

*Engaging Asset-based Education:*

*Practicing What We Preach in Multicultural Education Course*

*A Submission for Northwest Journal of Teacher Educators*

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Abstract:

This article centers on one teacher educator’s experiences and observations in teaching a Multicultural Education course to pre-service teachers at a teacher preparation program in the Northwest. The author asserts that, although the course intends to convey the positives of asset-based teaching and the negatives of deficit-based thinking, it is possible both the teacher educator and implicit messages within the course structure itself send the opposite message to pre-service teachers. One example of this contradiction lies in the language of the course description. In centering the course on “the development of cultural competence,” the implied assumption is that pre-service teachers are somehow culturally incompetent upon entering the classroom. Thus, teacher educators’ efforts to encourage asset-based perspectives may be read as hypocritical by the pre-service teachers. After examining how such a mismatch between theory and practice occurs, the author offers ideas towards helping other teacher educators emphasize asset-based teaching with their pre-service teachers.

## I. Introduction

The issue I discuss here is one I not only see in Teacher Education programs in general, but within my own specific work as well. Thus, I am writing for myself as much as for others. It is not an accident that I am drawn to put all of this down at a time when I am preparing myself for another year of teaching. Simply put, I want to avoid the mistakes I always seem to recognize after-the-fact as the academic year progresses. More specifically, I have recognized deficit-based thinking in my own teaching (and the teaching of others) too often and am using this writing as a way to think seriously about how to shift away from such dispositions permanently.

However, I also want to “talk back” against a strain in education research, as well as the publications that follow, that seem to require a deficit-first kind of thinking. This kind of thinking shows up in teacher educators because we invariably look for research opportunities in the courses we teach. Simply put, we need to identify a problem and a possible solution to it and then, of course, write and publish from it. As with my admission above though, I am as much a part of this pattern as my fellow teacher educators. You could even say that this is exactly what I am doing now.

However, to play with the always instructive Shakespeare: the fault is not in our students, but in ourselves. The translation being that we need to avoid a deficit-first mindset toward our students because such thinking leads us away from understanding fully our role in the classroom. Additionally, I also hope to provide teachers with a way to think about the dispositions they bring with them into the classroom every September. My purpose is not to chastise fellow teacher educators, but to challenge all of us to

*practice what we preach* in hopes our students become the kinds of teachers we know our schools need.

To dig into these issues with some specificity, I want to limit my discussion to the Multicultural Education course I teach as a part of the Teacher Education program at a university in the Northwest. After a discussion of some deficit-based assumptions I see as built into this course, I will discuss a few ideas towards engaging in more asset-based teaching in terms of both pedagogy and curriculum.

## II. Defining Terms: Deficit and Asset-based Thinking

My understanding of deficit-based thinking is drawn specifically from Angela Valenzuela and Richard R. Valencia's work. For example, in *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, Valenzuela writes of U.S.-born Mexican students being subjected to the "uncaring student prototype" (1999). Valenzuela's work details teachers who find deficits in how their students undervalue education, but are unwilling to question how such attitudes could be simply a defense mechanism. In her work we see many instances where deficit thinking is inscribed on low-income students and students of color. Although tremendously persuasive work has been done to show how deficit thinking infects our schools (Valencia, 1997) as well as pre-service teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2006), one crucial point still can be made: teacher educators are susceptible to the dull simplicity of deficit thinking as well.

However, before I discuss how deficit thinking exists in the Multicultural Education course, I must define asset-based teaching. Such work begins with understanding how students come to school with "funds of knowledge" from their

communities and homes (Moll et al., 1992). A teacher focused on asset-based dispositions and practices will assume students arrive with “assets that need to be recognized, validated, and used in the educational process” (McKenzie & Scheurich). Moreover, it is crucial for the asset-based teacher to connect these “funds” to the learning that takes place in the classroom. Again, significant work has been done to make these connections relevant and authentic (Ladson-Billings 1994, Gay 2000). The irony here is that within the course where students learn about deficit and asset-based thinking, teacher educators can easily fail to see these “funds” and tie them to the new learning.

### III. Is “Cultural Competence” an Insult?

The following is the course description for the Multicultural Education course I teach: “Exploration of marginalized groups and the implications for change in education. Examination of foundational elements of and approaches to Multicultural Education as the underpinning to the development of cultural competence.” My contention is that implied in this “development of cultural competence” of pre-service teachers language is the deficit-based notion that students are culturally *incompetent* on the first day of class. We then spend the rest of the term trying to convince our pre-service teachers of the importance of avoiding cultural deficit thinking and championing more asset-based dispositions.

Before continuing to discuss how I critique “cultural competence” with my students, I will provide a brief account of two ways in which the concept has been contested previously. One such critique, particularly relevant to my work, is voiced by Sandi Jacobs, vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality. It is Jacob’s

contention that teacher educators like myself should focus more on instructional strategies and not “soft skills” like learning how to meet children’s social needs. She said, “We need to make sure the exposure is on content and pedagogy” (Karp & Harris). As an example, The National Council on Teacher Quality group released a report in 2010 critical of schools and colleges of education in Illinois for their lack of rigor. In such critique, we see how those focused on data-driven identification of teacher preparedness are concerned that “cultural competence” is something more difficult to categorize. Although I could “talk back” against this particular vein of critique, it is perhaps more important for me to wonder if, in offering my own critique of “cultural competence,” am I offering cover for those who seek to judge my work in ways I find objectionable?

Another strain of critique makes the case that “cultural competence” should be replaced by more overt language, such as “critically cultural awareness” (Furlong & Brown). In this case, I agree that a shift in language may help our students see this dispositional development as less a comment on deficiency within them and more a necessary growth away from the perspectives they currently inhabit. To make their case to change this language, Furlong and Brown question the “dubious notion that cultural competence is an attitude, skill and/or knowledge that can be simply added onto the practitioner’s current stockpile.” They worry that, “if cultural competence can be ‘packaged’ and ticked-off as a box that can be, or has to be, filled in, this is worryingly associated with assumptions that non-indigenous culture has that expertise as a neutral, impersonal commodity.” Amazingly, here we see a kind of dialogue occurring between both manners of critique in regards to “cultural competence.” On the one hand, we have those who seek to deemphasize the term based on its lack of quantifiable objectivity, and

on the other, we have a concern that when we do look at that way, we neuter the power of the ideas this kind of thinking can embody.

Regardless of how this concept has been and will continue to be contested, my current concerns deal with how this language relates to the real resistance pre-service teachers often show in the classroom and in coursework necessary to any multicultural education course. The mistake teacher educators make is to identify this “resistance” as a poor disposition and suddenly we have a “problem” to work with, as opposed to understanding that we helped create it in the first place.

In fact, I have seen such perspectives expressed in articles for this very journal. Instead of blaming my colleagues for such perspectives, my intent is to stress this area as a focus for concern and improvement for teacher educators dedicated to the critical work of helping their students understand educational equity and culturally relevant teaching practices. This article looks at how to teach such courses in a way that advances asset-based dispositions in pre-service teachers by teaching them from those same asset-based dispositions.

For example, on the first day of every Multicultural Education course, my students and I read the course description and I ask them to unpack terms like “marginalized” and “cultural competence.” In our discussion, I inevitably draw students’ attention to this implied assumption of incompetence. I stress however that I do not consider them incompetent. I also tell them that I have higher expectations than mere “competence” when it comes to understanding how culture impacts education. To get there, I tell the students that the other night my wife told me “I was competent at making dinner” and I say that I felt pretty good about such a compliment. They look at me

incredulously until they get the joke. For me, beginning this way helps students understand the course as less an effort to reduce their incompetence in terms of being more tolerant of some ill-defined set of “marginalized others,” and instead more about expanding their knowledge of their own cultures and how schools (and society) interact with our cultures in complex ways.

Although this introduction takes all of ten minutes, I am confident my students benefit from a discussion that asks them to consider the implied assumptions often embedded in language and are better prepared for later discussions, like our discussion of our assumptions concerning who “good” students are and how such a definition immediately leads to defining the opposite – “bad” students.

#### IV. Teaching to Assets

Along with setting the bar above a disposition of cultural competence, another struggle for teachers of Multicultural Education courses is to provide pre-service teachers with the knowledges and skills to implement a complete vision of multicultural education in their future classrooms. For example, although all five of Banks’ dimensions of multicultural education are discussed, the dimension of content integration can often represent the first and last manner in which pre-service teachers come to understand the place multicultural education has within their particular content area or certification area. To delve more deeply into the four remaining dimensions (knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and empowering school culture), I have found it helpful to connect these dimensions to the students’ earlier course work. For example, we focus on connections between constructivism and knowledge construction as a way to

understand a progression from theoretical foundations to a notion of critical practice based on equity and excellence. Although students find these other four dimensions more difficult to implement than content integration, the habit of seeing the material itself as an asset to their teaching is another step in refusing to believe that content integration is all they can know.

Another area teacher educators can struggle with is responding to the great diversity of certification areas and content levels of the students in each class. Our first goal must be to critically consider how we think about diversity ourselves within the classroom space. Instead of focusing on the different subject area majors and grade levels my students are becoming certified to teach as a problem, I stress how we benefit from such variety. To do so, I create two different groupings within each section: the first, organized students within similar certification areas while the second was constructed to ensure a diversity of these areas so students can practice talking about the material across disciplines. Students commented that they appreciated the chance to speak with classmates in both these settings. I also use a diversity of content levels and/or certification areas within the classroom by both encouraging cross-discipline ideas of implementation as well as more content/certification-specific discussions of practice. For example, instead of having students work in content specific groups (for various assignments and their final exam), I encourage students to work in groups of mixed content areas.

One particular mixed content group worked on creating a lesson plan that used all five of Banks' dimensions of multicultural education as their final exam presentation. The four students came from the following content areas: Family & Consumer Sciences,

Secondary Math, and Physical & Health Education. After the quarter ended, I asked each student to respond to questions regarding their process of making lesson plan with such a diversity of content areas. Below I share my questions and the responses I received from one of the four students:

How did your group come up with the lesson plan in terms of fitting in different content and certification areas?

*“We started with the overall idea of using a nutrition unit to integrate the content areas of health and math. In a prior nutrition class...I participated in a project that required us to go to the store and calculate food items on a food stamp budget. It was very informative and eye opening to the food systems in America and the millions of people that struggle. Our group came together to create a version of the food stamp challenge that students in a high school setting could do. The lesson required a lot of calculations with food budgeting, which made it easy to combine nutrition and math.”*

How did your lesson plan fit with the content of our class?

*“Our lesson plan gives students the opportunity to experience what its like for many families in America, to shop and feed their families on a limited budget. Students are informed about government funded food programs and the realities many people face within the limited food budget. This lesson plan gives insight to some of the issues with food systems in America, for example the pricing of produce and other nutritional dense foods versus empty calorie foods. Students will be able to experience and understand the difficulties of healthy eating on a food stamp budget. Through their grocery shopping experience and reflection of the lesson students will witness and experience first hand that healthy eating isn't always a choice. Students will work with their peers to develop a grocery-shopping list from two separate stores. After the shopping experience each group will be required to reflect and discuss the experience through a set guided questions.”*

Such grouping will certainly make some of their work more complex, but will underscore the notion that classroom diversity is an asset to be used to enliven their learning, not a deficit to their learning.

Understanding diversity as an asset is crucial in helping my students begin to practice asset-based perspectives as a skill. I hope that continued mixing of content areas underscore ways of thinking about diversity in the classroom to avoid deficit paradigms and assist my students in seeing their own students' diversity as assets to learning.

Another way to encourage asset-based thinking in my students is to ask them to write letters to the next set of students at the end of the quarter. Before I detail this idea, some background is helpful. As a high school English teacher and community college instructor in Wisconsin, teaching in semesters was all I had ever known. Although some semesters seemed longer than others, structuring a syllabus in terms of 15 weeks had become second nature. When I arrived at Washington State in 2012 however, I had to adapt to teaching courses on the quarter system. The adjustment has been a difficult, both in terms of curricular shrinkage and because I felt the Multicultural Education class I was teaching exclusively at that point was the most important class I had yet to teach. Simply put, as soon as I felt the class and I were making real progress on the thorny issues of equity and diversity in schooling, the quarter was almost over and I had to prepare a final assessment to a course only three quarters-cooked.

At the start of my second year of university teacher education, I decided to ask my Fall quarter students to write a letter to students in my Winter quarter classes as a way to bring their knowledge of the course and me forward into the next quarter as an asset often lost as one group of students replaces the next. Specifically, I asked them to respond to the following:

1. What will you need to do to be successful in this class?
2. What will you need to know about Professor Hollar?

### 3. What should you make sure Hollar does the same and/or differently?

To encourage an honest accounting, I asked students to write their letters anonymously. A student was then elected to collect these letters in a large envelope and keep them until the next quarter began. When it had, I sent the student an email asking them to hand deliver the envelope to my new students during the first week of classes. The new students then each took a letter, read it, and passed them around their table until they had read three or four different letters. We then discussed what they had learned, paying particular attention to any comments they could share that re-voiced what they had just read. Not only did I gain valuable insight into my teaching, but my new students had an opportunity to become a “community of learners” with my old students, which is a central concept to multicultural education.

My next brainstorm concerning this process occurred at the end of the following quarter. I asked students to retain at least one letter until they wrote a letter of their own, but this time with the added responsibility of responding to the initial one they read. I then collected those letters and distributed them in the same manner as before. Students in the following quarter were able to read what amounted to a dialogue, call and response accounting of my Multicultural Education course over the span of two quarters. With these letters, I hoped to hit the ground running. My point here is, by creating this dialogue between different sets of students, I emphasized the value of what they had learned and considered that learning important enough to ask them to pass it along.

V. One Last Asset Idea?

One obvious issue ignored so far is how complex discussions of race and racism are considered in the Multicultural Education course, especially when the majority of my students are White (as am I). Much has been written about the negative attitudes White students display in response to such discussions. In the space I have here, I wish to structure my comments on this issue in the form of one last asset-orientated idea when addressing the concept of white privilege with these demographics.

My approach is to begin our discussion of White privilege with an episode from Season Three of the television comedy *30 Rock* titled "The Bubble." The episode centers on the protective "bubble" that a character, played by Jon Hamm, enjoys as an extremely handsome man. Here are a few examples of the privileges he benefits from: he doesn't have to wait for a table at a busy restaurant; he thinks you can cook salmon with Gatorade; and he gets out of parking tickets by flashing his blue eyes. The comedy is built less on how nice it is to have such privileges, and more on how ignorant the character is of them. In the end, after his "bubble" is popped and he understands why he people treat him the way they do, he is still unwilling to give up the privileges.

My students laugh at the character's final piece of dialogue of speaking gibberish, but thinking it's French. However, because he is also a White male, the transition to White privilege is easy for students to grab hold of. I am sure to tell them that as White, nondisabled, middle-class, heterosexual man, I walk around with a whole host of privileges. I challenge them to consider how true these privileges are for them regardless of how they identify themselves using those same descriptors. I ask how these privileges may benefit their everyday lives and, more specifically, how those privileges may have impacted their education.

They understand the idea that some people walk around in many different kinds of bubbles; yet, some do not. I see this understanding as an asset worth focusing on because discussion of White privilege often can become a repeat of the culturally incompetent assumption from above. The asset-based belief is that they also understand intuitively how harmful it is to ignore such privileges once you are aware of them. Simply, they understand the Jon Hamm character would make an awful teacher. Taking the next steps into what privileged people should do once the bubble has been burst are more difficult. However, by beginning in this way, I hope to offer a way for students to think about privilege more deeply.

## VI. Now What?

Although I find the issues I raise here critically important, I assume I am not really breaking new ground. Like myself, my fellow teacher educators are aware when they are thinking about their students from a deficit-based perspective. How could we not know? The more crucial issue for me, as with “The Bubble” episode, is what we do when we see ourselves from this new perspective? Do we keep going in this same way and hope our students, soon to be teachers, don’t notice the contradiction? My guess is that too many of us continue to think about our students in deficit terms: I suppose such thinking is both human nature and the nature of the profession of teacher educators. But, can we do better? Although I hope others find a challenge here, this article is my way to demand better from myself.

As I write these last words, the beginning of this new quarter is much closer than when I began. In a few days I will meet 90 pre-service teachers, 60 of whom will take

one of two Multicultural Education sections I teach. On the advice of a colleague, I plan to use this article as an initial reading and discussion starter during the first week of class. Hopefully, the discussion will encourage students to consider how “practicing what we preach” involves a commitment to not only self-reflection, but teacher-student dialogue as well.

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