

A Hierarchical View of Differentiation and The Need to Examine Approaches Critically towards teaching in relation to gender, subject stream and locality

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INTRODUCTION

This hierarchical vision of social diversity draws on what Sleeter and Grant (1988) call a "deficiency orientation." Problems exist for those who are "different" from the norm--for limited English speakers, students of color, and so on. Learners were seen as varying in the degree to which they differed from the norm. Respondents often described in apparently sympathetic tones the "victims" of difference, their need for self-esteem, and a reaffirmation of their "right" to education.

This view of differences carried consequences for teachers, according to many of the respondents, although their sense of the consequences tended to be quite general: chiefly, giving more attention, encouragement, motivation, and help.

Most often, problems of diversity were implicitly described as the concern of the individual "different" student and, in some cases, the teacher. The dominant approach of interviewees saw social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences as significant for their potential barrier to learning, and for their consequences for the individual learner and, to some extent, teacher. A minority of those interviewed considered the impact of diversity on the social relations of the classroom or social organization of learning, as one interviewee did in describing the ways in which "kids definitely perceive those differences, and they oftentimes think of those kids as inferior to themselves, we know, if they have different colored skin or something" (Mindy). Equally unusual was the perspective that saw difference as a positive resource for teaching and learning.⁷ In summary, prospective teachers expressed elaborate visions of ways in which students differ. Psychological and categorical differences predominated, but both of these types mattered to our respondents because of the apparent effect they have on individual behavior and, most important, motivation. Their dominant conception of diversity is thus fundamentally psychological

in its orientation. At the same time, however, our respondents tended to view social categories of difference in hierarchical terms and as having individual, not larger social, consequences. For the most part, "difference" was implicitly treated as a problem.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Emerging from the questionnaire and interview responses is a view of teaching which sees all students as different and the teacher as reactive to difference. This model of teaching is essentially individually oriented: the individual teacher working with the individual student and his or her unique set of characteristics. As one prospective teacher characterized this view, "my teaching would differ . . . with the individual" (Sonya).

Associated with this individualistic orientation towards teaching and diversity is the importance assigned to personality and attitude. On the questionnaire, respondents most often cited student attitudes as the sources of success (42 percent) and failure (35 percent) in student's learning experiences (see Table 3). The frequency with which student motivation was mentioned in the interviews echoes this findings. As part of this individualistic orientation, these prospective teachers tended to think of teaching as relating to individual students. As a result, they emphasized teachers' need to find out their students' interests; their responses to diversity often centered on developing interests among students who are different from the norm. The interviews suggest that these prospective teachers at this point in their professional studies tend to consider diversity as something affecting individual students. Except for the occasional interview which pointed out the status hierarchy in classrooms or the positive potential of classroom diversity, the majority of respondents talked about teaching as working either with individual students or with an entire class, where a class is the sum of individuals. Generally absent from these discussions of

differences was attention to the social relations of the classroom, the dynamics of group interaction, as well as the school context.

With this orientation, a standard response to diversity is to individualize. Recall that approximately 70 percent of students surveyed agreed with the view that teachers are able to tailor instruction to accommodate individual differences. For many, individualization appeared to mean making the content or approach of class interesting to the individual student. It was the rare respondent who considered other meanings of individualization, took this idea of meeting individual needs to a more specific level, or considered the complexities associated with this practice. One interviewee who did do this described the teacher's obligation to attend to what she sees as differences in cognitive stages and teach at two or three different levels at the same time, so that you're not just teaching two people who can understand you analytically, but you're also teaching people who don't have the analysis, the capabilities. . . . So it's really a time where, especially in older grades of elementary, where you have to teach and make sure it's getting across to everybody, and everybody is spread out. (Mavis) Implicit in the majority of the interviews was the expectation that teachers would find ways, though undefined, to engage all students.

The prospective teachers we interviewed talked at length about how children differ and why teachers need to consider diversity. Yet a striking finding from these often lengthy conversations are apparent limitations and difficulties students had in discussing diversity in depth in the context of pedagogical action. Interviewees were most eloquent when talking about individual differences.

Where their talk bogged down (and sometimes came to a halt) was when they were asked to consider categorical differences such as gender, race, and social class. Responses tended to be one of two kinds. Some reflected limited exposure to and understanding of the category, as for example, when handicapping conditions were described as simply using wheelchairs. The other common type of response reiterated the importance of equal treatment or the sameness of educational goals and activities, as in one prospective elementary teacher's claim that "I do not think race is an excuse or reason for anything" (Gabrielle) and another's that, "as far as education goes we educate everyone the same" (Sonya). Despite our interviewees' oftentimes complex notions of the ways in which students may differ, they had the greatest difficulty analyzing and being explicit about the pedagogical implications of diversity. A prospective secondary school teacher expressed an unsureness many shared regarding operationalizing their concern for equity:

I have had a deep concern about this [gender differences]

for a long time. . . . And if you ask me specifically what, I am not sure whether I can tell you, but I know that is going to be something that I am concerned with and going to be looking for ways of dealing with it as positively as possible. (Sheila)

Many faced difficulties in going beyond familiar phrases about fairness and individual effort.⁸ The questionnaire responses similarly reveal a pattern of vagueness or confusion in response to questions dealing with specific teaching practices.

One particular area of concern is grouping and tracking. The proportion of respondents who were "not sure" about a set of items dealing with these issues was very high, higher than that on most other items dealing with general teaching issues. Between 18 percent and 25 percent of the respondents were not sure how they would operationalize their visions of fairness in the face of classroom diversity and pressures to use grouping or tracking (see Table 2). Asked about the merits of high school curricular tracking, for example, these prospective teachers gave responses that were spread out across the possible 7-point range, with each possible option for agreement or disagreement garnering more than 8 percent but less than 19 percent of the responses. The category receiving the largest number of responses was "not sure," with 23.8 percent of the responses. This variation and doubt may suggest a general confusion about grouping. Interestingly, at the same time, 64.8 percent of respondents disagreed with the practice of whole group instruction for children of low socioeconomic status (SES) background. What is the alternative? For these students, grouping is one, although many had doubts about it as a viable method. Individualizing instruction is the other common alternative, but clearly there are problems with that, some of which interviewees themselves indicated.⁹ The questionnaire and interview data from these teachers indicate that the teacher education students have much disagreement and a good deal of doubt about grouping and tracking. At the same time, they seem unclear about alternatives.

Given the dominance of an "individual difference" perspective, it is not surprising that prospective teachers had a hard time conceptualizing working with groups of differing students. Even students who articulated perspectives of categorical difference had trouble when pedagogy entered the discussion; they had a clear sense of categories that make a difference, but they were not clear what to do about these. A view of difference that does not include some understanding of social interaction does not prepare teachers well for thinking about the dynamics of classroom diversity.

A second area of confusion concerns teacher expectations. Our respondents discussed diversity in

terms of fairness and equal treatment. Yet they encountered difficulties in discussing teaching standards and expectations. Some students' responses were marked by internal inconsistencies, ones which might suggest potential for self-fulfilling prophecies, particularly for children of color, poor children, or children with limited English proficiency.

The comments of one prospective elementary teacher are a case in point. When asked how her teaching might differ for students who are of different races, she said, "Really no different . . . but all the kids are going to have to do what I expect of them in class" (*italics added*). She was next asked about the way she would respond to language difference. During this section, the interviewer raised the issue of black English by asking "would you accept things that you might not accept from other kids because they have learned in a different way?" Her response was, "Yeah, but um, yeah, I guess" (Shelley). For this teacher, as well as others, identifying standards and expectations for different students poses a problem. Her general orientation is to treat all students the same and expect the same of all, yet when asked about specific differences, she suggests applying different standards for different students. Implicit in much of the discussion of standards was the idea of an orthodox approach or orthodox knowledge. Another prospective elementary teacher said that I know people of different, different races have different words to explain things and the way they pronounce things would be the reason for them spelling things wrong, and that has, that has to be taken into account but I think that they should be taught the right way. (Gabrielle)

This student, like many of her peers, took a strong stance on expectations needing to be the same for everyone ("I would expect the same from a black or a Hispanic person that I do from a white person"). At the same time, however, she explained that thinking about how teaching would differ for students who are from different backgrounds "is a hard question because you want to be fair but then you know you cannot expect as much . . . out of one person as . . . another." The tension between accepting difference and maintaining a common standard concerned many prospective teachers, especially as they discussed the teaching of writing. The difficulty in dealing pedagogically with diversity was particularly evident in the respondents' reflections on categorical differences and teaching expectations. When talking about race, gender, class, language and handicapping conditions as categories of difference, some students invoked educational research to explain and perhaps justify lower expectations for poor children and children of color. The comments by a prospective secondary school teacher, though slightly more explicit than those of many of her peers, typifies an implicit message that was present in

many interviews. This particular respondent (R) argued to the interviewer (I) that it would be important for her to know the racial and SES background of her students.

I: What about their SES and their race would be important for you to know as a teacher?

R: The kids do not perform as well on some tests as others do. They are more concrete oriented. Less abstract oriented. Higher SES kids usually come from a more motivated background education wise. You would have to know that if you have got an entire class of low SES kids you are going to have to work on motivation much more than if you are working with upper middle class kids.

The interviewer then asked about ethnicity, and the student explained:

R: In Hispanics it has been recently found are the worst educated of all. Blacks

have . . . as I understand it they have something against learning sociologically because it is the white thing to do and a lot of peer pressure is put on black students not to learn and not to succeed so you would have to know that whether or not these black students are going through peer pressure. (Sena) For this prospective teacher and others like her, research has provided frameworks for understanding inequality in classrooms that results from social diversity. Given an implicit model of teaching that stresses motivation and the tendency to attribute this to contextual factors, these frameworks may at the same time serve to absolve the teacher of responsibility for challenging that inequity. Much later in the same interview, Sena talks about various types of diversity that are either relatively easy and difficult to deal with. She considers racial diversity potentially difficult because the blacks with their peer pressure, they are among their friends all the time. The way they grew up was not to be like "whitey." It is ingrained in their social structure at times, and you cannot expect to change someone's grain just by saying, well, you are in a classroom now and I am your teacher and you are going to change your attitude. For Sena and her peers, diversity may well be something teachers cannot do much about, and this perspective may be reinforced by research. In sum, our respondents called on research to define categories of difference and, in some cases, to explain why these categories are important for education. Yet when it came time to define a pedagogical approach, their previous experience and professional courses had not as yet given them any helpful direction, although these experiences and courses may well have supported in some a view which removes teachers from responsibility for learner success. For most of these teacher education students, however, they were hoping to learn from their programs constructive approaches to complex questions about learner diversity. These

questions, associated with and highlighting dilemmas all educators face, and ones for which we as a nation have had little success in identifying solutions.

What Questions Do These Responses Raise?

These findings raise conceptual and methodological questions and implications for research and practice in teacher education. These are puzzles associated with four findings: the dominance of the individual, the emphasis on personality and attitude, the diversity of response to concrete situations, and the presence of confusion.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Our data point to the power (or popularity) of an "individual difference" understanding of diversity and to conceptions of teaching as working with a collection of individuals. How can these be explained? There are several possible explanations, yet each requires additional research to be evaluated. One could argue that teaching attracts candidates who highly value the individually and a psychologically oriented approach to diversity, and our sample simply reflects this. Certainly, other research (King and Ladson-Billings, 1988) suggests the dominance of individual over structural-level explanatory frameworks among teacher education students. But are teacher candidates distinctive in this regard? Comparative analysis of teacher education and other students needs to be done if we 10The liberal arts students surveyed and interviewed as part of the NCRTE's work can help us test the effectiveness of this explanation are to make claims about a distinctive perspective held by our sample (and other prospective teachers).10

A second possibility--that this finding reflects the impact of teacher education--also offers itself as an explanation. While our findings draw on baseline data, many of the students interviewed had already had some (small) exposure to teacher education courses and not infrequently referred to educational research they had been exposed to in their programs. But we also know that teacher education is commonly understood as being a weak treatment. It is important to examine the stability of this "individual difference" orientation over time. Comparisons of this baseline data with subsequent waves of data will make that possible. In addition, we need to find out about the orientations to diversity of specific programs and analyze the ways in which programs influence these learners.

A third hypothesis is that what we find represents social rather than professional norms, society-wide ideological foundations rather than specific professional orientations. One finds support for this in the critical sociology of education (see, for example, Giroux and McLaren, 1986, and Popkewitz, 1987). Yet to gain clearer understanding

of the force of social norms requires comparisons across cultures. Research on teacher education in China (Paine, 1986), for example, indicates sharp contrasts in approaching the balancing of individual/collective concerns in the United States and China. Cross-cultural research can add to our understanding of the impact of U.S. culture(s) on American teacher education.

Finally, a fourth explanation needs to be considered. What appears as the predominance of an "individual difference" perspective may in fact reflect the methods used to learn about diversity.

Given the power of the concept of the individual in U.S. society, teacher education, and social science research, we find it difficult to ask questions about diversity that do not lead to an "individual differences" response. The content of questions often may suggest that differences occur at the level of the individual. It is difficult to find lay language to use in asking questions about patterns of difference, differences in context, and pedagogical implications. Anyon (1981), for example, in her educational research makes an important distinction between static notions of social class (like SES, in which the individual is positioned through static measures of income or occupational prestige) and relational notions of class (which incorporate the dynamic relationships of individuals, work, and social groups). Yet these and other distinctions have not entered popular discourse.

Thus, in analyzing how prospective teachers think about diversity, we need to be aware of the ways in which the concepts, language, and situations posed themselves convey hidden messages about orientations to diversity. Do our questions imply an individual or categorical difference orientation and exclude a contextual approach (like Anyon's use of "class")? The very choice of the word "different," for instance, may imply something that is not the same as "diversity" and may suggest a normative view or a deficiency orientation not intended by the researchers. That is, "different" may suggest variation from a norm, whereas "diversity" may simply suggest heterogeneity. I believe we need to examine more closely the implicit meanings--conveyed and received--by the language and form of research we use. This poses a challenge for future research.

It also adds to the difficulty of interpreting our current data.

Each of these possible explanations is plausible and, thus, emphasizes the need for further investigation. Surely the sources of influence on teachers' views of diversity are important to examine, particularly if we are to consider implications for preservice and inservice teacher education. Specific recommendations for action will vary depending on which of these explanations holds. In all cases, however, the dominance of an individual

perspective suggests that teacher education needs to help teachers analyze differing interpretations of the causes of educational inequity, consider critically the consequences of an individual difference view, and understand different pedagogical implications of alternative orientations to diversity.

AN EMPHASIS ON MOTIVATION, PERSONALITY AND ATTITUDES

The data reveal a conception of teaching which relies heavily on relating to students, encouraging their motivation, and building on their interests. When it comes to dealing with diverse learners, personality appears to carry more weight with these prospective teachers than knowledge of content. How do we interpret this finding? I think it is important to consider this attitude in connection with teacher education students' attitudes towards content knowledge, as well as their own educational experiences. While this particular section of the data does not speak to this point, one might hypothesize that the emphasis on attitude represents the prospective teacher's undervaluing of content knowledge in their own academic background. This finding, like that related to the dominance of the individual, makes us wonder about the ways in which prospective teachers are likely to change over time. Is this emphasis on teaching as relating personally to students something that beginning teachers bring to their professional studies and later abandon? Is this the result of their own experience as students and hence likely to change when they learn about and experience the teacher's role? Longitudinal study of our sample, as well as a comparison between prospective teachers and experienced teachers on this dimension, could produce interesting and useful information.

This finding also raises some challenges for teacher educators. If prospective teachers approach diverse learners as people to relate to, what is their motivation to think about content in different and potentially constructive pedagogical ways? Considering the stress these beginners place on attitude, teacher educators confront a serious problem in justifying and making meaningful their own courses to students. This is not a new issue. Teacher educators frequently lament their students' conviction that "loving children" is sufficient motivation for teaching. The diversity of learners, however, adds complications to this stress on attitude and "relating."

How well prepared will prospective teachers be to deal with the frustrations and dilemmas of teaching when attitude is not enough?

How thorough can their commitment to fairness be when certain students will be easier to relate to than others?

These questions, I believe, pose significant challenges for teacher educators. In particular, the data suggest prospective teachers need support in developing a commitment to educating all learners, regardless of frustrations over student attitudes and motivations. Accompanying this is a need for teacher education to help teachers critically examine their implicit model of teaching and offer an alternative view that brings both the social organization of learning and subject matter to the fore in teachers' thinking about teaching (Florio-Ruane, 1989; McDiarmid, 1989).

THE NEED TO EXAMINE APPROACHES CRITICALLY

A third set of questions and implications is brought up by another finding, that is, the high degree of disagreement and uncertainty over specific approaches to diversity. Recall that at the level of general norms, these prospective teachers shared a common valuing of equity. Yet when asked to respond to specific pedagogical decisions (such as grouping and tracking decisions), they displayed wide disagreement and frequently were not sure of their position. What do we make of this range of opinion? We could see this as a reflection of the diversity

among programs of teacher education or as an indication of diversity across the individuals in our sample. The presence of such divergent views may illustrate the lack of teacher education consensus on "answers" to the dilemmas of diversity. Yet I am wary of reading much about programs into this set of data. As baseline data, it comes from students who are at an early stage in their professional studies. In addition, the traditional weak effect of most teacher education programs makes it unlikely that this wide range would be caused by short exposure to teacher education. Instead, I find it more likely that this variation represents a lack of consensus in society. The teachers in our sample, like Americans generally, are in agreement about broad democratic principles and abstract ideals, yet there is not a similar agreement on how these ideals and principles get spelled out in practice. In addition, more important than the obvious disagreement over operationalizing instruction for diverse learners is the lack of confidence displayed by our sample. The large proportion of respondents who are "not sure" may indicate broad differences of opinion in society. This confusion or lack of confidence shown by our respondents may also signify the difficulty individuals have in conceptualizing the unfamiliar. Recall that the interviewees encountered great difficulties during discussions of the contextual or pedagogical implications of diversity. This likely reflects the limited background of prospective teachers; they tend to lack both experience of the teacher's view of classroom diversity and exposure to people different from themselves. Without classroom experience, these

prospective teachers find it hard to talk about classroom complexities or even conceptualize a class as anything more than an additive sum of individuals. In addition, many of our sample were also constrained by their own backgrounds, which tend to include

schooling in settings absent of visible heterogeneity. As one prospective secondary teacher explained, "I have not come from any place that has really had that big of a difference. You know, my high school was strictly Caucasian" (Geoffrey).

This study suggests that we need to find out more about how prospective teachers coming from homogeneous backgrounds understand diversity: What does the concept of diversity mean to them, and how do they arrive at that understanding? Our first wave of data collection suggests that these teachers have many abstract labels for categorizing people, but these labels have not provided them with systematic and dynamic understandings of diversity. This preliminary analysis suggests a need to pursue further the labels themselves, to uncover the individual meanings that these teachers give to categories like "family background," "social class," or "handicapped." At the same time, this pattern of responses raises questions for teacher educators. Prospective teachers enter teacher education with little personal experience of diversity. Yet they also claim to be drawing on personal experience as a major influence on their teaching (88.4 percent of the survey respondents agree that a lot of their ideas about teaching derive from their own schooling experiences). And many talked about learning to teach as essentially a trial-and-error process.

How well prepared will these teachers be to recognize and respond pedagogically to patterns of difference?

If these prospective teachers are calling upon their prior experience to make sense of that "trial-and-error" process, it is likely that they will be particularly constrained in their ability to work with the diversity--both visible and invisible--that is part of all classrooms and to see this diversity as a resource rather than a problem. Certainly this learn-by-doing approach supports the reproduction of familiar practices, including those that perpetuate educational inequity. Given this orientation, which is essentially conservative, it is not surprising that our baseline data should reveal lack of confidence and confusion. (It can be confusing to apply familiar solutions to what may be very different and unfamiliar contexts and situations.) It will be important to watch over time to see how teacher education programs affect this conservative perspective and, in particular, how this influences teachers' orientations to diversity. Related to this conservative thrust

implicit in much of our data is the presence of internal inconsistencies--for example, between ideals of fairness

and self-fulfilling prophecies of unequal achievement.

How much of this inconsistency is malleable through professional studies? One could claim that the inherent tensions in the prospective teachers' approaches simply reflect the novice stage of their professional and intellectual development. Yet other research on American education may offer a differing explanation: that these responses reflect fundamental tensions in American education--between ideals of equity and excellence, the rights of the individual and the needs of society, and so on. It will take further observation and interviews with our sample to see if they have exposure to discourse that acknowledges and challenges these contradictory tendencies.

As for teacher education practice, these data imply that students could benefit from broader exposure to the range of human diversity, yet this exposure needs to be supported by conceptual understanding and analytical frameworks. In particular, sustained and direct consideration of contextual understandings of and pedagogical implications of diversity is required to avoid re-discovering that "good liberal intentions are not enough" (Delpit, 1988, p. 296) and instead support teaching that is "multicultural and social reconstructionist" (Grant, 1988; Sleeter and Grant, 1988).

The prospective teachers interviewed were generally hopeful that diversity does not pose impossible challenges. Differences were described as "difficult, but hopefully not impossible.

Otherwise, why go into teaching?" (Mercy). At the start of these prospective teachers' professional study, it appears that the teacher's ability to respond to learner diversity is an article of faith, firmly held, deeply rooted in a dominant liberal American vision of education. "Right now I'd like to believe that I can have the ability to overcome these obstacles, and until I'm proven wrong, I'm going to have to believe it" (Monica). For teacher education the obligation is to provide support to Monica and her peers to examine their implicit assumptions critically while grounding their beliefs in dispositions, skills, and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that prospective teachers bring much to the discussion of diversity. Their views are idealistic and more coherent in abstract than concrete situational terms. Their approach, chiefly psychological in orientation, focuses on "individual difference" and, to a lesser extent, "categorical difference" levels of thinking about diversity. As a result, they tend to see diversity issues as decontextualized. Their view of classroom diversity appears to reflect a static, rather than a dynamic conception of individuals and groups. We find that they bring to discussions of diversity,

much as they do to consideration of teaching more generally, an enthusiastic appreciation of personality factors and an underdeveloped sense of the role of content and context.

In discussing diversity, these prospective teachers bring with them no small measure of confusion and tension. They face enormous challenges, thanks to persistent dilemmas that have shaped our educational system and classroom life. These future teachers are unsure of how one makes concrete the abstract goals of fairness and equality. And not infrequently, when pushed to do so, they propose approaches to teaching which treat diversity as a problem rather than a phenomenon; it is a view which places responsibility for the problem often on the student's (or family's) shoulders.

The expectations some hold for students of differing backgrounds appear to be unequal, despite claims to the contrary. In short, these teachers bring approaches to diversity that have the potential for reproducing inequality and reflect larger social and historical dilemmas.

These findings pose problems of interpretation. One can make plausible arguments for these findings reflecting diversity within teacher education, but one could also explain these as the products of a society whose educational and social ideologies themselves have a history of long, unresolved tensions. Our interpretation for the present is limited by both data and concepts. These findings also offer real challenges to teacher educators concerned with diversity. The growing diversity within our schools makes the inherently conservative, individualistic orientation of these prospective teachers a particularly worrisome problem. With longitudinal analysis and careful examination of the ways in which we ask questions about diversity, we can begin to make choices between alternative explanations and, only then, about suitable action in teacher education. Both researchers and teacher educators have much to learn about the orientations to diversity that prospective teachers bring to their professional education. We have even more to learn by seeing over time what these teachers make of what they bring.