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Reading the White Space in a Multicultural Field Experience

Kelly Sassi, Denise Lajimodiere, Katherine Bertolini, & Gerald Ketterling

Introduction

The overarching goal of multicultural education is “to help all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate in cross-cultural interactions and in personal, social, and civic action that will help make our nation more democratic and just” (Banks, 2006, p. 202). In pursuit of this goal, teacher educators must “ensure the preparation of teachers for a diverse student population” (Hollins, 2008, p. 5). This is a complex and challenging endeavor.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standards: Standard 4 on Diversity (2008) articulates the expectation that “experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P-12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P-12 schools.” Furthermore, providing field experiences in diverse communities is especially important because:

... most people in the United States live in communities with others more alike than different from themselves. Students from these communities arrive at school knowing little of significance about people who are different. Yet their lives are intertwined with these unknown others and will become even more so in the future. (Gay, 2000, p. 20)

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While field experiences are, by definition, an ideal means to prepare future teachers to work successfully with diverse student populations, assessing the effectiveness of these experiences is challenging.

MacEntee (2009) asked:

Do our teacher-candidates understand the needs of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and/or have a disability? Are our teacher-candidates prepared to ensure the success of these students? Can we really and truly know this? Unfortunately, we cannot. We won't have a definitive answer until our teacher-candidates begin their professional careers. (p. 87)

Waiting until teachers begin their careers, however, is not sufficient for the teacher education program at the Midwestern university we describe here. This institution is one of 14 funded for the next 10 years through a \$40-million-dollar grant to reform how new teachers are recruited, prepared, placed, and supported.

Our study focuses on the preparation of these new teachers, specifically their field experience. The institution plans to guarantee that its graduates are “highly effective,” which is defined by the grantor as teachers whose students make at least one year of academic progress per school year and who are able to close the achievement gap. In order to make this guarantee, the institution needs to gauge its pre-service teachers' progress toward being “highly effective” prior to graduation and the beginning of their professional careers. Developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity is a signpost on a teacher's journey to being “highly effective.”

Multicultural Field Experience Research

Research shows that multicultural field experiences can have mixed effects on pre-service teachers. “[S]imply having coursework and field experiences may not

result in adequate awareness of the issues surrounding teaching in a culturally diverse classroom” (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007, p. 1). Sleeter (2001) adds:

Many teacher preparation programs have added coursework in multicultural education A good deal of research examines student learning in these courses from various angles, focusing mainly on how or whether they change how predominantly White pre-service student think. (p. 98)

Developing awareness requires that previous beliefs are first examined to make room for new understandings:

Although multicultural teacher education courses and field experiences are certainly important tools for developing [pre-service teachers'] awareness of and sensitivity to diversity, these courses and experiences, by themselves, may be insufficient to counteract the power of [their] preexisting attitudes and beliefs. (Garmon, 2004, p. 212)

McDiarmid (1992), for example, studied a multicultural strand in the Los Angeles Unified School District's school-based teacher certification training program which included 15 sessions of background information and instruction in pedagogical techniques for working with culturally diverse students. By interviewing the students, McDiarmid found that didactic presentations about diverse people actually taught stereotypes and generalizations and did little to change the thinking among the pre-service students (Sleeter, 2001).

Research by Pohan, Ward, Kouzekanani, and Boatright (2009) concluded that the achievement gap between White middle-class student and their low-income peers of color has continued to widen “...and this disparity leads many critics to believe that teachers are not well prepared to meet the challenges of today's diverse student population” (p. 43)

Little change occurs when field experiences don't challenge pre-service teachers' assumptions (McDiarmid, 1990). Furthermore, “these experiences might do more

harm than good if they reinforce existing negative stereotypes rather than dispel them” (Wiggins et al., 2007, p. 2).

When field experiences do work well, what are the factors that contribute to their success? In one study, Smith, Moalem, and Sherrill (1997) found that four factors contributed to prospective teachers developing greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity: exposure to different cultural backgrounds, level of educational attainment, extent of travel, and personal experience with discrimination as a child. While teacher education programs are able to address all but the fourth factor, they should also consider *how* these factors work together. For instance, simply traveling does not guarantee positive results in raising multicultural awareness.

Garmon (2004) found that exposure to different cultural backgrounds without accompanying educational information is usually ineffective, and argued that “opportunities for appropriate processing of these experiences may be critical to [pre-service teachers] developing greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity” (p. 212). While critics might claim that developing “sensitivity” is not the province of teacher education programs, others in the field argue that the correlation between a teacher’s cultural sensitivity and minority student achievement makes it crucial (Banks, 1987; Cruikshank, 1986).

Several studies indicate that learning is heightened when pre-service teachers reflect on their experiences (Barrett, 1993; Nieto, 2006), and NCATE has formalized the value of reflection and “appropriate processing”: “Both field experiences and clinical practice allow time for reflection and include feedback from peers and clinical faculty” (Standard 3c, 2007).

In their research, Pohan et al. (2009) found that “analysis of simple effects revealed that when compared to their peers placed in a school serving mostly White middle-class students, pre-service teachers working in a high-need school serving mostly low-income students of color became more culturally responsive over the course of the semester” (p. 48). They further state,

What we have come to believe is that although personal beliefs are unlikely to significantly change over the course of one semester, we can create opportunities that cause pre-service teachers to analyze, evaluate, and judge the basis for their personal beliefs. (p. 48)

O’Grady (1998) compared a “Human Relations Field Experience” requiring pre-

service teachers to spend 15 hours interacting with someone who is “of a racial or cultural group different from their own” to an “Urban School Field Experience” (p. 226) that required pre-service teachers to spend one day in an urban high school as part of a foundations course. He found that the latter was more effective because it “provided a context for evaluating the learning before, during, and after” the pre-service teachers’ placement in the field (p. 226).

The literature suggests field experience is more effective when it combines exposure to different backgrounds, travel, and related education, and includes reflection and appropriate processing, as well as a contextualization of the issues at the field site in relation to larger social issues. Extending the time at a field site may also contribute to greater comfort and more favorable attitudes toward teaching in a multicultural environment (Wiggins et al, 2007, p. 6).

Theoretical Framework

Our assumption in this research is that reflection and appropriate processing of a field experience will lead to understanding that increases multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Understanding can be theorized in many ways, but the Wiggins and McTighe (2005) six-facet model provides a good basis. They defined understanding as the ability to explain, interpret, apply, have perspective, empa-

thize, and have self-knowledge. The latter three facets are salient in this study.

Self-knowledge about one’s own cultural and racial identity facilitates pre-service teachers in working effectively with diverse students: “The process of examining racial identity is valuable to the extent that it encourages self-awareness—by increasing the capacity for introspection and reflection; by increasing awareness of the experiences of others; and by increasing awareness of one’s role as an institutional agent maintaining a particular ideology and social structure” (Hollins, 2008, p. 43).

Helms’s (1995) model of Racial Identity Ego Statuses and Information Processing Strategies (see Table 1) is a useful conceptual frame because its status characterizations help to identify fine distinctions between seemingly racially and culturally homogenous pre-service teachers.

Building on the previous research, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What kinds of identity statuses do our pre-service teachers have?
2. What kinds of information processing strategies do they use when they reflect on multicultural readings and a multicultural field experience?
3. What do their identity statuses and information processing strategies tell us about their development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity?

Table 1
Helms’s Model of Racial Identity Ego Statuses and Information Processing Strategies (1995)

White racial identity ego statuses	Characterization of status
Context status	Satisfaction with racial status quo, obliviousness to racism and one’s participation in it. <i>Information Processing Strategy (IPS): obliviousness</i>
Disintegration status	Disorientation and anxiety provoked by unresolvable racial moral dilemmas that force one to choose between own-group loyalty and humanism. <i>IPS: suppression and ambivalence</i>
Reintegration status	Idealization of one’s socio-racial group and denigration of other groups. <i>IPS: selective perception and negative out-group perception</i>
Pseudo independence status	Intellectual commitment to one’s own group and deceptive tolerance of other groups. May make life decisions to “help” other groups. <i>IPS: Reshaping reality and selective perception</i>
Immersion/Emmersion status	Search for an understanding of the personal meaning of racism and the ways by which one benefits, and a redefinition of whiteness. Life choices may incorporate racial activism. <i>IPS: hyper-vigilance and reshaping</i>
Autonomy status	Informed, positive socio-racial group, use of internal standards for self-definition, capacity to relinquish privileges. May avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression. <i>IPS: flexibility and complexity</i>

Study Design

The research team was comprised of various stakeholders: the field experience director, education professors in multiple disciplines, a graduate student instructor, an education professor from one of the American Indian reservations that the institution uses for a field site, and an administrator. The group met and developed curricula in support of the immersive field experience and collaboratively designed this study. A qualitative approach was utilized to analyze the writing of the pre-service teachers.

Context and Participants

While the state in which this study took place is predominantly White, its minority group populations are growing. Over the last 10 years the state's White population has decreased by 1.8%, while the population of Hispanics increased by 69.9%, Blacks by 67.3%, Asians by 30.2%, and American Indians by 13.4% (Fargo Forum, 2009). Pre-service teachers will teach in demographically different schools from those they attended as students.

The study participants were a purposive sample of seven pre-service teachers from a variety of disciplines enrolled in a general methods of education course entitled Instructional Planning, Methods and Assessment that included a four-day field experience in a large inner-city high school. The sample consisted of four females and three males; five were White, one Native American, and one Asian (Korean).

Procedures

Pre-service teachers read and held an online discussion of Peggy McIntosh's (1988) "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." They also viewed a DVD on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy narrated by Geneva Gay. The pre-service teachers visited a diverse urban high school for four days, participated in nightly meetings with their methods instructor, and wrote a daily reflective journal.

The study also gathered data from class-related discussion board postings and pre-service teacher field experience journals.

Methods

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the reflective journals and asynchronous discussions held on the Blackboard™ site for the course using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) qualitative method of open coding.

The bulk of the coding was done jointly by the researchers, who brought different institutional perspectives to the work. This kind of triangulation was employed to assure validity of the qualitative data.

The original concepts studied were empathy, self-knowledge, and openness, three of Wiggins and McTighe's categories of understanding. New concepts were added from the data as comparisons between discussion board postings and field experience journals were made. The research team found that the properties of self-knowledge in the data were self-questioning, self-awareness, and self-reflectiveness. Of these, self-awareness was found to have a further dimension: awareness of White privilege.

As new concepts were derived from the data, in-vivo codes were utilized—that is, such concepts reflected the actual words of the research participants. New concepts that arose from in-vivo coding included the following: awareness of diversity, contextual critique, deflection, and fear/anxiety. Awareness of diversity included the dimension of commentary on sameness and diversity; contextual critique included the dimension of classroom management; and fear/anxiety included the dimension of comfort. Deflection turned out to be a rich category, with several dimensions: agreeability, avoidance of first-person singular pronoun, exemption, and temporal or categorical qualifications of racism. Table 2 depicts the coding process.

After we coded the discussion posts and journals, theoretical sampling led us to Helms's (1995) model of "White Racial Identity Ego Statures and Information Processing Strategies" as a way to conceptualize our codes. For the two non-White pre-service teachers, Helms's (1995) "People of Color Racial Identity Ego Statures and Information-Processing Strategies" was used. It is important that studies of field experiences not focus only on the responses of White students.

Results

Context Status

Information Processing Strategy (IPS): Obliviousness

An individual in "context status" is satisfied with the racial status quo. An analysis of discussion board postings and journal entries showed that the participants used a number of rhetorical strategies that served to maintain the status quo, such as deflection strategies like agreeability and avoidance of first-person singular pronoun.

The concept of agreeability was, not surprising, given one of the dominant cultural communication models in the region. Called "Minnesota nice," this style of communication emphasizes affability over conflict (Tamale, 1996). This communication style recurred in the discourse on the discussion board: e.g., "I agree with your comment" (Nicole¹); "I agree with the article" (Susan); the effusive "I would totally

Table 2
Coding Process

Concepts from Wiggins & McTighe	Properties	Dimensions of properties and further expansion of concepts	Dimensions of new concepts
empathy	Self-knowledge		
↗	self-questioning →	self-awareness →	Awareness of white privilege
↘	openness	self-reflectiveness	
		Awareness of diversity →	Sameness/difference
		contextual critique	classroom management/ diversity
			agreeability
			avoidance of first person singular pronoun
		↗	
		deflection →	exemption syndrome
		↘	
			temporal or categorical qualifications of racism
		fear/anxiety →	comfort

agree with you” (Tom); or the more indirect “I don’t necessarily disagree” (Tom).

However, statements of agreement did not seem to equate with openness and were often followed by some kind of deflection strategy. Avoiding the use of the first-person singular pronoun was one deflection strategy we categorized. For instance, Susan wrote,

I agree with the article because unless we take the time to think about it, we don't realize what advantages we are given simply because of skin color. I think that this is something that is very hard to get away from but it is worth doing your best to eliminate its effects. [italics added]

Susan did use the first person singular at the beginning of each sentence, “I agree” and “I think”; however, in the first sentence she used first person plural three times to discuss the lack of awareness about privilege. By using first person plural, Susan did place herself in the category of people who are unaware of White privilege, but asserted that she was not the only one in this category.

In the second sentence, Susan’s use of the second person pronoun distanced herself further from White privilege: “it is worth doing your best to eliminate its effects.” This avoidance of first person can reinforce the individual’s obliviousness to White privilege and her participation in it. It can also be argued that, unconsciously at least, avoidance of first person is a form of suppression.

Disintegration Status

IPS: Suppression & Ambivalence

When experiencing “disintegration status,” an individual is often disoriented and anxious because of “unresolvable racial moral dilemmas that force one to choose between own-group loyalty and humanism” (Helms, 1995). The above-mentioned deflection strategies in the discussion threads are an example of using suppression to process information. It is easy to suppress new information about multicultural issues if one feels exempt from having to “eliminate its effects.”

According to Dawson (1981), the exemption syndrome is “prevalent in traditionally White colleges and universities in monocultural and monoracial geographical regions” where educators believe that “because the community and college have few, if any, minorities, the college has no obligation to commit time and resources to multicultural education” (p. 5).

The employment of exemption status

did not go uncontested in the postings, as this exchange between White students Tom and Charlize revealed:

TOM: Yeah, we watched that [video about an African-American man and White man looking for apartments that demonstrated how they were treated differently by landlords] in our multicultural education class. It's pretty disheartening to see something like that. However, the video was a little outdated and in a Southern city if I'm not mistaken. Not like that should make a difference, but I think it's important to be aware that White privilege may be more apparent in the South. I'm curious as to the progress that has been made since the video was taken. Either way, it was a great video.

CHARLIZE: Actually the city in this video was St. Louis. Growing up in Chicago, I can sadly say that this issue is not just in Southern cities. . .

TOM: . . . I would totally agree with you that the issue of White privilege would be found everywhere. I was simply eluding [sic] to the notion that it may have a bigger effect on people in the South. Maybe?

Tom’s posting was a demonstration of exemption status in that he tried to place the racism in the film in “the South,” far from where this institution was located, and in the past: “the video was a little outdated.” This criticism ended with a “niceness” move: “Either way it was a great video.” Charlize challenged Tom’s distancing of racism by referencing her experiences of White privilege in the North. In response, Tom first expressed his agreeability—“I would totally agree with you”—but then tried to hold onto his original notion by suggesting that it has “a bigger effect” in the South, implying that it has less of an effect here, in the North.

The anxiety about multicultural experiences felt by individuals in this status may lead to an over-concern with comfort. For researchers Teel and Obidah (2008), preparing teachers to be racially and culturally competent, so that they can ensure the success of diverse students, means attending to “the elusive elements of racism and how these elements are embedded in their fears and concerns about their future students and about teaching in urban schools in general” (p. 59).

Tom was a student who expressed his fears about the field experience openly: “I am nervous about teaching the class and . . . unsure of the students and how they will respond to me.” Susan said, “I am nervous because I don’t know what to expect from the teachers and students.” The pre-service teachers appeared not to expect to feel

comfortable in diverse settings and were surprised when they felt comfortable and connected with students. Tom wrote about this three times in his journal: “I was surprised how comfortable I was in the school setting.” Neither anxiety nor comfort, however, appeared in the electronic discussions; they only were registered in the participants’ field journals.

Reintegration Status

IPS: Selective Perception & Negative Out-Group Distortion

“Reintegration status” is characterized by “idealization of one’s socioracial group and denigration of other groups” (Helms, 1995). At least two pre-service teachers’ writings fit this part of Helms’ model; they criticized the authors of the multicultural readings and both the teachers and students at their field site. For example, Dave noted, “...teachers didn’t approach their job with the dedication that seems necessary,” and asked, “Why don’t teachers differentiate more?”

About the students, Tom asserted, “They seemed to take a rather passive role in their education” and “The students didn’t seem to be real engrossed until they started critiquing each other’s work.” Overall, he stated, “The environment is louder, the pace is slower, and the strategies are more basic.” This could be an example of selective perception. At least two pre-service teachers’ writings fit this part of Helms’ model.

Pseudo Independence Status

IPS: Reshaping Reality & Selective Perception

Individuals with “pseudo independence status” have an intellectual commitment to their own group and deceptive tolerance of other groups, characterized by “helping.” Most pre-service teachers identify with being helpers. Tom wrote in his journal,

I hope to be more knowledgeable about how particular students learn or how they view education. This will help me understand how I can teach them effectively. I hope to realize how teaching in a large city schools is different from the more familiar small school setting.

Charlize’s goal for the field experience was “to see firsthand what multicultural teaching looks like and how students respond to it,” which also suggested an openness to the experience.

For Tom, the openness to the diverse experience became a recounting of how his observations were similar to or different from his own experiences. While he expected “to see a learning environment

completely different from my own high school . . . a far more diverse student body and hopefully a more diverse teaching staff." He also observed,

The students were very similar even though they were so different. I've seen a much different demeanor in minority students. Stereotypically many minority students have responded better to stories and were more likely to vocalize their questions as soon as they have them.

He concluded that, "despite all their differences, students are the same." Statements like these seem to affirm selective perception when processing new information.

Immersion/Emmersion Status

IPS: Hypervigilance & Reshaping

Within "immersion/emmersion status" individuals are looking for personal meaning and considering the ways one benefits from racist structures. The pre-service teachers who acknowledged their privilege were Charlize, Nadine, and Nicole; they appeared to be entering this status. Charlize wrote, "the 'right' to an education is something we privileged types take for granted."

Nicole's self-awareness revealed how the field experience changed her thinking,

I wouldn't have even thought twice about turning down a job...in an inner city. I can't say that I will search far and wide for a job located in [this school] etc, but after these 4 days I am not ruling it out completely from my teaching future.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Charlize realized that "an urban school is a good fit for me."

Autonomy Status

IPS: Flexibility & Complexity

We identified only one student in the "autonomy status" group. (Note that we also used the People of Color Racial Identity Ego Statuses for this participant). Not surprisingly, Nadine, the Asian-American student who was adopted by a White family, had a more complex response and deeper self-awareness than the White pre-service teachers in the study. She wrote in her journal,

I think that White privilege exists everywhere people go, whether everyone is aware of it or not. Considering in the physical sense that I am not White, I can't exactly say that I have been privileged enough to realize it. However, I was raised by German and Norwegians, so I consider myself as White as they come (whether I am treated that way or not).

This response showed her understanding of White privilege, her self-identification as being White, and her self-questioning about how much she benefits from White privilege because she was raised in a White family.

However, she also wrote of how she was discriminated against, citing examples from her life experience that corresponded with the points in the McIntosh article: "I have noticed that Asians are under-represented in Hollywood and the music world"; "It sucks that some people think I do well at school because of my race and not because of hard work and talent."

This reference to the model minority stereotype demonstrated how she saw that her identity can seem both privileged and not. "I have been asked several times as an Asian if I would represent 'my race' for campus organizations—annoying!" Nadine's complex articulation of identity stood out from the responses of the rest of the participants.

People of Color Racial Identity

Ego Statuses

There were two pre-service teachers of color in our study: Korean American Nadine, and Frank, a Native-American male. We do not have enough information from Frank because he did not participate in the discussion board postings, but Nadine fit the "Autonomy status" on the White scale and "Integrative Awareness status" on the comparable people of color scale because of her "capacity to value members of other oppressed groups as well as one's own collective identities."

Conclusion

The answer to our first research question surprised us. Although they live in the same seemingly culturally homogenous area, the pre-service teachers' identity statuses were quite varied. They corresponded to all six parts of Helms's (1995) identity statuses model for Whites and one identity status for People of Color.

The second research question addressed information-processing strategies. The participant reflections on the multicultural readings and field experience indicated that these strategies varied in conformance with the corresponding Helms model identity status. However, some information-processing strategies we found were not articulated in Helms's model.

For example, agreeability might appear to indicate a positive pre-disposition toward multicultural discourse and awareness and

be associated with immersion/emmersion or autonomy statuses; our study, however, found that in some cases agreeability was a precursor to a deflection strategy, such as avoidance of first person singular when discussing White privilege.

Our study suggests that there could be an identity status between context status and disintegration status. The information-processing strategies of this new status, which we will call "comfort status," indicated more awareness than the obliviousness of context status, but a lack of overt suppression of disintegration status. Rather, the pre-service teachers in between these two statuses processed—whether consciously or not—new multicultural information using deflection strategies like avoidance and exemption. Their agreeability masked a fear and anxiety of being uncomfortable.

The third research question was the most difficult to answer: What do the pre-service teachers' identity statuses and information processing strategies tell us about their development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity? Like Deering and Stanutz (1995), we recognized that, ". . . raising the cultural sensitivity of [pre-service teachers] is more difficult than originally thought" (p. 393).

We posit that discourse and reflective writing about multicultural issues and an analysis of them can provide a more nuanced picture of the pre-service teachers' multicultural awareness and sensitivity. We came to see the codes that emerged as evidence of the various kinds of information processing strategies the pre-service teachers used when encountering new multicultural ideas and experiences. If the students had performed a privilege walk, rather than just reading about privilege, we may have seen discursive changes following the spatial changes (Sassi & Thomas, 2008, p. 29).

For the practitioners on our team, the nuanced differentiations between participants indicate that pre-service teacher training must be differentiated to meet individual needs. Grant and Koskela (2001) stated that

Attention to race, class, and gender within the total teacher training program needs to be addressed. In order to help pre-service teachers transfer campus learning to their classroom teaching, not only must they be given information, they must be shown how to put that information into practice. (p. 203)

This "showing" requires pre-service teacher trainers to thoroughly understand the indi-

viduals they are training and design field experience activities that promote growth within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1994).

In fairly homogenous regions like the one we studied, sometimes all that people see is "White space." Reading this White space through a qualitative analysis of the information processing strategies of seemingly homogenous pre-service teachers, as we have done here, highlights that we must be alert to indications of "exemption syndrome" (Dawson, 1981) such as deflection. We must both attend to and challenge concerns about staying comfortable. "Challenging . . . assumptions about educational practice involves providing opportunities for [pre-service teachers] to be pushed out of their comfort zones and to de-center themselves" (O'Grady, 1998, p. 212).

What our study contributes is a recognition that those comfort zones differ for individuals, and de-centering may look different from person to person.

Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms to the protect the privacy of the study participants.

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