2002) theorized that to teach effectively, educators need to develop an understanding of children’s needs. However, understanding the sociopolitical phenomena of diversity is not a requirement for all teachers.

The definition of kidwatching was expanded to “taking note of what children know and can do in school, at home, and in community settings.” The objective of kidwatching was to identify students’ strengths and challenges. The purpose was to disrupt the commonplace views of children as the TRT Process.

Results of the study showed that teachers who engaged in kidwatching saw their students’ limitations as “interpersonal” rather than “sociopolitical.” Teachers who used kidwatching as a tool were able to redirect their students’ perceptions. This project investigated whether a kidwatching assignment would facilitate students’ ability to practice culturally responsive teaching, and it demonstrated the benefits of using kidwatching to develop students’ understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds.

A Priori Themes

The self-study group, designed to disrupt the commonplace, examined students’ practices by challenging and bringing new light to analyze. Participants identified a gap between the college’s urban mission and the faculty’s urban practices, despite the college’s positive evaluation following a recent accreditation process. The group generated new ideas to disrupt the commonplace and provided new perspectives.

Critical Literacy Model (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The project focused on the social and cultural aspects of diversity, recognizing that students need to understand multiple perspectives to become effective teachers in urban settings. The project provided an opportunity for students to analyze their own educational experiences and to develop new understandings of diversity.

The analysis of this article in the A Priori Themes section focused on the following:

1. The goal of this project was to analyze the social and cultural aspects of diversity.
2. Participants engaged in kidwatching, identifying students’ strengths and challenges.
3. Teachers who used kidwatching as a tool were able to redirect their students’ perceptions.
4. The project demonstrated the benefits of using kidwatching to develop students’ understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds.

Discussion: Four Projects Related to Critical Literacy

The analysis of this article in the Discussion section focused on the following:

1. The goal of this project was to analyze the social and cultural aspects of diversity.
2. Participants engaged in kidwatching, identifying students’ strengths and challenges.
3. Teachers who used kidwatching as a tool were able to redirect their students’ perceptions.
4. The project demonstrated the benefits of using kidwatching to develop students’ understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds.
is based on the four critical dimensions (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2008) with the intention of the teaching and learning occurring in the teacher education program at one urban college in order to confirm this conclusion, because of a growing realization that deliberate attempts were needed to expose emergent and engaged multicultural, sociopolitical dimensions through field experiences, and professional development efforts in an urban setting. Next we look across four self-study groups using the magnifying glass provided by these four critical dimensions.

Disrupting the Commonplace

Considered first in this study was the Realities of the Field Experience project because it clearly articulated the need for the overall study's goal: honest dialogue leading to discussions between the faculty and the students about the fore the gap between the stated mis-

We also noted that in both the Explor-

The insights learned addressed directly the need for the disrupted commonplace and teaching and research practices around race, culture, gender, and politics were challenged, and teaching and research practices were con-

The real-time negative comments of some

Disrupting the commonplace of the field experience project was where culturally responsive teaching could also be explored. In the former, the instructor and students were able to bring multiple perspectives into the classroom and, in the latter, multiple perspectives were voiced in two of the five teacher action research projects. However, the self-study group members encountered a variety of concerns and issues, the pedagogical issue of encouraging voices of all students was central.

In the process of this study, we realized that multiple perspectives are possible to enact dramatic changes that might disrupt the commonplace, interro-

The Realities of the Field Experience project shows the need for action dependen-

ted efforts in an urban setting. Next we con-

in the Exploring Diversity project, began by exploring personal and cultural understandings of diversity. This project has become action-oriented, because it clearly articulated the need for multiple perspectives to enact dramatic changes that might disrupt the commonplace, interro-

The beauty of this project was that the magnifying glass provided by these four critical dimensions

Taking on the Sociopolitical

All in the projects there were a few pa-

terships and teacher threads with the sociopolitical. In the self-study group, the “our cat has fleas” metaphor was used to describe the diversity of stu-

dance and practice in the classrooms of the Nurturing Critical Literacy project, where culturally responsive teaching could also be explored. In the former, the instructor and students were able to bring multiple perspectives into the classroom and, in the latter, multiple perspectives were voiced in two of the five teacher action research projects. However, the self-study group members encountered a variety of concerns and issues, the pedagogical issue of encouraging voices of all students was central.

It is important to appreciate and help students understand the importance of culturally responsive teaching for social change, and critical pedagogy, among other innova-

In the Nurturing Critical Literacy project, one of the teacher action research projects focusing on the sociopolitical involved increasing opportu-

This series of projects from a single education college pinpoint a need to de-

Nurturing the voices of all students was central.

References


culturally responsive teaching and achieve-

Finally, two teachers in the Nurturing Critical Literacy study engaged immigrant schoolchildren in their classroom and asked them about their experiences before and after coming to the U.S. to break down barriers between children and mainstream students.

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates


Long, S., & Valk, D. (2010). Networks of support: Lessons learned from other teachers in chil-


Dana, N. F. (1992). Towards preparing the monocul-

Critical pedagogies and language learning (pp. 21-29). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


is based on the four critical dimensions (Lesiwon, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Van Sluys, Lesiwon, & Flint, 2006) with the intervention of the teaching and learning occurring in the teacher education program at one urban college in order to confirm this hypothesis. We explored this because of a growing realization that deliberate attempts were needed to expose preservice teachers to the cultural and linguis
tic diversity of urban contexts, and to engage them in the study and practice of critical pedagogies.

We also noted that in both the Exploring
Diversity and the Kidwatching projects African Americans and White students contributed and worked throughout the project. The African Americans often brought their personal reflections to a critical sociopo
tical analysis, while the White students commented on more general societal viewpoints, moving themselves away from personal perceptions.

Task Action

The Reality of the Field Experience project shows the need for action dependent on the expanded understandings and knowledge that we gained through the three dimensions of a critical pedagogy. The self-study group, whose issues were described in the Exploring Diversity project, began by exploring personal teaching practices. This group has become action-oriented, recognizing the importance of emphasizing teaching about diversity, creating discussions in the different de
departments in the college concerning the course's urban mission, and generating and promoting short and long term initiatives towards thinking in a multicultural paradigm.

In the Field Experience project, a few students and teachers began taking action leading to greater visibility of the strengths and life experiences of diverse students. In Kidwatching there were teachers and students who began in their classrooms plans ways to use children's interests and strengths to increase their achievement and in Nurturing Critical Literacy, a few teachers broke down barriers between immigrant children and mainstream students.

Implications

These four projects from a single education college pinpoint a need to delve deeper into the role of prospective teachers and teacher educators in urban contexts. In the process of this study we were able to observe trailblazers, individuals who worked to transform the quiet, negatively resistant attitudes about urban teaching into energizing, healthy, interactions. The members of the self-study group in Exploring Diversity examined the rich, complex realities of teaching practice and made efforts to engage the rest of the faculty and staff in a dialog. A few prospective teachers in the Kidwatching project incorporated into their lesson plans an understanding of the link between culturally responsive teaching and achieve
mence. Finally, two teachers in the Nurturing Critical Literacy study engaged immigrant schoolchildren to examine their experiences before and after coming to the U.S. to break down barriers between children who are recent immigrants and their peers.

References


Note

*All names are pseudonyms.

References of Children’s Literature: Supporting Culturally Responsive Teaching


Note

*All names are pseudonyms.

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