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ARTICLE

In the spirit of self-assessment: Critical engagement and moral agency in pre-service teacher education

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Introduction

As multicultural education has evolved over the last five decades, it has markedly shaped the lexicon of the discourse about culture and education. Notable periods of sea change include the conceptualizing of “multiculturalism” as primarily multicultural education; and the moving away from multicultural education as solely ethnic studies (e.g. Hispanic, Black/African American, etc.) to “multicultural” meaning a diversity of cultural groups. In this manner of use, “diversity” is defined as race or ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Presently, the educational field generally conceives of multicultural education as pedagogical, curricular and policy “transformation” (Banks and Banks, 2003, p. 25) through reforms (Ladson-Billings and Tate, IV, 1995) that promote broad inclusion of these diverse groups.

One way in which we have seen the significant influence of multicultural education’s account of diversity has been in the priority that standards of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) gives to this formulation. In its year 2000 policies, NCATE (2001), the primary accreditation body of teacher education institutions, codified diversity as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, exceptionalities, geographical area and gender. In NCATE standards three and four, engendering equitable education for all of America’s children is the criterion by which NCATE evaluates institutions of teacher preparation across this country.

Under the NCATE standards regime, the pre-service teacher is expected to develop the expertise and professional character consistent with promoting diversity, an educational good. Standard three calls for the design, implementation and evaluation of clinical practice and field experience for the development of “knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for all students to learn” (NCATE, 2006). For the experiences and practices of standard three, standard four attends specifically to goals of inclusiveness, with respect to the markers of diversity (ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area). The goal is for pre-service teachers to become practitioners, equipped to help all students achieve academic success.

In my view, aspects of the NCATE standards regime raise some theoretical questions about its consistency with giving support to the moral agency of pre-service teachers, an educational desideratum for teacher education. I believe that because of NCATE’s authority and attendant influence, institutions accountable to NCATE must be engaged in ongoing self-assessment about the cogency of those standards. My paper is in this vein. Questions that I believe that standards three and four in particular raise are the following: To what extent are pre-service teachers being held to given moral principles in being required to exhibit recommended dispositions, and if they are, is such accountability morally legitimate? These questions about the ethics of teacher preparation raise another issue: If promoting diversity in the NCATE sense is in keeping with the highest ideals in education, doing so may assume values and principles that are criticizable.

The thesis that I am putting forward is the following: Considerations about the moral agency of pre-service teachers arise in complying with NCATE standards three and four because they presuppose particular moral claims in promoting diversity-friendly dispositions. In my view, not critically evaluating these moral presuppositions, as teacher education programs seek to meet these standards,

would constitute a lack of critical engagement with the moral agency of pre-service teachers. Merely meeting NCATE standards would then not be sufficient for acceptable multicultural education. Direct discussion of presupposed moral principles would also be needed as an additional condition.

I offer two arguments for the priority of critical engagement with the moral agency of teacher candidates in multicultural education, or in any course that has the aim of meeting NCATE standards three and four. One argument is theoretical and is from the demands of the internal consistency of moral commitments, which means that subscribing to a moral principle is to hold it without contradictions. Applied to teacher education programs, to validly promulgate principles on the basis of which we promote diversity is to be obliged to hold such principles all the way down. I argue that critical engagement with the teacher candidate embodies this consistency. The second argument, which takes into account the nature of the practice of teaching is from the relevance of intergroup conflict to applying the moral principles underlying diversity programs. Preparing teachers for the diverse schooling environment in American society means antecedently adjudicating intergroup conflict along the fault lines of diversity. I argue that by encouraging the reflection inherent in critical engagement, candidates can better negotiate this conflict. Finally, I also propose a way to promote dispositions that fosters the desired critical engagement with teacher candidates.

The Argument from the Internal Consistency of Moral Commitments.

The argument from the internal consistency of moral commitments maintains that to hold a particular value is to hold it consistently across all of one's projects. A premise of this argument for fostering the critical engagement of pre-service teachers is that generally accepted moral principles in teacher education such as social justice, equality and fairness motivate the priority given to diversity. To be consistent, pre-service teachers must be treated in ways that are in keeping with those values. In my view, to not attend to critical engagement with the moral agency of teacher candidates is inconsistent with values such as social justice, care and equality. First I will elaborate upon the moral principles that are incumbent in the priority that NCATE and the educational bodies it accredits give to diversity. Then I will discuss the implications of this precedence given to moral principles for teacher education.

The Argument

That moral principles motivate diversity and inclusion in the NCATE regime is evidenced in the rationale for this standard. In the "Supporting Explanation" for standard four, the NCATE document states the following:

America's classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse: more than one-third of the students in P-12 classrooms are from minority groups. The families of an increasing numbers of students are immigrants, many with native languages other than English and from diverse religious backgrounds. Growing numbers of students are classified as having disabilities. At the same time, minority teachers are less than 15% of the teaching force. As a result, most students do not have the opportunity to benefit from a diverse teaching force. Teacher candidates need to develop proficiencies for working with students from diverse backgrounds and with exceptionalities to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn. (NCATE, p. 35, 2001)

This explanation shows that the statistics about the changing demographics of American society are to provide justification for accommodating diversity.

The moral principles that motivate diversity in standard four emerge in the move above, from the data about the growing diversity of society to an obligation to promote equitable and inclusive education. Such a move is termed the "demographic imperative" in current literature (Lowenstein, 2003). I would

formulate the demographic imperative succinctly as the following:

Because of the rapidly changing make up of American society, there is an urgent obligation to promote diversity in areas of teacher education to impart intercultural competence with the goal of fostering more inclusive, culturally relevant K-12 education (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 1999; Zeichner, 1996a).

For NCATE, enacting multicultural reforms in such areas as curriculum, pedagogy, and policy is meant to follow from the demographic imperative.

I would argue that although moral principles of promoting equity and diversity are not inherent in the data about the growing diversity of society, they are presupposed in the very assertion of a demographic imperative. The move from data to a call to action constitutes an imperative, but without an implicit or explicit moral premise, obligations consistent with promoting equity and diversity cannot be legitimately derived merely from the data. Statistics about the changing demographics of American society are objective statements of facts that on their face do not entail a given, mandative attribute.

If the data alone do not imply any given values, it follows then that it is possible for a hearer of claims about the increasingly multicultural makeup of the United States to impute to the data a range of implications. Whether the data intimate a directive of a given nature is a function of the hearer's values, prior experiences and other beliefs. That the notion of a demographic imperative is presently operative as an ideal in pre-service teacher education suggests that there are similar broadly held principles and values being presupposed.

Because the statistics about the changing face of America are merely descriptive, mandates for equity and diversity within the demographic imperative have prescriptive and moral status. Candidate moral claims, such as respect, the care we owe each other in communities, and the character traits of the kind of people we want to be, underwrite the case for more inclusive education. Teacher education for social justice also exemplifies one strong moral program for multicultural education in teacher education. Defenders of the social justice view, such as Cochran-Smith (2004) and Gollnick and Chin (2005) characterize the issues raised by diversity as a matter of addressing a primarily political problem of social justice. For these scholars, social justice provides the moral framework within which educational policy and practice may be normatively evaluated.

The argument from the internal consistency of moral commitments maintains that to value moral principles such as care, social justice and equality as immanent in the demographic imperative means that, as a matter of consistency, those principles have implications for how teacher preparation programs impart this mandate to all pre-service teachers. Those very values and principles demand that pre-service teachers be treated as moral agents.

To only impute the demographic imperative in teacher education is to treat pre-service teachers as merely objects for the transference of values. Having one's moral agency acknowledged is, in Paolo Freire's (2000) sense, akin to being treated as a "subject," who must come to have his or her own convictions. In a Kantian moral framework, agents can only self-impose moral rules that are internally generated. As members of the teaching community, treating candidates as Noddings' (1984) "cared for one" involves fostering their self-directed inquiry and critical reasoning. Each one of these frameworks grants the agent the status of moral actor, in which conscious, informed choices are the standard of agency.

The kind of view of the teacher candidate that is compatible with moral agency is one that encourages autonomy rather than conformity as an orientation in one's education and future profession. One way

of fostering this kind of self-governance is through reflection. Zeichner (1996b) and Schon (1983) present seminal accounts of how pre-professional education can create an environment for reflection. Zeichner's work explores the meaning of the term, "teachers as reflective practitioners," (p. 201) in which teaching practice involves an ongoing self-assessment. Relatedly Zeichner decries reform efforts in education that treat teachers as "passive implementers" of other people's ideas (p. 201) and rejects policies that involve uncritically foisting reforms onto candidates. To treat pre-service teachers according to the demands of treasured moral principles means, therefore, that we cannot impose the very moral principles we advocate upon them, even for weighty and important goals such as the demographic imperative.

Practically, pre-service teachers as moral agents means that candidates must be critically engaged with those values that underwrite the demographic imperative and be won to diversity or multicultural education by the weight of the reasons in its favor. For example, in the case of social justice principles, the argument from moral consistency maintains that teacher education cannot advocate social justice in one sense and yet not in the other by holding this value dogmatically, where pre-service teachers are concerned. Although social justice is a broadly held value, the derivative judgments that follow from assent to social justice are not all the same. The action that one person may view as following from social justice may not be the one that another person believes does so. More importantly, for the thrust of this paper, it would be self-refuting for social justice principles to be imposed upon pre-service teachers. On this view, the recent NCATE action to clarify the significance of social justice for the standards is a well-based retrenchment rather than a cowardly retreat. It is a move that should open discourse rather than the converse.

The Implications

What implications, then, does the moral mandate presupposed in the demographic imperative have for pre-service teacher education? I believe that one upshot is the need for inquiry into the kinds of moral premise that support the demographic imperative. Cochran-Smith (2004) describes these kinds of principled questions in education as being about "ideas, ideals, values and assumptions" and questions of "ideology" (p. 145). Cochran-Smith maintains that multicultural teacher education answers these questions either implicitly or explicitly, and that more often than not multicultural teacher preparation provides unstated answers that perpetuate the undesirable status quo of culturally close-minded teachers, by default (p. 145).

The argument from the internal consistency of moral commitments maintains that teacher education institutions should abide by moral principles of promoting equity and diversity that they promulgate in the demographic imperative. The NCATE standards, which have the expectation that pre-service teachers will develop those traits that are in keeping with promoting diversity, raise questions about the consistency of teacher education institutions. Consistency issues arise in terms of whether teacher education programs are adequately attending to the said principles by seeking uncritical compliance to NCATE standards. I would argue that successful multicultural education should take fostering the critical agency of the pre-service teacher into account. In this form of multicultural education, values are made explicit and are considered criticizable, even as the overall goal is promoting diversity and inclusion.

The Argument from the Existence of Cultural Conflict

There is a second reason why teacher education should attend to the critical engagement of pre-service teachers, particularly with respect to values implicit in the demographic imperative: the existence of intergroup conflict in education. Such conflict takes many forms. Despite being a culturally uniform society in the anthropological sense, there are deep sub-cultural differences that lead to profound

schisms in our society. One example is cultural conflict in terms of race and ethnicity that roughly maps onto conflict along socioeconomic lines.

One reason cultural conflict occurs is, in Lisa Delpit's (1995) account, because the prevailing beliefs of the majority are norms against which minority cultural views are measured. The power and privilege of the majority compound the conflict by engendering the systemic marginalization of minorities. This form of cultural conflict is exemplified in the area of religious differences. In my multicultural education courses at a mid-size, Mid-western university, typically 95% of my students express deep religious commitment to the Christian faith. Further, their demographic is consistent with studies (Zeichner, 1996a) that show the typical teacher candidate to have limited intercultural experiences. They are not only deeply religious, but ill-acquainted with religious diversity.

For my students, religious convictions influence and shape beliefs across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines so that their religious faith can be the most authoritative belief in their lives. The depth of the belief can therefore place them in conflict with other prevailing religious views. Further, religion can bear on diversity issues of many kinds. One of the primary areas of diversity that religious beliefs influence is in regarding sexual orientation. Some pre-service teachers hold religious beliefs that constrain their justification for dispositionally accommodating differences across sexual orientation. While the typical preservice teacher of my institution tends to understand her professional obligation to teach all students, the student typically does not view her professional responsibility in the light of a morality that accepts all sexual orientations.

The clash of cultural beliefs and the social consequences are particularly prominent when pre-service teacher education seeks to promote the advancement of minority religious or racial and ethnic interests to the majority. For the member of the majority, who may even be well meaning, fostering diversity raises questions such as, What is to be my position with respect to minority cultural beliefs that are in conflict with my own? Which of my own beliefs must I change and on what basis? How important are these beliefs to my identity?

In the case of race and ethnicity, the conundrum of the majority pre-service teacher who meaningfully confronts the cultural beliefs of the minority is akin to the search for white identity described by Barbara Applebaum (2000). Applebaum distinguishes a "positive, white anti-racist identity" from whiteness "as a system of dominance." Gary Howard (1999) also chronicles his search for non-racist identity as partly constitutive of locating aggregative cultural claims. It is in the search for a positive, white identity that the majority pre-service teacher renounces racism and privilege but may still struggle with reconciling specific claims attributed to a minority group with his or her own. Concomitantly, the presence of privilege can mean that there is minimal motivation to alter one's deeply held beliefs.

A second reason that cultural conflict occurs is because as Appleton (1983) claims, there are limited resources in society. This cause of cultural conflict is related to the first in that power and privilege influence the distribution of resources; however, in the cultural conflict over resources, acting on the basis of self-interest is particularly salient. In education, this scarcity is profoundly evident. Webster (1997) argues that in the absence of criteria for evaluating beliefs, considerations of self-interest prevail. Webster in his manifesto for returning intellectual standards to a paramount place in multicultural initiatives claims,

Teachers cannot become empowered, if they disregard the need for reasoning within intellectual standards or conceive their role as preparing their student to celebrate *their* group culture. Such students will hardly be interested in knowledge of "other cultures." They would become agents of social justice only in the sense of demanding their group's ascendancy, or equality, in

occupations and consumption patterns. Thus the core feature of “bourgeois society”---the reduction of human endeavors to a pursuit of commodities—remains unchallenged . . . (p. 9)

Webster maintains that social justice unfettered from any critical, justificatory rationale leaves only competition as the basis for intergroup relationships, because one group would be seen as gaining an advantage over the other in our highly competitive society. Indeed, recent research into white students’ response to educative experiences meant to foster appreciation of diversity suggests that prudential concerns sometimes obscure the value of multicultural education (Li & Lal, 2005; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005). It is not unusual for pre-service teachers to register negative attitudinal shifts in valuing multicultural education by the end of the course. The different kinds of cultural conflicts and their differing motivations suggest that critical engagement with the teacher candidate will have to provide some criterion on the basis of which the candidate can wrestle with the conflict. This topic is the subject of the final section of my paper.

Conclusion: Promoting Diversity through Critical Engagement

In many ways, much of what I have been arguing in terms of promoting the critical engagement of pre-service teachers appears to already be the intent of courses designed to meet the standards and dispositional requirements of NCATE. For example it is not unusual to find sections in many multicultural education textbooks under the heading of “Thinking Critically,” or to find liberal use of the term “critical thinking.” Further, these texts generally encourage the kind of reflection in which the candidate examines his or her cultural belief, taking into account issues of power and privilege. Such texts provide ample cases of historical hegemony and oppression as grounds for rethinking cultural identity. As an instructor of such a course, I present much of this kind of information to my students.

In my view, however, to comply with the demands of the moral agency of the candidate, more is needed for critical engagement with pre-service teachers than challenging their cultural beliefs. As I mentioned earlier, critical engagement takes the form of awareness of oneself as being a moral agent and being empowered to subscribe to principles that are self-imposed. For the teacher candidate from a minority group, critical engagement means ceasing to view oneself as merely oppressed and marginalized. For the candidate from the majority group, critical engagement means conceiving of an identity outside the boundaries of privilege. Generally these reflective exercises in the various texts provide no substantive, consistent account of what is meant by critical engagement beyond contesting privilege and power.

To compound the misconceptions about this kind of critique further, many textbooks **advocate** cultural relativism, the view that standards of right and wrong vary from culture to culture. One particular textbook refers to cultural relativism as a matter of merely being open-minded about other cultures (Gollnick and Chin, 2005), whereas if cultural relativism is true, then no cultural values, regardless of how heinous, are criticizable. Authors of these kinds of texts seem to encourage the critical engagement from the positionality solely of the minority culture to the majority culture

For all of this attention to reflection, I would argue that critical engagement of pre-service teachers involves not only creating the reflective conditions for scrutiny but also addressing the criteria on the basis of which the scrutiny takes place. Doing so appeals to notions of reasons, evidence and warranted beliefs versus unwarranted ones, terms typically associated with critical thinking. However critical thinking need not be revived only in terms of elitist assumptions about absolute truth. Elsewhere I have argued that identity group membership can give access to good reasons, which can be the basis for critical discourse about reconciling conflicting cultural beliefs (Fraser-Burgess, 2005). Here critical thinking involves an acknowledgement that there are objective criteria for truth, but that warranted beliefs are epistemologically global. On this account of critical thinking, pre-service teachers attempt

to make sense of all of the beliefs presented at the proverbial table (Bailin and Siegel, 2002).

For this picture of critical thinking, one of the wonderful advantages of multicultural education is that it presents the opportunity for many kinds of cultural beliefs to be represented. The pre-service teacher, then, is in a position to be critically engaged across diverse cultural groups. The goal is have well-supported beliefs, surrendering those not held for the best reasons. Critical engagement with pre-service teachers fosters another desideratum of education: candidates who hold their beliefs on the basis of evidence of all kinds, such as their experiences, experts or those they have come to trust. The benefits of having such candidates are exponential in that they go on to foster the same kind of thinking in their classrooms.

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