

TEACHING AS A MORAL ENDEAVOR: PREPARING TEACHERS TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE FOR ALL CHILDREN

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Vexation

In the Department of Teacher Education at Brigham Young University (BYU), we hold that education is fundamentally a moral endeavor. Because of this, we seek to prepare teachers who embrace Goodlad's (1990) moral dimensions of teaching, which combine to emphasize teachers' shared stewardship to implement nurturing pedagogy that ensures all children access to the knowledge necessary to enable them to participate fully in a political democracy. The *National Science Education Standards* (National Research Council, 1996) also advocate science education that empowers all students, preparing them with the knowledge and skills requisite to making sound decisions and becoming responsible citizens (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1989).

I support and applaud our institutional aims, recognizing that my commitment to these principles originates from a deep moral sense of regard and compassion for other human beings. Indeed, I believe that all educators, individuals who are responsible for the care and nurturing of others, should view teaching as a human action undertaken with issues of what is fair, right, and just in mind. Thus, I also envision teacher preparation as an opportunity to support prospective teachers' ability to "develop educated persons who acquire an understanding of truth, beauty, and justice against which to judge their own and society's virtues and imperfections...[while] ensuring that no attitudes, beliefs, or practices bar students from access to the necessary knowledge" (Goodlad, 1990, pp. 48-49). I believe that this suggests that there exists a moral imperative to prepare culturally responsive teachers who are equipped to work to overcome the existing disparities in science achievement among various demographic categories of learners. Herein lies the source of my vexation.

Situated among the foothills of the Wasatch Front, BYU is a private university, sponsored by the LDS Church, which attracts students from all 50 states and international students from over 50 countries. This means that, unlike many teacher preparation programs whose focus is to prepare teacher candidates for the populations of students that inhabit the communities immediately surrounding the college or university, our goal must be to prepare teachers to return to their various communities and the diversity of student populations situated there. However, like most teacher preparation programs, our preservice elementary and early childhood teachers are predominantly White, middle- and upper-class females in their early twenties, who may or may not have interacted with diverse others, even as students.

Much like other teacher preparation programs, the intending teachers in our program are asked to face, or at least discuss, issues of difference. They are required to successfully complete specific courses that address diversity and attendant implications for practice as well as methods courses that explicitly speak to issues of diversity with respect to teaching particular academic subjects, such as science. Additionally, field experiences offer opportunities to apply strategies of responsive pedagogy in situations that involve children with differing socioeconomic, cognitive, or physical capacities. However, multicultural issues are most often addressed largely from an academic or theoretical perspective. Although we are able to place prospective teachers in classrooms that are becoming increasingly diverse as the demographics of the Intermountain West region of the United States slowly shift, field experiences that enable our students to interact with children whose heritage and cultural norms differ substantially from their own are relatively scarce, particularly in the school districts immediately surrounding our campus. And, while BYU offers a number of options for field experiences outside of our predominantly suburban area (inner-city Salt Lake City, Houston, Washington D.C.) and even outside of the United States (Mexico, New Zealand, China), a comparatively small number of our intending teachers elect to participate.

Interestingly, I hear little, if any, conversation from our education majors that might suggest that they are insensitive to or lack concern for children of diverse backgrounds. Rather, it is typical for these young women to speak sincerely of all students as "God's children." Indeed, it is not uncommon for preservice teachers to have served 18-month missions for the LDS church nationally and

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internationally—amongst very diverse populations. However, their notions of difference with respect to teaching and learning within schools and schooling remain naïve and, in some ways, “blind” to cultural differences. I am left to wonder if this is because they lack practical experience in classrooms with diverse students.

Venture

To be honest, I acknowledge my efforts to address this challenge to my satisfaction to be relatively unsatisfactory and, perhaps not surprisingly, largely academic. This is likely attributable to my recognition that I cannot change the ethnic and/or cultural characteristics of the surrounding populations wherein my students are placed for their practicum and student teaching experiences; I cannot actually see them interact with diverse students. I do, however, shape the learning experiences that occur within and as a result of the courses I teach. Thus, my venture has been restricted to my own classroom.

Along with emphasizing the myriad issues associated with multicultural education as we attend to various topics surrounding science teaching and learning in class, I have adopted teaching materials for my methods courses whose focus is teaching science to all children. These include textbooks and other print materials as well as videos of elementary and early childhood classrooms with diverse populations. All of these materials lead to rich conversations amongst students and instructor. Additionally, case studies are used to help preservice teachers identify issues related to difference and teaching/learning strategies that successfully negotiate the complexities inherent to teaching across cultural boundaries and teaching students with varying cognitive and/or physical abilities. Nevertheless, I recognize that no matter how excellent the materials used to stimulate or guide discussions about diversity relative to teaching and learning science, teaching science in diverse settings is best learned by doing it. As Settlage and Southerland (2007) so aptly argue, learning to become culturally responsive must ultimately involve “firsthand interactions with children” (p. xxvii), and these are the types of experiences my students too often lack.

Where might I find or how might I create authentic interactive experiences for preservice teachers that involve children with diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds? What strategies can you suggest to make learning activities within the context of an elementary science methods course more authentic to firsthand interactions with diverse populations of children?