

Honoring, Respecting, and Supporting LGBTQ Students

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Abstract

Educational settings are becoming a microcosm of society representing the diversity that is manifest in an increasingly multicultural world. As early as 1969, Smith recognized there was a need for major re-engineering of teacher education programs to prepare professionals for work in these every changing diverse settings. Unfortunately, most educators are not taught how to handle diversity and inclusiveness in the classrooms. This position is just as profound for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) students and their families. Based on recent sweeping reforms for gay rights, and specifically gay marriage, it is more likely that there will be more students with openly gay parents and more students who are willing to come out as LGBTQ. This paper provides a theoretical framework for using reflective writing as a pedagogical tool for examining beliefs and attitudes towards GLBTQ students in the development of future educators who support all students and their families.

Keywords: diversity, pre-service teachers, inclusion, reflection

Introduction

Educational settings are becoming a microcosm of society representing the diversity that is manifest in an increasingly multicultural world (Samuels, 2015). As early as 1969, Smith recognized there was a need for major re-engineering of teacher education programs to prepare professionals for work in these every changing diverse settings. Unfortunately, most educators are not taught how to handle diversity and inclusiveness in the classrooms (Samuels, 2015). Overwhelming, programs continue to place emphasis on the development of cognitive knowledge and pedagogical skills and fail to connect these elements to attitudes and beliefs which are equally important rudiments of teacher education in order for all student to be successful (Gay, 2010). Attitudes and beliefs about diversity have profound influences on teacher's instructional judgments' and actions (Knopp & Smith, 2005; Nieto, 2005). Existing reports (Geneva Gay, 2010; Mills & Ballatyne, 2010; Schussler, Stocksbury, & Bercaw, 2010) support the premise that racial, ethnic, and cultural attitudes and beliefs are always present, often problematic, and profoundly significant in shaping teaching conceptions and teacher actions. This position is just as profound for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) students and their families. Based on recent sweeping reforms for gay rights, and specifically gay marriage, it is more likely that there will be more students with openly gay parents and more students who are willing to come out as LGBTQ (Samuels, 2105).

GLBTQ Issues and Schools

In order to provide equitable support for all students, teachers should have an in-depth understanding of human sexuality, including sexual orientation (Howe & Lisi, 2014). The rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students, in particular need to be understood in light of the rampant homophobia in schools and society (Donahue, 2000). The urgency to address this troubling behavior is exemplified in a report by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN.org). This organization reported:

- Ninety-seven percent of all students in public high schools regularly hear homophobic comments from peers. Fifty-three percent report hearing homophobic comments remarks from school staff or faculty.
- Ninety-three percent of transgender students report verbal harassment based on their sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity/expression.
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens are twice as likely to consider suicide because of the way they are treated; three times as likely to create a suicide plan; and four times as likely to make a concerted suicide attempt. (Samuels, 2015, p.3)

To date, there is no federal legislation on bullying; however, 21 states plus the District of Columbia have hate crime laws that include sexual orientation (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2012). Federal legislation is one response to the harassment of GLBTQ students. However, the development of culturally competent school administrators and educators who effectively address these potentially debilitating physical and emotional acts is equally important. School personnel are culturally responsive when they are able to adapt cognitive and physical behavior in cross-cultural situations (Bennett, 1993) to meet the needs of all students. Further, Smith (1998) indicated that teachers who aspire to be culturally competent must understand sexual orientation identity development; have knowledge of the case law on gay and lesbian issues; and comprehend the unique psychological, emotional, and educational needs of GLBTQ students. Whatever personal opinion an educator may hold toward GLBTQ orientation, one thing remains irrefutable-educators have the same legal and ethical responsibilities to educate GLBTQ students as any other category of students. To this end, educators must create schools and classrooms that are safe places for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. (Diaz, et. al, 2006).

Changing Attitudes and Beliefs towards Cultural Diversity

Historically, teacher education programs have aimed to address attitudes and beliefs about diversity with add-on or piecemeal approaches (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010). Garmon (2004) suggested that the impact of these courses on developing positive dispositions towards diversity have yielded mixed results. Davis, et. al (2008) and others (Artiles & McClafferty, 1998; Delany-Barmann & Minner, 1997; Tran, Yung, & DiLella, 1994) for example reported that students' racial attitudes and beliefs were changed in a positive direction by a course on diversity. Conversely, research by Banks (2001) and others report pre-service teachers exit these courses unchanged and often have existing stereotypical perceptions reinforced. Further, Ballantyne and Mills (2008) suggest these fragmented programs do not lend themselves to the development of dispositions in pre-service teachers that are aligned with a cognitive view of social justice.

Another perspective must also be considered within the context of existing research. These studies suggest multicultural education courses may have different effects on different students. Pohan (1996) found students who bring strong biases and negative stereotypes about diverse groups to multicultural education course are less likely to develop the types of professional beliefs and behaviors most consistent with multicultural sensitivity. Similar, Garmon (2004) reported "if students are not "ready" to receive instruction and experiences presented to them, even the best-designed teacher preparation programs may be ineffective in developing appropriate dispositions toward cultural diversity.

Although there is no decisive evidence which supports the impact of multicultural education courses on pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward diversity, it is profoundly evident that U.S. schools are becoming more ethnically, racially, culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse (The Center for Public Education, 2010). In order to support the needs of these students and their families, shifts in the ideological orientations and programmatic actions of teacher education are needed. One resounding unified voice echoed in all the research is the need for the interrogation of attitudes and beliefs of prospective teachers towards diversity.

This paper provides a theoretical framework for using reflective writing as a pedagogical tool for examining beliefs and attitudes towards GLBTQ students in the development of future educators who support all students and their families by exploring two primary questions: (1) what attitudes and beliefs emerge from participants as they write about their perceptions on GLBTQ students? (2) are those attitudes and beliefs challenged or altered? If so, what types of new awareness's emerge? This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge base on how to prepare students to become culturally responsive and inclusive professionals through reflective practice.

Examining Dispositions through Reflective Thinking and Writing

The underlying premise to attend to teachers' dispositional characteristics is the development of attitudes and beliefs essential for ensuring the social and emotional well-being of their students (Stall, et. al 2010). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2001) defined dispositions as:

The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and effect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. (p. 30).

Villegas (2007) cites that it is a moral obligation and ethical obligation to pay attention to the dispositional behaviors of teacher candidates as their beliefs are powerful filters that not only make new phenomena understandable but also organize new ideas. Reflective writing is a tool that can be implemented to examine entering and developing beliefs of teacher candidates towards cultural diversity. Dewey (1910) defined reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends". In short, it is much more than simply listing ideas but connecting them logically (Davis, 2006).

Reflective writing is a powerful medium that can mediate between a pre-service teachers' existing and new knowledge, promoting meta-cognition thinking, increase awareness to tacit knowledge, while encouraging self-reflection in order to propose solutions to problems (Cohen-Sayag & Fischl, 2012). Similarly, Emig (1977) suggests that reflection leads to learning and that writing is a useful vehicle for reflection. Reflective writing may range from the open and free format to a structured one (Cohen-Sayag& Fischl, 2012). Researchers, McGuire et. al (2009) and Clayton et. al (2005) have noted that reflection becomes a critical skill for functioning effectively in diverse and complex practice realities when promoted by:

- challenging assumptions
- testing the logic of conclusions
- considering multiple perspectives

Furthermore, reflective thinking can lead to critical thinking which may be defined as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view of improving it" (Paul & Elder, 2006). Ultimately, reflection can serve as an agent of change in acquiring those dispositions needed to support the complexity and diversity of all students (Avalos, 2011). As such, reflective writing can be instrumental in interrogating ideologies related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and speakers of other languages. Additionally, when coupled with critical pedagogy (e.g. readings, discussions, videos, etc.) reflective writing can serve as an effective vehicle for penetrating colonized minds situated in a privileged and narrow perspective towards culturally different "others".

The Process of Reflective Writing

Reflection asks students to engage with their own learning processes by thinking about and commenting on them (Amicucci, 2011). Further, reflection asks students to make decisions-commitments-about where their learning process will go in the future and how they will move in that direction (Amicucci, 2011). In the author's multicultural education course, students begin to develop their own reflective and critical skills. During this developmental process, critical reflection is a multi-layered analysis that permits one to make sense of complex experiences by thinking about their assumptions and biases; framing problems of practice through multiple professional perspectives; critiquing their frames of reference from broader social, political, and moral perspectives; and making commitments and taking action that is informed by such reframing. The scaffolding of this process helps students establish a framework for making thoughtful and purposeful responses to a particular incident (i.e. reading, video, classroom activity, etc.). Kolb's (1984) and Shon's (1983) models of reflective writing served as models for the multicultural education class. Below is a description of steps adopted for the reflective writing process.

A. Description of the Critical Incident

Choose an incident that is thought provoking, complex and likely to draw you into an exploration of ideas, beliefs, and disposition you have learned about in your classes. Completely describe the critical incident or practice you have selected as the focus for this entry.

Your entry should include sufficient detail so that the reader can easily understand your focus. This section should be purely descriptive. Simply explain what you saw or experienced or the way something worked. The description should be about 2 paragraphs in length.

B. Feelings

In this section, briefly describe your feelings in relation to the event. Your feelings are emotional responses whereas your thoughts are cognitive responses. Therefore, do not mix your thoughts and feelings (such as happiness, anger, frustration, etc.). For example, do not write: "I feel that I should have been more concerned." This sentence describes a thought not a feeling. Your feelings should be candid and written in short sentences or bullets.

C. Thoughts

In this section, describe your initial thoughts and opinions in relation to the description and feelings you provided in sections A and B. Essentially, you are trying to convey what you were thinking at the point in time in which the event occurred.

D. Deconstruction

This section invites you to analyze your first thinking about the critical incident and to explore from multiple perspectives.

D1. Underlying Assumptions

Study your description, feelings, and thoughts for assumption and biases. Ask yourself what assumptions or biases are embedded in the way you perceived the event. Remember that finding assumptions or biases is OK. We all have biases and assumptions that are sometimes difficult to recognize or reconcile. In this assumption-checking step, you are NOT required to find every assumption.

D2. Multiple Perspectives

Once you have identified your assumptions, reflect on them. What would be the different perspectives of those involved in the event?

D3 Further Analysis

In what ways, has your socialization influenced your description, feelings, or thoughts? Consider the influences of your cultural background – including the culture you grew up in and the things that were exposed to and not exposed to during your childhood, adolescent, college, or professional experiences.

E. Reframing and Taking Action

The last step of this critical reflection process is the most important. It is the proactive step. What do you see as the new possibilities arising from this situation; how might you apply personal discoveries to future professional practices.

Setting and Participants

Samples of student work were derived from students who were primarily elementary teacher education majors enrolled in the author's multicultural education course. It must be noted that non-education majors (i.e. speech pathology, nursing, criminal justice) were also represented in this multicultural education course which resides in a College of Education at a large Midwestern public university in the United States. Background information gathered from students' Cultural Autobiographies revealed that most residents in participants' neighborhoods were white, schools attended were mostly rural, Christian beliefs dictated family and social life, and the student or his/her parent is the first to attend college.

Description of the Multicultural Education Course

The conceptual framework of the course holds a social justice orientation; whereby over a 16 week period, the students participated in a variety of individual, small group, and whole group learning experiences (i.e. readings, discussions, videos, presentations and case studies) which addressed various dimensions of cultural diversity.

The learning was designed to encourage students to engage with and unpack academic literature and make sense of this in relation to their own experiences of identity, diversity, and difference (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010).

The learning experiences were focused on cultural self-awareness; awareness of different cultural worldviews; awareness of the social-construction of race; awareness of race and privilege, prejudice and discrimination in historical and contemporary societal and school contexts; knowledge of cultural patterns and culture specific knowledge; knowledge of and skill in using different communication and learning styles; knowledge and skill in using diverse classroom management strategies; ability to adapt the curriculum content to reflect cultural diversity of students; and skills to implement various pedagogies, including discourse, participation and assessment, that are culturally relevant to one's students. This selection of learning experiences was based on research which suggested such content is necessary to develop cultural competence (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Banks, 2006; Hammer and Bennett, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Bennett, 1993; Sleeter, 1992; Cross et al., 1989). It must also be noted that the content of reflective papers is not graded. However, they must follow established guidelines for reflective writing in order to receive credit for the assignment; thereby, discouraging socially desirable responses.

Key Findings

An analysis of reflective writings suggested students' attitudes and beliefs had been altered towards GLBTQ students. These findings were garnered from students perceptions presented in the "deconstruction and reframing and taking action process" of their reflective writings. The following selected commentary provides insights into initial attitudes and beliefs towards GLBTQ students and community members.

Deconstructing Beliefs

"I grew up in a very religious family so I respect other religions. I still struggle a little with understanding people who are homosexual because I have been taught all my life that it is wrong from a religious standpoint..."

"My father was a Methodist minister. He would not have condoned the torture and mis-treatment of these students, he would have tried to reach out to them and share the word of God and that it is wrong to have sexual relations with same sex partners."

"...people of different sexual orientation were looked down and derogatory terms were often used to describe gay/lesbian people...In my whole life, only one person from XXX came out and announced they were gay...kids at school would call him names. The mindset was incredibly close-minded and not accepting of people who were different."

"As I was growing up I was taught that homosexuality was a sin in Christianity. However, the Bible says that God loves everyone and I try to practice the same behavior. Despite this belief I think that I have had a hard time accepting homosexuality."

"Coming from a small town, and even smaller school, I was never really exposed to people being openly gay or lesbian. I knew what it meant if someone was gay or lesbian, but I never experienced having anyone in my classroom having a different sexual orientation. However having multiple talks with my parents allowed me to become more familiar and accepting."

"My upbringing was relatively insignificant on my opinion on homosexuality. I knew gay people when I was growing up and have gone to school with many openly homosexual people. I was always raised to see the best in people and to always respect others."

One particular Cultural Autobiography by a female student detailed a poignant encounter in 6th grade which shaped beliefs and attitudes towards GBLT students. She wrote,

"When I was in 6th grade, I spent all night having a heart to heart with one of my childhood friends, he was a year older than me and he came out to me and confessed he liked boys. I don't remember how we got on the topic, but I do remember feeling joyful he felt comfortable enough to come out to me that he trusted me enough to tell me this and not afraid that I would not judge him. Although I had that moment of joy, the rest of the night was filled with sadness. It pained me deeply to see one of my close friends crying for hours about being ashamed about who he was and how wrong he felt. I didn't understand why he couldn't be happy; he deserved to be happy, and I wanted nothing but happiness for him.

I just cannot wrap my mind around the concept of someone being so sad about who they are as a person, it just shouldn't be that way, and everyone deserves to be happy. I have had many types of friends all my life, and I am blessed to have such a variety."

Reframing and Taking Action

Further analysis of reflective writings revealed students who attended mostly rural schools prior to college had given consideration to the future professional implications of their current beliefs towards GLBTQ students. Reflective writings suggested this new awareness may have heightened their sense of duty to master effective instructional and professional strategies which create a supportive and nurturing environment for all students. Their writings asserted,

“As a future educator I plan to have a section in my curriculum to discuss how harmful name-calling and bullying can be. I will educate my students about all types of sexuality and have them look at different perspectives in order to encourage them to sympathize with people who are subject to anti-gay bias. I will speak up when a student is being harassed and will not tolerate any type of bullying or name-calling. It is very important to me to try and love everyone regardless of their beliefs and sexual orientation.”

“I know that I’ll have no troubles in dealing with gay and lesbianism my classes when I teach. The big trouble, however, lies in the problem of dealing with others who don’t accept those with a different sexuality. I can only hope to make them aware of their humanities and make them accept all of their peers for who they are and how they treat people not their sexuality.”

“...my knowledge was furthered on how important it is to teach my future students about respect. After listening to many people talk about the hatred, I began to realize how important it is for me as a future educator to teach my students about hatred... I also recognized how strong the hatred is towards gays and lesbians, in today’s society. The saying *sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt* is completely wrong statement to teach our children. In fact, hateful words stick with us forever, and can hurt us more than the so-called sticks and stones.”

“I was motivated by the video to help people be more aware of saying hurtful words. They can cause people to kill themselves or drop out of school.”

“As a Speech Language Pathologist, I could potentially be working in school systems, and I will not stand for bullying and name calling, whether because of homosexuality or other reasons, by students or teachers toward students. It just simply is not fair to the students. If necessary, I will explain to students how insults can hurt others and explaining how they would feel if someone treated them likewise. By doing this, I could hopefully make students feel more comfortable in their own skin and help them feel welcome and safe in a school setting.”

“...I remember about how we read in class an article on an elementary teacher who had an Open House to invite all parents. One kid brought two fathers, and the class was shocked. They were all whispering under their breath about the kid’s two fathers, and how it was weird. That is when she (elementary teacher) had the group sit down, and she addressed the situation head on without embarrassing the student or the two fathers. Every teacher should be open like that because if a teacher is not then the students will think it is ok to discriminate on gays or lesbians which is wrong.”

“...In the future as a professional I will be able to understand and be more sensitive to gays and lesbians. Knowing that I have reflected and took a further look at myself I know some biases I have. With this information on myself I can now be better a professional and take a step in a more positive direction.”

“I will try to limit the pressures that students feel by letting them know that they need to be proud of who they are, regardless of that society says. After all, we are all different in our own respect and to some people; the idea of the norm may be different. I plan to educate myself on these issues and try to limit my own personal biases as to not to inflict fear or oppression into those that surround me. “I believe that as teachers it is our responsibility to create a comfortable learning environment for all students...I would plan various speakers throughout the year to combat all of the basic stereotypes; race, gender, and sexual orientation. “I am prepared to stand up for the minorities in my classroom. I am prepared to defend those who are being abused due to their sexual orientation...It is not okay to sit by and do nothing.

By doing nothing I would be saying that I agree with what is happening. I don’t agree so I am going to face it and hopefully stop it. Although the previously noted reflective writings indicated some attitudes and beliefs towards GLBTQ students had been altered in a positive manner, the author cannot rule out that some students may have provided “socially desirable” responses which may not reflect their true beliefs about cultural diversity. This inclination was captured in a student’s reflective paper which described a verbal exchange on race with another student enrolled in a multicultural education course taught by the author a previous semester.

She wrote, "I don't typically speak my mind the way I did the other day in class. I wouldn't want to upset anyone, but when XXX mentioned that everyone has the same opportunities in America, I knew he was mistaken. The only way that I felt I could get my point across was to ask him to think about if he would want to be an African American. I said that I knew I wouldn't. That may seem like a bold statement but I kept thinking about what I had just read. The article is entitled *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* by Peggy McIntosh. She talks about how easy it is to be a white person, the things that we don't have to think about. A couple of statements that stood out to me were; that I could move just about anywhere and be sure that white people would live there too and that I could be sure that when I turned on the television that the white race would be represented.

I grew up at a time when it was extremely unusual to see anyone other than the white man in charge. Everywhere I looked my race was represented; the presidents, the history books, the television shows, the news anchors, the magazines, the billionaires, the senators, the teachers, the doctors, the toys, the actors, and I could go on and on. I wonder how I would feel if my skin would have been a different color. What effect would that have had on me and how would my attitude be different? I know things have changed and will continue to change so that we will see more people of color represented in a positive light. I still don't think I would want to be anything other than white because life is hard enough. We are always trying to prove ourselves and why would I want the color of my skin to be one more thing that people judged me on?"

The exchange described in the fore mentioned reflective writing might imply some students enrolled in the course were unable to comprehend or simply rejected the notion that sociocultural structures hinder access to resources essential to academic achievement (Howard, 2008; Conchas, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2005); while others in the course may have engendered a growing awareness of social inequities as they begin to construct a nascent understanding of their privileged social position (Gosselin, 2009).

Conclusion

The interrogation of attitudes and beliefs towards cultural diversity is not only imperative for teachers but all professionals. Professionals in all disciplines must be equipped with the ability to rigorously reflect on their practice in an ever changing global society as well as manage the complex technical requirements of professional practice (McGuire, et al., 2009). Given the ever changing demographics in all schools, it is critical that teacher education programs give special consideration on ways to expose pre-service teachers to experiences which promote reflection upon cultural perceptions that contributes to an inclusive, tolerant, and expanded knowledge base (Terrill & Mark, 2000) which undergirds the success of each and every child. In educational systems, reflection is both a pedagogical strategy as well as a valuable skill to support effective professional practice (McGuire, et al., 2009). Further, reflective writing seems to be a key ingredient to one of many teaching tools which stimulates actions towards social justice. In schools, reflective practitioners will be better positioned to create culturally responsive and "socially just" classrooms which are evidenced by rigorous subject matter, differentiated pedagogy, an ethic of care, equitable inclusion, and social action pedagogy whereby teaching encourages the development of democratic citizens who understand and engage social issues (Kose, 2007; Banks, 2006).

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