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The Need of Global Understanding and Context: Multicultural and International Perspectives on Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of lacking global context and international perspectives in the traditional teacher education program and research in the United States through literature review. Current research based on teacher quality, professional development, and teacher education programs have developed based on the U.S. focus, while pre-service and in-service teachers are having an increasingly diverse student population in their classrooms. The lack of appropriate trainings and preparations in developing multicultural and international teaching competence will create instructional barriers between teachers and their multicultural and international students. A more specific question this study poses from the review is the following: what we are missing in teacher education by having a U.S.-focused lens in the teacher education literature.

Keywords: teacher education, comparative and international education, multicultural teacher education

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the issue of a lack of international contexts and perspectives in teacher education in the U.S. On a practical level this study views this lack as a problem that could be addressed in foundations courses in teacher education programs, alongside multicultural education training and course options. Nor do this study suggests that international issues are absent from all research literature. Indeed, international issues and lenses do exist in education, though not explicitly and in any form of multiplicity within teacher education literature. Scholars of comparative education necessarily include an international lens in their work. So as there are scholars in fields such as multicultural education increasingly drawing attention toward international perspectives (Banks, 2004).

A possible contributing factor to the lack of international focus, or addressing international perspectives in teacher education is the demographics of the teacher candidate population. There is currently a lack of diversity in the teaching profession, moreover, an issue of retaining teachers of color (Achinstein, et al., 2010; Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008; Carillo, 2010). This lack of diverse representation amongst teacher candidates poses unique challenge for developing the future generation of teachers. The predominantly White, female (and domestic) demographics present in the teaching force provide challenges to multicultural and international trainings and resources in teacher education program (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Another issue exists in teacher education program is curricular imperatives for including global and international contexts. The English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (CCSS-ELA) are now the official standards for 48 states. In its introduction, the CCSS-ELA claim to be internationally benchmarked and aim to prepare students to live in and participate in a “globally competitive society” (p. 3). Given this global imperative, teacher education should be informed by and include a more international focus and context.

Despite this international imperative, the teacher education literature does not include sufficient international perspectives. Nevertheless, there is a lack of content and case studies from international perspectives and multicultural voices. Lampert’s (1985) discussion of the teacher as dilemma manager is useful for teacher education, but neither offers nor suggests how such practices might be informed by international context.

A similar problem emerges in the literature on core practices in teacher education. While Kavanagh and McDonald (2013) acknowledge their U.S. focus, the seeking of a “common language” in teacher education and practices pose a

dilemma of an assumption of universality. While the authors state “[o]ur argument is not that one needs to develop a lock step prescription for how to prepare teachers to enact core practices,” the following statement we seek to trouble: “[o]ur hope is that this framework would also enable us to build tools and resources that teacher educators (broadly defined) could access to make decisions about how best to teach the candidates or teachers in their contexts” (p. 381). The notion of a “broadly defined” teacher education force implies a universality that crosses national border. It is the assumption of such universality without the consideration of international contexts informing such statements that this paper take issue with here.

The lack of international examples and international contexts that inform teacher education faces the challenge of perpetuating neoliberal critiques of American exceptionalism. Nevertheless, the study proposes that continuing to not include international perspectives in teacher education literature produced in the United States would run the risk of stunting the global imperatives of the curriculum teachers are expected to deliver and, on a world stage, perpetuate notions of American exceptionalism.

The lack of representation of international contexts in teacher education can most readily be addressed in teacher education program foundations courses. International issues necessarily engage sociocultural contexts—the interplay between contexts beyond borders. Bowman and Gottesman (2013) suggest, foundations courses offer a great benefit for teacher education to address and make explicit the sociocultural contexts in education. This study argues here that given this ability foundations courses might offer the most ideal locus of change for teacher education. Other traditionally labeled foundations courses such as multicultural education offer opportunities for engagement with international issues. This study discussed that doing so will help reify what Dewey (1904/1965) writes as “[t]he thing needful is improvement of education, not simply by turning out teacher who can do better the things that are now necessary to do, but rather by changing the conception of what constitutes education” (p. 171). In the following section, this study offers further recommendations for how teacher education might go about including more international contexts into education—particularly through a multicultural education frame.

2. A Proposal for Possible Solutions

This study indicates that a theory-practice gap in teacher education exists in the United States, especially among teachers who have increasing numbers of multicultural and international students in class through reviewing literature and scholarship in teacher education. This provokes the need for a re-conceptualization of teacher education in a multicultural educational context with international perspectives. Through exploring the problem of a lack of international context and multicultural concerns in current teacher education, this study proposes the following suggestions and directions to prepare teachers for diversity, to reform teacher education programs by promoting culturally responsive components and increasing international-oriented teacher education program in training.

2.1 *Rethinking Preparing Teachers for Diversity and Increasing Diversity in Faculty Team*

An important mission of teacher education is exploring pathways to improve teacher education programs aimed at improving teacher candidates’ professional content knowledge and teaching strategies, as well as empowering educational excellence and equity. One of the major aims of teacher education should be to assist teachers to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to become thoughtful and approachable for every student in the multicultural and global academic environment. To achieve this goal, appropriate and comprehensive training of fostering positive teaching attitudes towards diversity and the deconstruction of teaching stereotypes and bias is needed.

Delpit (1995) points out that there is a silenced dialogue in teacher education for training teachers to teach students of color. Cultural, linguistic, and racial pluralism in classrooms not only increases the difficulty of instructional methods, but also challenges traditional pathways to educate teachers. The needs from multicultural and international students require teachers’ appropriate responses. It is necessary to incorporate related training courses about diversity including international perspectives, address identity, cultural and racial diversities in the curriculum, and develop the multicultural goals of teacher education programs.

Cochran-Smith (2000) mentions that American teacher education programs offer brief lessons towards the topic of race and cultural differences, which apparently are not well addressed issues regarding race and culture. The teacher education, which is mainly focused on instructions of foundation and methods courses to teacher candidates, may exclude attentions of racial and cultural contexts from content knowledge and instructional methods training. The missing component of teaching awareness towards diversity will directly impact teachers’ attitudes and practices,

which attributes to inequitable teaching and the academic achievement gap among students of color and their White counterparts.

Lampert & Ball (1998) advocate for teaching for understanding as well as identify that teacher educators have little understanding of diversity. Taken together, this study promotes the concern for increasing appropriate training for teaching for diversity in teacher education programs to foster a positive understanding of teaching attitudes and beliefs towards diversity in training and practice. As Cochran-Smith (2000) addresses, “educating teachers for diversity needs to be fundamental to the entire teacher education program” (p.176).

Moreover, increasing the diversity of a faculty team can benefit and strengthen teacher awareness of diversity as well as empower the culturally diverse atmosphere in teacher education programs. According to recent research, teachers in the United States are predominately White and middle class from suburban areas (Seidel, 2007). Lacking diversity in faculty teams may decrease the concern of diversity among faculties. Increasing cultural and racial diversity among faculty teams in teacher education programs can reduce the sense of cultural blindness among teacher candidates and faculties in teacher education programs.

2.2 Reform Teacher Education Programs Through Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers and Adding Cultural and International Components in Training

Teacher education is, in important ways, related to the construction and practice of teaching knowledge, content subjects, instructional methods, and attitudes. It is highly related to the quality of prospective teachers as well as the professional contexts in which teachers’ quality and practice is created and improved. The increasing diversity in both the student and teacher candidate population demands an emphasis on training for culturally responsive teaching and incorporation of multicultural and international education into teacher education programs. Adding cultural components and global perspectives in teacher training and promoting teachers’ cultural competence to better serve culturally diverse students are crucial.

There is a cultural gap in many of the nation’s schools as a growing number of novice teachers struggle to better serve students from cultures other than their own in response to dramatic demographic changes that have created culturally diverse schools, and culturally challenging teacher education curricula (National Education Association Report). It is essential for teacher education programs to enable teachers to understand teaching as an intellectual and cultural activity, as well as develop productive perspectives about the interactions between race, culture, class, and schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2000). Professional teacher education programs need to modify teaching content to support collaboration between faculty and teacher candidates in terms of adding culturally responsive components in teacher education programs and teaching practice in schools. Based on this claim, Stoddart (1993) argues that the development of teacher education programs requires a mutual accommodation between the cultures of teacher education programs and schools.

Separating racial awareness, global perspectives, and cultural diversity from foundation courses and methods courses in teacher education can be a major obstacle to the development of teacher education programs (Stoddart, 1993). Culture plays a critical role in students’ learning and teachers’ instruction, which needs an emphasis on foundation course design. Foundation courses, which aim at designing conceptual tools, principles and fundamental guidelines that could benefit teachers to use to guide and modify their decisions (Foster et al., 2006), need to take culturally responsive teaching components into consideration. Since culture is central to student learning, teachers must become knowledgeable about their students’ distinctive cultural backgrounds so they can effectively translate that knowledge into appropriate instruction and enriched curriculum---accomplishing this goal requires solid culturally responsive teaching training from foundation courses in teacher education programs (Gay, 2010).

In addition, though many prospective teachers of color may have experienced diverse cultural and racial contexts, most have been educated “within teacher education programs where they experienced a Eurocentric approach to education and have been provided with few opportunities to consider culturally relevant practices or a multicultural curriculum” (Seidel & Shavelson, 2007). Overall, in teacher education programs, it is still far easier to talk about cultural differences than to practice on that understanding, because these is a lacking addressing culturally responsive pedagogy in foundation courses in teacher education programs. Moreover, as Seidel (2007) further argue, there are also shortcomings in models and support for developing culturally responsive pedagogy for teacher candidates and novice teachers in teacher education programs---this situation needs to be improved.

Obidah (2000) proposes the importance for educators to reconsider the design of foundation courses in teacher education programs. She argues that teacher candidates and faculty in teacher education programs should approach their classroom far more confident about what they want to teach and to re-examine how they will teach it and why

they want to teach it. The re-conceptualization of what kind of conceptual tools, principles and content knowledge is necessary and culturally responsive is needed.

Therefore, this paper proposed to address the importance of cultural awareness, modify the process of training teacher candidates' culturally responsive pedagogy through foundation courses, provide teaching models of culturally responsive teaching, and reconstruct the curricula and foundation courses to prepare teachers to address the diverse racial, cultural, and international contexts in teacher education programs.

2.3 Increasing International-Oriented Teacher Education Program and Case Studies in Training

This research indicated a lack of international/global contexts for teacher education programs, not only in cultivating teaching attitudes towards diversity and fostering culturally responsive pedagogy, but also for case studies in training. There exists a lack of attention to international perspectives in teacher education programs and teacher education literature. The increasing diversity of students and teacher candidates not only calls for an internal, culturally relevant reform in curriculum design and course settings for teacher education, but also demands externally informed and successful models from other countries as examples. Learning what successful teacher education programs contain and how they work in addressing the cultural and racial backgrounds of students and teacher candidates in diverse contexts can contribute to utilizing experience and strategies from successful cases into informing teacher education reform approaches in the United States (Seidel, 2007).

3. Conclusion

This paper examines the current problem of a lack of international and global contexts in U.S. teacher education. This study has been informed by the theoretical frames of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching specifically. This research and analysis add an important lens for future research to use in constructing a practical dimension to better educate prospective teachers and the diverse populations they will encounter and to prepare students for the increasingly diverse, global world they will live in. It is imperative teacher education include coverage of the multiple contexts of teaching that include implications for how international contexts of teacher education and multicultural teaching environments frame novice teachers' instructional pedagogy and teaching attitudes in attempts to achieve educational excellence and equity. This study advocates for increasing cultural components and expanding teacher education concerns from U.S.-focused to international-concerned scale to maximize efforts to improve the quality of teacher education and teachers in the United States.

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