

# READINGS OF DIVERSITY FROM AN UNDERGRADUATE FOUNDATIONS COURSE

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## The Insights of Four Undergraduates and the Implications for Teacher Education<sup>1</sup>

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by Karen Lowenstein

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### Preservice Teachers and K-12 Students: What Is the Demographic Imperative?

One critical rationale cited repeatedly throughout the teacher education literature for why we need some form of multicultural preservice teacher education is what many have called “the demographic imperative” or “the demographic data” (e.g., Chisholm, 1994; Colquett, 1999; Hopper, 1996; Kennedy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Melnick, 1994; Paine, 1989; Zeichner, 1996). This imperative or data, familiar to teacher educators and educational researchers, continually notes that the typical teacher candidate is female, in her twenties, White, and from a lower middle to middle income background.

It is crucial to recognize these characteristics of future novice teachers because they do not match those of many of our students, particularly within our nation’s urban schools. Generally, the prospective members of the teaching profession speak English as their first language, progressed through schooling already familiar with its literacy

traditions and practices, and essentially were successful students in school (Florio-Ruane, 1994).

On the other hand, “...not only are [current K-12] students likely to be multiracial or multiethnic but they are also likely to be divided along linguistic, religious, ability, and economic lines that matter in today’s schools” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 14). This disjunction between future teachers and K-12 students has implications for the construction of any teacher preparation program.

### One University’s Teacher Education Program: What Are the Implications of the Demographic Imperative?

One does not need to look too deeply into the teacher preparation program within which this study is located to see the strength and resilience of the demographic imperative. Recognizing these demographics today remains crucial for several reasons. First, we need to examine the recruitment practices of our program, and make the recruitment of teachers of color a priority. Second, we need to recruit more teachers of color into our doctoral programs and hire more teachers of color into our education faculty to increase the numbers of teacher educators of color.

Without the knowledge and contributions of diverse teachers and teacher educators to conceptualizations and instantiations of both K-12 teaching and teacher preparation programs, we will not be able to create a profession that adequately serves our diverse student population (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Third, the demographic imperative urges us to examine how we address issues of diversity within our teacher preparation program (Chisholm, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2001; Melnick & Zeichner, 1994; Zeichner, 1996).

Though each of these three implications merits consideration and action, the study reported in this paper attends to the third concern by examining undergraduates’ perspectives regarding my efforts as a teacher educator to scaffold their learning about diversity.

### Preparing Our Preservice Teachers: What Do We Ask?

Given the characteristics of our teacher candidates, we usually ask questions such as: how can we prepare teacher candidates to envision how different their students may be from them and how unlike their students’ schooling experiences may be from their own? What kinds of assumptions do teacher candidates have about children

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who are less economically advantaged, speak a different first language, and face myriad racial barriers? And, how can we as teacher educators help teacher candidates become more aware of these assumptions?

Paine (1990) describes a sense of “urgency” regarding these considerations “as schools grow more diverse and our teaching population does not” (p. 2). To address these kinds of urgent questions, multiple bodies of work have emerged in the field of teacher education.

### **Multicultural Education: What Has Been Examined?¹**

Although there is a major consensus that the demographic imperative indeed exists, there are many ways teacher educators and others have supported addressing it. This important work includes conceptualizations of multicultural education, programmatic instantiations of multicultural teacher education, ideas about pedagogy, and teacher educators’ own self-study work. Teacher educators and researchers have noted that there are varying conceptions of what multicultural education is, in terms of how each names and enacts school-wide and societal goals, who the target students are, and what curricular practices and instruction look like (Banks, 1995; Gollnick, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

For example, Sleeter & Grant (1994) characterize five general approaches to multicultural education, all of which aim to address issues of race, class, and gender and some of which address disability, sexual orientation, and language. The broad goals of the five approaches range from teaching those who are different how to succeed in mainstream society, teaching tolerance for all groups, or studying a single ethnic group, to reforming the entire educational process to support diversity, and foregrounding social justice issues and social change in order to reconstruct society and schools. Some teacher educators and researchers have described multicultural efforts at the programmatic level (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2001; Zeichner, Melnick, & Gomez, 1996), and some have detailed a culturally relevant pedagogy or pedagogy for the success of ethnic-minority students in schools (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2001; Nieto, 1996; Zeichner, 1996).

In addition, one aspect of the new scholarship in teacher education in the

last two decades is the growing prevalence of teacher educators researching their own teaching practice (Zeichner, 1999). This research includes studies about the nature of teacher education activities (Zeichner, 1999, p. 8), foregrounding the voices of teacher educators who share their pedagogies, philosophies, and challenges in enacting some kind of multicultural teacher education (e.g., Allen & Labbo, 2001; Chavez Chavez & O’Donnell, 1998; Cockrell et al, 1999; Cochran-Smith, 1995, 2000; Rosenberg, 1997).

The contributions of all teacher educator and researcher efforts to foreground issues of diversity are critical to any advancement of efforts to prepare teachers. What seems largely absent from these bodies of work, however, are systematic studies of teacher candidates’ reflections on their learning about issues of diversity. Despite what has been gained from much of the work on multicultural teacher education, there remains a need to research how learning experiences are interpreted and given meaning by teacher education program participants (Zeichner, 1999). The voices of teacher candidates need to be considered to inform and reform the efforts made by teacher educators to address issues of diversity in teacher preparation programs.

### **Purpose and Contribution of This Study: What Do Teacher Candidates Have To Say?**

Thus, this study explores the following question: How do teacher candidates reflect on their learning about issues of diversity? As a novice teacher educator teaching a foundations course that foregrounds issues of diversity, power, and opportunity in schools and other social institutions, I set out to analyze how the students from my course who are pursuing teacher certification reflect upon their learning about diversity after completing this course.

In this paper, I share my analysis of interviews with four of my former students, foregrounding their voices in order to explore how they make sense of their learning about diversity. After an analysis of the reflections of the teacher candidates, I share some initial conclusions about the challenges involved in teaching and learning about diversity.

Here, I discuss the implications for teacher education, as I describe the tensions that the teacher candidates

foreground and how these tensions complicate my theory of teacher learning about diversity that starts from the assumption that preservice teachers have experiences from which they can begin to theorize about issues of diversity. Before offering an analysis of each student’s interview, I describe the foundations course that the students completed before their interviews, offer a brief introduction of the composition of the class and of the students who were interviewed, and describe the methodology of this study.

### **The Course and the Students: What Is the Context of the Students’ Learning about Diversity in This Study and Who Are the Students?**

Melnick and Zeichner (1994) differentiate between two approaches regarding the teaching and learning of issues of diversity in teacher preparation programs. One is a segmented, single course approach. The other approach emphasizes the integration of issues of diversity throughout an entire teacher preparation program. Melnick and Zeichner (1994) problematize the single-course approach, and also note that this is the most common arrangement for learning about diversity across teacher preparation programs.

A single course approach is the arrangement of my institution’s teacher preparation program. Although teacher educators may address issues of diversity within other courses of the teacher preparation program, explicit attention to issues such as race, class, and gender occurs primarily in the foundations course in which I teach. I investigated my students’ learning about diversity in the context of the one semester-long foundations course approach to diversity in my institution’s teacher preparation program.

Students who envision themselves as elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers, across all subject-matter backgrounds must enroll in this foundations course. The thirty-one students enrolled in my section represented an array of fields that included biology, English, mathematics, history, and music. All were undergraduates, and only two members of the class had been accepted into the college of education before the start of the semester. Twenty-eight of the students were European American, and three were African American.

The students who were interviewed, Andrea, Sean, Adrianna, and Kathy,<sup>3</sup> are all White; three are female. One of the female students, Adrianna, has an elementary school focus; the other three students seek secondary certification. At the time of the course and the interviews, three of the students were sophomores and one student, Kathy, was a senior. Kathy had already been accepted into the college of education before the start of the course. The other three students were applying for entry; two had been accepted by the time of their interviews and one was planning on applying the following year. Their fields of study include music (Andrea), math and international relations (Sean), Language Arts (Adrianna), and environmental science (Kathy).

### **Methodology: Debriefing with Students after the Course Ended**

During this study, I served as both teacher and researcher of the teacher candidates. Over the course of the semester, I kept a teacher journal, audio-recorded class sessions, and photocopied students' major writings. After the course ended, I engaged in what Duke calls, "debriefing" (as cited in Kincheloe, et. al., 2000), as I interviewed former students and asked them how they described their learning about issues of diversity. I asked students open-ended questions during the interviews, which fostered a more inductive process when examining the interview data. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and was transcribed and coded.

As I generated categories based on what the data offered in one interview, I looked to each interview successively to see whether categories held and noticed relationships among the information presented by each student. By a process of induction, analytic categories emerged. Though my analysis draws primarily from data generated in my interviews of the students, triangulation was attained by using data from classroom artifacts and my teaching journal.

### **Andrea<sup>4</sup>- Learning about Diversity as Re-Seeing One's Individual Experiences**

#### **Learning about Diversity as a Music Student**

I am wondering if Black students have the same schooling opportunities as White students with

regards to music...when looking at the people in my own [music] class, I've taken notice that most are White. I think there may be one or two African-Americans, and about three students who are Asian, out of more than probably eighty or so students.

In articulating her learning about diversity, Andrea discusses having the freedom to examine her own experiences and highlights her intellectual exploration of diversity through her increasing awareness of the intersection of race and class within her experiences as a musician and music student.<sup>5</sup> During her interview, as in her statement above, Andrea reiterates much of what she wrote and shared in class discussions throughout the course, wondering about the access to music opportunities for both students of color and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. To describe her learning about diversity, she names the process as a new "consciousness" about her own past and present experiences.

Andrea shares that through the process of consciousness, or recognizing issues of diversity within her own experiences, she began to see herself as a person who thinks and enacts issues of diversity in the world. She describes her journey from "just floating through life" to "an amazing clarity" about her experiences because she says that she is "not just walking through the world not asking questions." She states, "[I am] really examining the world around me, and realizing that I am an active part" in constructing any understandings of issues such as privilege, race, and class. Andrea sees herself as an active meaning-maker and describes clarity about diversity as having many questions about her and others' experiences, questions involving issues such as opportunity and privilege.

Moreover, she shares that she not only has the capability but the responsibility as both a citizen and a future teacher to ask particular kinds of questions regarding things like the relationship between issues of race and class with opportunities in the field of music so that she can work towards changing inequities.

#### **Learning about Diversity: An Individualistic Pursuit**

Andrea reflects, "Because I had all these experiences [in the music department] ...perhaps [learning about

diversity] leads each person to their own independence of thought. You know, you can take your individual processes, and come up with your own conclusions about things." Andrea characterizes her learning about diversity through re-seeing her particular experiences in the music school as an individualistic pursuit. She views herself as a learner who processes her own individual experiences which are experiences that no other classmate shares.

She suggests that her classmates engaged in parallel kinds of individualistic pursuits because their learning was embedded in their own personal experiences. Given that students have different experiences during the semester, outside of the shared classroom, Andrea believes that each student can engage in a kind of individual or independent processing of those experiences using issues of diversity (e.g., race, class, and opportunity) as lenses. Andrea's descriptions of the work of learning about diversity suggest that this learning is highly context-bound.

#### **The Role of Discussion: A Forum for Learning; the Legitimacy of Personal Experience**

Andrea foregrounds class discussion as granting opportunities for students to engage in their individual learning. She states that class discussion "helped a lot, in each person being able to do with it what they want with the information...to take it to where it needed to go." Class discussions were a forum for students to share how they see issues of diversity within the contexts of their lives.

Andrea also believes that class discussion encouraged students to consider both their own and others' viewpoints. She claims that the structure of sitting in a square encouraged students to share their experiences and required students to think and actively engage in discussion; class discussion in the square specifically enabled students not only to raise their awareness of their ways of making sense of the world, but to assess those ways and make choices about what counts as sensible or legitimate.

Andrea outlines, "It [class discussion] made me come up with my own reasons for why I felt this way, which is what I think a lot of the discussion [in the class] did." Change in one's views was also a possibility according to Andrea: "[My views] may have changed, based on what other people had to say

and based on someone else's support of their views...That is a good point, and I should take that into consideration as I am talking about my own [point]."

Andrea seems to stress that students both articulate their viewpoints based on their experiences and evaluate their own and others' viewpoints for the purpose of creating conclusions they can put forth in class discussion. The conclusions students draw, according to Andrea, must take into account the unique contexts and experiences of any individual student.

Moreover, given the context of music education as her realm of experience, Andrea believes that no other students in the class could have countered her ways of making sense of diversity in that realm of experience. She notes, "I felt I had enough knowledge about [music education]. And perhaps part of it was that I had the knowledge, and...others didn't, so...they couldn't counteract me." Andrea's personal experiences carry strong legitimacy, perhaps attributable to her status as the only music student in our class. This notion of authority of experience leads Andrea to consider what she sees as a key dilemma in learning about diversity.

### ***One Dilemma in Learning about Diversity: Considering Others' Ideas and Defending One's Own***

Andrea shares that as she and her classmates engaged in raising their consciousness about how issues of diversity intersect with their lives, they became more certain of the ways in which they articulated their consciousness. This led to what she describes as students speaking more in defense of their interpretations, rather than listening with an open ear to classmates' ideas, and a concomitant "halt" in considering the ideas of others. She also says, "This halt may not be such a good thing." In talking about the solidifying of students' interpretations, she explains,

I think because people perhaps were being more sure of their views almost. People have, now they have their base for why they believe what they believe, and they're more ready to defend them perhaps. Maybe that is not good. Maybe it means we are not thinking so much about the other people's views...But in a way, should we be in a position where we are feeling that we have to defend?

Thus, at the same time that her experiences serve to raise her consciousness about issues of diversity, Andrea deems the notion of finding "solid backing" in order to defend her ways of understanding her experiences problematic. She fears that this might lead to a halt in her own and her classmates' consideration of others' views. She concludes that her conception of learning about diversity stresses individual ownership of ideas, and wonders whether the act of defense is indeed a laudable goal.

In sum, Andrea seems to suggest that both a halt in a consideration of others' understandings and a preoccupation with defending one's ideas can occur as personal experiences are considered when learning about diversity. Personal experiences appear to serve as both a liberating, empowering foundation for learning about diversity as well as a possible impediment to sustaining an open dialogue where different perspectives are explored.

### ***Sean - Learning About Diversity As Learning How To Think***

#### ***Learning about Diversity as a Math and International Relations Student***

The key difference, really, might be that the end result in math is 45, and the end result in international relations and learning about diversity is a page-long of explaining what you think.

Sean draws upon his experiences pursuing majors in both mathematics and international relations as his primary lens for making sense of his learning about diversity. He locates his learning about diversity in the same category as his learning about international relations and social sciences more generally. His distinction between the two kinds of fields, social sciences with other sciences and math, is also apparent in how he describes what counts as legitimate answers in each field.

He shares his belief that "answers" in learning about diversity and other social sciences are "much more open to interpretation" compared with answers in math and hard sciences which are "much more objective...[because] this is the answer to this, and this is the answer to this."

Sean's distinctions suggest that he views concepts in math and science as concrete and indisputable compared with those in social sciences because social

sciences focus more on multiple or different ways of understanding social phenomena. He characterizes learning about diversity as "learning how to think rather than what to think." According to Sean, class discussions, rather than teacher lectures, access the range of students' ideas in a class, thus foregrounding the *process* of learning as critical to scaffolding students' understandings of diversity.

#### ***The Role of Discussion; The Role of the Teacher***

Sean strongly associates the process of learning about diversity with learning through class discussion and emphasizes that the square structure of the seating arrangements of our class fostered discussion. He shares his belief that a class needs to engage in discussion because issues of diversity "really need to be talked through a little bit more," compared with the ideas of a math classroom, in which the math teacher needs to guide students to particular answers.

For Sean, class discussion plays an important role in learning about diversity because he believes that it allows students to notice the range of interpretations within the class; thus, discussion scaffolds students to the particular understanding of the lack of definite answers regarding issues of diversity. Sean seems to conceive of knowledge about diversity as highly interpretive and individually constructed, compared with his more static, objective, and collective conception of knowledge in fields like math.

Sean links his conception of knowledge about diversity through discussion with a particular view of the teacher's role. In comparing his learning about diversity to his learning in math class, Sean comments, "I mean if my math class did that [opened up the class for discussion], I would question the professor's real commitment to his undergraduates' education career."

Sean notes that although the square or discussion format of our class did not render me as the teacher a complete co-participant alongside of the students, I played more of a participant role than an expert or leader role in learning about diversity. He shares,

If it's a square and everyone's sitting there, it is a little bit more clear that there is no one in charge necessarily...People know who's in charge, but it makes it a

much more equal stance. I think the conversation opens up a lot more...Maybe I could almost have a conversation with [name of student in class] across the room and Karen is here, but the conversation is more so between students.

Based on the square formation of the class, Sean highlights the resultant space for discussion where students discuss ideas about diversity with each other, not solely with the teacher. He believes that discussions are richer as a result of students' contributions, as students dialogue around their interpretations of issues of diversity.

He seems to suggest that the teacher should not dominate class discussions because of the need to allow the array of students' interpretations to be heard as a critical part of the process of learning about diversity. This leads to what Sean foregrounds as a central dilemma for the teacher, given the goal that students learn how to think.

#### ***A Dilemma - How Does a Teacher "Lead" and "Let Go?"***

In describing class discussion about diversity as something that occurs not just as interactions between the teacher and individual students but as something between students, Sean highlights that the teacher negotiates the tension of both leading and allowing class discussion to develop from the students' own contributions. He notes, "the teacher is...still playing an important role, leading it [classroom discussion], but at the same time, kind of letting things go."

Sean recognizes students' active engagement with issues of diversity and participation in class discussions as critical parts of the learning process; yet, he also suggests the teacher is a leader in terms of fostering or scaffolding particular directions in which the students should head. He seems to suggest that the teacher continually negotiates the tension between pursuing particular directions that stem from the teacher's leadership responsibilities and particular directions that stem from what students may deem as important considerations.

#### ***Adrianna - Learning about diversity As Not about "Right" or "Wrong" Answers***

##### ***Learning about Diversity through the Sharing of Personal Experiences in Class Discussion***

I think a lot of it [my learning about diversity] came from class discussion...[from] the square...I liked that we could look at each other when we talked...it seemed more of a conversation.

Adrianna believes that the structure of sitting in a square played a critical part in facilitating her learning about diversity. She connects the square seating arrangements of the class with conversation between students, not just between student and teacher, and attributes the conversations in part to the students' ability to see and hear each other. Specifically, the square communicated to Adrianna that learning about diversity involves listening to others who have different experiences than those that she has had; she links the square explicitly to her learning because she says that it enabled her to listen to classmates who share a diverse array of experiences.

In offering a specific example of listening to someone with different experiences, Adrianna explains, "I think that what she [the other student] had to say was really helpful for me because it gave me a different viewpoint." For Adrianna, learning about diversity is about "actually hearing" the different experiences and perspectives of others; she adds that the stories and ideas of classmates who sit alongside of her are a more credible source of knowledge about diversity than course readings.

Thus, Adrianna foregrounds her view of her own and others' personal experiences as a form of highly legitimate knowledge when discussing and learning about issues of diversity. In discussing the process of learning about issues of diversity, Adrianna suggests that students will take away knowledge from others' personal experiences that they have not heard before, filling in the particular gaps in their own experiences.

Accordingly, Adrianna believes that she tried to offer insights to her classmates about issues of diversity if she had particular knowledge about those issues; when she thought that she lacked knowledge on an issue, she listened to others in the class who could offer their experiences. She claims that knowledge

is "offering [her] background" on a topic, or having experiences relating to something and contributing those to the conversation. In her view, a person's experiences cannot be denied; they are valid sources of truth that can inform others who have not had those kinds of experiences.

##### ***No Specific Rights or Wrongs; Just Prove Your Answer***

There was no right or wrong [in learning about diversity], as long as you could back up why you felt like that or you felt like that for whatever reason.

Adrianna shares her belief that in class conversation, as well as in all writing assignments, there were no right or wrong answers in terms of issues of diversity. As long as she and her classmates could present evidence for their points of view, their understandings were accepted by me and the other students in our class. In talking about interpretations regarding issues of diversity, Adrianna explicitly states, "I don't really think that anyone is really wrong or right."<sup>6</sup>

She explains that learning about diversity translates into learning how to demonstrate the reasons for her interpretations; in her view, "In order to be accepted in my papers and class conversations, I had to give evidence. I had to back it up." Adrianna does comment that even if others disagree with her views, at least they can see and accept how she has arrived at her understandings.

Given her interpretation of the lack of "right" or "wrong" answers in learning about diversity as well as the right of all students to explain their own answers, Adrianna explicitly recognizes the multiplicity of particular beliefs and ways of acting in the world. She shares specific examples of these beliefs when talking about being a woman, using herself, her female roommates, and her mother as examples to highlight the multiple ways of being a woman in our society.

She describes her roommates as more feminist than she is and she describes herself as more feminist than her mother. She also outlines the struggle to understand what she might want for herself compared to both what her roommates and her parents want for her as a woman. From these relationships, Adrianna believes that what is "right" for some may be "wrong" for others, and she shares that she tries to act sensitively so as not to offend others, such as her roommates and her mother,

who interpret and enact issues around gender differently than she does.

***A Tension for the Teacher:  
No Rights or Wrongs,  
Yet There Is a "Right" Track***

Although Adrianna espouses a belief that any students can be "right" if they articulate the reasons that guide their interpretations regarding issues of diversity, she also shared that she was confused about my role as the teacher. She says that at first, given her experiences with other teachers at the university, she continually waited for me to enter and control the conversation.

As class discussions ensued and Adrianna observed me listening and taking notes, she shares that she viewed me as a caring teacher, modeling a sensitivity to the diversity of experiences and ideas in our class. However, she explains that she eventually thought of my role as one of keeping the class "on track," by "pulling the class back" and asking relevant and penetrating questions when they "got off the subject" or "got so far off."

She shares, "I thought it was interesting because when the class would get off of the subject, you would bring us back...and you kept asking questions...that are relevant to what we are talking about." Thus, even though Adrianna shared explicitly her belief, "You as the teacher would never say, 'no, that's not right,'" she also shared that my role was one of guiding students along what she labels as a "right track."

Adrianna viewed me as a teacher embracing the multiplicity and divergence of students' ideas; she also seemed to suggest that as the teacher, I had an expertise for scaffolding students to consider their experiences in particular ways.

***Looking across Andrea,  
Sean, & Adrianna;  
Linking to the Last Student, Kathy***

Four interconnected premises can help synthesize what Andrea, Sean, and Adrianna conceptualize as learning about diversity; all three students seem to suggest that these premises for learning about diversity honor or respect the lives and meaning-making of all students.

First, these three students believe that the lived experiences of different people must be valued because they see experiences as critical sources of legitimate knowledge about issues of diversity.

Second, learning about issues of diversity involves a process of understanding, articulating, and possibly defending one's individual interpretations about how those issues play out in one's own experiences.

Third, the three students view sharing the diversity of personal experiences as an integral part of the learning process; an array of understandings across individuals is a natural consequence of class discussions where students offer their own understandings of how issues of diversity intersect with the unique contexts of their lives. In addition, Sean and Adrianna also suggest that across individuals, there are multiple ways of understanding a particular experience (e.g., a particular social phenomenon; the experience of being a woman).

Fourth, for all three students, the purposes of class discussion seem to also revolve largely around the goal of crafting interpretations that can be defended when talking with others.

The three students differ in their assessments of having to defend one's ideas when learning about diversity. While Sean and Adrianna seem to accept having to defend or give evidence to prove one's interpretations as part of the process of learning about diversity, Andrea begins to question the idea. She wonders whether she and her classmates become more unwilling to consider others' ideas, as they become increasingly certain of their interpretations of the issues within their own lives.

The students also comment on my role as the teacher. They suggest that I as the teacher had the responsibility of guiding students to think about and discuss their experiences in particular ways. While Andrea explicitly articulates that I guided her thinking through the lenses of diversity (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.), both Sean and Adrianna name the guidance that I provided more generally. Sean and Adrianna share that it was my role to scaffold students along a particular "track," in teaching them *how* to think rather than *what* to think. However, neither of them offers specific details to describe this "track." Sean also comments on what he perceives as the challenge for me as the teacher to lead and simultaneously allow students to lead the learning process.

Like Andrea, Sean, and Adrianna, the final student, Kathy, also highlights the importance of acknowledging a range of ideas when learning about diversity. However, Kathy suggests that learning

about diversity is not simply recognizing various interpretations of an issue. She believes that in order to engage in the work of learning about diversity, a deeper engagement across different ideas must occur. She also explicitly acknowledges the role that discomfort needs to play when wrestling with divergent ideas.

Furthermore, Kathy questions whether all students' viewpoints were accepted in our class. She characterizes our learning about diversity during the semester as learning about relativism, and she problematizes relativism as a laudable goal.

***Kathy - Learning About Diversity  
As Problematizing Relativism***

***Learning about Diversity  
as an Environmental Science Student***

The conceptual change model is that you allow students, you give students questions that really make them think about topics, in science...And then you give them something that allows them to make observations, a truth that may contradict their prior conceptions, their prior understandings.

To explain her view of learning about diversity, Kathy first draws upon her account of the conceptual change model she has studied in her science methods education course. She believes in this model of learning, explaining that students come to understandings of scientific truths when teachers both take students' ideas seriously and provide educative experiences based on those ideas.

Kathy considers experiences to be educative if they allow students to engage with multiple and contradictory understandings of an issue and then to acquire the correct science understandings. She explains that students will not learn if the teacher insists on "standing up and saying, 'this is the way it should be'" but rather "by 'wrestling with ideas.'" For Kathy, the students' active engagement with new and old ideas also involves the students' discomfort or dissatisfaction with their previous ideas. She believes, "Discomfort is really a part of the [learning] process...You are not completely satisfied anymore with your prior conceptions."

Kathy also outlines her belief that scientific truths are social constructions that change over time. She comments that she wants her students to know

what counts as the current scientific understandings.

She says, "With science, there is a scientific conception and that's very important...I want [students] to know...the scientific explanation. With science, it changes a lot." In wanting her students to know what scientific explanations hold as true, Kathy further explains that her goal for students is to help them acquire what counts as intelligent understandings of science today.

Kathy draws upon these conceptions of learning in science as she discusses her view of learning about diversity. She shares that the first part of the process of learning about diversity is increasing her knowledge of a range of perspectives on many critical issues through discussions with others. She states that our class discussions allowed her to work toward this goal, because through class discussions she was able "to be more aware of the spectrum" of divergent interpretations.

What she sees as the next step in learning about diversity, however, did not occur in our class. According to Kathy, the next step involves discussing how to make sense of the juxtaposition of divergent ideas and pushing towards a state of discomfort. Kathy believes that the ideas in our class discussions "were kind of left a lot of times as 'ok, there's all these ideas; they've been presented.'" She asks, "What could happen as a result of so many ideas, or how could that [range of ideas] be interpreted?" and she stresses that further discussion around this key question was warranted.

Rather than learning as solely a recognition of an array of ideas, Kathy sees a need for collective work that involves discussion concerning how to make sense of that multitude of ideas. She also shares that in learning about diversity, "even in the class, a lot of the things that we talk about, there isn't really an absolute truth" but rather socially constructed truths in learning about diversity which we as a class did not articulate. In sum, Kathy believes that learning about diversity involves delving more deeply into the work of understanding the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives on any issue of diversity. She explicitly states that we did not engage in the critical work of collectively deciding upon truths during the class discussions of the semester.

One issue that Kathy also raises is the amount of time needed to enact what she views as learning about diversity. "We just touched on [an issue], and it

made it, it seemed like...we didn't have the time to consider other perspectives very much, to have a deeper understanding of the issue in general." Kathy views learning as having the time to engage with others' perspectives, and asserts that this was a critical reason for our inability to help each other further our learning about diversity.

### ***Learning about Diversity: The Problem with Relativism***

Kathy stresses, "The answer to learning about diversity is usually relativism." From her perspective, relativism becomes an absolute truth because of our lack of any collective examination of ideas and lack of any naming of socially constructed truths about diversity. In addition, she foregrounds what she sees as the illusion of tolerance that stems from embracing a relativistic stance. She states, "We can present them [all of our different viewpoints] so we are aware of them, but we seemed to be like, 'Oh, well, here's all these viewpoints and look, they all work together so nicely.' But, logically, they don't."

She suggests that while we seemed to believe in relativism as an ideal into which all individuals fit, this is not true. She notes, "To believe in an absolute truth doesn't fit into relativism unfortunately...But we have this idea that relativism is all good and tolerance of every, that it incorporates everybody, but it really doesn't." Kathy problematizes the idea that relativism can claim tolerance for all, when in reality, relativism excludes those who hold particular truths as absolute. Thus, although our class claimed to honor all students' perspectives, Kathy sees an inherent contradiction.

### ***Implications for My Work as a Teacher Educator/Researcher***

My analysis in this paper provokes many questions for me as a teacher educator and a researcher of my own teaching practice. Andrea's insights highlight questions concerning who counts as a knower and what counts as knowing when learning about diversity. Do all students count as knowers? Are all students' ways of making sense of their experiences valid?

Given that Andrea was the only music student in our class, how does this influence both her conceptions of knowers and knowledge about diversity? Is knowledge about diversity putting the

experiences of diverse others together, in puzzle-like fashion? In addition, how does believing that students have to defend their understandings when learning about diversity limit learning and restrict dialogue? Another way of examining the issue of defense that Andrea explores might be through examining the role that uncertainty may play in helping students construct understandings of diversity.

Sean and Kathy draw upon their subject-matter experiences to compare the construction of knowledge within those fields to learning about diversity. This raises the key issue concerning how students' epistemological understandings of various academic subject-matters intersect with their conceptualizations of knowledge about diversity.

Students receive messages about the construction of knowledge and "answers" from all of their classes; how will this shape the lenses that they bring to their learning about diversity and how do I consider this as their teacher? What should count as an answer in learning about diversity? Are all students' answers equally valid?

Adrianna and Sean foreground the issue of what it means to keep a class on "track" as students learn about diversity. What counts as a "track" in learning about diversity? How am I and how should I decide when students' ideas can lead in specific directions worthy of exploration compared with ideas which may be diversions from the real work of learning about diversity?

Finally, Kathy pushes me to ask what it means to scaffold a deeper engagement of multiple and conflicting ideas. What is the role of discomfort in the learning process? What might it mean to collectively understand issues of diversity? Are there truths about racism and power, for example, that I want all students to take away from their learning?

Kathy seems to suggest that it is my responsibility to help students not only articulate personal positions on issues of diversity, but to find ways to compare the various positions so that collectively, we make choices in order to act in the world. How do I help my students think about the choices that they will make as future teachers? What is my role in helping them make "good" choices? How do we consider what counts as "good?" These kinds of questions also point to a central issue: what is the knowledge base for teaching and learning about diversity? What do we want as teacher educators to help students construct?

I do not believe in a transmission kind of education (Freire, 1993), in which the teacher serves as the expert on diversity who disseminates critical information to passive students who lack knowledge and experiences. I believe that students bring experiences and understandings that I as a teacher educator need to use to scaffold their learning about issues of diversity.

Florio-Ruane (2001) describes a shift in the field of teacher education from a view of learning as knowledge transmission to one of knowledge construction, and she cites Griffin who characterizes the movement from "a 'deficit model' in teacher education where practitioners are assumed to be 'unthinking'" and "experts disseminate information about instruction to disempowered workers" to a view of "learning by talking (i.e., where teacher learning occurs in thoughtful dialogue among empowered professional peers)" (p. 57). This analysis raises questions about how I as a teacher educator can construct this kind of "thoughtful dialogue."

If students engage in their learning through the lens of their own experiences, they may feel empowered to act in the world. They may feel re-valued by ways in which I ask them to learn, as they begin to see these issues not as distinct from them, but as an integral part of their lives. Yet, students may also take away from my pedagogy of revaluing their lived experiences a kind of relativism, which may be problematic in the context of a course on diversity and in the larger context of working as an equity-minded teacher.

If the work of teacher education "involve[s] identifying features of...students' experiences that can be drawn on and transformed to create educationally productive dialogue" (Florio-Ruane & McVee, 2000, p. 159), this analysis points to a broad research question: what does it mean to create educative experiences for White students which foster learning about diversity?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thank Doug Campbell and James Damico for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See Banks (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1999) for comprehensive historical accounts of the development of the practices and dimensions of multicultural education.

<sup>3</sup> All of the students' names are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> All quotes within the students' sections are taken from the students' interviews. All of the students' interviews occurred between the

end of March and the beginning of May, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Andrea questioned the inequities in access and opportunities for different students to own better instruments, afford music lessons, and see and hear professional orchestras perform, which may not be available to lower-income people, but which were available to her as she grew up. She attributes her own advantages to her race and her familial economic privilege.

<sup>6</sup> Adrianna adds that the majority of class assignments, which involved writing, communicated to her the same idea that no answers are right or wrong. She believes that writing assessments can function as opportunities for students to offer and defend their own interpretations of ideas. As long as students can defend their interpretations, Adrianna states that a professor should not find fault with those ideas (either in writing or in class conversation).

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