



Literacy, Diversity, and Being a Teacher in Challenging Times

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to answer a key question in teacher education: what does it mean to be a literacy teacher in K-12 schools in challenging times? The question emerges from a series of dialogues between student teachers and the instructor in a graduate course in education to prepare pre-service teachers to support students in elementary schools where diversity and disability are part of the daily challenges teachers face in designing effective curriculum and instruction in literacy across the curriculum. The conversations are presented as topics students developed in their reflective journals in the Internship and Student Teaching courses in the fall and spring semester of their graduate year. The topics reflect what the student teachers experienced in their placements, how their self-reflective processes supported student teachers to an in depth understanding of what it means to be an educator in challenging times in education. The paper demonstrates that the challenge is to turn challenges into strength. How teachers will reduce the literacy gap for students who are linguistically and culturally diverse and with diverse abilities in a society that requires solid literacy foundations.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher's preparation programs are aware of the importance of preparing preservice teachers to educate students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and with diverse abilities (Bates and Rosaen, 2010). Instructors in teacher's preparation programs must engage preservice teachers in oftentimes challenging conversations on diversity in terms of language, race and disability (Bates and Rosaen, 2010). These conversations are very crucial while students are completing their internship and student teaching taking responsibility of curriculum and instruction in the classroom (Nieto, 2015).

The challenge to teach for literacy and social justice is what many teacher educators are confronted with when the majority of teachers are still white and middle class in many school districts (Schulte, 2005). This challenge is what inspired me to write this paper. The study presented here stems from an overarching question I jotted down teaching student teachers during their graduate year at a liberal arts college in Eastern US. The overarching question is: what does it mean to be a teacher in challenging times? The question emerged as part of my teaching and supervision of student teachers during their graduate year where they take full responsibility of the class and develop an action research to study their own students and practices (Shagoury and Miller Power, 2012). It was this question that kindled the fire for writing

this paper. The compelling question of what novice teachers must do to design effective curriculum and instruction in diverse schools where culturally and linguistically diverse students and students with learning disabilities must acquire the foundational knowledge in literacy across the curriculum to become literate and engaged citizens in the 21st century.

The overarching question of what it means to be a teacher in challenging times is the conceptual map that gave momentum to dialogues around the importance to educate student teachers to see diversity not as a stumbling block in their teaching but as an opportunity to enrich their curriculum and instruction (Skerrett, 2008). The data presented and discussed in this study are an opportunity to focus our attention on these compelling issues in teacher education and to walk along the road not taken of diversity in its complexity in K-12 schools (Skerrett, 2006).

POSITIONALITY

When I started thinking about writing this paper, I began to reflect on what it means to be a literacy instructor in a teacher preparation program supporting preservice teachers in helping students to become engaged literate citizens in a complex society where diversity in culture, language and diverse abilities is what forms the US sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape (Guyton, 2008). I am an international scholar who was not born and raised in the US. I am a bilingual person, Italian and English, and my cultural and linguistic identity plays an important part on the way I see literacy in the context of diversity in K-12 schools. As Guyton (2009, p. 108) claims “Education is a moral enterprise; it is not a neutral process. The way it is practiced has monumental implications for the lives of those being educated.” It is this moral enterprise and monumental implications that lead me to reflect on my identity and positionality in looking at the way I design curriculum and instruction in my Literacy Specialization Course and how I support preservice teachers in acquiring literacy foundational knowledge to support students in K-12 schools.

As a white middle-class bilingual international scholar, literacy is for me not just the to read, write, and speak a second language. It is a blueprint to look at literacy as a map to make sense to find the in depth meaning of what it means to be part of a sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape where language conveys a complex worldview to our students in a very diverse social, political and cultural landscape to be able to map the territory of who we are as individuals in society (Dover, 2013). This is my identity as a literacy instructor. This is the way I see myself as a scholar working with pre-service teachers. My vision of literacy and learning is kaleidoscopic in nature due to my bilingual/international identity (Dolby & Rahman, 2017). What I mean by kaleidoscopic is that literacy is multidimensional in the way I perceive it. As Kucer (2005) points out in his work on the dimensions of literacy, literacy is linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural and developmental in nature. This means that the literate individual is constantly immersed in the complexity of literacy as a system of meaning where the word crystallizes all the aforementioned dimensions of literacy (Kucer, 2005).

In addition, the bilingual and bicultural dimension of literacy complicates the picture of what it means to be literate. It is also this dimension that will be explored, analyzed and discussed in this paper in the form of dialogues with the preservice teachers in the Literacy Specialization Course. It is from these dialogues, what the preservice teachers brought to the table and the way I responded and enhanced the conversations that gave momentum to systematic and in-depth reflections on teaching literacy in challenging times in K-12 schools (Milner, 2008a).

METHODOLOGY

The Literacy Specialization Course

Preservice teachers in Virginia go through a five-year program. They choose their major and declare the education track in elementary and secondary and after their graduation in the major they complete one more year where they earn a master's in education and initial license. At the university I teach, the fifth year allows pre-service teachers to make choices on the specialization areas during their Internship in the fall and student teaching during the spring semester. The areas student can choose are the following: (a) arts specialization; (b) English Language Learners Specialization; (c) technology specialization; (d) literacy specialization; (e) mathematic specialization; (f) science specialization; (g) social studies specialization; (h) special education.

I teach the literacy specialization course to prepare pre-service teachers to support students in the elementary grades to acquire the foundational knowledge in literacy in the areas of differentiated instruction and literacy for students with special needs (Tomlinson and Moon, 2013). The objectives of the course in fall is to give the students the opportunity to begin a systematic experience with student teaching. Students are placed in an elementary classroom and go to the school twice a week for 15 weeks. During fall semester pre-service teachers design an impact study where they have to teach a thematic unit and assess it via data analysis and self-reflection and prepare the prospectus of their action research that will be completed during spring semester. Each specialization area has an enrolment of five students.

In my Literacy Specialization Course, I ask students to keep a journal that is shared once a week when we meet in class to assess the preservice teachers' progress in the classroom. The format of the journal is kept open. The pre-service teachers date the journal and write their reflection according to specific significant events that impact their experience in the classroom setting (Finlay, 2008). These events are elaborated in form of dialogues during our weekly meetings where preservice teachers can critically assess thoughts, doubts, and epiphanies on teaching and learning (White, 2009).

The dialogues I collected in the form of notes in my own journals and recordings that I transcribed are presented in this paper as topics emerging from the weekly dialogues over the course of two semesters. The name of the students in the dialogues are pseudonyms. The choice of categorizing the weekly dialogues according to the following topics is based on my analysis from my journal's notes and recordings. The topics are the following: (a) literacy as a path to diversity; (b) second language learning and the stigma of IQ; (c) special need and reading as blueprint for learning and (d) white identity and teaching diverse students. The dialogues illuminated an important area of teaching preservice teachers that teaching is not just delivering the content of the curriculum but to become aware and understand that knowledge is always intertwined with the political, social, and ideological dimensions of curriculum and instruction (Nieto, 2003).

RESULTS

Literacy as path to diversity

After the first month into the Internship, the preservice teachers were ready to share their experience in the classroom recorded in their journals. I asked the five pre-service teachers in my Literacy Specialization Course to choose a significant event occurred in their placement and critically reflect on it and share in class. What emerged during this first dialogic exchange was

how literacy and diversity were intersecting in designing the curriculum in their elementary classrooms. Susan (all names are pseudonyms) opened up our dialogue by pointing out:

Susan: What I notice more and more by designing instruction in my 3rd grade class is that you cannot think about literacy instruction without looking at the diversity in your classroom.

Jane: What do you mean by that? How can we infuse our literacy instruction with diversity?

Susan: Well...first, the texts. I noticed that oftentimes we use texts (children's books and informational texts) that do not represent the students' diversity in the classroom. For instance, I have students with LD in the classroom but we never read books on their lives. Plus...we do not differentiate instruction.

Melissa: I know what you mean. It is the same for me. My mentor teacher is very experienced but she does not think that differentiation and culturally relevant texts are important. We use good texts but diversity in race, culture and disability is not there. I wonder why this seems not a concern...

Rachel: I think that this is because our school is slowly changing from a predominant white population to a more diverse student body. Teachers are trying to understand these changes but is not easy if you have been there for 20 years with the same community.

Dawn: Well, my mother was a teacher there for 25 years. She told me that teaching in our district was very predictable. Same families, same expectations and needs of the students. Today, she told me you cannot approach teaching with the same culture. What I jotted down in my journal is that cultural shifts affect the way you teach in school and community.

Me: Hum...I can see that there are two themes emerging here. The first is literacy is now embedded in diversity. The second is that cultural changes or shifts always affect the way we teach and address curriculum and instruction in the classroom. Let's continue our conversation next week and think about what we critically discussed today.

What I experienced as a literacy instructor was a systematic discussion about literacy and diversity and how to address it in the curriculum. It was very interesting to listen how the preservice teachers in my course were aware of the dynamics of diversity in the classroom in culture, language and diverse abilities (Feger, 2006). According to Feger (2006) is paramount to infuse the reading/literacy curriculum with culturally relevant literature and non-fiction into the curriculum. This will give students the intrinsic motivation to begin an in-depth connection with the literacy process and the meaning of texts they see relevant in their life (Alanis, 2007).

The main thought I jotted down in my journal was: Even though mentor teachers are experienced educators, they do not have an extensive experience using books that relate to the children's linguistic and cultural background and also disability. I want to talk to the mentor teachers on how to support the preservice teachers in my course in this area...Critical consciousness to design a more effective curriculum in literacy and diversity (Ciardello, 2004).

Second Language Learning and the Stigma of IQ

An interesting discussion ensued as a question sent me by e-mail from Jane to the whole class before our weekly meeting. She was troubled by one comment made by one student in her classroom on English Language Learners on learning English. She wrote me this short e-mail: "Good afternoon, Dr. Causarano. I would like to open-up for a conversation on learning English and IQ. It is something that happened in the classroom a couple of days ago. Thank you, Jane." I

replied saying that the topic was going to be our priority for our weekly meeting and pointed out that it was crucial to analyze the topic in terms of literacy teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

The weekly meeting started with Jane talking about the comments made by one of her students saying that ELL probably were not so smart because they did not speak English. She asked if this is something that comes from a culture at home or if was a more widespread cultural perception in the community. The conversation yielded very important critical assessment of ELL and learning:

Jane: The question I sent by e-mail is what I have experienced last week. I thought, as educators, we do understand that learning is not a questions of what language you speak. Well...the comment for the student was upsetting because I realized that there is a stigma still present in our culture of learning. The mentor teacher told me that things are changing but not as fast as we think.

Me: It is interesting that you used the concepts of stigma. What thoughts do we have as a class? Anybody would like to elaborate?

Susan: Well, I think it is because many of our students do not have a global perspectives. Also, many teachers have been teaching in the same community and the same students. They do not see or understand diversity as important as we do as younger educators. It is...well that we see the changes coming and they don't.

Jane: Well, yes. But many schools around this area are rural and so they are settled. I mean, many students in my school do not know much about the outside world. I do not think this is a stigma but more ignoring what the world looks like.

Rachel: I agree. That comment is more because the student does not know better. It is our responsibility to open up with a teaching that is sensitive and responsive to the new challenges of our society today.

Me: I wonder if you could open up by providing positive examples in the classroom and show how speaking two languages can be an enrichment.

Dawn: Well, we could but we always depend on our mentor teachers. It is not our classroom in reality.

Melissa: Yes, I agree. But we know that we need to address diversity by infusing our literacy curriculum with good books or material. It is something I am going to work on for when I will teach my own students.

This was a very constructive dialogue where the student teachers reflected on what it means to be a teacher for diversity (Loughran, 2007). The idea of stability and changing or becoming a different educator was the core of our dialogue. This is an important point and core component of what instructors should do when supporting preservice teachers in acquiring the foundational knowledge to teach in diverse settings in terms of language, culture and diverse abilities (Soslau, 2012). Our responsibility as instructors working with preservice teachers is to see these concerns as teachable moments to take into their classroom in a systematic collaboration with the mentor teachers (Soslau, 2015). We need to extend the conversation to our mentor teachers to create an effective system of support to give strong foundations to our preservice teachers. In turn, a virtuous cycle of mentoring that will allow our preservice teachers to be ready for the challenge to teach for diversity in K-12 schools.

Special need and reading as blueprint for learning

The conversation around special need and reading as blueprint for learning took place when the preservice teachers in the Literacy Specialization Course focused on the importance of fluency as a strong predictor of reading comprehension. The question that was brought to the

table in our December meeting before Winter Break due to Jane's mentor teacher fluency test for students with special needs. As reported by Jane, the teacher was using the Qualitative Reading Inventory 6 (Leslie and Caldwell, 2016). Jane's question from her journal was: what is the importance of the data from the Inventory and how can we use them to design reading comprehension instruction with quality texts? The question helped the group to delve into the importance of teaching with data and how fluency is important when supporting students with special needs:

Jane: I helped the teacher with the testing today using the Qualitative Reading Inventory 6. I think that the data from the test for students with special needs is important to design effective reading comprehension instruction. My mentor teacher will differentiate the texts on science (environment) once we go through the data. I think this is really important when you teach in a very diverse class.

Rachel: I think that fluency gives us the opportunity to see how students with special needs read with automaticity and prosody. Working with students with lower literacy levels, I can say that fluency must be systematically assessed if we want to plan effective differentiated instruction,

Susan: This is the same thing that my mentor teacher told me. Data and effective teaching go hand to hand. Without assessment you cannot effectively teach.

Melissa: I think that when we want to differentiate we need to know where students are in terms of reading levels. Fluency is foundational to me when teaching reading in special education,

Dawn: Yes! I agree. Without fluency, you cannot focus on meaning when reading.

Me: I agree. Fluency is so important to give students with special needs the foundations for reading that without assessing it, you cannot even begin effective differentiated instruction. Once you return to school in January and have the data. We will continue this conversation. It is key for novice teachers to understand the significance of teaching students with special needs to read for comprehension.

The dialogue reported here is important for at least two reasons. First, the correlation between fluency and differentiated instruction (Jones, Yssel and Grant, 2012). According to Jones, Yssel, and Grant (2012, p.210) maintain the importance of applying "empirically validated intervention strategies" to support students who struggle with reading comprehension. The key here is in the words empirically validated. This means data-driven instruction that effectively addresses the areas of need of special needs students. It is key to give preservice teachers the foundational knowledge in the area of literacy assessment to effectively support reading comprehension instruction in the classroom (Kuhn, 2005).

The second reason is part of providing clear, specific, and valid data to special education teachers when preparing IEPs. It is what makes an IEP effective in supporting students with special needs in the area of reading comprehension and literacy development (Hudson, Pullen, Lane, and Torgesen, 2009). A data-driven IEP on reading goals is what teachers need to design effective differentiated instruction and reduce the literacy gap in students with special needs. The dialogue demonstrated that the preservice teachers in the Literacy Specialization Course were aware and understood the importance of acquiring the foundational knowledge in literacy assessment to support students with special needs by designing and implementing differentiated literacy strategies in the classroom. In turn, the blueprint for effective teaching (Soslau and Bell, 2018).

White Identity and Teaching Diverse Students

The last dialogue we had was generated from a question Dawn sent by e-mail one week before our last meeting in spring. She wanted to open up on what it means to be a white teacher in a diverse classroom. The e-mail sent to the group was an invitation to think about identity and positionality as a white teacher. She wanted the group to think about literacy, white identity and what it means to design a culturally responsive teaching in K-12 schools (Brubaker, 2012). The dialogue began with Dawn explaining the rationale for her e-mail:

Dawn: I started self-reflecting on this issue because I realized that students look at Teacher in terms of knowledge and phenotype. I was talking to my mentor teacher

She told me that she taught in a very diverse school in Virginia and the issue of Being a white teacher teaching for diversity (Dawn pointed out that this is Important for literacy when teaching culturally and diverse students and students With disabilities.)

Me: It is significant because you have to teach literacy to students that bring to the table Many cultural, linguistic and special needs variables. From learning English as L2 to Students with special needs who are bilingual and so forth. It is complicated. However, it is very fascinating how literacy is deep into the fabric of teaching and Learning.

Rachel: I can see now the complexity of literacy and learning in diverse schools. You do

Do not learn this until you begin to be in the classroom and experience it on Your skin. When I think about literacy, I think about how culturally responsive Teaching can help me to propose quality texts in the classroom. Also, to know My students and what they need to succeed instead of one size fits all.

Susan: I agree. I feel it is a long way to go though. I know that I am not going to be ready my first year of teaching, but I am learning what it means to support diverse Students in the classroom.

Jane: Same here.

Melissa: It is going to be a learning curve as Susan said...It is a challenge but also an Opportunity for us as teachers to teach literacy to students who will be the next Generation of literate citizens.

This last dialogue was very important to the preservice teachers. They knew that the literacy curriculum is not an isolated component of effective teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. Literacy is the living tissue of curriculum and instruction that can give diverse students the opportunity to critically understand the meaning in texts (Garcia, Luke, and Seglem, 2018). The idea of literacy as the living tissue of curriculum and instruction is the blueprint for equity and social justice (Freire, 1973). Equity in allowing diverse students to access curriculum, resources, and opportunities and social justice to give diverse students the key to advocate their own needs, goals, and dreams in a complex society.

Another important ramification from the dialogue with the preservice teachers is that as literacy instructors and engaged educators with need to support our student teachers to acquire the foundational knowledge to teach diverse students. Literacy is at the center of this pedagogical revolution where theories, models, and strategies are the key to open the texts in their richness and complexity to access critical knowledge for our diverse students (White, 2009). In turn, literacy teaching in challenging times is intertwined with the complexity

of learning to read, write and think but also and more importantly to critically assess the content embedded in texts with their complex and multilayered meanings.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the importance of teaching literacy in challenging times. It is the beginning of my exploration of literacy and diversity as a literacy instructor by attempting to broaden the lens of diversity when designing literacy curriculum and instruction (McDonald, 2007). As a literacy instructor and engaged educator, this paper represents the blueprint for planning the next steps in supporting preservice teachers in acquiring foundational knowledge in literacy to teach diverse students in K-12 schools. Two main frameworks emerged from the data presented and discussed in this paper: (a) supporting preservice teachers in designing literacy teaching by culturally responsive teaching repositioning the texts at the center of effective literacy instruction. Texts that must entails the diversity of the students in the classroom and their needs to see literacy relevant to their lives (Luke, 2016); (b) provide preservice teachers the opportunity to be placed in schools where diversity can be seen, lived and experienced.

Without these two components, preservice teachers will not be ready to step up to the challenge of teaching diverse students, to supports their pedagogical needs in the literacy curriculum and instruction. It is a challenge that reminds us what Horton and Freire (1990) point out as the essence of education: we make the road by walking. We always add new paths to our understanding of a complex cultural, political, and social system that prepare our students to be part of critical transformations in society. As Horton and Freire point out education for social justice is not just for third world countries but is a reality of the US educational landscape where literacy is the key to open new and richer opportunities for our students in a diverse and complex world.

Finally, literacy and diversity have the potential to form literacy leaders in schools who see literacy curriculum and instruction as the hub of a new directions in teaching for diversity (Kluth and Chandler-Olcott, 2007). I call for inclusive learning literacy practices aligning my philosophy of teaching and learning with Kluth and Chandler-Olcott (2007). I envision inclusive literacy practices where teachers have the foundational knowledge to guide students who are diverse in culture, language and abilities to become part of a literacy community where they acquire and apply critical literacy skills in a complex literate society. Teachers need to reconceptualize the literate community (Kliewer 1998) by rejecting the prejudice that students who are culturally, linguistically and with special needs are not part of an inclusive literacy community. It is our responsibility as literacy instructors to begin to teach a new culture of literacy with inclusive practices in curriculum and instruction. It is what the next generation of literacy teachers must bring to the table of education to diversity.

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