

Addressing “Who am I?” Before “Who are they?”
When Facing Diversity

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Abstract

This paper represents an ongoing attempt to focus on the kinds of educational theories and practices that encourage educators and students to understand the relationship among ideology, history, power, perceptions, and culture. It also focuses on knowing the self as an educator and as a self in relationships with students. This workshop reflects a social reconstructionist approach to multicultural education that teaches about power, power relations, and hegemony as they contribute to self identity and decisions related to self and identity.

As we face diversity in our schools, we realize we must learn who our students are, what their interests and life experiences are, what they need, and what they bring to the teaching-learning context. We often overlook, however, the fundamental necessity of reflecting on who we are. Typically, educators reflect on their actions and on what happens in the classroom (see Schon, 1987), but rarely do we focus on who we are in terms of race, class, gender, culture, philosophy, values, and life experiences (see Marshall, 2002). All of who we are is brought to the teaching-learning context and has a significant impact on how we present ourselves to our students, how students see us, how we see our students, the curricular decisions we make, our management decisions, the pedagogy we choose, and how we interact with the families of our students, our colleagues, administrators and school staff.

Knowing the self is also the base from which one is able to develop a relationship with anyone else. Only in knowing the self can one reach out to another in a meaningful way so that a relationship can evolve. As a teacher, relationships are the foundation of teaching-learning (See Goldstein, 1999 and Noddings, 1984). Goldstein (1999) stresses the importance of relationship in cognitive development, citing the work of Vygotsky (1962) and of Noddings (1984).

Knowing one's self may be an effective way in which an educator can be a model of diversity, multiculturalism and an effective teacher. As a teacher, one must be reflexive about one's own perspective, biases, and place in society. (Frankenberg (1993) asked, “How did I come to be where I am?”) At some point one must know one's “self,” ask questions about one's “self.” A definition of the self is a biological and social process. Questions such as “Who am I?” and “How do I see my ‘self’?” are cognitive constructs, referred to as “the self concept.” Questions such as “How do I feel about who I am?” and “Do I feel good about my ‘self’?” are affective constructs, referred to as “self-esteem.” (See James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1964; Snyder, 1987; and Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984.)

Answers to questions such as “Who am I?” and “How do I feel about who I am?” inform the development of an identity, as well as informing answers to the question “Who do I want to be?” (See Tatum, 1992; Cross, 1991; and Helms, 1990.) The development of the self-concept precedes the development of an identity and provides information relative to one's identity. Of particular importance to students of color in the formation of their identity is thinking of the racial/ethnic self. Stated slightly differently, answers to identity questions (Who do I want to be?) may often be influenced by their perceptions of messages received from the dominant culture (in the broader society and also in school). This may represent a limitation to their life choices. As educators, we must encourage and support the development of “self” within our

students. We need to challenge our students' thinking in terms of diversity and multicultural issues and push them to think of the "other" by expecting our students to address the questions “Who am I?” and “How do I know?/On what do I base my thinking?” for themselves. Personal narratives (see Frank, 2002) are a means of examining the self and the racial identity process. As educators we need to write our own narratives as well as expecting this kind of analysis from our students.

The Model of Effective Teaching that will be discussed in the remainder of the paper focuses on the following: (1)the teacher first addressing herself/himself in a reflexive, critical analysis, (2) the teacher reaching out to the students so that relationships are formed that will be the crucial basis of the teaching-learning context, and (3) as a result of the relationships, answers to the questions “What do I want to see?” and “How do I maintain a positive sense of place for everyone?” can be developed.

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