

To Thine Own Self Be True: Self-Discovery, Diversity, and Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

In this increasingly multicultural society, it is imperative that teacher education programs attack issues of diversity head on. Pre-service teaching programs must use Self-Discovery, the self-inquiry process through which future teachers discover themselves as individuals operating within a multicultural context, as pedagogy if we hope to successfully train the next generation of multiculturally competent educators. Self-Discovery is a four-step process for teaching individuals to be sensitive to human differences in education and society. The stages of Self-Discovery are: (a) Discussion, (b) Admission, (c) Accommodation, and (d) Proaction. If all programs involved in the creation of future educators successfully guide them through Self-Discovery, we will begin to resolve the multicultural conflicts of society so often propagated in today's schools.

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius wisely offers the words, "To thine own self be true," just before sending off his beloved son Laertes to travel the world. As removed as I may be from Globe Theater times, I find these words to be incredibly relevant and timelessly appropriate as I prepare pre-service teachers for their educational assignments "abroad." And just as Polonius intelligently advises his young son to remain "true," or honest with himself, so too am I charged with reminding each student who passes through my Diversity Sensitivity and Multicultural Education course to do the same. Polonius knew full well that if one does not openly and willingly confront his or her own beliefs,

fears, and preferences, it is impossible to function honestly and most effectively with all others. This wise counsel, therefore, is not only critical for fresh-faced sons entering the world at large, but also for newly-stamped teachers entering the world of education.

The power of Shakespeare's poetic plea to "be true" must resound loudly in the halls of post-secondary academia. As a professor at a university that prepares the future educators of mass society, nowhere else do I find it more necessary to encourage this notion of "critical self-inquiry" (Gomez, 1996, p. 125), self-confrontation, or as it shall be referred to here, Self-Discovery. It is crucial that pre-service teachers (and all educators currently in the field) own a method by which they can discuss, deconstruct, and discover themselves as individuals operating within a multicultural context. As our surrounding culture evolves into a heterogeneous world, so too do our student populations in public, private, and parochial schools. To match the demands of a diverse and changing society, pre-service teachers *must* have access to a reflective process that adequately prepares them for educating students of all backgrounds in the multicultural hodgepodge we now call America. Self-Discovery, therefore, is an originally-conceived, systematic way to teach all post-secondary students, especially those enrolled in teacher education programs, to "be true" to themselves, or to pinpoint and actively recontextualize those long-held beliefs that may render them biased, prejudiced, or unknowingly ineffective as they encounter students of diverse backgrounds. Self-Discovery is a

four-step pedagogical technique which, if properly implemented by instructors, has the power to uncover, break-down, re-educate, and rebuild stronger society members and better future educators. Pre-service teachers who participate in diversity courses that implement Self-Discovery or a similar method of “critical self-inquiry” will not only exit teacher preparation programs with a better understanding of themselves, but with a genuine understanding of and appreciation for their future students, larger society, and all of humanity.

It cannot be emphasized enough that Self-Discovery as pedagogy should have its definite place in pre-service teacher education programs originating at universities, vocational institutions, or at any venue where individuals are training to become educators. Future teachers must be aware that issues in diversity and the techniques associated with teaching students from diverse backgrounds do not fall secondary to content learning. If anything, it must first be said that regardless of the grade level, content area, or demographic region in which pre-service educators hope to teach, understanding and appreciating issues in diversity will not only be relevant, but salient and necessary for practical classroom success. The current state of affairs in higher education does not reflect the critical nature of diversity learning as the cornerstone of pre-service teacher education (Ladson-Billings, 2000). For Self-Discovery to be adequately and widely implemented on campuses, multicultural education instructors must first believe that educating pre-service teachers about diversity issues is a top priority. Furthermore, the diversity instructor himself or herself must also *undergo* or be fully *willing to undergo* the process of Self-Discovery for any degree of diversity learning to occur. Current courses in diversity and multicultural education at the collegiate level ordinarily mandate a

simple review of relevant literature concerning minority groups, gender-based theory, socioeconomic status differences, and issues in historical racism and current societal prejudice (Bennett, 2003). The optimally effective method of teaching issues in diversity, however, includes a proper balance of emphasis on these important facets as well as on each student’s metacognitive Self-Discovery process.

The operational definition of Self-Discovery can best be summated as a “metacognitive process” that, when used in conjunction with the coordinating pedagogical strategy in any post-secondary course on diversity or multiculturalism, encourages pre-service teacher education students to “think about their thinking” (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2004). Self-Discovery is a method and collegiate teaching style that prompts pre-service teachers to constantly discover and reflect on the way they conceive other members of society who are not like themselves, be they children, colleagues, or people they meet on the street. Self-Discovery is both a process and a framework for instruction. The process of Self-Discovery for pre-service teachers includes four stages that all students may or may not fully complete. The pedagogical framework underlying Self-Discovery requires the instructor to understand the process well enough to guide students through each phase of Self-Discovery as both individuals and as a group. To understand this progression for both student and instructor, let us first examine the prerequisite settings and four phases of Self-Discovery.

The first and most difficult stage of Self-Discovery is “Discussion / Invitation to Attack.” The precondition for this initial phase is that both the multicultural education course instructor and students must be willing to enter a psychological setting and the ensuing discussions that address issues

of diversity, culture, race relations, and societal injustice. Racism, sexism, classism, and various forms of discrimination are all topics that have long been regarded as “taboo.” They evoke strong emotions, anger, shame, guilt, sympathy, and disgust. For most, discussing such topics is an arduous and uncomfortable task to be avoided at all costs. The nature of collegiate-level diversity and multicultural education courses, however, should be to delve deeply into difficult topics that most individuals choose not to acknowledge, and certainly not to discuss. It is, therefore, the onus of the instructor to create a safe, nonjudgmental, and confidential environment in which to open such discussions. A student’s willingness to discuss sensitive diversity issues and to enter this first phase of Self-Discovery will depend largely on the ability of the collegiate professor to make everyone in the course feel at ease with the idea of sharing, being disagreed with, and possibly having their ideas labeled as politically incorrect or outright prejudiced – all for the good of their teaching in the future, as well as their ability to function in society today.

In the “Discussion / Invitation to Attack” phase, the instructor and students must ask themselves a series of important questions: Today or in the future, am I willing to: (a) share my personal experiences and long-held beliefs about individuals and groups who are different than me?, (b) have someone disagree with my statements?, (c) consider views that may vary or run counter to my own?, (d) participate in open dialogue where I must speak *and* listen?, and (d) defend my personal views and opinions if challenged?

In the opening days of any collegiate course on multiculturalism, instructors may choose to “invite their own attack” or “break the ice” by sharing anecdotes of their personal encounters with biases, stereotypes, or formerly held beliefs that may have

rendered them prejudiced in the past. For Self-Discovery to occur, it is preferable that instructors take the lead in offering this sensitive and well-reflected-upon information for students to hear, absorb, form opinions about, gather insight from, and most importantly, to learn from, so as to avoid similar pitfalls in their own future teaching experiences. An instructor who models comfort and openness in sharing personal experiences will very likely incite his or her students to do the same. For students to enter the “Discussion / Invitation to Attack” phase of Self-Discovery, therefore, it is important that the diversity instructor ask himself or herself each of the aforementioned questions and answer in the affirmative. And then, even on the first day of such a course, students will begin to romance the idea of being open, honest, and willing to discuss tough issues with themselves and eventually with others.

Some instructors may choose not to share personal anecdotes, and that is to be respected. In this instance, it is helpful to show films, share stories, read testimonies, or invite guest speakers (perhaps even students who are ready to share their own experiences at this early stage) to encourage discussion and give students important information upon which to reflect. The purpose of introducing these personal encounters with bias, stereotyping, or prejudicial treatment is to prompt students to consider alternate perspectives for how persons, even their fellow classmates who are different, may be experiencing education, work, and life in American society. Thus, if the instructor is uncomfortable sharing his or her own stories, all is not lost. Many more stories of misfortune, mistreatment, and misunderstanding lie waiting to be told. Students who are just beginning to engage in the process of Self-Discovery, therefore, need not buy into the concept via his or her

instructor alone. Rather, what is most important is the students' willingness to receive new information from other individuals who maintain different vantage points within the same society. From whom the transmission of viewpoints comes is irrelevant. What truly matters is that these diverse viewpoints and thought-provoking life experiences are presented to students for deep analysis, objective critique, and maximum impact on the formation of their opinions.

The second phase of Self-Discovery is the "Admission / I Am Not Immune" stage. Here it is the instructor's onus to not only share alternate beliefs, experiences, and encounters with multicultural faces and situations, but also to critically reflect upon and qualify those events. For example, while teaching the Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching and Learning course at Kennesaw State University, I once shared a personal story about my Thai immigrant mother as an exemplar of a topic. The students and I were exploring the concept of being and feeling "other," or the problem of having to identify yourself and being treated as anything "other" than a White/Caucasian member of the dominant majority group in America (Greene, 2000). I willingly shared the story of how my short, "slanted-eye" mother would sometimes pick me up from school, bring food or goodies for special events, or carry in a change of clothing if I ever wet my pants as a child. I explained how I would always ask her to park behind the school, wait outside in the hallway, or leave my clothing at the front office and not enter the classroom at all. Since I am darker, have coarser hair, and was generally accepted as being "just Black," I did not want my classmates to see the short Asian lady whom I called, "Mom," or to ask me questions about her, my heritage, or my family afterward. It was much easier to be "just plain Black" than to have to explain why a

short Asian lady was visiting the school on my behalf. I shared with my students that I was outright ashamed of my mother, embarrassed and confused about my mixed racial make-up, and unwilling to discuss any of that with my peers. At that class meeting, I expressed that I had personal experience with our newly-defined term, "other," and I was bold enough to explain how feeling the effect of that term was totally unnecessary and absolutely changeable within our ever-diversifying, increasingly pluralistic society. And gladly, because I took the first step in explaining my own experience with that cultural tragedy, I quickly saw several hands go up. My students were bubbling over with desire to share similar stories. I had done it. I had built the bridge — this important walkway over which we would all need to travel in order to fully understand this nasty term "other," and more importantly, how to abolish it. At that very early point in my course, I myself had passed through the second phase of Self-Discovery and was fully intending to take each of my students along with me.

After the triumph of entering the "Admission / I Am Not Immune" phase of Self-Discovery, students will ask themselves several questions regarding their level of comfort with unadulterated disclosure. They will also begin to consider the idea that they, and indeed no one, are "immune" from harboring harmful and incorrect beliefs about themselves, individuals, or entire groups. They enter the first step of *discovering* that every member of society is subject *to* and suffering *from* misinformed and discriminatory ideologies such as self-hatred, superiority, or good old-fashioned ignorance about the "other." The difficult questions that invite this honesty and admission include: (a) Can I share my personal experiences, beliefs, and true feelings regardless of the consequences?, (b) Can I admit to myself and others that I

may harbor self-hatred, bias, prejudice, or even hate toward a certain group?, (c) Is this a “safe” and “contained” enough environment for me to share painful or telling anecdotes?, (d) Am I willing to accept that I can now qualify my perceptions as biased miscalculations?, and (e) If I am open and honest with my instructor and classmates, will something positive result?

Crucial to entering the “Admission / I Am Not Immune” phase of Self-Discovery is the instructor’s creation of a “safe” and “contained” class setting in which everyone feels as though they can be honest. The term “safe” refers to there being no negative consequences to a student for sharing a sensitive story. There must be no repercussions for that honesty by assigning lower grades, supporting negative class dynamics (encouraging peer condemnation and ostracism), or by treating students poorly after incendiary verbalizations in class. If a student shares that he or she regularly refers to Hispanic migrant workers as “Wetbacks,” for example, the instructor should reinforce that admission, discuss the issue, and disallow harsh judgment from classmates who are outraged. This class “safety,” created and preserved by the collegiate instructor, is vital to the second phase of Self-Discovery.

Equally important for encouraging the second “Admission” phase of Self-Discovery is “containment.” Before completely opening up verbally, students will ask themselves,

“will my statements be kept confidential and private enough to remain with my professor and classmates and NOT travel with me outside this setting?” The answer should be a resounding “Yes.” Collegiate professors must respect the confidentiality of the important and personal information students will be willing to share, analyze, and hopefully alter. It is an absolute mandate that instructors remain objective,

professional, and that they keep classrooms “contained,” or as airtight spaces devoid of scandalous “leaks.” When instructors in such courses are fortunate enough to engage pre-service teachers in open dialogue about culture, race, religion, and other extremely taboo subjects, they need to carefully handle such sensitive material with the utmost respect and care.

The goal of creating a relaxed, nonjudgmental and “safe and contained” atmosphere for pre-service teachers is to encourage them to think about their preferences, dislikes, and genuine distastes for working with certain types of students and families as educators. Inevitably, the teacher of today (and tomorrow) will continue to encounter an increasing number of students who are unlike themselves. Gomez (1996) accurately notes that most current teachers in the United States are “White, middle-class, English-speaking people” (p. 111) who have great fears about teaching “other people’s children” in general (p. 109). By creating an environment within the context of a pre-service teacher program that encourages future educators to express such thoughts and fears in an open forum, we can combat the problem of being afraid of “other people’s children,” or students of diverse backgrounds, one college course at a time. Thus, it is imperative that we “catch” possible mistaken, discriminatory, and prejudiced opinions before we ever unleash poorly prepared, non-reflective pre-service teachers on society. It is essential that we prompt teachers to explore their biased beliefs *before* they set foot in a classroom. Future educators may have insecurities about teaching students with disabilities, children who are racially different, or interacting with school families and colleagues of a different social status (Banks, 2001). As a result of entering phase two of Self-Discovery, pre-service teachers are not only asked to confront their taboo

thoughts, but are prompted to consider the consequences of carrying those ideas into a classroom, imparting those beliefs on a young mind, and worsening an already tainted society. In the “Admission” phase of Self-Discovery therefore, pre-service teachers share their faulty fears and views, see that they are not alone in holding them, and ultimately realize that everyone is biased in some way. No one is “immune” from the deleterious effects of misinformation, stereotyping, and superiority mentality regardless of which cultural group they are a part.

Once pre-service teachers have embraced the idea that every individual is biased toward or against others, and most importantly, that they are no exceptions, both the instructor and group can proceed to the third stage of Self-Discovery, which is “Accommodation / I Must Change.” The term “accommodation” is lifted directly from the work of Jean Piaget, who defined this important element of learning as changing one’s cognitive structure or thought process to adapt to new information about the environment (Vasta, Haith, & Miller, 1995). The “Accommodation” stage of Self-Discovery is crucial for pre-service teachers because it not only encourages inexperienced teachers to take in objective information concerning destructive beliefs about individuals who are different, but also propels them to alter those specific beliefs, and to subsequently adopt a general mentality of change. The process of receiving new information, considering its value in their lives, and converting that value into meaningful change prepares teachers for lifelong learning. The process of accommodation, just as developing children experience it, requires constant self-reflection and mental modification. In order to begin this process of accommodation and change, however, students must first ask themselves the following questions and

answer in the affirmative: (a) Am I more aware of the feelings and life experiences of others?, (b) Do I accept that racism, sexism, classism, and various forms of discrimination have existed in the past? (c) Do I accept that racism, sexism, classism, and various forms of discrimination still exist?, (d) Am I convinced that members of society who do not look, speak, or act like middle-class, able-bodied White men have a different life experience?, and (e) Do I want to stop partaking in commonly-held beliefs that are inherently biased?

In the “Accommodation / I Must Change” phase of Self-Discovery, students are called to critically consider alternate viewpoints, different perspectives, and altogether disparate “worldviews” that do not coincide with their own. In this stage, the notion of “worldview,” or the lens through which each of us views society based on our individual experiences and social, moral, religious, educational, economic, or political beliefs shared with those belonging to our own cultural group, is explored in depth (Sodowsky & Johnson, 1994). At this critical point in Self-Discovery, pre-service teachers have discussed their beliefs and biases, been honest about their genuine feelings toward those who are “other” and “other people’s children,” and in this phase, hopefully begun to develop negative opinions about discriminatory beliefs and seriously want to change them. It is so relevant, therefore, to refer to the Piagetian concept of “accommodation,” or the taking in of new information and using that information to form new thought patterns around what is true and correct, in the Self-Discovery process. The ensuing “I Must Change” attitude, then, is an eye-opening breakthrough for both professor and student. Instructors can finally conduct discussions about sensitive issues such as affirmative action, institutional racism (Daniel-Tatum,

2000), and the culture of poverty (Payne, 1996) in a way that is fair, balanced, and not dominated by long-held discriminatory beliefs or strong, one-sided emotion.

One of the primary goals of the “Accommodation / I Must Change” phase of Self-Discovery is to convince pre-service teachers that all differences in individuals are not always appreciated in American society. In this phase, students begin to fully understand that dark-skinned Mexican children who do not speak English are having a different and challenging experience in American schools. Those little Black boys with corn rows, gold teeth, chains around their neck, and sagging pants are receiving a different and possibly sub par education. Those girls in Math and Science classes are having a different, and sometimes limited experience in those fields...and if they grow up and apply for an employment position, they will only make \$0.76 on the dollar when compared to male applicants (ABC News, 2004). That a Korean student somewhere, anywhere in an American classroom is constantly being referred to as “Chinese,” and is rebuffed by teachers when he underperforms in his Math class. All these stories are true somewhere in America, and the “I Must Change” attitude they develop as a result of experiencing Self-Discovery will gradually obliterate such overtly biased behavior one class, one student, and one teacher at time.

After passing through the preceding phases of Self-Discovery, students and instructors will likely reach the fourth and final stage, or “Proaction / I Will Do My Part.” In this exciting end-state, both students and instructors alike will feel compelled to take “proaction,” (proactive action) against biased ideas, societal injustices, and prejudiced individuals. Having discussed, admitted, and accommodated information regarding the current state of affairs in schools,

communities, and society at large, pre-service teachers and their classroom leaders will discuss ways to stamp out the various forms of unfair and unequal treatment of the diverse group of individuals residing in America and attending American schools. Taking “proaction,” therefore, will consist of pre-service teachers proactively seeking out information about youth culture, racial minority culture, female culture, bisexual/gay/lesbian culture, obese culture, disabled culture, regional culture, urban/rural/suburban culture, and all other groups for which there is a specific culture. At this point in Self-Discovery, pre-service teachers will have learned that what is more important than identifying and understanding the subcultures, or the array of specific groups to which all individuals belong, is emphasizing the “culture of humanity” in their classrooms, schools, and surrounding world. For example, students will have had the opportunity to express and openly admit their concerns for working with certain types of young children and their families. For most pre-service teachers, they will be children and families who are most unlike themselves – someone with a different skin tone, an accent, ornate hair, almond-shaped eyes, or tattered clothing. At this point in Self-Discovery, however, future educators will be able to appreciate the differences they were once afraid of, and to pursue opportunities to treat all future students as “students,” regardless of their physical, psychological, or situational attributes.

In the “Proaction / I Will Do My Part” phase of Self-Discovery pre-service teachers will learn to actively seek out the “humanity,” or commonality in children and families that anyone can share irrespective of their looks, attitudes, or social class. One of the primary foci of Self-Discovery overall is to encourage pre-service teachers to realize that everyone is a thinking, sentient,

and sensitive human being, and that similarity should be their main emphasis in the classroom, in their communities, and in general. Pre-service teachers should take away from any collegiate course involving Self-Discovery that anyone can be a loving mother, a caring sibling, a hard worker, or a student in need of nurturing in a school setting. They will need to internalize the importance of their role in society as the professionals who shape young minds into those who will either be culturally aware and compassionate members of society, or disgusted and disenfranchised victims of injustice. In this culminating phase of Self-Discovery, the future educators of tomorrow will proactively create and implement ways to develop anti-discriminatory views and unbiased teaching practices that work to stamp out the unfair and unequal treatment of any student, family, or citizen they encounter. They will learn to break down and resist stereotypes, to avoid racist comments and refuse to participate in conversations that degrade or unduly criticize one group, to actively pursue making right the wrongs of discrimination when they see it, and finally, to carve out a space in each of their future classrooms where this very same Self-Discovery dialogue can successfully take place. Pre-service teachers will take on the attitude of “I will do my part” to ensure that with each passing day, our society and education system becomes more fair, more effective, and places more of an emphasis on humanity than any other civilized nation in the world.

In the year 2050, racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants will comprise over 50 percent of the nation’s workforce (Henderson, 2000). To adequately provide quality educational experiences for the children of those minorities and immigrants, it is vitally important that post-secondary institutions that educate pre-service teachers

take Self-Discovery as a part of diversity learning to heart. Training a legion of multiculturally aware teachers who have had the opportunity, at some point in the pre-service teacher education programs, to experience Self-Discovery is the most important mission of teacher education programs today. Collegiate instructors, backed by their teacher-training institutions, must take the lead in addressing the crucial issues of diversity awareness, multicultural sensitivity, the celebration of individual differences, and the emphasis of collective humanity. If we do not seize the opportunity to implement Self-Discovery or the processes by which serious critical self-inquiry can occur, we stand to lose the battle of retaining quality teachers in education systems, serving the vast and growing number of multicultural students and families in America, and uniting our entire nation around the common goal of celebrating individuality, uniqueness, and common humanity. If we do not encourage instructors of multicultural education courses to at least consider asking their pre-service teachers to critically investigate what ideas and beliefs lie at the core of their hearts and minds, we are denying future educators the important opportunity to discover their true selves before stepping into the world of education.

Shakespeare’s Polonius wisely and responsibly counseled his son on the absolute necessity of understanding yourself before ever hoping to understand or “be true” to all others. With the use of Self-Discovery and an emphasis on diversity learning in collegiate settings, we can equip and empower every individual with this same truth before sending them out in classrooms as purveyors and perpetuators of destructive beliefs, discriminatory teaching practices, and disharmonizing societal goals. Self-Discovery, I contend, will not only armor each newly-trained teacher with the

self-knowledge they need to be an effective and progressive educator, but also with the truth they need to be a warrior of real and necessary change.

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