

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION ZONES

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In working with preparatory teachers, we have tried to “place diversity front and center” to help students “see culture” as a prerequisite for culturally responsive teaching. The language arts methods-course students who, like the authors, are White women from middle- or upper-income families, participated in learning opportunities that included writing cultural memoirs, field experiences in diverse settings, and written reflection on the relation between their cultural constructions and those of the students they were teaching. In this article, we turn around the culture question we’ve pushed the students to consider to ourselves: What are we learning about our students as cultural beings that is helping us prepare them more effectively to be culturally responsive teachers? We identified three areas of growth: We reconstructed our understanding of students as complex cultural beings, of ourselves as privileged teachers of the privileged, and of the nature and relationship of resistance and risk.

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Excellent teachers whose students are failing do not blame the students; rather, they ask themselves, “What am I doing that contributes to this failure?” (Ladson-Billings, 2000). It stands to reason then that as teacher educators striving to be excellent, when we see our graduates struggle in culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse classrooms, we must ask ourselves, “What am I doing that contributes to this failure?” More often we blame our students, especially our undergraduates. We blame what we often generalize as their race and class privilege, socially conservative or outright bigoted family values. We question their naiveté born, we assume, of sheltered inexperience. We bemoan their unexamined Whiteness; their proud monolingualism; their sorority priorities; their “love of little children” that seems to apply mostly to clean, White, well-dressed children and only in the most patronizing way to “those poor little Black/Mexican/trailer-park kids.”

Most of all we rail against their resistance to multicultural teacher education. If we hear that “shoving it down our throats” line one more time, we might just do it.

However we keep trying. We try to “place diversity front and center” (Nieto, 2000, p. 180), to help students “see culture,” their own as well as their students’, as a prerequisite for culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994a). We try because we are writing our own teaching narratives (Clandinin, 1995), and we are the only ones who can change the setting, experiences, and actions that might influence the character development—our own, that of our students, and that of their students. Britzman (2000) noted,

To implicate oneself in one’s own narratives of learning and teaching means turning habituated knowledge back on itself, and examining its most unflattering—for many, its most devastating—features. It also means exploring how even this most unflat-