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Poetry as Provocation for Intentional Teaching

Joanne M. Szamreta

Reflecting on one's own educational experiences and background and how those things affect one's teaching and interactions with children and parents needs to start early in a preservice teacher's education. Becoming an intentional teacher requires an individual to have knowledge of self and deep knowledge of human development, content, and pedagogy. It is critical that self-reflection becomes a process that a teacher summons when a classroom relationship is problematic or a child or children are not engaged in the learning process. Selma Fraiberg wrote eloquently about how all parents have 'ghosts in the nursery' (Fraiberg, et al, 1975), their own experiences of being parented and how those experiences both consciously and unconsciously often guide their parenting. When a developing teacher searches through the layers of his/her own experiences of being taught, it becomes more likely that there will be fewer 'ghosts' in the classroom guiding his/her practice and s/he can collaborate intentionally with children or adolescents towards joint goals in the learning process.

To lay the foundations for the development of intentional teaching, the faculty in the first year education course at Lesley University begin by prompting the process of students' reflection on the layers of their own development and learning so far. We start early in the course with an interactive presentation by Dr. Ulric Johnson who has developed a model for reflecting on what factors might have influenced the content of these layers. In his description of the Five Cs of Awareness, Dr. Johnson and his co-author, Patti DeRosa describe Color, Culture, Class, Character and Context as being critical dimensions to analyze about one's self so as to better understand one's own identity as the foundation for one's identity as a teacher.

Color is a given characteristic for each individual. In the 5Cs model, color refers to an individual or group identity related to skin color as defined by one's self or by those in power. The C of color also includes aspects of a person's core identity that typically don't change such as physical appearance, sex, sexual orientation, and abilities as well as other aspects of an individual's identity.

The C of Culture refers to the many cultures within which each of us participates and the various sets of "...values, beliefs, symbols, behaviors, ways of living and shared history of a group of people that are continually changing and that are passed on from one generation to the next." (DeRosa & Johnson, p.3) One's race may be included in the C of culture when race is defined by one's skin color or one's ethnicity as determined by various other cultural groups. For example, the Irish were defined by mainstream American society as a race during the mid-19th century when vast numbers of Irish immigrants were arriving in the US. There is also one's home culture, one's work or school culture, peer culture and so on.

The C of class refers to socioeconomic class and the classes with which an individual identifies and to what degrees of social and economic power s/he is accustomed based on socioeconomic class. With the C of character, the focus is on personal attributes, idiosyncracies and preferences that combine to create a unique individual. Finally there's the fifth C of context or the broader environment or environments within which an individual is accustomed to functioning.

Students read about these Five Cs and do several different exercises related to them over several class periods. Students also write a reflection on their 5Cs in relation to their one-day-week field experience connected to the course. Through the readings, discussion and then this reflection, many students identify major differences as well as some similarities between some of their Cs and the Cs of the children in their classrooms. Some students have been able to identify differences in teachers' expectations of students because of the unstated beliefs they have and the value that they place on some of the students' 5Cs. For example one student works with two different teachers in each of two different content areas. This student observed, one teacher teaches...' at a slow pace and is very repetitive....so...her students have become used to learning at this rate...' . The student also observed that the second teacher '...teaches the same students at a much faster and impressive rate....' and challenges them with reading, followed by discussion about topics such as women's roles in today's society, equal pay for equal work and other sophisticated themes for 9 & 10 year olds. Another student wrote, I thought 'My 5Cs of color, class and culture might be influencing the beliefs and values I hold about teaching and learning....I thought that white privilege (of some children)would create an imbalance of cultural capital brought into the classroom by the white students....Instead I found that the students who were of different races, social class, gender and ethnicities came to school each day and shared their unique cultural insights and values. As a result, democracy in the school prevails...'. and everyone is learning. Students' examination of their 5Cs have led them to self-reflect and uncover some of the less conscious aspects of their identities that will hopefully become areas for continual self-assessment as they move into more depth in their roles as student teachers.

Another activity that has been helpful in supporting preservice undergraduates as they develop their professional identities as teachers has been the linkage of some reading with poetry writing. Each students reads the article " Where I'm from : Inviting students' lives into the classroom" that we then discuss in class. Afterwards, each student writes a poem that reflects learning experiences in his/her family as well as in school. I have also written such a poem as does the student Course Assistant who has been working with me and we share them with our group to build comfort among the students.

I have written:

“I come from kapusta and kielbasi,
 From Uncle Adam falling asleep in a chair after
 A big holiday meal.
 I come from more cousins than I can count,
 Playing and teasing and getting away with wild behaviors.
 At the massive family gatherings, the adults are too busy at massive to notice
 what’s going on.
 I come from Polish-American love and family closeness,
 Closeness that is sometimes claustrophobic but is usually well- intentioned.
 ‘Poland is the ‘motherland.’, my daughter says.
 This is something I will feel forever.”

The Course Assistant and I share our own poems first to help build comfort among the students for the time when they will share their poems. As they feel ready, student will share what they have written within their small groups and then decide if there is a poem from the group that a student would like to share with the class.

Some amazing self-reflections and disclosures tend to come out during this poetry exercise. A student who has been extraordinarily careful about assignment specifics and deadlines, always asking questions and wanting detailed answers, writes about how she broke all the rules in high school and was a ‘class clown’.

“(a friend) and I throwing chocolate pudding at people in the lunchroom
 then making fun of those who couldn’t do flips on the bars...”

The seriousness of her attitude in the course did not reveal any of this previous disposition that she exhibited in her former schooling! When asked about her behavior as a young student, this undergraduate, preservice teacher replied that now that she had been able to experience at least a little of what the responsibilities are of a teacher, she had a very different perspective on her previous behavior.

Another student wrote about his background:

“Sharing wasn’t caring.
 It was just our norm.
 No fat wallets, no bright jewelry,
 Our parents toiled for the very
 Dirt we played in.”

He spoke about how books he read in school had opened up new worlds for him :

“..the dreams that slept
between the covers of books
wrought more emotion
than that plastic box ever could
despite its familiar faces and catchy jingles.”

The love of books he read in school became a source of much emotion and a motivation for him to pass on his passion to the students he hoped to teach, perhaps helping them to imagine beyond the limitations they may experience because of the C of their socioeconomic class and the passive addiction of tv.

Other students came to a realization about the critical importance of childhood experiences.

“Childhood memories last forever,
from playing in the park to making friends.
Friendly faces come and go
but some stick around for a lifetime.”
“I know I am loved.”
“...but it's the (family) craziness I've come to love.
My family is who I am.”
“ I am from 'Don't let the bed bugs bite!' and 'I love you.' “
“I am from loving parents and a supportive boyfriend.”
“ I am from a single mom,
a weekend dad, a step-dad,
two brothers as my best friends,
momentous grandparents,
surrounded by love.”

These students had begun the process of reflecting on their own school and family experiences and discovering the connections between those experiences, their current identities, and who they hoped to become as teachers. We talked about how it's important to be intentional in interactions with their students so as teachers they could communicate some of their own positive experiences in their families and in their schooling or reflect on their negatives experiences to the children they will teach.

A similar experience of self-reflection and discovery occurred within a graduate course for preservice teachers, many of whom were career-changers from the business world. Their career intention was to become teachers and they very much wanted me to tell them what that meant. The course, *Issues in American schooling*, focused on the tensions and

transformations in conceptions of equity and equality over the history of education in the US and so had the potential of eliciting some engaging but perhaps contentious discussion.

Over the course of three summers, I taught this 5 day/week course and about a third of the way through, used a poetry-writing exercise similar to the one used with the undergraduates that required students to self-reflect and write about what they were bringing to the role of teacher. The initial impetus for this potentially revealing and risky activity was the behavior of the students in the course who seemed to be expecting me to ‘tell them what they needed to know’ in order to teach. They seemed to be asking for answers while I was interested in having them engage, argue, and debate ideas as well as challenge their own 5Cs through reflection on them. It was also important for them to explore how their 5Cs related to current issues of equity and equality in education and to incorporate those discoveries into being intentional in their teaching. For this experience, the students read an article focusing on the experiences in a high school classroom after the tragedy of 911 and the harassment a Muslim student was experiencing in the classroom and the school. The teacher in this high school classroom, asked her students to each write a poem modeled on Langston Hughes’ poem “ I, Too, Sing America”, had her students share their poetry, and as a result, come to better understanding of themselves in relation to the others in the class. The students in the course voiced many concerns about their ability to write poetry and asked many questions about how I would be grading this assignment. My response focused on how the assignment was not about writing Hughes’ caliber of poetry but rather on providing a poetic template for their reflections on what internal resources they would bring to the role of teacher.

In the first year I attempted this assignment, the positive outcomes for the group were quite dramatic and lead me to continue using this assignment in subsequent years. With students’ permission, I made a display of their poetry and allowed time in class for everyone to read each other’s poems. When we regrouped for discussion and reflection, the conversation was much deeper, engaged and more meaningful to us all. We had learned more about each other and so were able to ask each other questions more freely, and engage in debate in subsequent classes. I was no longer the only one with ‘knowledge’ in the classroom. Everyone contributed from his or her own fund of knowledge and experience to the discussion and debate.

One student who was able to ‘pass’ for white wrote:

‘We feel invisible,
 My sister and I
 White and not white
 Too white but not white enough
 Castro-phobia
 (The teacher) asked If my family were Kommunists?
 In front of the whole first grade....

All Micks are drunks All Spics are lazy So we must be
Too lazy to get drunk
Irish and Cuban Lucy and Ricky Lucille and Desi
In reverse Just not like on tv....”

Another student wrote:

“I, too, sing America
I am the good girl
A Catholic
Who does her homework
Colors within the lines and
Plays by the rules.
But, silently I question.
Today, I want to sing a new song.
I want to break the rules.
I want to challenge your definition of who belongs.
I want to paint a new picture
Where colors blend
Like the dawning of a new day at sunrise....
Tomorrow I will teach you to lift your voice
And sing your own song.
I might even teach you to break the rules.
Yesterday has taught me how....
I, too, will teach America to sing.
I, too, am an American.”

Yet another student wrote:

“I, too, am an American.
I am a white, middle-class lesbian.
Although that is not what most see.
They only see the white of me.
My difference can be hidden from most everyone,
To protect me from what they may say, think, and do.
However, it’s hard to keep a major part of me constantly hidden from view.
I want to show that my ‘kind’ deserves an equal voice in democracy too....
Tomorrow,....
I won’t need to worry...
They will see me for me and not for who I love
They will be ashamed--
I, too, am an American.”

Each student revealed an important part of him or herself to the rest of the group. Each took a risk but was rewarded with positive recognition from their peers and found a voice in the class discussion, having reflected on what the contribution from their uniqueness would bring to our group.

We reflected in further discussion how this might be the same for children or youth in their future classrooms, how it would be important to acknowledge what each child or young person can contribute to the classroom group from his/her own uniqueness and fund of knowledge. Being aware of how their own experiences influenced their identities as teachers and being intentional about creating experiences through which students could reveal themselves and their funds of knowledge became an important piece of our discussions about equity and equality.

To become an intentional teacher, one needs to explore the many aspects of one's own identity that one brings to the role of teacher. Only in this way can a teacher be intentional about engaging each of his/her own students into the learning process, especially when a student is reluctant to do so. A teacher needs to self-reflect and ask what about his/her own identity, values and beliefs may be being communicated to a student and perhaps his/her family so as to hinder the kind of engagement with the teaching-learning process that the student needs to be successful. A teacher needs to be intentional in creating a classroom environment comfortable enough for each student to share his/her funds of knowledge from his/her own 5Cs so that each student will be able to find a voice within the learning process.

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