

Expanding Pre-service Teachers' Notions of Literacy and Diversity

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In this paper, two teacher education researchers describe their inquiry to understand pre-service teachers' conceptions of difference related to student learning. The specific research question is: how do pre-service teachers respond to difference in students? According to the deficit model in education, student failure in school is attributed to explanations that include genetics, physiological, or cultural/racial reasons (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Wiener & Cromer, 1967). Additionally, teachers adhere to the deficit model by assuming that children from certain backgrounds are incompetent because they do not do well in school. Too often, the deficit model is the norm with many teachers as they interact with students from cultural groups different from their own. These teachers tend to equate cultural differences as "deficits or disadvantages" (Bennett, 1986; 2003), and they ignore the effects of social class, race, gender and culture (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

An inclusive approach for learning is often used to counter the deficit model in education (Pearl, 1997). However, when asked about creating inclusive environments for learning many pre-service teachers will respond with "I'm colorblind" or "I will treat all kids the same in my classroom" (Bennett, 2003; Nieto, 2000). By regarding students as all equal in the classroom, a teacher ignores the differences inherent in each person and instead expects each student to respond to instruction in the same way. When a student fails, teachers usually do not look at their own practices but blame the student (Gomez, 1994; Ryan, 1976). Gay (1993) states that, "many teachers do not have frames of reference and points of view similar to their ethnically and culturally different students because they live in different existential worlds" (p. 288). This perspective prevails when teachers fail to challenge their own perceptions, attitudes and assumptions, accepting them as inevitable, justifying inequity (King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

It is a fact that the number of culturally diverse students continues to increase in American schools yet the number of white teachers remains the same, at around eighty percent, who are unfamiliar with the backgrounds of their students (Irvine 2001). Multicultural education for pre-service teachers has been identified as one way of increasing teachers' understanding of culturally diverse students. Multicultural education aims for teachers to understand the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. Bennett writes that the "major goal of multicultural education is to change the total education environment so that it will develop competencies in multiple cultures and provide members of all cultural groups with equal education opportunity" (1986, pp. 52-53).

In multicultural education literature a continuum exists on approaches towards implementing a multicultural curriculum in schools. These approaches span a conservative to more liberal and democratic approach. Additionally, not only does a continuum exist but varying interpretations among theorists create a multiplicity of frameworks for one to consider. [See Banks ([1994](#)) for his four phases; Sleeter & Grant, ([1999](#)) for their five approaches; and Baptiste and Archer ([1994](#)) for their three levels.] Some teachers view their role in the classroom as one of integrating students into the existing mainstream society while others promote learning about the existing cultures of students in the classroom in order to build equity and respect for everyone ([Sleeter & Grant, 1999](#)). These two approaches illustrate the contrasts in multicultural education pedagogy: one perspective places emphasis on making the student fit into an existing society while the other promotes a society accepting of all. When teachers ignore a student's background and expect them to "fit in" to their own personal belief system they are in fact illustrating deficit thinking.

One of the underlying beliefs of deficit thinking is that the student is unsatisfactory and must be brought up to teachers' or schools' standards. Because of conflicting internal and external messages pre-service teachers may have internalized, Gonzales argues that teacher educators should encourage pre-service teachers to ask these questions of themselves to ensure curriculum integration and move away from this deficit model:

1. Does my course assist students with knowing the multicultural context of this society?
2. Does this course assist students with knowing major perspective views and frames of reference contributed by diverse social groups to cultural thought and practice?
3. After taking my course will students know of the contributions by women, people of color and other groups to the institutional life of this nation?
4. After my course will students know more about the major controversies and issues shaping the experiences of ethnic groups? ([Gonzales, 1994, p. 13](#))

These questions can serve teacher education programs by assisting them to discover what practices are appropriate, uniting goals with reality. In doing so, educators are beginning to question themselves and their course requirements in order to find out if the needs of their students are being met. Therefore, teachers are taking responsibility for their influence in the educational system.

In this inquiry, the researchers discovered what teacher education practices were appropriate, uniting goals with reality. In doing so, these educators are beginning to question themselves and their course requirements in order to find out if the needs of their students are being met.

Methods

The researchers co-taught an undergraduate education course entitled *Literacy, Technology and Instruction* to pre-service teachers enrolled in K-12 teacher education programs across the university. This course was taught at a university located in the Appalachian mountain area. It would be fair to say that there was a lack of racial diversity among the students as the pre-service teachers in both classes self-classified themselves as White. The majority of the pre-service teachers were traditional in age, coming straight out of high school into residential university programs, and from a middle to upper class background. None of these pre-service teachers, at the point of entering this course, had participated in a course devoted entirely to diversity.

The goals of the course were to expand pre-service teachers' notions of literacy, media literacy, technology, and to relate these concepts to issues in education. To expand students' notions of literacy, the instructors incorporated the concepts of deficit thinking and literacy into course topics. For two semesters, Fall, 2001 and Fall, 2002, a pre-instruction survey was conducted with pre-service teachers in order to document perceptions and attitudes before class instruction. This survey was conducted to gain information about students' ideas surrounding "good" teachers and students, two concepts that can reveal levels of multicultural understandings. Students were also asked in the survey to relate diversity to teaching and learning. The open-ended questions on the survey were:

1. What does it mean to be a good teacher? Please describe.
2. What pictures do you have in your mind of a "good" student?" Please describe.
3. Are you familiar with the concept of deficit thinking? If so, what does that mean to you?
4. In our own words, define or explain the concept "diversity."
5. How does diversity relate to teaching and learning?

Following this survey, students were introduced to the concept of deficit thinking through an article ([Valencia & Solórzano, 1997](#)), a PowerPoint presentation and full class discussion linking back to Purcell Gates' *Other People's Words*. This five-week unit of instruction culminated in the students' writing a reflection paper relating deficit thinking to the Purcell Gates book. Comparisons between survey responses and reflective papers were conducted for final evidence of change in students' points of view. The researchers met regularly to discuss and analyze the data. Salient points were selected and coded to develop emergent themes and issues for further discussion ([Glasser & Strauss, 1967](#)).

Analysis

Analysis was conducted on the surveys and unit reflections, and comparisons between the two were made to examine evidence of change. The researchers examined the surveys and unit reflections separately. Responses were catalogued and examined for emerging themes. The researchers compared analysis of the same data and resolved differences in conference. Major themes in surveys and reflections are reported as well as comparisons between semesters and between surveys and unit reflections.

Results

Surveys

The first question on the survey asked students what it meant to be a good teacher. The 37 pre-service teachers in Fall 2001 semester tended to name characteristics such as “caring” people or a person that “included all students regardless of their culture backgrounds.” Only three pre-service teachers named content knowledge as important in terms of being a good teacher. So the most consistent response to this question is that teachers should care about students and reach out to them and support them in learning. One pre-service teacher from the Fall, 2001 semester indicated some sense of accountability resting on the teacher when she wrote on her survey: “... a good lesson is only as strong as the instructor and even a ‘good’ student can identify a poor lesson and easily lose interest. A good lesson can capture a ‘bad student.’”

Pre-service teachers from the Fall 2002 semester expressed more varied views of being a good teacher. While the majority of the pre-service teachers (31 out of 45) did describe a good teacher as possessing affective qualities such as: respecting students, being a friend to students, exhibiting passion and care, being a role model, enjoying teaching and students; 14 pre-service teachers wrote responses indicating other perspectives. Of these 14 responses, seven pre-service teachers indicated that good teachers possess knowledge and skill in their content as well as affective qualities. Responses include, “knowable about material, kind, considerate.” Another pre-service teacher wrote, “To be a good teacher is being able to ‘teach’ your content and follow the state’s competencies, however, at the same time your students should walk away with an understanding of your content.” These pre-service teachers appear to take responsibility for students’ learning as well as their content domain. Another seven pre-service teachers wrote responses that indicate a primary focus on content knowledge, but support this focus with teaching effectiveness. These responses include: “A good teacher is equipped with the knowledge and skill to teach at the level of his/her chosen profession. [Furthermore] A good teacher is made when he/she contains a compassion/love of herself, her career, and her students.” “A good teacher shares the knowledge he or she has with their students and gives them a framework for the process of learning.” And finally, “Being able to teach the subject that you assigned. Having the students understand and learn the subject matter. Being caring and warm to the students. Being understanding and willing to help the students in any way.”

So, while there were varied responses to the survey prompt, the responses support the conclusions made from the earlier semester: being able to reach out and support student learning is the most important aspect of teaching or just as important as being able to know one’s teaching content area.

The next survey question asked what picture do you have of a “good student?” Typical responses from the Fall 2001 semester included: “Attentive, Listens, Respectful.” However, if we look at how one pictures a good student, most respondents place the responsibility for “being good” on the students. Also, pre-service teachers saw

“goodness” in the traditional sense of the word. A “good” student was defined as one who “tries to understand,” “attention,” “effort,” “eager/excited,” “on time,” and “behaves well.”

The pre-service teachers responding to the survey question from the Fall 2002 semester presented a variety of views. Traditional, behavioral traits were identified by 29 of the 45 students. These traits include: disciplined, attentive, asks questions, non-disruptive, shows up, does best work, and asks questions. Two pre-service teachers indicated that the teacher has a role in a student being “good,” for example: “There are no bad students. There are just some who are easy for the teacher to reach and those who are more challenging to reach.”

While none of the pre-service teachers from either semester were familiar with the concept of deficit thinking from the outset of the study (survey question #3), many from the Fall 2001 semester reflected the concepts of “Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different” in their diversity responses (question #4). For example “diversity is the presence of different backgrounds...being different” (see [Table I](#)). One student went even further writing, “diversity is encompassing differences-it’s accepting who/what we are at face value and learning from it. It’s overall an attitude about accepting and collaborating.” This pre-service teacher understood the value of meeting individual students’ needs.

As the researchers read through the Fall 2001 surveys, pre-service teachers’ concepts or explanations of diversity illustrated that they have some idea of what diversity is but have absolutely no concept of how it relates to them as teachers (question #5). The majority of the pre-service teachers saw diversity as being different or having other cultures in the classrooms. One pre-service teacher saw diversity as a political tactic, six pre-service teachers related diversity as simply being open-minded towards difference. While several pre-service teachers named open-mindedness, when it came to what that meant this also was limited to learning styles, add-on methods or ability. When asked to define or explain the concept of diversity, the majority of students said it was “bringing in another culture.”

Table I
Pre-service Teachers' Ideas of Multicultural Education

Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different	Human Relations	Multicultural Education
"Diversity should be exposed to children sometime in their education in order to prepare them for their future."	"There are many different backgrounds and upbringings of students that you are going to have to teach. You have to know these differences and be able to relate to them."	"I want to not only teach diversity, I want my students to breathe and desire knowledge for information and concepts far beyond their experience-this is the best way to learn."

Note: Taken from Sleeter & Grant, 1999.

[BACK](#)

Pre-service teachers responding during the Fall, 2002 semester had either no concept of deficit thinking (survey question #3) or attributed it to some sort of individual self-perception based on the lack of cognitive skills. However, three pre-service teachers did write that deficit thinking is (a) "thinking someone is less because of who they are or where they come from;" (b) "thinking poorly of others because of their class, gender, etc.;" and (c) "preconceived notion of how certain people will behave." (The pre-service teacher writing the third response above additionally wrote that deficit thinking is "a politically correct term directed at disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Ignores individual strength and determination.")

The pre-service teachers (Fall, 2002) writing in response to their understanding of diversity (survey question # 4) were clear that this refers to differences in individual students' race, ethnicity, religion, home cultures and even learning style. As in the Fall, 2001 survey responses, their writing for survey question #5, connecting diversity and teaching, reflected Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different level in Sleeter & Grant's model ([Table I](#)). Their responses ranged from believing that simple "exposure" to difference cultures was a good thing in itself, to going beyond exposure to having students and the teacher knowing "where people are coming from" in order to avoid favoritism and to promote acceptance and tolerance. Additionally, these pre-service teachers responded that diversity relates to classroom teaching and learning since teachers need to have an understanding of each student in order to understand classroom interactions, and that teachers can nurture diversity and use it as a learning tool.

Survey Results Conclusion

As described earlier, there is a continuum for understanding and integrating multicultural education in the classroom. After reading through the responses to these

initial surveys that ask pre-service teachers to relate diversity to teaching and learning, the researchers discovered three levels of understanding that directly relate back to the Sleeter & Grant framework (1999). While pre-service teachers held traditional beliefs for the role of the teacher and the student, they did believe that they had a responsibility to expose their students to a variety of other cultures. In the Sleeter & Grant model these beliefs correspond to the Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different level (Table I). At this level teachers work to adapt their instruction to the individual learner's needs reflecting the underlying belief that the curriculum and schooling process was good and beneficial for all—that the students will fit into the existing system. Additionally, the researchers saw pre-service teachers sporadically responding at one of the two other levels: the Humans Relations category which leads to acceptance, tolerance, and empathy, and the Multicultural Education category which incorporates diversity into teaching strategies and uses it as a learning tool.

Unit Reflections

The final assignment of the first unit on literacy was the Unit I Reflection. In this assignment, pre-service teachers were to write: (a) on their learning of literacy, (including readings from Gee (1989), Purcell-Gates (1995), and Hirsch (1988)); and (b) insights they gained from the Purcell-Gates book. Additionally, the pre-service teachers wrote about literacy, teaching and learning, diversity, and deficit thinking. Through examination of these artifacts, the researchers were able to obtain a tangible glimpse into attitudes, perceptions and understandings of concepts related to difference and learning. Three major themes emerged from the Fall 2001 semester: (a) the connection between diversity and teaching; (b) genetics, and (c) internalized deficit thinking. Comparison of Fall 2001 and Fall 2002 data indicates that these themes are consistent across both semesters.

Connecting diversity and teaching.

It appears that pre-service teachers in the first semester class were beginning to name acts of deficit thinking in Other People's Words. Utilizing the words of the pre-service teachers, teachers must not "blame the victim." In the case of the Purcell-Gates' book, one student wrote, "[The] teachers did not look at individual students difficulties, but viewed them as part of the collective disabilities urban Appalachians are stereotyped to possess" (Student 18). This student was able to see the negative impact of a label. Another pre-service teacher in Fall 2001 class was able to put this into the context of her own classroom:

As a teacher I must constantly be aware of literacy and diversity in my classroom...the least noticeable group, maybe even a group of people solely in the school that I teach, might be the most important ones for me to recognize and abolish stereotypes about. (Student 10)

Throughout this unit, pre-service teachers recognized that difference does not mean deficient and that they will be responsible for setting an accepting environment in

their future classrooms. “As a perspective teacher I am seeing more that you have to get to know your students [but] by putting a certain label [on a student] you are truly putting the child at a disadvantage” (Student 5). These pre-service teachers began to realize that:

there [are] going to be kids like Donny everywhere. They may not fit his description but they certainly [may] have his same problems. So we must all understand that these children are out there and they need our help. They cannot just be pushed to the side and forgotten. (Student 9A)

Another wrote:

...teachers have to teach to the diversity, not simply to ignore that it exists. This means that we must encourage differences and celebrate our diversity, as well as, foster an environment were they are able to learn regardless of their cultural backgrounds. These students deserve the same knowledge and opportunities, but perhaps not the same treatment of how they obtain that knowledge. (Student 2)

In the Fall, 2002 class, the pre-service teachers made connections between expanded notions of literacy, diversity/deficit thinking, and teaching. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote:

I realized through reading this book that stereotypes pervade and plague our culture, and people are easily convinced that their way of life is ideal. I will never forget Donny’s teacher claiming Jenny’s ignorance, but undoubtedly being unable to fix her car or remember a grocery list. Jenny and Donny were non-literate because they were unable to read, but they were also completely unaware of the significance of print in our society. But, they also had no reason to be able to read. They didn’t use it in their every day life, until Donny began going to school. As Purcell-Gates states, “one learns a discourse by being enculturated into its social practices through scaffolding and social interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse” (p. 182). Donny had no reason to write on how to build a kite, because he could just as easily show the process, as he always had. People assume that diversity constitutes a person of a different race or religion, but Donny provided much more diversity in his classroom than an African-American face or a Jewish boy. He provided the school system with a boundary that it is not structured to deal with accepting different discourses within the classroom. Jenny and Donny are not language deficit because they are able to communicate with each other for all of their purposes outside Donny’s schoolwork. People assume that people who are unable to express themselves with extensive vocabularies are perhaps mentally or verbally deficient with language, but the discourse and the particular language to that discourse is not being considered (Student 22).

Another pre-service teacher wrote that:

The first session has opened my eyes about many things. First it opened my mind to the fact that I truly did not know the meaning of literacy. I was forced to see

with my own eyes by looking, researching, listening, and discover all of the extra factors that play into someone being literate. During this I realized how many teachers do not play the role of a teacher and do not help their students learn. Students are stereotyped by their diversities. Then the teacher will decide if he or she is willing to take the extra time needed to help the students. (Student 9)

From these examples, the researchers found that in fact many pre-service teachers were establishing connections between diversity and teaching. First they were able to identify acts of deficit thinking and this led them to attribute negative outcomes to stereotyping and negative perceptions. When pre-service teachers learn about the negative impact of labeling and jumping to conclusions about students based on their own personal bias they negate the individual. It seems that these pre-service teachers are seeing the importance of recognizing diversity among their students, using diversity as a strength in the classroom as well as a learning tool. Yet, in terms of the Sleeter and Grant model (1999), the students did not question the institution of schooling in the broader societal sense and believed that the established curriculum was valid and useful for all students. While the majority of the students reflected the Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different level in the model, and a number then reflected the Human Relations level, only two or three from both semesters indicated through their responses an understanding and a desire to incorporate the multicultural education level in their teaching.

Deficit thinking and genetics.

According to Valencia (1997), deficit thinking has become a justified approach in education due to the differences in genetics between the races. In this manner of thought, different races have different genetic composition, which are thought to be deficient. This has been generalized further to also include accents or dialects that further mark negative attitudes. This has also been linked with poor socioeconomic status, another theme from *Other Peoples Words*. Pre-service teachers in the Fall 2001 class began to understand this type of deficit thinking. For example, as one pre-service teacher wrote:

Social class differences have predicted literacy skill achievement. Social status has predicted how one will be educated. If one is born into a family that is not middle class and educated they have a lower chance of achieving a good literacy level. Jenny and Donny were seen as poor whites-part of a minority class. They were foreigners and outsiders to the world of literacy. (Student 3)

Pre-service teachers in the Fall, 2002 class articulated understandings of the genetics argument and deficit thinking through their understanding of Donny and Jenny in the Purcell-Gates book as members of the “invisible minority” (Purcell-Gates). For example, one pre-service teacher wrote:

More troubling in Jenny and Donny’s case (main characters in the Purcell-Gates book), was the fact that they physically looked like everyone around them. Their key difference is background and culture. People in their community saw them,

not so much as being different, but as being helplessly ignorant. Purcell-Gates offers help because she realizes the futility of “deficit-ridden views”. While she may agree that Jenny and Donny are significantly different than others in the community; she is not willing to write them off as helpless. (Student 11)

Some pre-service teachers in the Fall 2002 semester were not able to see their own versions of the genetics and deficit thinking point and maintained a narrow view of difference by continuing to use the term illiterate in the final reflection. This usage implies the genetic disposition of certain groups of people. Another pre-service teacher stated that Jenny and Donny suffered from acute learning disabilities. This student states that the:

...alleged links between literacy and diversity are overstated in the extreme, being a politically correct society we attach identifying nametags to certain groups of people. These communal nametags are used to provide people with a reason for not being successful. The concept completely ignores the strength and determination of individual human beings. (Student 6)

While one does not deny the strength and determination of individuals, the main goals of the researchers’ unit on literacy and deficit thinking seem to be lost with this particular person.

This version of deficit thinking, as merely a variation in genetics, seemed to be the most accessible for the majority of the pre-service teachers. They were able to articulate its meaning and at the same time, students were extremely vocal in their outrage at the treatment by the educational community who were in this mindset. During class discussions pre-service teachers would ask, “what is the point of education if you already think someone is going to fail?” What an excellent question to pose for any educator who is already determining a child’s future based on the way they look or the way they talk.

Internalized deficit thinking.

Pre-service teachers in both classes were able to understand the concept of deficit thinking when groups of people or individuals attribute it to themselves and act on these beliefs. As a pre-service teacher from the Fall 2001 class wrote: “Sadly, many who are labeled as being deficient in thought, end up believing in the stereotypes themselves” (Student 6). Another pre-service teacher responded:

After being told time and time again that Urban Appalachian culture was the factor that restrained Donny and her from reading and writing, Jenny seemed to have engaged in deficit thinking herself...Jenny illustrated deficit thinking herself because she believed her hillbilly or countrified language hindered her from becoming a successful reader, while she felt Donny’s inability to learn to read and write was due to his laziness. (Student 1)

Some pre-service teachers wrote contradictory statements about difference, deficit thinking and teaching perhaps illustrating their confusion. One example is from a person who wrote:

She [Purcell-Gates] does, however, offer valuable insight through her experiences with Jenny and Donny into many factors that influence a student's ability to succeed at reading and writing. There is a great connection between a student's success in school and their background. Race and financial status are huge factors in predicting the success of a student. For Donny his race did not make him difference, but his whole background did. The diversity within a classroom should be a positive thing rather than a negative thing. A child of any background can be taught to read and write within their realm of understanding. A teacher such as Donny's really has a problem with deficit thinking because she could not relay information to Donny in a way that made it relevant to him, therefore his success at literacy was greatly hindered. (Student 3)

This student does understand and can write an example of internalized deficit thinking, believes that diversity in the classroom can be a positive feature and that a child of any background can be taught. Yet she also refers to the connection between one's racial and socioeconomic status and success in schooling and that students who come from "less desirable backgrounds" can only be taught "with limitations."

Conclusions

The two classes began at introductory levels of understanding multicultural education as illustrated in the Sleeter & Grant model of Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different. Students in the classes understood the value of exposing their students to diversity and of teaching to individual students' needs. Yet this could be a superficial level as exemplified perhaps in only studying Black Americans during Black History month. The Unit I Reflections written at the end of the five weeks indicate that the pre-service teachers understood and could apply bits and pieces of concepts that underlie multicultural education: connecting diversity with teaching; deficit thinking and genetics; and internalized deficit thinking. The researchers felt that while most pre-service teachers were well-intentioned, many still seemed to feel that students in public school will have different learning abilities due to their different backgrounds. One student wrote:

...not everyone can read and write and that by examining a persons background and the social class that they come from that has something to do with their capabilities in learning. (Student 5)

This pre-service teacher was not able to see the larger picture and was still blaming the student for not being able to learn (according to the teacher's standards). The pre-service teachers couldn't articulate how expanded notions of literacy and their own projection of deficit thinking would enter into the picture.

The researchers concluded from working with the data that pre-service teachers need a carefully constructed sequence of readings that introduce concepts aligning with and supporting notions of literacy and deficit thinking. These concepts would include among others: stereotyping, prejudice, dialect, devaluation of education, and human capital. During this one five week unit of instruction, the students read the material outside of class, and participated in multiple small group interactive activities to discuss, articulate and argue with these notions. The concepts are complex and require one to move away from their personal ideologies or beliefs. Recognizing how deficit thinking and narrow views of literacy influence our understandings of our students is a long process not completed in a five-week unit. Just as the most integrated level of Multicultural Education in the Sleeter & Grant model (1999) states that students will seek knowledge and experiences that contributes to deeper and deeper understandings of diversity, so too do the course instructors need to create and plan activities that will move the students beyond the first level of multicultural education into the more complex areas. Perhaps the underlying assumptions about societal and schooling goals should be learned as well as a comparison of the curriculum, and instructional practices implicit in each level (Sleeter & Grant, 1999).

While the teacher population is increasingly comprised of white female teachers with limited experience with minorities, the student population is becoming more and more diverse ([Colville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995](#); [Fuller, 1994](#); [Tran, Young & Di Lella, 1994](#)). It is vital that all teachers are able to teach to all kinds of diverse populations because it is becoming apparent that most will be doing just that. Utilizing this aspect of deficit thinking contributes to expanded notions of literacy. This process continues to challenge pre-service teachers' expectations of children that will continue when they are in their own classroom.

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