

Chapter 8

Inspiring Teacher Candidates to Embrace Cultural Diversity

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges facing teachers in the United States is providing high-quality education for all students met in the classroom, including those who too often are underserved: students of color, low-income students, English-language learners, as well as students in urban and rural settings. Teachers report feeling unprepared and lack confidence in teaching students from culturally different backgrounds from themselves. This chapter suggests that in addition to becoming certified teachers, teacher candidates need to be inspired by teacher educators who are passionate about cultural learning and willing to share their own journey. Through sharing, teacher educators can provide practices that build cultural knowledge and increase cultural experiences of teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

There is no more important factor for student learning than having a great teacher, particularly in high-needs communities, so it is essential to have strong teacher preparation programs that can generate pipelines of new teachers with the right mix of knowledge and skills to meet the full range of needs in classrooms across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This is a not an easy task but can be made easier when faculty are on a journey, with teacher candidates, to explore a wide range of cultural diversity.

During the 2015-16 academic year, 77% of public school teachers were female and 23% male (McFarland, Hussar, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Rathbun, et. al., 2018). There is a fundamental mismatch between a predominantly white, middle-class, female PK-12 teaching force and the increasing diverse students they meet in their classrooms; as a result there is a need for teacher educators to prepare teacher candidates with knowledge, skills, and experiences with diverse student populations (Yuan, 2018). In 2011, within

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U.S. schools, White students made up 55 percent of the elementary school population, Hispanic students were 23 percent of those attending grades 1 to 12, and the proportion of Black elementary and secondary students was 14 percent (Davis & Bauman, 2013, p. 10). The increase in diversity within PK-12 schools has been steady for the past several years. Projections indicate that by 2050 the ethnic and racial minority groups in our schools will be the majority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The diversity teachers meet in the classroom includes socioeconomic diversity. In 2006, Darling-Hammond commented, “In classrooms most beginning teacher will enter, at least 25 percent of students live in poverty and many of them lack basic food, shelter, and health care; from 10 percent to 20 percent have identified learning differences; 15 percent speak a language other than English as their primary language; and nearly 40 percent are members of minority groups, many of them recent immigrants from countries with different educational systems and cultural traditions” (p. 300).

While there is a need for teacher preparation programs to develop the knowledge, skills, and varied experiences of teacher candidates, teacher educators must also help teacher candidates recognize and critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, culture, and the impact of poverty, in shaping the learning experience of PK-12 students. Beyond building knowledge and skill base, it is equally important for faculty to model their own commitment to continually growing in cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching pedagogy.

This chapter posits that faculty in teacher preparation programs can inspire teacher candidates to work with underserved and diverse populations of students by sharing their own stories of seeking culturally diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences, as well as providing similar opportunities for students through course assignments, field experiences, and encouragement of study abroad opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Teacher Beliefs and Behaviors

A teacher’s beliefs about characteristics of diversity can influence teacher behaviors (Bakker & Denessen, 2011). Faculty in teacher preparation programs can motivate and inspire teacher candidates to explore beliefs and behaviors. Altinsoy and Okan (2017) report that prior PK-12 learning experiences of teacher candidates, as well as teacher preparation programs attended, are instrumental in shaping teacher beliefs. While faculty cannot influence the prior experiences of teacher candidates, faculty can draw upon the prior experiences of teacher candidates and guide them in examining beliefs and biases that resulted from these experiences. Teacher candidates often enter teacher education with very little cross-cultural background, knowledge, and experiences; they “often bring naïve optimism that coexists with unexamined stereotypes taken for granted as truth” (Sleeter, 2008, p.559). For example, teacher candidates can have a great desire to work with underserved populations but find that they have low expectations of the ability and success of students who look different from them.

It comes as no surprise that teacher beliefs and associated perceptions, biases and attitudes, shape instructional decisions which in turn influence student learning. A teacher’s expectations of individual students do have a hand in shaping teaching behaviors and subsequent student learning outcomes (Nurmi, Viljaranta, Tolvanen, & Aunola, 2012). Guiding teacher candidates to examine their biases, known and unknown, and discussing how bias and beliefs can influence teaching behavior is foundational to any discussions of teaching pedagogy related to cultural issues. Teachers who display negative perceptions,

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