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Taking Stands for Social Justice

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Abstract

In this paper the authors describe efforts to help students take a stand for social justice in the College of Education at one predominantly White institution in the western Rocky Mountain region. The authors outline the theoretical frameworks that inform this work and the context of our work. The focus is on specific pedagogical strategies used with teacher education students who primarily were from monocultural (Euro-American) communities in their preparation for diversity and equity in multicultural America. The authors describe these strategies and themes that emerged from student responses. These themes included the value of seeing things from different perspectives, recognition of White privilege, and the role of power in schooling. The paper is concluded with broad questions and implications for research and teaching for social justice.

Introduction

American public education is under attack. Part of the attack is effort by the political right to dismantle public education while simultaneously supporting “faith-based” private and charter schools. The other part of the attack is the documented failure of public schools to address substantial concerns especially around meeting the academic and educational needs of students in urban areas and newcomer (immigrant) students (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

This latter challenge is partly a result of the fact that many teachers come from suburban, Euro-American cultural backgrounds of privilege. These privileges are

understood vis-à-vis a neo-colonialist ideology wherein they come to believe in a divine right (manifest destiny) of their status and the benefits therein. Conversely, this ideology positions ethnic minorities (and all others considered “different”) as the marginalized, deficit-filled “Other” in need of saving (if only these “others” would just embrace middle-class, White cultural and linguistic orientations). This ideology serves as the framework for public policies that push against the cultural and linguistic capital of the “Other.” Anti-bilingual education propositions (successful in such linguistically diverse states as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts), anti-affirmative action policies, and anti immigration policies (to name just a few) are evidence of public policies working to further existing marginalization and racial castification (Trueba, 1993).

The strength of a neo-colonialist ideology is in the ability to enforce subordination not by way of physical domination (occupying armies, for example) but by way of mental domination (Euro-centric worldviews and ways of life, for example) (Macedo & Bartolome, 1999; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). The power of an ideology that undergirds this mental domination as it is translated into public policy is described by Sampson (1993):

Dominant groups have the material power to make reality fit their ideas: less dominant groups become the reality the ideas suggest. In other words, for the dominated groups, the idea is the reality. What is said and thought about them becomes the reality of their lives, because those who have the power to say and think also have the power to construct the world in that image. (p. 27)

Further solidification of this ideology comes by way of deflecting analysis and critique away from social and political systems of group conflict. Instead an “individualist” orientation wherein success or failure is purely a product of human capital (e.g., individual effort, merit, and talent) is reified. Therefore, for the many people (dominant as well as dominated) who have internalized racist ideologies, any analysis based on a socio-political framework that makes explicit and challenges the underlying ideologies that undergird the caste-based system, is difficult to understand (let alone to inspire to transform). Asking Euro-Americans to question the very system that provides them with superior status and innumerable privileges or to consider giving them up in the service of equity is a nearly impossible task. Likewise, it is difficult to get prospective teachers to acknowledge the limitations of their own cultural and social experiences when considering educating students from marginalized communities (Brady & Kanpol, 2000).

Schools serve as agents of the state and have changed in response to differing political agendas historically (Spring, 2001). Thus, rather than being immune from racist ideologies, schools convey values and worldviews in their role to “socialize” people to the dominant cultural and political perspectives of those in power. This dominant ideology is transmitted through the physical structures of the buildings, the administrative policies, the explicit and hidden curriculum, the kinds of school

programs offered (or not), etc. Significantly the dominant ideology also rests inside the perspectives of the teachers who transmit this ideology as it was transmitted to them as they were socialized within school settings.

Recent efforts aim to broaden educators' perspectives about teaching the "Other" in the hope of increasing academic achievement of students from marginalized communities. These efforts happen in both preservice and inservice professional development experiences. For example, many Colleges of Education (COE) use multicultural education requirements in their teacher credential program to attempt to expand educators' perspectives. However, it is clear that many of these efforts have varied impact given the interaction of the students' (often problematic or superficial) understandings of diversity and the quality of the multicultural teacher education experience. The challenge of having a robust multicultural teacher education experience with students who are "open" to transforming their worldview is substantially difficult.

This has led Tellez (2002) to suggest we forgo the goal of multicultural education. He argues that as most programs are currently configured, attempts by novice teachers to "do diversity" are superficial (at best) and end up violating the integrity of the very students multicultural education intends to help. Additionally, the structure of these requirements (for example only one three-credit hour class) can often be problematic. Sleeter's (2001) review of teacher education programs shows that these requirements, via this structure, are marginalized and marginalizing. However, some of the best efforts seem to be those aimed at activity and effort at the university level, at the level of the COE, at the level of programming (especially field experience requirements), and then, within specific classes, at the level of curriculum, instruction, and classroom climate (Sleeter, 2001).

The challenges described above are multiplied when they are employed in predominantly White institutions (PWI) with students who have not had substantial interaction with people of color prior to their arrival to the university. These challenges are multiplied further in COEs when the number of ethnic minority faculty is minimal, where real, sustained contact with ethnic minority students is significantly limited, and where institutional structures and the ideologies that guide them contain racist assumptions. Questions of how to prepare this next generation of teachers in these contexts given these challenges are at the forefront of the thinking of teacher educators who care deeply about equity and justice.

This article will describe efforts to help students take a stand for social justice in the College of Education at one PWI in the western Rocky Mountain region. This paper will focus on specific pedagogical strategies that might make a difference for teacher education students who mostly come from monocultural (Euro-American) communities in their preparation for diversity and equity in multicultural America. We describe the theoretical frameworks that inform this work and then detail the context of these initiatives. We describe the specific strategies we have employed in one class and uncover themes (with examples of student responses) of student

thinking spurred by those strategies. We end with broad questions and implications for research and teaching for social justice.

Theoretical Framework

Since we are guided by multiple theoretical frameworks, the specific pedagogical interventions we describe here are best understood as the result of a hybrid theoretical orientation. This hybrid theoretical orientation helps us to think through the specific contextual features (both facilitative and debilitating factors) vis-à-vis our efforts to create transformative experiences in teacher education. It begins with postulating our efforts to promote social justice in teacher education. For us, social justice is at the intersection of efforts to advance equity and diversity in schooling within the precepts of this nation's democratic ideals (Parker, 2003).

The hybrid theoretical orientation is best described as "pedagogy of the Other" (Kanpol, 1992). The intent is to connect people in ways that allow them to understand difference and similarity as well as to hear other voices as part of an effort to struggle/construct a human cultural transmission. The hope is to highlight challenges to equality, justice, and liberty (with difference at the center) as part and parcel of a larger struggle toward the dynamic democratic ideal (Parker, 2003). In essence, we agree with Laclau and Mouffe (1985) who assert that discourse and imagination of the democratic ideal serve to advance a counter hegemonic ideology. We hope that our preservice teachers can then transfer these understandings to their own students. We assert that this pedagogy of the Other is rooted in both questioning and critiquing existing social structures but also is rooted in a new, hopeful vision of the possibilities inherent in an emancipatory politic (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

For us, embedded inside this is multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2003) within a critical and liberatory perspective (Darder, 1997; Nieto, 2003). The major curricular content is aimed to help students understand how oppression (based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability) has played itself out in society (generally) and schooling (specifically) (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Central to this aim is seeing things from multiple perspectives. This is especially critical when the opportunity for real interaction with the "Other" is lacking. Equally important within this curriculum is effort to help our students "think deeply about structures that continue to produce disparities" (Brady & Kanpol, 2000). The other curricular emphasis is focused on understanding how oppressed groups have resisted the oppression they have experienced. Connected to this is the story of their allies (especially, people who have taken a stand against social injustices). In this sense, we are guided by a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1994). Thus, a key part of our curriculum efforts is developing skills for social action.

Also informing our practice is critical race theory (see, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995 for its historical foundations and application to education). To help understand the ideology of the supremacy of Whiteness, critical race theory urges the use

of narratives. As described by Villenas and Deyhle (1999), “Through the stories of ‘raced’ peoples, we see how the daily indignities take their toll on the integrity and livelihood of people of color” (p. 414). Thus, for our work, narratives play a central role in our curriculum and instruction.

Equally important for us is how we urge our students to use these stories in critical dialogue (Noddings, 1992). In this regard, we are informed by a socio-cognitive theory (Vygotsky, 1993) embedded within a caring curriculum (Noddings, 1992; for a review of the connection between the two, see Tappan, 1998). We wish to engage our students in dialogue (as transactional phenomena) with the people whose lives they come to understand, inquiring into their perspectives, experiences, and feelings. In this way, students cannot see themselves as passive outside observers but rather must consider their own active engagement in meaningful interaction with the “Other.” The hope is for the development of an ethic of social care (with its cognitive and affective implications).

Context

The study took place in a comprehensive, land-grant university in the rocky mountain west. It is located in a rural community (population, 30,000) with a student population of 12,000. The ethnic minority student population is less than 10 percent and the number of ethnic minority faculty is approximately 10 percent. The diversity efforts at the university and college of education have been described elsewhere (Trent, Rios, Antell, Berube, Bialostok, Cardona, Paradis, & Rush, 2003).

The college of education has nearly 50 tenure track faculty. The teacher credential baccalaureate program is described as “field-based” since students gradually increase their work in schools as they progress through the education program. The college has been a leader on campus with respect to diversity and has a focus on “access to quality K-16 education.”

A newly created class, Education for Social Justice, was offered in the fall of 2003 in one department within the COE for incoming students to meet one part of the university’s core requirements. As most of the students were in their first semester in college, this was their first education class. The intent of the course was to introduce students to the “intellectual” community of the field of education. Of the 25 students enrolled in this class, 18 were from the rural state in which the university is located and 20 were female. One student was American Indian/Native American, one was Alaskan Native and two were Latina. All of the students were in their late teens/early twenties except for one woman in her mid-thirties. The course was team-taught by a male, tenured professor in the department who is Chicano and one female, graduate student who is Euro-American. As teachers and researchers for this study, this represents for us the scholarship of teaching.

At the beginning of the class, we met to discuss the aims for the course. Given that this was the first time the course was taught, there were many possibilities. As

discussion proceeded, we asked ourselves what we hoped our students would walk away having learned as a result of taking this class. The four aims we developed are described as follows:

Thinking critically—Students must recognize that there is value in thinking critically and that there are many frameworks for thinking critically;

Building empathy—Students' lives are enriched by associating with people whose experiences in life differ and coming to understand this difference;

Understanding oppression—Oppression plays a role in the lives of others in many forms and privilege is an outcome of this oppression; and,

Embracing agency—People can make a difference in combating, resisting, and coping with these oppressions.

The course outline stated these four aims in the form of questions to be raised during the course. The text for the course was an edited volume by Julie Andrewjewski, (1996), *Oppression and Social Justice: Critical Frameworks* (5th Edition). The class met twice every week (15 weeks) for 75 minutes. We met in the university laboratory (K-9) school lunchroom.

Assignments and Activities

The course was set up to meet the “introductory research” requirement for the university so a central activity for the course was scaffolded assistance to produce a research paper with a social justice topic. In addition, we asked the students to produce an autoethnobiography (guided, in part, by O'Donnell's, 1998, description). At the end of the course, students had to produce a final reflection on what they had learned. Other assignments consisted of “quick writes” to start the class connected to a topic or to end the class to gauge student responses to and reflection on the activities of the day.

We did a variety of activities in the class that were consistent with the pedagogy of the Other (as described above) that we sought to employ. These included a poem and short description of “Where I'm From”, the simulation “Star Power” (wherein one group is chosen to “make the rules” for the game and do so in a way that privileges them leading others in the game to disengage or sabotage it), and guest speakers from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender group on campus. We did one “Take A Stand” activity where students stood along a continuum (agree/pro to neutral/no comment/uninformed to disagree/con) as we advanced questions around gender issues, forcing students to take a stand, allowing them to see the differences of perspectives, having them articulate their position, and (frequently) asking them to describe the viewpoint of others who differed from them on that issue.

The focus of this paper, however, is on three specific activities and the database

(student reflections) they engendered. The three that we detail in this paper are the Level Playing Field (guided experience), Little Rock Nine (role play), and Reformed Schools (role play) (Bigelow, 1996). We describe each briefly, share emergent themes identified from the database (see Table 1 on the themes in relation

Table 1
Relationship of Aims of Course with Emergent Themes by Activity

<i>Theme—Activity</i> (<i>LPF or LR9 or TTT</i>)	<i>Goals</i>			
	Thinking Critically	Building Empathy	Understanding Oppression	Embracing Agency
New awareness of differences among people - LPF	X	X	X	
Recognition of privilege - LPF	X		X	
Differences matter in terms of social inequality - LPF	X	X	X	
Differences are not always evident - LPF	X		X	
Value of seeing a different point of view – LR9	X	X	X	X
New awareness of the extent of racism - LR9	X	X	X	
Difficulty/Ease of taking another’s perspective – LR9	X			
Personal positionality impacts response to reforms - TTT	X	X	X	X
Schooling is connected to power/money - TTT	X		X	
Money, power, position determine whose voice is heard - TTT	X	X	X	
Role playing illuminates the theoretical framework - TTT	X		X	

LPF = Level Playing Field
LR9 = Little Rock Nine
TTT = Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line

to the aims for the course), and then share samples of students' comments as exemplars of those themes and that bring them to life.

Methodology

There were two major data sources for our analysis: (a) the data generated by students in our class, particularly in their written texts and observations; and, (b) our field notes, observations, and memos which included our observations and interpretations of activities and actions of students. To analyze all of the data, we initially employed an emergent, grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As our initial examination was anchored in the specific data sets, in a meeting we asked, "What is in this material?" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 59). We wrote each of the themes that had emerged from the analysis on a chalkboard and examined their range. The themes that emerged were discussed, questioned, clarified, and melded to develop more robust, appropriate categories. In our axial coding we noted repeated patterns and identified categories and conditions within the data. We mapped the data back to these themes for final definition, clarification, and re-coding. We now share the activities and emergent themes identified.

Three Activities

Before describing each of the three activities and their emergent themes, we detail some guidelines¹ that informed much of how we engaged in these activities. It is important to note that we did many "community building" activities in the first few weeks of class; developing a sense of community was, for us, an absolute prerequisite for the intensity of activities we were to engage in later. We also think it is critical to point out that the social perspective taking activities were part of the course that included readings, videos, discussions, speakers, course assignments, etc., that also emphasized and reinforced the key principles we addressed around social justice in schooling.

First, before beginning any of these experiential activities, we sometimes provided a theoretical framework for students to consider (for example, levels of racism from Scheurich & Young, 1997) then asked students to see if they could "experience" the dimensions of the framework as it played itself out during the activity. Second, we were conscious and sensitive to the roles we assigned students. Student characteristics such as self-image, self-reflection, and empathetic ability were considered when making such assignments. Third, we gave students a moderate amount of contextual information about the setting and the "characters;" as Bigelow (1996) instructs, you want to provide just enough information for participants to be able to assume the role but not too much that their imaginations are not engaged. Fourth, we provided an opportunity for students, once they received their role, to discuss it with others who shared their role (What might this

person think and feel about what's going on? Why might they think/feel this way? What would this person want to accomplish in this situation?). Fifth, during the role plays, we wanted the students to engage in "dialogue" with their character in different ways such as talk show format, poem for two voices, town hall meeting, writing a letter, etc. Sixth, we challenged and questioned everyone (even those whose position we agreed with).

Finally, we always assumed that the debriefing afterward was essential for the learning as well as for getting students "out of character" so that the feeling of community would not be jeopardized by what someone said or did during the activities. We did this by having students fill out debriefing sheets following a common (though not consistent) pattern. It included:

- ◆ responses from their role (What did the character you play think/feel/do? Why?);
- ◆ responses from their own personal perspectives (What experiences have you had that mirror this situation? What would you have done in this situation? How would your response differ if you were....?);
- ◆ responses about what they learned from the role play (What was the most important thing you learned from this role play? Which aspects, if any, of the theoretical framework did you see in the role play?); and,
- ◆ responses about role-playing (What did you like/dislike about this role play? How might you use this role-play in your class?)

We did this symbolically by physically mixing and moving the students out of their seats where they were playing a role to other seats in the class midway through the activity debriefing.

Level Playing Field: "Like Getting A Math Problem Right"

The third week of the class we conducted an exercise called "The Level Playing Field." The goal is to offer a graphic representation of the roles oppression and privilege play in each of our lives. Students lined up along one even horizontal line in an open pasture. Fifty different questions were asked and students were instructed to take a step forward for questions representing a "privilege" (such as "I had my own room") or backward for questions representing an "oppression" (such as "My ancestors were described as uncivilized barbarians"). At the end of the questioning, we asked the students to stop and look around to see where people stood along the oppression-privilege continuum and to note their own place along that continuum. Then they were asked to run to see who would be first to get to a bench that was about 30 yards away in the direction of the most privileged students of the class. The students at the front and the middle of the group ran while the ones in the back stayed in place. We then

returned to the classroom and debriefed the students via discussion and written response.

For the written response, we asked students to imagine the very front of the group as being at 100 on a scale, the middle at 50, and the very back as at 0 and to locate their position on the scale by choosing a number between 0 and 100, tell where they were and how they felt about where they stood. We asked them to respond to the questions: “What does this tell you about difference?” and “What did you learn from participating in this activity?”

The dominant theme (based on number of respondents) in their ratings had to do with recognizing the differences among people (generally) and within the class (specifically) along the oppression-privilege continuum. A male White student near the front of the line said, “I realized that there is a lot of ethnic diversity in this classroom. This activity showed me that people with different backgrounds had somewhat of a harder time growing up” (TQ). One White, female student in the middle of the continuum described it this way:

I learned that there are many people that come from different backgrounds. I also learned that we are all here in this class, but some of us had to work really hard to get here and others their parent paid for them. I also noticed that the people in the back didn't run, while the people in the front were the first ones to start to run. (TN)

As we hoped, the second theme spoke to student recognition of how privilege played out in their lives. One female, White student near the front described it this way, “I felt very privileged that I was where I was because of what I have been through and where I came from. At the same time I felt selfish when I saw that some one so far away just because of *little things* you can't help or change” (DI). This female, White student offered the following:

Every time I took a step forward I felt good, like I was getting a math problem right, but I kept leaving more people behind, so it was sad too. I kept getting the things I needed, but I couldn't share them with anyone. (KT)

A third theme was students' recognition that these differences matter in terms of social inequality. A Native American (female) student close to the back described it this way, “I was one of the last ones so that means that I was oppressed more than everyone else in my class. I learned something I already knew. I'm oppressed due mainly to my race!” (SD). But a White (female) student close to the front made the same observation, “I learned that society is racist even if people say it isn't. I learned that we are not all equal like the United States says we should be” (LE).

The fourth major theme in students' responses dealt with the fact that these social differences are not always “visible” in terms of skin color, clothing styles, etc. Echoing the first theme described, this female, White student near the front stated:

This experience has shown me that even in a small group of people these differences vary extremely. Everyone has different background, ethnicities, religions, etc. and

it's hard to see it unless we're given such a good visual aide. I really enjoyed this activity because it allowed me to grasp a different perspective. (LX)

Another female student (Latina) close to the back of the continuum said, "I learned that race doesn't always mean someone is being oppressed. Financial situations can also effect people. I think that you can never know someone's story until they tell it to you" (ST).

Two final responses are noteworthy. The first student (White, female, near the middle) comments about valuing difference, "There is difference all around us. We all have experienced different things and we have learned from them. I also learned that the world isn't always accepting of difference. We are all different and that's okay" (FM). The second student, however, discounts difference altogether and the social inequalities therein. For her (White, female, near the middle), "individualism" is the difference:

The way I see it, everyone has been oppressed in one way or another....I think that difference isn't as big a deal as people think. I don't think I'm better or worse off than anyone because of my background, just my actions. (BD)

Little Rock Nine: "Stand Up When Others Are Too Afraid."

The class viewed a portion of the "Little Rock Nine" video from the *Eye on the Prize* series. This documentary recounts the experience of the nine African American students who integrated the high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 as well as the responses from the groups that contributed to the event. Students were assigned different roles: members of Little Rock Nine, members of the angry mob, the President of the U.S., the governor of the state, national guardsmen, and White allies of the students. During the simulation of the event, each person playing a role was interviewed by a "talk show host." In the debriefing students were asked to respond to their experience in writing. Many of the responses below were in answer to the question, "What is the most important thing(s) you've learned as a result of this role-play?"

A theme frequently expressed by the students was that there is value in seeing a different point of view. As a female Native American student expressed:

The most important thing that I learned was that people had a very hard time accepting these things and the hardship these nine students went through. I was glad that we did this because I myself never knew what the 'Little Rock Nine' were. (SD)

Many commented upon their new awareness of the extent of racism. CD, a female White student wrote:

I have learned that the more I learn about Whites and how they treated people of different backgrounds, it makes me sometimes feel bad, and it makes me very angry that whites feel that they are superior to every race or background. I feel that this is wrong.

In response to the question, “What’s the most important thing you have learned as a result of this role-play?” the male Alaskan Native student in our class responded, stated “The extreme extent of racism” (EA).

Another of the main themes echoed by students was that through this role-play they were able to take another person’s perspective, although the ease or difficulty of doing so was influenced by the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the viewpoint of that role. The woman quoted above also stated, “. . .I am grateful for this role play. It made me see different views.” A young White woman commented, “You have to look at all subjects in different perspectives. Think about how you would feel if the roles were reversed. And sometimes change can be a good thing” (ET).

Some students also believed that everything is okay now. One female, White student commented, “that [in] today’s society every person is treated the same. Color is not really a problem anymore.” Another White (female) student wrote, “Schools are now fully integrated.”

Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line: “We are the norm.”

The third activity we describe is the role-play (modified) “Testing, tracking, and toeing the line” (Bigelow, 1996). Preceding this discussion was a description of the four levels of racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997): individual, institutional, societal, and civilizational. The activity begins by creating five community groups: corporate executives, middle class, unionists, Black activists, and Hungarian immigrants. Each group is told to create a vision for schooling for their children. They then have time to go and see if they can create alliances with any of the other groups. The next phase of the activity is a “community forum” wherein they believe that they will share their vision with the new superintendent. However, the new superintendent does not give them a chance to share their vision. Instead, after acknowledging the corporate executives and middle class members who were on the superintendent selection committee, the superintendent lays out a vision for the district consistent with the values of the corporate executives (mostly) and middle class (moderately). The reforms include using Euro-centric standardized tests, tracking students into manual occupations, eliminating “ethnic” clubs, establishing English-only instruction, etc. The superintendent “leaves” and the assistant superintendent stays to begin the debriefing. As might be expected, the corporate class and middle class are pleased while the other three groups are feeling marginalized. We end with moving people out of their groups and having a whole group debrief with written responses.

For this activity, students were asked to describe their role. They were asked if they’d experienced any of the reforms suggested, which (if any) of the levels of racism were evident, what their role would be in combating these kinds of socially oppressive reforms (and if it mattered if their child was privileged or not by them), and their overall response to the role-play.

A major theme discussed by the students was how their personal positionality impacted how they would respond to the reforms and whether they would challenge reforms that created inequality. Typical of many, this student (White, female, in the role of Black activist) said, "If my child had an advantage I might not care as much but I would still want equal rights for every child" (OO). Another student (female, White, as a unionist) described it thusly, "Yes, everyone wants the best for their children. Someone may feel that things needed a change, but it isn't likely they will be the one behind the change" (BD).

A second major theme was that how "schooling gets done" is connected to power and money. KT, a White female (corporate executive) said this about that connection, "I learned that schooling is really political and money plays a big role." One male student (White, Middle Class character), said, "It's all about politics and money" (KC).

The third major theme was that money, power and position are most evident in whose voices are heard and included. One student (Alaskan Native), a male in the role of a Black activist) said, "I felt I got the short end of the stick. Now, we Black Activists didn't get much say in anything" (EA). Another student also identified the role of voice, but in this instance how her voice is privileged as a Middle Class representative (female, White), "I didn't agree with the position that I held so it was harder to defend it. I didn't say much. Middle class people don't have a voice. We don't need one. We are the norm" (ET).

The final theme was that students were able to see the connections of this role-play to the theoretical perspectives we presented at the outset. DE, a White female who played a Hungarian immigrant, described what she learned from the theoretical perspectives, "I learned that societal/epistemological racism influences are more powerful in "schooling" than individual perspectives." More specifically, KT (a White, female playing the corporate executive) said:

Societal and epistemological racisms did play a large role in this exercise. If the tests were meant to separate the students according to race, than societal definitely came into play. If the white majority doesn't believe Mexicans are important to teach, then something is wrong.

Discussion

We offer some key observations that come from our own experiences during the class, during these role-plays, during class discussions, and evident (sometimes) in their written responses. We share a few specific thoughts about role-playing and then some about the class atmosphere that emerged as a result of these (and other) activities.

We note that the main themes identified support the original major aims of the course as discussed earlier. Table 1 is a matrix categorizing the major themes as they relate to these major aims. We are pleased but not surprised that students would be

identifying key concepts related to the course aims given our intentional planning and choice of activities.

A second observation is that the power of role-playing comes from the way in which it engages the heart, mind and body (via actual movement within the activities) of the participants. One student (White, female) commented on the emotional aspect of the role-play, “I think that role-playing really helps bring emotion into the learning. It makes a person more committed to a subject and possibly learn more about a subject” (DE).

A third observation is that there were a range of responses for each activity (what we presented were the dominant themes by number of respondents in Table 1). We noticed, for example, in an analysis of the range of responses on the Level Playing Field (see Table 2), differences both in the number of responses received per theme but more importantly nearly 15 different responses. Table 2 demonstrates responses qualitatively that range from understanding issues of oppression and social injustice to those that hark to meritocracy as a dominant value.

The classroom atmosphere was characterized by openness and truth telling. Part of this stemmed from the openness that marked the role-playing. We surmise that by playing in role, students voiced their latent views they really held, had those views challenged by way of multiple points of view being presented, yet could do so without feeling personally attacked (the fallacy in thinking was the character’s, not the

Table 2:
Range of Responses to the “Level Playing Field”
Social Perspective Taking Activity

Theme	Number of Responses*
New awareness of differences among people	12
Recognition of privilege	11
Differences matter in terms of social inequality	7
Differences are not always obvious	6
People have experienced oppression	5
Feel helpless/guilty about social differences	5
Individuals can accomplish anything	2
It depends on the “era” you grew up	2
We can’t control oppressions/privileges	1
I can see multiple perspectives	1
Need to learn from peoples’ experience with oppression	1
People with “privileges” ran when prompted	1
Minority students were in the back	1
I felt inferior	1
Total Students**/Total Responses	24/56

* Any one student’s responses usually communicated more than one theme

** One male student was absent.

student's). At first some of the comments were disturbing (one usually quiet female student, for example, commenting that women would be raping men, in equal numbers to men raping women, if they had the physical wherewithal). Later we came to appreciate the depth of honesty that was being expressed especially as we saw students' challenging each others' viewpoints and their openness to our viewpoints.

These activities also proved themselves to be generative and transformative. For example, when three of four groups presented on some dimension of oppression, they used some variation of social perspective taking activity that required students in the class to take an alternative viewpoint. They were also transformative (consider several of the students' comments above). One student for example related how the readings on oppression associated with sexual orientation were difficult for her but that she was learning substantially. She also challenged students in the class to watch their language especially with the common phrase "that's so gay."

We were pleased with the results yet we realize that there are still issues to address and questions to be answered. For example, we felt that there were several students who were angry as a result of what they were learning, resulting in strained relationships, and others who resisted learning outright. We also wonder if students were being honest and truthful in their responses to our prompts. No doubt, sometimes students tell teachers what they think the teachers want to hear. We have not fully developed the social action skills (especially around developing an advocacy orientation) and this is a limitation of our work to date. We spent only two whole classes discussing alliance building and attempting to foster agency. Note in Table 1 that only two dominant themes that emerged speak to this aim (partly a response of the activities we chose to describe herein).

A whole cluster of questions emerge about the limitations of playing a role. One such limitation is the lack of explicit discussion we had with the students about the difference between "being the person" and "playing the role of another." Indeed, while no one suggested to the students that this role-playing had anything more than just an "as if" quality to it, we believe we need a more explicit discussion about the privilege and ability to move in and out of a life marked by oppression (as in role-playing) and the inability to do so in real life (as with ethnic minority people in a racist society). In a related way, we struggle with the potential that these role-plays may trivialize the real, deeply negative experiences of people of color; we believe that the "seriousness" with which we engage these activities may mitigate against this trivialization though acknowledge the potential.

With respect to the questions that beg answering, we wonder which students have made the greatest movement toward a social justice orientation and what were the critical moments in the class for them toward that goal. We also wonder what the impact of this class was for the ethnic minority students within the class. Finally, we ask what the long term influence of our work will be given the students' movement into a teacher education program where issues of diversity are dealt with in an uneven fashion and often within a hegemonic framework.

We do not want to be optimistic about the results we report here. Indeed, several students have been outwardly resistant and hostile to our work (fortunately, they are the minority). Several students seemed to have not made much change in their thinking or actions. The importance of this cannot be understated. Thus, we would recommend that the instructor new to dealing with student resistance around issues of racism begin with activities least likely to engender strong negative emotional reaction but “work up to them.” Additionally, observing those instructors who negotiate student resistance effectively is also suggested. Getting that person to mentor/coach through those initial efforts would be an ideal.

Even for those students who have exhibited a social justice orientation, we acknowledge that they may have brought to the academy a strong foundation for a critical perspective around issues of difference. Certainly other courses the students were taking play an important role (at the mid-semester debrief, several students mentioned a social justice theme throughout their courses). Thus, thinking organically, we recognize the need to have many elements working toward the goal of taking a stand for social justice for real, robust, and enduring change to take place. We hope our work has moved many of these students along the way.

Notes

¹ We offer these guidelines as we have, over the years, come to employ them. We urge you to consider which, if any, of these guidelines serve you in implementation of social perspective taking activities.

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