

TRULY INCLUSIVE? DISABILITY AND DEAF EXPERIENCE IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract:

This paper presents a rationale for including disability and abilism issues in multicultural education of future teachers. The results of a review of professional literature and textbooks with respect to disability and Deaf culture suggests very little attention has been paid to the disability and Deaf experience. Strategies employing cultural immersion activities and assignments in Multicultural Education courses are described as a means of exposing future teachers to disability and Deaf culture and reducing stereotypes about disability. Finally, the authors submit recommendations for increasing the emphasis and focus of disability and Deaf culture in the Multicultural Education coursework.

It is essential that educators address cultural diversity and promote social justice in their teaching (Butson, 2003; Castagnera, 2001; Nagda et al, 2003; Nieto, 2001; Shechtman, 1994). Wiedeman (2002) reviewed the literature regarding the inclusion of social justice and equity issues in teacher preparation and maintains that attention to social justice is now more critical than ever. Cochran-Smith urges teacher education programs to prepare teachers to teach for social justice and against the grain at a time when standardization and prescription are being mistaken for higher standards (2001). She cautions educators against ignoring structural inequalities and differential power relations (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

One population which is clearly disempowered is the disabled community, and its numbers are growing as the average age of Americans increases. The year 2000 Census counted 49.7 million people with some type of long lasting condition or disability. They represented 19.3 percent of the 257.2 million people who were aged 5 and older in the civilian noninstitutionalized population — or nearly one person in five (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003). There are large gaps between persons with disabilities and those without in terms of employment, education, income, frequency of socializing and other basic areas of life (National Organization on Disability/Harris, 1998). It is thus clear that disability has a profound effect on the way that people's abilities are perceived and on the nature of opportunities extended to them. Because it affects employment status and other key aspects of people's quality of life, disability status is a very significant characteristic of human beings along with gender, color, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. Addressing issues related to people with disabilities is thus an important component of promoting social justice in education.

We contend that disability should be a larger part of the multicultural education discourse. This article will present an overview of deafness and disability, explore the degree to which the deaf and disabled communities have been acknowledged by multicultural education, and share suggestions on how educators can be more inclusive in this regard.

Deafness and disability

Scholars from within and outside of the Deaf community have argued that people who are deaf comprise a linguistic minority, and that deafness should not be defined or viewed as a disability (Butler, Skelton, & Valentine, 2001; Hahn, 1997; Jones, 2002; Lane, 2005). Nonetheless, introductory special education textbooks typically focus on a description of the physiological characteristics and perceived deficits attributed to deafness, defining it as a disability or exceptionality with very limited discussion attending to an understanding of the potential educational and instructional implications of deafness as a unique and collective cultural experience and identity. For the purpose of this paper, Deaf culture was included as a specific area of interest based on the fact that hearing impairments and deafness are among 13 categories included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and subsequent reauthorizations of this legislation in 1997 and 2004 that includes the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) defining a "Child with a Disability."

Although a number of deaf studies scholars have taken issue with conceptualizing deafness as a disability (e.g., Hahn, 1997; Lane, 2005) and despite our opinions about this perspective, hearing impairments and deafness are without question treated as disabilities in the fields of education and special education. In deference to scholars of the Deaf community, Deafness is discussed and treated as unique and separate from the other 12 categories of disability defined by IDEIA 2004, allowing for the possibility of alternative understandings of Deafness as a cultural and linguistic minority characteristic rather than as a disability.

Multicultural Education and Teacher Preparation

The number of students in the United States who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is increasing at an exponential rate (Major & Brock, 2003). The importance of preparing future teachers to effectively educate an increasingly diverse student population has been widely acknowledged (Bartolome, 2004). Educational institutions, teacher preparation programs, schools and communities have long emphasized the need for cultural proficiency and cultural pluralism that values, accommodates, and respects diversity and difference (Banks & Banks, 2005; Edgar, Patton, & Day-Vines, 2002; Gay, 2003; Lynch & Hanson, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2006) to address the diversity of the student population.

Multicultural Education has emerged as an instructional approach that promotes the development of cultural competence and proficiency in an effort to understand and appreciate differences as a positive force and of intrinsic value (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1973). The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1977) stated that the goals of Multicultural Education were: (1) recognizing and prizing diversity; (2) developing greater understanding of diverse cultural patterns; (3) respecting individuals of all cultures; and (4) developing positive and productive interaction among people and among experiences of diverse cultural groups. The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), the nation's largest organization of multicultural educators, has a stated commitment to being proactively inclusive in all areas of diversity including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, ancestry, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, socioeconomic status, marital status, language, disability and immigration status (NAME, 2007).

A Review of the Discourse in Multicultural Education Regarding Disability and Deaf Culture

Since multicultural education seeks to address prejudice and discrimination against diverse populations, it can play a major role in helping to decrease bias against people with disabilities. Changing attitudes seems to be more important than making special accommodations for people with disabilities on the job, since only 25% of people with disabilities who work and 40% of people with disabilities who want to work say they need special equipment or technology to effectively perform the kind of job they prefer. Unfortunately, it would appear that multicultural education by and large has failed to address issues related to disability in its key literature. While the failure of teacher education programs to address issues of race and culture has been criticized (Cross, 2003), there appears to be scant criticism in the literature of the fact that teacher preparation efforts focus very little on issues related to disability. This lack of attention is particularly striking given the fact that people with disabilities comprise an estimated 19-20% of the U.S. population and that most people will have a temporary or permanent disability at some point in their lives.

Journals. We reviewed articles published between 1999 and 2004 in *Multicultural Perspectives* and found that only two articles were related to disability in any way (Artiles et al, 2002; Gorski & Clark, 2002). Similarly, from 2000 to 2004 the *Journal of Teacher Education* (JTE) only published four articles focusing on disability (Gabel, 2001; Hamre & Oyler, 2004; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000; Ware, 2001). Articles written about disability issues often focus strongly on ethnicity. For example, Artiles et al (2002) focused on Black and Hispanic deaf students but focused primarily on cultural issues rather than disability. This focus on ethnicity in the literature, even when the topic is presumably disability, is consistent with the prioritizing of culture and color over all other dimensions of human differences. Whereas any number of articles addressing ethnicity can be found in multicultural education journals and texts, including *Multiple Perspectives*, it is no easy task to find articles focusing on people with disability or on the prejudice and discrimination they face daily in many aspects of their lives.

Textbooks. John Johnson and Jesús Nieto (in press) conducted a content analysis of 11 Multicultural Education textbooks (Banks & Banks, 2004; Bigelow et al, 2001; Cushner et al, 2003; Golnick & Chinn, 2004; Goodman & Carey, 2004; Nieto, 2004; Noel, 2001; Pang, 2004; Ramsey & Williams, 2003; Sleeter, 2001; Spring, 2004) to determine the extent to which disability and Deaf culture are represented and the perspectives of members of the disability and Deaf community are represented in the discourse about disabled and Deaf persons. The texts selected are used at a very large urban university in Southern California. Results of this study indicate that on average less than one percent of the total pages of text reviewed addressed or mentioned selected search terms related to disability or Deaf culture. Of the total pages of text addressing or discussing issues involving disabled and Deaf persons, it was found that on average about six percent of the pages addressed disability or Deaf culture. In addition, inaccurate information was often presented and perspectives were often not informed by a substantial body of literature that has emerged in the field of disability studies. It was found that Multicultural education textbooks rely heavily on information about persons with disabilities from Special Education that are not uniformly accepted by disabled or Deaf persons. In short, this study indicates a conspicuous absence of content addressing disability and Deaf culture in the discourse about cultural diversity. These findings were consistent with those of Sapon-Shevin and Zollers (1999), who reported that minimal attention is paid to disability in most multicultural education texts.

Implications for Multicultural Education

The exclusion of disabled and Deaf persons and their perspectives from the discourse about the shared and collective disability and Deaf experience in favor of a dominant perspective widely held by the non-disabled professional community is clearly inconsistent with the values and goals of Multicultural Education and teaching. In fact, the exclusion and invisibility of disabled and Deaf persons in much of the educational discourse is one of the most profound semiotic features of the disability and Deaf experience. Multicultural education offers a conceptual framework that accommodates and supports a cultural understanding of

disability and deafness as difference in contrast to deficiency.

We believe that people who are perceived as having disabilities experience profound prejudice and discrimination in all aspects of their lives, including education. We contend that children are treated extremely differently by their families, by their friends, by strangers and by the educational system based on their perceived abilities and disabilities, with enormous differences characterizing “gifted,” “regular” and “special” education. These differences have been explored in the literature and we need not review them here, but it is essential to keep in mind the very great consequences for children with disabilities of the fears and prejudices of others. In spite of the foregoing, disability is almost invisible in multicultural education texts and journals although it has a great impact on people’s lives, perceptions and experiences. Linton (1998) commented that “The perspectives of disabled people and the field of disability studies are conspicuously absent across a broad range of endeavors, but most notably from those in the higher education curriculum and in those with a social-reconstructionist orientation” (p.89). When disability is addressed, it is typically the prevailing deficit-based construction of disability that dominates the professional literature to the exclusion of the perspective of persons with disabilities as authentic representatives of their own experience. This is very problematic because it represents a potentially ableist perspective of the disability experience, a perspective that multicultural education hopes to avoid. In short, the perspective of disability presented by authors of most introductory textbooks to disability, exceptionality and special education is primarily a non-disabled perspective of disability. Fundamentally, multicultural education demands a perspective of disability that affirms the perspective of those who have the most direct experience—that is, people with disabilities, rather than promoting a dominant perspective of disability by external observers.

Stereotypes of People with Disabilities

In Jesús Nieto’s multicultural education classes for future teachers, students are required to undertake four cultural immersion activities known as cultural plunges. These activities involve interacting with populations which are markedly different from oneself. Examples of cultural plunges are attending a Sunday service at the largest African American church in the city, feeding homeless people, visiting a center for the blind, and attending a religious service in a language one does not understand. As part of the assignment, students write a reflection paper about their experience which helps them to sort out and articulate what they learned about themselves as well as about the focal group. The paper begins with a list of popular stereotypes about the population they are immersing themselves in; the lists tend to be very similar for any given group (e.g., African American, homeless, disabled, Vietnamese), such that most of the lists about disabled people are very similar. These lists typically include such words and phrases as “weak,” “inferior,” “dependent,” “unable to care for themselves,” “burden on society,” “unintelligent,” “pathetic,” “useless,” “angry,” and “don’t deserve to live.”

These extremely harsh characterizations of people with disabilities are learned, and we all learn the same lies. Such perceptions greatly affect attitudes towards people with disabilities and lead to great fear and nervousness in interacting with them. It is therefore essential that multicultural education provide future teachers with an opportunity to acknowledge and address their own biases as well as those of their future students regarding people with disabilities.

Cultural Immersion as a Strategy for Reducing Stereotypes

What can be done to help modify these stereotypes? We believe that there is nothing like personal contact with those stereotyped to provide a more realistic and humane view. In Jesús Nieto’s courses, cultural immersion activities called “cultural plunges” have been found to be effective in increasing awareness of one’s own stereotypes and to help reduce them. In order to explore their impact we can examine students’ own statements via brief excerpts from cultural plunge papers. The nature of the plunge activity is stated as a title and is followed by an excerpt from the plunge paper.

A shopping trip with a woman with Down’s syndrome:

“After being with my parents for a while my mom said that she was going to have a friend over, she was bringing her daughter and that she wanted me to take her to a shopping center. I was glad that I did not have to go by myself. . . I was shocked to see that Martha was different. I mean she had Down syndrome. At first, I was a little hesitant to say hello, but then I knew that I could learn from her and use this experience as my plunge.

On our way there Martha said ‘Are you afraid of me?. . . people are usually afraid of me.’ I was holding back my tears. I could not believe that we could be so mean to someone so beautiful and unique. She was 20 years old and she did have some abnormalities, but I did not let that bother me. . . . When we arrived at the shopping center, she mentioned that she did not want to embarrass me since she was ugly and I was pretty. I started to cry, and I told her that I was no different from her. . . . When she saw me cry, she apologized. ‘No one, other than my mom and dad has taken me anywhere.’ As we walked inside the store, I could see people staring. I saw kids laughing and not to mention when we would walk into one of the stores it was obvious that the merchants would ignore us. . .

I know that education does not make you a real person, my heart makes me a real person and if I decide to hang out with people who are disabled I am going to make sure that we have a good time. I know that with education I am able to learn more about the injustices that happen within our society. When I become an attorney, I am going to try to help those who are in need and know that sometimes we can learn from them just as I learned from Martha.”

Volunteering at a Special Olympics volleyball tournament:

“I was nervous while I was getting ready for my plunge. I knew I was volunteering at the Special Olympics, and that it was a volleyball event, but I did not know what I would be doing or how large the event would be. . .

This experience definitely affected some of my plans for my future career in teaching. While considering going into special education, I have visited several special education classrooms, yet I have never gone to an event with people with disabilities outside of a school setting, so this was a first. It was a wakeup call to me, because determining intelligence and what a student is capable of doing is such an integral part of teaching that I never questioned my own stereotypes in regards to people with disabilities. Outside the classroom, not everyone has a disability, like the people playing volleyball in that gym. Their mental deficits were not hindering them. People with disabilities are people first, and I think this was the first time I really saw it with my own eyes and took notice of it. . . I am glad that I had this experience, because even if I never teach special education, it will help me remember that people are people before they are anything else.”

A visit to a service center for blind persons:

“Going to the center for the blind and returning I just can’t explain what I feel. All I am going to say is ‘Don’t EVER judge a book by its cover’ because you don’t know anything until you see, hear and experience. I mean I have never in my life seen such people that are so educated, loving, caring, helping one another, so energetic and very down to earth kind of people. First of all, when I saw that these blind people have all these qualities in them, I said to God ‘Please forgive me.’ I believed what others said about blind people and to be honest with you I said a few things myself. . .

Something about me changed that day at the Center for the Blind that I can’t even put into words. I believe we were there about three hours and I couldn’t believe time flew by so fast because I was so into the things he was telling us that I didn’t even know what time it was. I literally cried when I walked out the door because I couldn’t stop thinking about the things we said about the blind. I felt guilty; the things we said were completely NOT true, not being close to true. I also felt very angry after leaving that place at how the majority of us judge people by not even knowing them. They are humans too and just because God created them differently that does not mean we should put them down or call them names; not just blind, anyone whether ugly, overweight, etc. . . . Now I tell every person I know about my experience at the center for the blind.”

Implications of Cultural Immersion Experiences

Students seem to draw a number of lessons from their cultural immersion experiences:

1. It’s important to realize that stereotypes get in the way of getting to know others because our prejudgments are often inaccurate.
2. Many of us have biases that we are not aware of until they are challenged via direct experience. Many students feel shame and guilt regarding their former stereotypes that are challenged and altered via the plunges.
3. Direct interaction teaches lessons that other forms of education cannot.
4. The type of learning that takes place through direct experience is far more lasting than the traditional approach of memorization and regurgitation.

In addition, many students get so much out of their cultural plunges that they spread their learning by talking to their friends and

families about their experiences and by taking others to their plunge sites. Many students indicate that they plan to use cultural plunges with their own students when they become K-12 teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Evidence has been presented that multicultural education has not sufficiently addressed issues related to disability and that it is increasingly important to do so. It is essential that disability be given far greater attention in multicultural education than it is presently receiving.

There are numerous ways of doing so and the authors would like to suggest the following:

1. Multicultural education journals and introductory textbooks are in a key position to contribute greatly to exploration of issues related to disability. We call upon them to focus much more on this topic in special issues and, more importantly, on an ongoing basis. Relevant information, statistics, case studies and model programs would be invaluable additions. It is of utmost importance that people with disabilities play a leading role in these efforts by defining themselves, their community, their issues and their solutions.
2. Speakers with disabilities can educate future teachers in ways that no one else can by sharing their experiences and perspectives. It is essential that this community be allowed to define and represent itself. No outsider, however well-intentioned or well-informed, can fully and accurately educate others about a group to which they do not belong. The authors have had individual guest speakers as well as panels representing a variety of disabilities in their classes. Such speakers are very effective in providing a personal touch by sharing their experiences, perspectives and reflections.
3. Cultural immersion experiences wherein students interact with people with disabilities can be invaluable. Such interactions bring out biases which students often don't know they have and help them to acknowledge and modify their own programming regarding disability. Meeting people with disabilities brings a sense of humanity to the topic and allows folks to attach a face (and mind and heart) to the notion of disability.
4. Videos about disability such as "When Billy broke his head" (Golfus & Simpson, 1994) and "King Gimp" (Hadary, Whiteford & Keplinger, 1999) are powerful tools that can be used to educate and to reduce bias. Books and articles can also be used for this purpose. Many films and educational resources pertaining to disability can be found via the internet on sites such as those previously cited. Given the dearth of focus upon issues related to disability in multicultural journals and textbooks, it is essential that teacher preparation courses make a concerted effort to incorporate relevant materials.

Some informative websites concerning disability and education include:

- - Disability Resources Monthly Guide to Disability Resources on the Internet – this guide lists thousands of websites that have information on topics related to disability ranging from services for people with disabilities to lists of famous people with disabilities. <http://www.disabilityresources.org/>
 - disABILITY Information and Resources – this site lists many links on topics such as special adaptive clothing, disabilities organizations, and education for people with disabilities. <http://www.makoa.org/>
 - DisabilityInfo.gov - a comprehensive Federal website of disability-related government resources and benefits. <http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov/public/DisplayPage.do%3fparentFolder...>
 - Untangling the web – this site provides links to many disability-related organizations and resources such as medical resources, websites addressing specific types of disabilities and personal pages of people with disabilities. <http://www.icdi.wvu.edu/Others.htm>

Performing a search on an internet search engine will yield many websites which provide information related to disability.

In addition to changing attitudes, educators can serve as advocates for people with disabilities to insure that their needs are met. Personal Assistance Services (PAS) refers to help provided to people with disabilities to assist them with essential tasks such as bathing, dressing, getting around, toileting, eating, shopping, and remembering things (Center for PAS, 2004). Unmet need for PAS is a critical issue of PAS users and is "highly associated with numerous adverse consequences including falls, injuries, dehydration, weight loss, burns, and other problems that can worsen health and disability," although relatively modest additional public expenditures can help ease this problem (Disability Statistics Center, 2004). Interestingly, more than three-quarters (77.4%) of Americans ages 22 to 64 with disabilities do not receive any type of public assistance, although disability is relatively common among persons receiving government cash, food or rent assistance. About half of the recipients of these types of benefits have some type of disability. If teachers are aware of these types of issues and needs, they can help to address them personally and can bring them to the attention of their students. Such education is highly appropriate if the intent

of schooling is to prepare children and adults to participate effectively in a democratic society.

Our purpose in writing this article is to advance a conversation which has been largely absent from the field of multicultural education. While there have been a few efforts to break the silence regarding disability and abilism, much more vigorous and focused efforts along these lines are needed if we are to truly prepare teachers to accommodate diversity in and out of the classroom. We welcome inquiries and comments.

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