

Uncommon Teaching in Commonsense Times



A Case Study of a Critical Multicultural Educator & the Academic Success of Diverse Student Populations

Emilie M. Camp & Heather A. Oesterreich

To me, it would not be easier for me as a human being to run off pre-made worksheets for my kids to do. It would be an assault on my senses and everything that's inside.

—Rae

Rae, a 5th grade teacher, challenges the commonsense approaches mandated in the era of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) that frequently requires teachers to run-off pre-made worksheets of standardized curricula as a panacea to closing such educational woes as the gap in achievement between the White, middle-class students and the largely Latino population that she teaches. Her senses are assaulted by the thought of participating in a “homogenized” curriculum (Sleeter, 2005) which has resulted in pedagogies that fail to meet the diverse needs of students. She rejects the commonsense that “schools teach these things and students do these things” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. xxii) and demonstrates how quality educators problematize those ideas, or the “official knowledge” that is internalized as “commonsense” (Apple, 2004).

Emilie M. Camp is a doctoral candidate and Heather A. Oesterreich is an associate professor, both with the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the College of Education at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

By repositioning *commonsense* with *uncommon* teaching, teachers like Rae challenge what it means for students to learn and teachers to teach by helping their students understand themselves in relation to others and their world (Allen, 2002, p. 110). Teachers who reject the commonsense of practices such as pre-made worksheets, scripted lessons, standardized knowledge, and boxed curricula and programs are needed to challenge the dominant paradigm of the standards movement and actively advocate for a more critical, multicultural curriculum. Practicing uncommon teaching is not simply something that someone does, but rather is something someone is always becoming.

Exploring perspectives on how teachers like Rae become teachers who challenge commonsense with uncommon teaching offers insight about how to nurture, support, and sustain perspectives and possibilities for creating uncommon solutions to what have been situated as commonsense problems. When she brings herself to her uncommon teaching, we learn that while there are unique elements that exist in multicultural classrooms like and unlike Rae's (Marri, 2004), there is an interdependency of multiple complex aspects that create, support, and sustain teachers who engage in uncommon teaching. Understanding this interdependency informs teacher educators to create their programs with the integration of multiple, differing

curricular offerings, pedagogical support, and educational life experiences.

Perspectives on Uncommon Teaching

Uncommon teaching offers the possibility of re-centering education on the students and away from the commonsense of scripted and restricted curricula to promote acquisition by students of a critical consciousness in order to become agents of change for social justice. Allen (2002), in his discussion of critical theory, describes consciousness as the “state of mind that acts upon an awareness of the circumstances of oppression” (p. 108). Apple (2004) argues for the responsibility of educators to problematize the “official knowledge” that teachers internalize as commonsense, even as they discuss how it defies all of what they have been taught and understand as good teaching.

By repositioning commonsense with uncommon teaching, teachers act with the intention of transforming reality and actively advocate for teaching that reaches out to rather than preaches to students (Sleeter, 2005). Teachers who resist curriculum driven by high-stakes testing and related policies anchor their practices of resistance in situating commonsense knowledge as uncommon and impossible, so that they are professionals who are empowered to invoke professional judgment

in order to meet the diverse needs of their students (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).

Many researchers have taken an interest in the application and implementations of pedagogies that counter the oppressive, scripted curriculum derived from the standardization movement and situate teaching and learning against commonsense (Kumashiro, 2004) even as they name it critical, multicultural, anti-oppressive, and/or social justice pedagogies (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Agee, 2004; Arce, 2004; Crawford, 2004; Marri, 2005). Case studies illustrate that teacher preparation programs do foster philosophies of resistance in pre-service teachers and this manifests in their initial teaching.

Yet, after beginning their teaching careers with dispositions to teach uncommonly in common environments, many teachers succumb to the pressures to conform to the standardized curriculum, internalize the commonsense of the prescribed curriculum, and even leave the field of teaching altogether (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Agee, 2004; Crawford, 2004). Arce (2004) and Marri (2005) likewise utilize case study to focus on teachers who resist the imposed curriculum in order to employ uncommon and multicultural teaching to foster democratic empowerment within their students. While both studies offer hope that empowering multicultural education exists, neither significantly explore *how* teachers are able to maintain resistance to scripted, undemocratic, test-driven curriculum.

We have some understanding of how individuals develop a commitment to multiculturalism. Paccione (2000) discusses the stages of developing a commitment to multicultural education. Based on various life experiences of the participants, Paccione describes the four stages of developing a commitment to multicultural education in a linear fashion. Ford and Dillard (1996) outline four phases of "becoming multicultural" as a cyclical, lifelong process of becoming. In the face of dominant cultural ideologies and their influences on curriculum, teachers exhibit an ability to maintain multicultural pedagogies that create uncommon teaching in commonsense times (Wallace, 2006). However, there remains a need for understanding how commitment translates into shifting away from the current commonsense mentality of test-driven curriculum and pedagogy to uncommon teaching.

Additionally, what we understand of uncommon teaching in commonsense times tends to focus on solitary aspects such as the process of becoming multicultural (Ford & Dillard, 1996; Paccione, 2000), the

struggle to persist in uncommon teaching (Wallace, 2006), characteristics of uncommon teaching in a classroom (Arce, 2004; Marri, 2005), or previous life experiences that potentially shaped individual teachers' commitments to uncommon teaching (Paccione, 2000). Although these studies contribute positively to the field of multicultural education and how teachers create and maintain uncommon teaching against the commonsense of limiting curricula, more research is needed that explores the relationships between multiple complex factors to understand how teachers come to understand the commonsense of educational practices as uncommon and engage meaningful curriculum outside the bounds of test-driven curriculum.

Methodology

In an effort to explore the complexity of how teachers develop and sustain the ability to teach uncommonly in commonsense times, we conducted a life history case study of a fifth grade teacher at a local elementary school in the Southwest United States who has practiced and sustained uncommon teaching for four years (Wedgwood, 2005). Such a life history case study, with a focus on the participant's past and current life experiences, provides insight into the uniqueness of a teacher by revealing in-depth insight into life phenomenon that "...we would not otherwise have access to" (Merriam, 1998, p. 33).

We chose this particular teacher for this study based on her apparent commitment to uncommon teaching within a school culture that otherwise employs the commonsense of standardized, test-driven curriculum as its official policy. In our work as teacher educators, we find her to be "one of a kind" among her colleagues and even among the majority of teachers we have come to know in our professional careers.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss this approach to case studies in which researchers do not identify the 'type' of person they want to interview and look for appropriate examples, but rather they already know a person or persons who inspire a line of inquiry and decide to pursue it. An intrinsic interest on the part of the researchers is also a common reason for using the case study method (Merriam, 1998).

The Teacher

Rae is a White middle class woman who was raised by a religiously conservative family in an area of the Southwest which is home to Navajo Nation and therefore embedded in the diversities of race, class, gender, nationality, and spiri-

tuality. Although Rae valued diversity in her own life, surrounding herself with friends and experiences which enriched her understanding and appreciation for cultures other than her own, her schooling was driven by the commonsense curricula of Eurocentricism and standardization. Consequently, Rae struggled to find value in her schooling experiences.

She now teaches fifth grade in an elementary school in the Southwest where eighty-five percent of the students are Latino, twelve percent White, two percent Black, and one percent Asian. Located in a working class area of the city, Rae recognizes the struggles many of her students experience in relating to a curriculum which elevates middle class White culture and identity.

Rae exhibits an ability and a passion for providing rich contexts for learning beyond the boundaries of the standard curriculum, incorporating students' lived experiences and issues relating to social justice and democracy into the curriculum. Her classroom consistently hums with activity. Rae's teaching exudes an organic quality as she shapes learning experiences around students' interests and experiences. Her tendency to recognize social injustices and her desire to combat such problems inform her own teaching, as she guides her students to understand their obligation to participate in democracy in order to fight injustice. Her life—past, present, and future—illuminates the complexity of becoming, committing, and persisting in uncommon teaching during commonsense times.

Methods

Combining observational and life history methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998), we gathered data to illuminate Rae's life experiences that led to her commitment to multicultural education, the current "strategies" she uses to resist the scripted, test-driven curriculum, how her past and present allows her to maintain her empowering pedagogy, and what support, if any, she receives from colleagues and administration. We conducted two semi-structured interviews, two 40-minute formal observations of her classroom, and daily informal observations lasting from five to twenty minutes. Member checking was implemented to confirm findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

Becoming Uncommon

Basically I think every teacher teaches from who they are...I think every teacher brings themselves to their teaching in some form or fashion...

—Rae

As this quote highlights, during interviews and observations Rae reveals the complex interweaving of her life experiences, her sense of self, and her responsibility to uncommon teaching. As a result of this complexity, the following discussion and analysis of the data weaves her life experiences with observations and discussions of her teaching, because they are inseparable. Rae teaches who she is and demonstrates how her journey of becoming uncommon challenges the commonsense that uncommon teaching exists strictly as a result of life experiences prior to teaching (Paccione, 2000), or processes of development (Ford & Dillard, 1996; Paccione, 2000), or struggles that lead to eventual succumbing to commonsense practices (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Crawford, 2004; Wallace, 2006). We highlight how her uncommon teaching emerges from the intertwining of her past and present life experiences and are further shaped and actualized by the structures and practices in teacher preparation and her social justice orientation.

Teacher Preparation: A Call to Action

Recent calls for transformation of teacher education programs have focused on stronger connections to schools, bringing together teacher education faculty, teacher candidates, K-12 students, and school teachers (Levine, 2006). On-site teacher preparation programs are touted for their ability to provide opportunities for their candidates to learn in real world situations and persist as professional teachers longer than their counterparts in programs without site-based education.

At the center of the call for more on-site teacher preparation programs is a focus on the inculcation of teachers into the commonsense professional practice of teachers. This focus ignores how on-site programs may actually provide the spaces to create and sustain teacher candidates' desire to practice uncommon teaching to challenge what exists in education to perpetuate inequities for K-12 students. Rea's participation in an on-site teacher preparation program demonstrates how this opportunity provided spaces for her continual development as an uncommon teacher in commonsense times.

Culture of Mediocrity

As a pre-service teacher, Rae participated in an on-site teacher preparation program during her final two semesters prior to student-teaching. Rae had the opportunity to become a daily participant in the culture of a public elementary school, spending a minimum of twelve hours each

week working with students and a mentor teacher. When asked specifically about her on-site experience, Rae responded:

You know, I was [t]here for two semesters as an intern ...and when I first arrived I left in tears probably sixty-five percent of the time... because of what I saw. And a lot of it had to do with the culture of the school, a culture of mediocrity, a culture of hierarchy that made no sense to me where the teacher was somehow above everything. And then we have a whole army of worksheet filler-outers. You know, and uh, it hurt me to be [t]here.

As Rea recalls the professional, intellectual, and emotional struggles created by her immersion in the school cultures, she specifically identified the limitations of teacher-centered pedagogy and unchallenging curriculum so common in schools with significant populations of students of low socio-economic status (Haberman, 1991). Rae became aware of the "hidden curriculum" which she terms a "culture of mediocrity, a culture of hierarchy" (Henderson & Gornik, 2007) of which she could not make sense. Her observation of the culture of mediocrity resonates with a "pedagogy of poverty...in which learners can 'succeed' without becoming either involved or thoughtful" (Haberman 1991, p. 291) and creates compliant hostages to a system that will continue to situate them as necessary tools in the social division of labor.

These cultures within the school assaulted her senses with her penchant for recognizing and addressing the injustices of "students trained as armies of worksheet filler-outers." However, Rea was not left without options as to how to counter these armies of students being enculturated into mediocrity. Recognized in literature of on-site teacher education programs (Levine, 2006), theory and practice must always be integrated for one to challenge the other. To simply drop students off without providing tools, techniques, and guided reflections on the practices within schools leaves our educational systems—both in PreK-12 and teacher education—unchallenged and subject to replication of existing power structures.

Inquiry as Conduit

The on-site university program also sought to support pre-service teachers in their development as teachers who could battle armies of worksheet filler-outers. Specifically, the program integrated required methods classes into a weekly seminar, stressing the pedagogical values of inquiry and constructivism. Teaching rooted in "constructivist best practices" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993) allows

students to use inquiry to construct meaning in order to make "personal connections between past experiences and the content they are studying" (Henderson & Gornik, 2007).

Students are viewed as active meaning-makers who engage in learning experiences which are personally meaningful (Henderson & Gornik, 2007). Rea recalled how this provided her with a conduit to connect her sense of critical consciousness and necessity to act in a world where injustice is inevitable.

One of my most vivid memories of any part of my schooling is one day Dr. Garza taking out a box or a bag...and he just started pulling stuff out and putting it down. And some of the other interns were like (she makes a disinterested face), and I was just 'What is it?!' You know? And just those kinds of things that showed me that it's possible to spark enthusiasm and interest and curiosity without saying anything! Without saying 'you must learn this.' A new way of doing things.

The focus on inquiry at the on-site program became a tool that directed her implementation of the abstract principles of democracy, justice, and multiculturalism into comprehensible ideas for young students. Still today, Rae's students are consistently engaged in research and inquiry via various library resources, the Internet, literature, and guest speakers. However, their inquiry is embedded in concepts focused on democracy and justice. Rather than using inquiry simply for the sake of incorporating constructivism into her teaching, Rae elevates her teaching to a more purposeful and human level. Henderson and Gornik (2007) stress the value of making curricular decisions in the interest of democratic self and social understanding:

All curriculum decisions are, at their heart, moral decisions. They touch the core of what it means to be human, to live in community with others, to find meaning and purpose, and to create a more just and peaceful world. (p. 12)

Rae's curriculum decisions reflect this human element of teaching, as she engages her students in inquiry with the intention of guiding them to an understanding of the complexity of the human experience.

Teaching as Social Action

Frequently, when teachers challenge the commonsense of practical and simple solutions with the complexity of social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of the lives of children, they situate their professional lives and exist in the neces-

sity for action. This action occurs amidst short- and long-term visions of children's potential and capacity to succeed even when there seems to be little that exists in schools for their success (Knight, 2004).

Rae existed in this necessity of action by eventually securing a job in the same school after becoming certified, and has spent her first four years as a teacher in the school. Rather than viewing herself as a "savior" of suffering children, Rae, by her nature as a critical pedagogue, was drawn to the environment; it became an opportunity to bring the uncommon to a commonsense environment.

When I was here as an intern, Dr. Garza was this little beacon of light. You know, the simplest light; just friendliness, acceptance, and caring. And that's what I saw was lacking in the classrooms I went into. And it was a jolt for me because the kind of person I am. I think I'm wired that way; I couldn't do this if I wasn't connected to each one of these kids, and invested in a part of who they were, and they're a part of who I am. And what I saw was shells of interactions but not meaningful ones. What I saw was an emptiness...

Rae responded to the jolt and the urgency to create spaces for students who have been socially constructed as less than, at-risk, deficient, and/or troublemakers to make connections to their schooling and enact change in their worlds. In the same way she situates her life relationships in the context of transformation, she entered her professional life without a disconnect between her students and herself, knowing that as long as one of us is oppressed, we are all oppressed (Lorde, 1994). She chose her teaching position not with a focus on her own comfort and ease, but on the necessity of to live her life connected to those who had come before her and those who will come after (Knight, 2004).

You know, I did my student teaching at Monarch Elementary and I loved it there. Um, it's closer to where I live and I felt more of a community connection there, but really I was like, I'm gonna try to go back [to the school where I interned] and have my own light, you know, light another candle over there!

As Rae's college professor, Dr. Garza, had been a light for her in the emptiness of the cultures of mediocrity and hierarchy, she wanted to return to not only be that for her students, but to cultivate a culture of inquiry for justice within the injustice she witnessed. Rae's *uncommon* philosophy on democracy and justice merged with the *uncommon* pedagogy supported by her university professors. Instead of forming an "army of worksheet filler-outers," Rae

Instead of forming an "army of worksheet filler-outers," Rae counters the commonsense of test-driven curriculum with her army of critical thinkers . . .

counters the commonsense of test-driven curriculum with her army of critical thinkers who seek to recognize injustice and work to end it through democratic participation and action.

Social Justice: Experiences Manifest Action

[Students] need to be able to identify justice and injustice and I think that is a big part of who I am... You know, part of our role as teachers is to empower students to identify justice, injustice, and then what do we do about it.

Social justice saturates the classroom culture that Rae and her students have created. Social justice requires a "revolution of everyday life" which stems from our ability to read and transform the world in order to challenge and change inequities that exist (Ross & Vinson, 2006, p. 154). Interviews with Rae reveal her critical understanding of the world and that she views teaching as one way she can transform it.

From the time I was born, I knew how to identify justice, injustice... You know, there was injustice in my family... and people did not stand up for me! You know, that was, like, injustice! And at the same point, at the same time, you have people expressing rightness and righteousness, and this is the way to Heaven, and it didn't match for me.

Rae's experiences with injustice have led her to teach about injustice through justice. Her pedagogy often focuses on the identification of social injustices within a just, democratic, and empowering pedagogy; a pedagogy described within three areas: the negotiation of power, democracy, and multiculturalism. Rae uses all three to guide her students toward a critical consciousness of their world with the intention of fostering a sense of agency and democratic empowerment within them because all of these things have become integral to who she is based on her lived realities.

Negotiation of Power

Upon entering Rae's classroom, her negotiation of power with her students, the curricula, and her colleagues is almost immediately evident. When she tells the students it is time for reading, they choose some reading materials rather than gather in predefined reading groups labeled by a

reading level. She chooses a book of her own, settles comfortably at a table and immerses herself in the literature. The students do the same, some quietly reading together, others alone. Occasionally, a student or two becomes off-task, and she then gently reminds them of their responsibility, and students return to reading, as does she. A teacher desk is no where to be found; all furniture seems to be for everyone, students and teacher alike.

The uncommon practice of the negotiation of power between Rae and her students is evident in the above description, particularly as it relates to the reciprocal relationship she has with them. Freire (2003) discusses this type of relationship, noting its pertinence to empowering students to think critically about their world as they develop their own agency. "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (p. 80). Interviews with Rae further divulge the value she holds for relationships of this nature. When asked if she did in fact view her relationships with her students as reciprocal, she replied:

Oh yeah! It's me pulling up my chair to be a part of an audience while a student is teaching... I try to be a human being first, who is in this room with other human beings, and we're all trying to be better each day, and be bigger, and more than we were yesterday... It is relationships. It's relationships that make people change.

Power as Collegial and Policy Conflict

Rae not only negotiates power between herself and her students, but also with her administrators and colleagues. She expressed, quite emotionally, some of the encounters and conflicts she had with administrators and colleagues during her first year teaching.

My first year was like swimming with sharks... it was really a battle ground... I had colleagues who did everything they possibly could to sabotage me... I had, um, people insinuate that I wasn't teaching because kids were happy in my room... the administration at that point was different and several times, probably three or four times that year, I was asked to stop.

Despite the pressures to conform to prescribed curriculum, Rae stays grounded in her uncommon teaching and asserts her

own power and defends her pedagogy with simple stubbornness at times, but also by actively pursuing current research and literature on education issues.

I have in my room “high-heeled” strategies posted. I use them. “Best teaching practices.” I use them. You know, I do my research, it’s not based in fluff and stuff like I just came up with it last night. I’m plugged into what I think is the future of education. So I *do* feel confident about what I’m doing, and even as a first year teacher, I was confident enough to say, “I will give that to my kids.” I don’t feel badly about it. I will not apologize for it.

Rae also refuses to allow common sense education and curriculum policies, such as the NCLB Act, to control her teaching. When asked about what she thought of the current state of public education, she replied:

Well, obviously No Child Left Behind is a huge, you know, that’s what everybody’s kind of talking about, but ultimately, to me, that doesn’t matter! You know, I do care about it and I do follow it...but ultimately it’s teachers in classrooms...I may teach kids a way to help them on the test because I want them to be successful on everything they do, but that’s not what drives me in my classroom...it wouldn’t matter what law was on the books really. I know what I’m going to do for my kids.

This overt resistance to the commonsense of prescribed curriculum is evidence of Rae’s own critical consciousness and use of her own agency to assert herself as one who is empowered to make curricular decisions.

Democracy

The power to make decisions about curriculum does not simply rest in Rae’s hands. Much of the power lies with her students. They make many decisions related to content, teaching, and problem-solving. Democracy then, also comes into play here. In this context, it is linked to the negotiation of power. Wood (1998) relates participatory democracy to power. Participatory democracy depends upon the “full participation” and “equal power on the part of the participants to determine the outcome of decisions” (p. 181). According to Wood, when students have voice and power over their own education, they are more likely to become active participants in a democratic society.

Today we had a circle of kids sitting around, taking turns at the mike, reading a story out loud. Somebody went and got a footstool and propped their feet up, and in the back of my mind, I thought, because of my past experiences, I thought, “That’s not

allowed!” But then, it’s just, even a split second later, I thought, “I want them to put their feet up and enjoy what they’re reading. I want them to feel comfortable in this setting,” to say, “Man, oh, I’m lovin’ it!” You know? They’re invested.

Uncommon teaching centers on the visibility and engagement of this democratic power. For example, while involved in a unit on the book *And Now Miguel*, students had options as to what activities they would take part in to demonstrate their internalization of the novel. Some students chose to create family trees, which were proudly displayed in the classroom. Students also participate in “buffet” activities periodically, having a choice over what to do.

For example, after an inclusive discussion of what students had read during their reading time, Rae announced it was time for “buffet” activities. She reminded students of their options; students dispersed to their chosen activities, quickly becoming engaged in their respective places. On another day, based on a discussion during earlier instruction, a chart on the board asked students to vote if they would be interested in participating in an intensive cursive writing workshop, to which many students had written their names under the “yes” or “no” column.

Rae wants her students to experience participatory democracy in her classroom so they will become invested in their education, developing political efficacy and use this as adults. By giving students choice over collectively developed activities, Rae invites students to make their own decisions, rather than allowing them to rely on others to make decisions on their behalf. This reflects the distinguishing factor between participatory and protectionist democracies; citizens in a participatory democracy have more power (Wood, 1998).

Within the negotiation of power, democracy is also visible when solving problems that surface in the classroom. Her statement about empowering students to identify justice and injustice is also relevant here. She concluded the statement with “and then what do we do about it.” Rae not only wants her students to develop a critical consciousness, but uses democratic pedagogy to help foster an ability to problem-solve, to make right injustices.

For example, a conflict between two boys emerged. One of the boys complained to Rae, who responded, “You need to talk to him about it.” The boys quickly and smoothly resolved the problem. Rae, when noticing problems, addresses them immediately, calling class meetings and encour-

aging students to work out problems as a class. In this way, the students have been socialized to respect one another and act as collaborative problem solvers. It is the active participation of the students in decision-making that speaks to the relationship between democracy and the negotiation of power in Rae’s uncommon teaching.

Another aspect of her uncommon teaching exists in Rae’s refusal to accept simple answers to complex problems. She talked about a student in a different class who used a racially derogatory term to describe himself in a poem. While many teachers would likely punish this student for using an offensive word, Rae reflects,

...these things are so complex...the only way to negotiate that complexity is dialogue. You can’t ignore it.

Dialogue is a critical component of democracy (Sleeter 2005), and by promoting dialogue among her students when solving problems, Rae demonstrates the importance of the complexity of problems students will encounter as adults, and the importance of considering various perspectives when making decisions to reflect collective interests.

Democracy as Speaking Out

I remember all the things you have to write as a teacher to jump through this hoop and another, and I remember writing down that I will be willing to speak up if I think something is wrong. And, you know, I didn’t know if that would please an employer or make an employer not want to hire me. I didn’t care because that to me is part of a teacher’s job. That’s part of my job. To me, that’s a *qualification* for teaching.

Using one’s voice to make unjust situations more just is the responsibility of an active democratic citizen (Wood, 1998). Rae uses her voice through her multicultural pedagogy, speaking up to her colleagues and administrators regarding her beliefs on teaching and curriculum. When asked what she thought could be done to inspire other teachers to address issues of injustice in their classrooms she commented:

I think modeling does a lot. I think when other teachers see, you know. When we had our posters out there of Cesar Chavez and Gandhi, I had a lot of adults comment. You know, so they noticed...putting it out there, being visible with it, invites a dialogue...

Rae’s inclination to speak up comes from her past experiences seeing injustices and becoming outraged when people failed to speak out against them. Telling about her relationships with African Americans and

Navajos, she describes her disillusionment at the poor treatment they were given.

And I didn't like that because I had people that I cared about...I never felt a hierarchy the way some people do... I never thought that was fair, I never thought it was right that people didn't speak up. And when I would speak up, people would look at me like, 'why are you talking?' And that's continued my whole life... You know, those issues, I've always spoken up.

Integral to uncommon teaching, Rea believes that teaching is a platform from which to speak out against injustice. Rae views one's voice as vital to one's participation in democracy. The walls inside and outside her classroom are full of her and her students' voices, speaking out against injustice and announcing their opinions about various issues. A bulletin board with signs reading "Fight Against Injustice!" "Speak for Those Whose Voices Aren't Being Heard!" "Use Your Voices!" "Demand Justice!" was hung next to a prominent display of books about Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

In the hall, students had created their own personal "*La Causa*" (The Cause) flags with themes such as cancer, violence, and animal abuse. Posters of Cesar Chavez, and Gandhi lined the walls outside her classroom for several weeks. Student posters on an economics project revealed the economic stratification between the United States and the Third World, offering opportunities for others to write their thoughts about it. On a "free speech" poster outside her classroom to celebrate Veterans Day, Rae had written that she liked our freedom to question government leaders and to demand change in policies we are unhappy with. Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Gandhi, all figures she highlights in her teaching, serve as examples to her students of leaders who used their voices to demand social justice.

Beane and Apple (1995) relate this democratic pedagogy to social justice, claiming that democratic schools seek to "change the conditions that create" injustices (p. 11). Rather than teaching her students *about* democracy, Rae teaches them *through* democracy, providing them with opportunities to participate as citizens in dialogue with others to explore ways in which they can effect meaningful change in their classroom. This approach to teaching will likely foster participatory democratic values within her students, leading them to carry their participation to their adult lives (Wood, 1998).

Rather than teaching her students about democracy, Rae teaches them through democracy, providing them with opportunities to participate as citizens in dialogue . . .

Multiculturalism

A third theme in Rae's uncommon teaching focuses on the value for multiculturalism. Sleeter and McLaren (1995) define multicultural education as "a particular ethico-political attitude or ideological stance that one constructs in order to confront and engage the world critically and challenge power relations" (p. 7). Furthermore, Nieto (cited in Pacione, 2000) points to the development of multicultural teaching through the development of becoming a multicultural person. Life experiences that inform one about cultures different from one's own, make racism and bias apparent, and allow one to understand the world from various perspectives, all play vital roles in shaping an ethic of multiculturalism.

I've always been drawn to different kinds of people, and so growing up, I experienced social aspects of those relationships. For many years my best friend actually came from a family where her dad was Anglo and her mom was Navajo. So I experienced her cultural life with her mom's side of the family because we were best friends. And I was always very interested and really wanted to know more... When I had boyfriends of different races, um, I was aware of that. Family dynamics were very intense. African American boyfriend: big deal. Navajo boyfriend: big deal. And so, those issues were very close to me because I put myself in the center of them and probably did it on purpose.

It is not simply Rae's exposure to people of diverse cultural backgrounds that fostered her multicultural disposition. She recognizes the injustices people close to her experienced, as described earlier, and the responsibility she felt, and still feels, to defend them. She does this through her teaching, by opening up spaces for her students to engage their world critically, identify injustices, and participate in the improvement of society.

Banks (1996) strongly asserts that multicultural education is much more than simply teaching *about* other cultures: it is also about respecting and valuing the "diverse funds of knowledge" all students bring to the classroom, connecting the curriculum to students' lives, identifying social inequities, and taking actions as democratic citizens to improve the quality of life for oppressed people. Rae's reflections on her own schooling point to her

understanding of the importance of connecting the curriculum to students' lives and cultures.

I'm from northern New Mexico where there's a rich cultural heritage, and my teachers never tapped into that. You know, I never learned any Navajo words or about that culture, I never learned anything about the Hispanic culture, these people who I was sharing my friendships with or my life with. Or any other culturally significant anything.

Rae discussed her disengagement in schooling as a result of being bored, unable to connect to the curriculum. She uses these personal experiences with schooling to inform her practice, ensuring that students have opportunities to make personal connections to the curriculum.

Right now we're reading *And Now Miguel* which is set outside of the Taos pueblo in northern New Mexico, and even that is so far removed you know, from here. These kids down here don't connect to northern New Mexico issues, places... it's been an eye opener for me, just understanding how culturally disconnected we are from even that area. I'm not, because I'm from that area; for these kids, they don't understand, the Spanishness up there is so different from the borderness... Miguel in this book is very interested in this family...it's the family and the generations, and some of my kids chose to do family trees. I mean...they do connect themselves and I want that to happen.

She also recalled,

...this unit we did on Cesar Chavez, I found out that I have students in my reading class whose families have been or still are field workers, and it's something that never would be addressed or taken into account....

The overall environment of Rae's classroom reflects this desire to provide students with opportunities to make connections to their schooling. The freedom to make curriculum decisions based on personal interests has been discussed, but Rae even creates a physical environment that reflects her multicultural ethic. The reading center is full of hundreds of books, newspapers, and magazines, all representing a variety of cultures, languages, and genres.

Although Rae is not a bilingual teacher, she includes bilingual dictionaries and Spanish literature in her room, making connections to the Latino heritage of

the majority of her students. The room is simply comfortable, inviting her students to enter as themselves with the promise that they will be able to remain themselves while in her classroom. This tenet of multicultural education serves as the catalyst to capture her students' interest, as they are gently propelled into her uncommon pedagogy of justice.

Implications for Education

Rae's story offers hope for the possibility that teachers can resist pressures to implement oppressive, prescribed curriculum. The unmistakable interdependency of life experiences, classroom experiences, research, and teaching practices demonstrates a strong responsibility in teacher education to adopt a multi-faceted approach to preparing teachers. Teacher education programs that provide authentic classroom experiences, unveil school cultures, and provide support for utilizing tools such as inquiry and constructivism as conduits for powerful learning experiences can offer schools uncommon teachers poised to release students from the binds of commonsense teaching.

Rae shows us that life experiences that expose one to social injustices can be instrumental in the formation of a critical multicultural approach to teaching. The profound influence of life experiences on Rae's teaching suggests that teacher education programs developed around providing multicultural experiences for pre-service and in-service teachers may help foster a critical consciousness among educators. This can be the catalyst for asserting one's agency to transform social conditions.

While planned multicultural experiences may not be the equivalent of real-life experiences as Rae described, they nonetheless could serve as powerful elements in teacher preparation programs. Aspiring teachers who experience multiculturalism in ways that expose that social injustices are immersed in school cultures and who are presented with research and theory regarding the effectiveness of using inquiry as teaching tools may be awakened to a multicultural pedagogy aimed at teaching uncommonly in commonsense times.

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