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Examining the immigrant experience: helping teachers develop as critical educators

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The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine ways that a multicultural perspective using critical literacy practices engaged practicing teachers to rethink and re-vision oppressive hegemonic structures and attitudes regarding immigrant students and their families and helped them to develop as critical educators. In the context of a professional development master's program, 57 teachers experienced a curriculum strand focused on immigration issues and provided extensive feedback responding to the curriculum. The data were analyzed to assess in what ways using current and controversial issues helped teachers to develop their capacities to understand and critique the world in more complex ways and what impact these experiences had on their teaching practice. Evidence suggests that the majority of teachers were receptive to the curriculum although some teachers exhibited resistance. Resistance appeared to be minimized and teachers' development supported using curricular experiences that "put a face to the issue," that put learners "in others' shoes," that engaged teachers' emotions, and that made clear how policies, practices, and attitudes directly and indirectly impact the lives of children and their families.

Keywords: teacher education curriculum; teacher thinking and knowledge; teacher professionalism

Introduction

After a class discussion about the recent immigration controversy playing out nationally and in the local community, one of our practicing K-12 teachers¹ reflected,

I keep thinking about good 'ol Paulo and his discussion about the "oppressor" vs. the "oppressed." If the oppressed group is somehow able to get out of their difficult position, the only way they know how to be is the oppressor and therefore treat others who are now below them with the same negative attention and oppressing actions that were placed upon them. If a person/group has only seen this way of "ruling" or controlling a people then this is the only way they will treat others. *Until we educate the population – both the oppressor and the oppressed – how will we ever break the cycle?? It starts with education – not just talking about what happened in the past, but connecting it to today and using critical literacy to really stop the cycle.* (emphasis added)

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As Richard Shaull reminds us, and as this teacher clearly understands, “there is no such thing as a neutral educational process,” rather education is a political act that either emphasizes conformity to the system or supports the freedom to change it (as cited in Freire, 1999, p. 16). This question of purpose was raised within our local community when the board of supervisors in Prince William County, Virginia, passed the Rule of Law Resolution in 2007 giving law enforcement the right to check the immigration status of anyone they suspected of being in the country illegally. The public, including some teachers, might argue that this legislation was not directly related to education; however, it quickly became clear to us that it was having a pervasive negative impact on the schools, silencing the voices of immigrants (both documented and undocumented) and pressuring them into conformity. Many in the community were outraged by the racial profiling that would inevitably ensue, and the debates ultimately impacted the school system. Families were living in fear, stress began to impact the students’ learning, and many documented citizens were leaving the area to settle in more welcoming communities resulting in an economic crisis in the county (Fuller, 2010). We decided to use this current event to challenge the teachers enrolled in a professional development master’s degree program to connect their readings on critical pedagogy with their classroom practice. It is our central belief that if we develop different ways of examining our social, political, and power systems; then there is hope that people will question the ways in which power is unequally distributed in our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Examining power structures is the first step in changing them to create more equitable experiences for all. As the teacher stated above, this process is nurtured through emancipatory educational practices.

The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, was to examine the ways that a multicultural perspective using critical literacy practices engaged practicing teachers to rethink and re-vision oppressive hegemonic structures and attitudes regarding immigrant students and their families in schools and communities. The particular focus of the study was on a curriculum strand in a professional development master’s degree program that revolved around a local immigration controversy that was raising some serious human rights questions. The curriculum engaged students in reflection and dialog using multiple perspectives of immigration experiences, including those that helped teachers to examine and challenge oppressive hegemonic structures of power and privilege in both current and historical contexts and those that offered opportunities for developing increased empathy. This research study explored the following research questions:

- How can we use current and controversial issues to help teachers develop their capacities to understand and critique the world in more complex ways?
- According to the teachers, in what ways did the curriculum we developed around immigration issues impact their thinking and their classroom practice?

Theoretical framework

The very identity of the USA is intricately connected to the issue of immigration. The story we tell is of a nation built by people who sought freedom from persecution and opportunities for a more prosperous life. As the inscription on the Statue of Liberty proclaims, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to

breathe free ...” This story, however, does not often include the experiences of all people who call the USA home. For many, including indigenous peoples, people brought to this land by force and those immigrants whose skin color, language, and/or religious beliefs differ from the dominant groups’ (White, English speaking, Christian), their journey has been anything but free and prosperous. Understanding how we could use the issue of immigration to help classroom teachers explore the complexity of experiences and how this complexity might impact their work as PK-12 teachers required us to look further at how immigration issues are connected to PK-12 teachers, and how to prepare teachers to effectively work with immigrant populations.

The USA is not the only nation facing identity issues due to the presence of immigrants. For example, about 9% of the population in the European Union was born in countries other than where they currently reside, representing at least 175 nationalities (as cited in Salomone, 2010, p. 202). Some of these immigrants struggle to identify with and to be accepted by their new nations such as the Turkish immigrants in Germany and the North African immigrants in France (Salomone, 2010). Just as in the USA, other nations are searching for ways to best meet the educational needs, particularly the linguistic needs, of immigrant students (McPake, Tinsley, & James, 2007; Virtue, 2006). In this process, teachers are also challenged by deficit views of students, simplification of the connections between language and culture, and racist undertones within the dominant discourse (Arber, 2010; Theodorou, 2011). Within a global context, it is clear that immigration is a growing issue as technology, job opportunities, and international mobility make it easier to straddle borders impacting not only the identity of a nation, but the education system that is tasked with preparing the children to be active, contributing members of that nation.

Connecting immigration issues to PK-12 classrooms in the USA

In order to understand the need for particular teacher professional development around immigration issues as examined in this study, it is important to recognize the impact of increasing immigration on PK-12 classrooms. One in five students in the USA is an immigrant (Schoorman, 2001), and the school system is challenged to address the diverse needs of these students. Immigrant students and the children of immigrant parents enter the school system with varying knowledge of the English language and with cultures, customs, and family systems that may differ from those of mainstream America. US teachers often feel ill-prepared to meet these students at their instructional levels and to use their differences as strengths within the implementation of the curriculum (Pappamihiel, 2007).

Language is not the only challenge facing school systems that serve immigrant populations. As Salomone (2010) states, debates about appropriate educational practices for immigrant students, namely, Spanish speaking immigrant students in the USA, have “little, if anything, to do with language but all to do with the cultural and political changes that Spanish, with its vast numbers of speakers, portend” (p. 151). Cultural differences between the teachers and the students as well as cultural differences among the students have the potential to enhance educational experiences; however, these differences are often viewed through a deficit lens (Nieto, 2011), highlighting ways in which the immigrant students and their families should shed aspects of their culture that do not fit neatly within mainstream America.

Educational researchers challenge this assimilationist approach in favor of practices that embrace different cultures. If we take seriously the charge to educate students in the USA to be contributing members of a democratic community (Nussbaum, 1998), then we need to find ways to help all students embrace and work across these cultural differences. Banks (2008) offers a framework for considering the ways in which teachers can infuse multicultural practices into their curriculum that ranges from the lowest level, a Contributions Approach where important people and customs are shared in the classroom setting, to the highest level, to a Social Action Approach that encourages students to “make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them” (Banks, 2008, p. 48). Within this framework, researchers have explored specific practices that align with multicultural perspectives. For example, Gay (2000) recommends the use of culturally responsive practices that recognize and honor the values, beliefs, and experiences students bring to the classroom and that help students see themselves in the curriculum. Furthermore, critical literacy practices encourage students to critically read the *word*, and read the *world* (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 135). Freire (1999) highlights the importance of having students critically examine the world in which we live and work in order to name existing inequities and begin to transform oppressive structures through the power of words (spoken, read, and written). It is clear that immigration issues impact PK-12 classrooms because of the inclusion of diverse languages and cultures into classroom settings; it is important, therefore, that teachers find ways to traverse these differences and to use them to enhance the learning experiences of all students.

Preparing teachers to effectively work with immigrant students and families

Effectively navigating and appreciating the diverse languages and cultures that children bring to the classroom can be challenging for the current relatively homogeneous teaching force, which is 72% female (Suárez-Orozco, 2000), 83% white (NCES, 2011), and 97% monolingual speakers of English (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Research shows that teachers entering the field prefer to teach students who are like themselves (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). In addition, teachers tend to teach the way that they were taught (Ridgeway, 2004), which does not often include multicultural pedagogical practices. In fact, teachers who did not have specific language training are less likely to have positive attitudes toward heritage language maintenance (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). These characteristics of the current US teaching force make it particularly challenging to prepare teachers, both pre-service but particularly in-service, to work with immigrant students.

Teacher educators need to consider the kinds of curricular experiences that effectively support teachers to engage in this work. Constructive developmental theorists (e.g. Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 1991) suggest that transformative learning and development occur for individuals in contexts that support meaning-making through critical reflection. Embedded in these theories is the assumption that development moves hierarchically from simple to more complex and elastic cognitions as a result of this meaning-making. Through critical reflection that includes perspective taking and dialog with others, individuals often arrive at “a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable and integrated perspective” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 14). The challenge then for teacher educators is to support each learner in their individual growth, to move toward greater cognitive complexity. When principles of constructive developmental theories inform and shape the design of teacher professional development

experiences, teachers engage in transformative meaning-making by critically reflecting on the world and on their practice, constructing professional knowledge with their peers, and developing more collaborative relationships with their fellow teachers (Gregson & Sturko, 2007).

Zull (2002) offers additional insights into how learning occurs. Drawing on the work of Kolb (1984), he describes a learning cycle that depends on experience followed by reflecting, developing abstractions, testing those abstractions, and finally circling back to concrete experiences (Zull, 2002, p. 17). Zull (2002) argues that “all parts of the learning cycle are influenced by emotion” (p. 223) and activating these emotions will help impact the learner’s thinking. This scientific analysis of how our brains operate actually mirrors the process of engaging in what educational researchers call critical pedagogy. Wink (2005) succinctly describes critical pedagogy as a process of naming, reflecting, and acting in the world in order to work toward creating a world that is more socially just. The process includes helping learners to move beyond dichotomous views toward more complex and ambiguous understandings, a goal for both young learners and educational practitioners.

Within the literature reviews organized to tease out potential “best practices” in preparing teachers to teach in culturally diverse settings (Grant, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 1992), some common themes emerge related to instruction: (1) address teachers’ dispositions, (2) build their pedagogical knowledge, and (3) offer them more experiences with diversity. We contend that these three instructional areas are not only essential for pre-service teachers, but are critical for the professional development of in-service teachers as well. One way to support teachers to examine their assumptions related to working with diverse populations is through the use of critical literacy practices. Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, and the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (2009) argue “for a model of critical literacy education across the lifespan” (p. xiii), where teachers are questioning issues of access and equity within their own settings and are teaching their students to do the same. Because critical literacy practices are grounded within the contexts and the lived experiences of the participants, curriculum grows out of current issues facing a community. Evidence also suggests that teachers need simulation and immersion opportunities in order to experience life through their diverse students’ eyes to deepen understanding and increase empathy (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Rychly & Graves, 2012). In our context, the immigration debate became the current issue we asked teachers to explore through the critical pedagogy curriculum we developed, taking into account the best practices identified above.

Methods

Due to the nature of the research questions, qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2002) was used as the framework for the study. According to Yin (2002), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). The “contemporary phenomenon” in this case was the curriculum developed around the current immigration issues and the ways in which that emerging curriculum impacted teachers’ thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. Case study design allowed us to explore more deeply the ways in which our teachers experienced the curriculum intended to help them critically examine societal hegemonic attitudes regarding immigrant students.

The study sample was composed of 57 graduate students who were enrolled in a nontraditional, school-based Master's program, called Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET), at a large university on the east coast. The nontraditional structure of the program, with 8 h class days concentrated in summers and Saturdays during the academic year, requires that teachers join in school-based teams of anywhere from two to six teachers and move through the two-year program together as a cohort. This professional development program, specifically designed for practicing teachers, focuses on developing teachers' capacities to engage in critical pedagogy and critical literacy, school-based and community-based inquiry, collaboration, and continuous improvement. It offers an interdisciplinary curriculum that addresses fundamental issues impacting educators, including language, culture, and moral professionalism (Sockett, DeMulder, LePage, & Wood, 2001). This context was well suited to address the current research questions:

- How can we use current and controversial issues to help teachers develop their capacities to understand and critique the world in more complex ways?
- According to the teachers, in what ways did the curriculum we developed around immigration issues impact their thinking and their classroom practice?

Curricular experiences

We dedicated three 8 h class days to immigration issues and the ways in which these issues impact families, teachers, and schools. The first class day in February focused on English language acquisition. A complaint often voiced about immigrant populations is their assumed lack of English proficiency, which impacts the role of schools and teachers in educating immigrant children. To deconstruct myths concerning second language acquisition and to better understand the challenges of learning in a new language while learning a new language, teachers read a text that examined second language acquisition (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004) before class, and then participated on the class day in unfamiliar language learning situations and in extended discussions. Teachers were divided into two groups; each group received a 30-min reading/writing lesson in either Kirundi (an African dialect) or Bengali (an Indian dialect). In these sessions, the instructors spoke only in Kirundi or Bengali and expected the teachers to do the same even though they had no prior knowledge of either language system. We then debriefed with the teachers about the experience asking them: (1) How it made them feel (2) What came up for them, and (3) How the experience helped them relate to English language learners. We then connected the discussion to the idea of hegemony and asked the teachers how power and privilege tend to play out in the classroom for children learning English. In the afternoon, teachers worked in small groups to deconstruct and examine the three myths that Genesee et al. (2004) debunk in the text they read: (1) Bilingual acquisition leads to confusion; simultaneous acquisition of two languages results in confusion because the child treats input in two languages as if it were part of one language – results in mixed language, (2) Code-mixing is a sign of confusion and lack of mastery of one or both languages, and (3) Early dual language learning results in delays and deficits. After small group discussions around these myths, the teachers were divided into groups to more deeply delve into each chapter of the Genesee et al. (2004) text, responding to questions we posed and creating a graphic organizer to summarize the main points of the chapter that they then reported back to the larger group.

The March class day focused on the immigration process in order to raise awareness of the complexities and challenges of obtaining documented immigration status. Teachers first watched an excerpt from a film entitled *The Shadow of Hate* (Teaching Tolerance, 2006) that highlighted the history of intolerance in the USA. They were later given scenarios of individuals seeking documented immigration status and they conducted online explorations of regulations, processes, and procedures involved in seeking documented immigration status. For example, one of the scenarios stated:

You are an international graduate student from Sudan on a Fulbright scholarship at the University of Maryland in the United States. A deadly civil war erupts three months before you are due to complete your four-year academic program, at which time the financial support from the scholarship will end. The reports that you are receiving from home all discourage you from returning as your life would be in grave danger. You have to figure out how to extend your stay in the United States. Your situation is quite complicated. Your entire family including your spouse and three children are all in Sudan. Your dream is to reunite with your husband and children in safety in the United States.

Teachers also viewed an excerpt of a new documentary entitled *9500 Liberty* (Rigopoulos, Park, & Byler, 2010) about the politicization of the immigration issue in the local Prince William County, VA community. After completing a free write about the issues or questions the film brought up for them, we used the following questions to guide small and large group discussions:

- What are the community issues raised in the film and how can you state these community issues as dilemmas?
- In what ways do the community dilemmas trickle down to schools and classrooms?
- Identify dilemmas that you, your students, or their families face as a result of the current immigration controversy.
- If you do not think you currently face any dilemmas related to this issue, what might be dilemmas you face in the future as communities become more diverse?

These questions were developed specifically to spur the cycle of learning that includes reflecting, developing, and testing abstractions, and circling back to concrete experiences, leading to more critical understandings (Kolb, 1984; Zull, 2002).

Teachers also listened to the perspectives of local immigrant community members who were invited to speak at the class day. The speakers came prepared to address the following questions:

- Tell the story of how you came to live in this area.
- How is the current immigration controversy affecting you and your family?
- What do you want teachers to understand about the issue?
- What are your greatest hopes for the future?

While many teachers believed that the media was generally one-sided in reporting the immigration issue and felt it was enlightening to hear from immigrant members of the community about the ways that they, their families, and their communities are being affected, some interesting issues surfaced. For example, a

lawyer on the panel shared her appreciation of the Dream Act (legislation that granted her permanent residency based on criteria for making positive contributions to the community including serving in the military or completing a degree in higher education). Our field notes captured the anger that teachers expressed in reaction to her story. Teachers were “insulted” by what they identified as her “pride” in entering the country illegally and moving ahead “perhaps at the expense of someone else waiting to enter the country according to the law.” We pointed out that the Dream Act was also “the law,” but because many felt that the legislation was unfair to people who were “following the rules,” teachers felt justified in dismissing the validity of her path to legal citizenship.

Finally, teachers discussed the articles they read prior to the class day that highlighted immigrant perspectives (Garza & Crawford, 2005; Lopez, 2001; Olsen, 1997). The questions guiding their discussions included:

- What insights/conclusions are described by the author?
- What supporting evidence for these insights/conclusions does she/he provide?
- What does the author see as important implications for teachers, schools, and education in general? Are there cultural patterns identified in the article that might help you to communicate across differences?
- What new questions does reading/discussing this article raise for you?

Some of the themes that emerged in their discussions included the challenges students face as they attempt to straddle two cultures, the importance of creating reciprocal relationships with families, and the issue of adjusting to other cultures rather than fixing them to “make Americans” out of them. There were a few teachers who struggled to accept this final theme and made comments in support of hegemonic structures and assimilationist assumptions related to immigration; they reasoned that if they were to move to another country, they would be required to adopt the language and culture of that country. There was little to no recognition of the power of English in other parts of the world, of the desire of most immigrants to the USA to learn English, or of the accompanying barriers to opportunities to learn English.

The May class day was devoted to a deeper exploration of immigration issues and controversies, with viewing of the full 9500 Liberty documentary, discussion with the documentary directors about building opportunities for nonpolarizing dialog, and discussion of the leadership roles and responsibilities of teachers. This was by far one of the most controversial discussions we had. Teachers who struggled with the legal/illegal aspect of immigration seemed to be looking for reasons to discredit the speakers. They focused on the delivery of the message rather than the content of the message. For example; one of the directors shared that under the new legislation, police officers had the right to pull someone over just to check their immigration status – information he received straight from the local police chief. A teacher who was married to a police officer challenged this “fact” and an argument ensued. Other teachers in the class sympathized with their colleague and used this opportunity to dismiss anything that this director then had to say; they did not trust him, instead finding him “pompous,” “unprofessional,” “rude and inappropriate.” It was interesting that teachers felt justified in expressing their strong opinions but did not find it appropriate for others to do the same. Stephanie² wrote, “... [the directors] did not do a good job mediating their own feelings. I realize some of the people in our class have some pretty strong opinions, however, they are entitled to them.”

Woven throughout each class day was the opportunity for critical dialog. The design of eight-hour class days over the course of two years allowed us to be intentional about setting aside ample time for discussion in safe environments. These curricular experiences took place in the second year of the program after teachers had an opportunity to create norms for dialog and to develop a level of trust among the group. During the class days, teachers engaged in critical dialog in various small group configurations as well as in the group as a whole.

Data sources

In order to offer teachers opportunities for reflection on their learning experiences in the graduate program and to collect feedback to improve our own teaching practices, we collected teachers' written reflective responses submitted via an online learning environment called Blackboard within a week after each class day. These responses to particular prompts often offer a rich source of information about the ways teachers experience the curricular innovations, the challenges they face, and the insights they gain in the program that influence their attitudes and approaches to teaching. We then analyze the feedback and share the themes supported by anonymous examples with the class to generate further discussion (Maxwell, 2005, 2008); this recursive process allows teachers to revisit issues through the eyes of their colleagues and deepen their own understanding of multiple perspectives (Brookfield, 1995). The data from this study come from the reflective feedback teachers wrote after class days in February, March, and May. Response prompts for each day were:

- February
 - What new insights did you gain from the class day regarding English language learning?
 - What do you plan to do differently as a result of these insights?
 - Is there anything else you would like to tell us?
- March
 - What was the most powerful part of the day for you?
 - How did the readings, film clips, and class day discussions help to reveal the complexities of the immigration controversy?
 - In what ways has the class day impacted your thinking about the immigrant experience?
 - What will you do to contribute to constructive dialog in your school and/or community regarding the immigration issue?
 - Is there anything else you would like to tell us?
- May
 - What did you learn about the immigration issue, about leadership, and about yourself from the morning's activities?
 - In what ways did the afternoon's activities help you to think about your role as a leader in your school and/or community?
 - Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

In addition, we collected artifacts (e.g. class day agendas, planning notes, emails, and other documents) and field notes we took on the class days to document the discussions and the progression of teachers' responses to the curriculum.

Data analysis

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the three sets of class day feedback, which totaled 62 pages of text (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this method, we engaged in three levels of analysis: open coding, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each class day, we engaged in a process of open coding with the feedback data for that class day. After all class day feedback data was collected, we returned to the full set of data and engaged in axial coding: Two of us read through the data individually and coded for themes that emerged related to teachers' reactions to their class day experiences. Then we came together to compare coding; when there was disagreement, the unit of data was discussed thoroughly until a consensus was met. In some cases, one argument won out; and in other cases, a new understanding was reached reflected in a brand new code. Once the coding was complete, we cut and pasted the data by codes to obtain a clearer picture of the teachers' reactions to the issue of immigration. After printing out the data by codes, we reread all of the data and combined codes that appeared to overlap. We then engaged in selective coding: the new piles of data were arranged on a large table to explore and illustrate the connections across the codes. We then combed through the additional data (agendas, planning notes, field notes, etc.) to see if they mapped onto the existing themes and/or if new themes emerged. In the end, we created a thematic map of the data (Figure 1) that summarizes the insights we gained from this qualitative inquiry.

Results and conclusions

The thematic map depicted in Figure 1 illustrates an organization of themes that emerged from the data. Our objective in offering the curricular experiences involving the immigration issue was to help teachers examine their assumptions through multiple-perspective taking and questioning in order to challenge oppressive hegemonic structures and to gain a more complex and deeper understanding of the world in general and the immigration issue in particular. Our expectation was that these kinds of experiences would develop teachers' capacities and dispositions for critical reflection that will lead to informed, potentially transformative action. The data revealed that most teachers were receptive to and engaged in the curriculum, which led to them acknowledging the complexity of the immigration issue and coming to deeper understandings; these deeper understandings often led to critical reflection (internal action) as well as changed behavior (external action).

Along the way, we were faced with resistance from some of the teachers (these are illustrated in the figure as red stop signs along the edges). Only one teacher out of 57 expressed a negative reaction to the first class day that was focused on second/dual language learning. In contrast, 14 teachers expressed some form of resistance and disengagement in their feedback on the second day (six of them more than once) and 10 teachers did so on the third day; on both of these days, the curriculum was more focused on immigration and the controversies surrounding documented and undocumented immigrants. Research consistently shows that people from dominant groups are often resistant to engagement in discussions and activities geared toward social change because of a central fear of losing power (Goodman, 2001; Howard, 1999; Sleeter, 1994; Spring 2004; Tatum, 1997). Goodman (2001) argues that this resistance is shaped mainly by sociopolitical and psychological



Figure 1. Thematic map of data.

factors. Sociopolitically, people from privileged groups are encouraged by society to be “self-focused, to gain their sense of self-worth by feeling superior, to see others as threats, to protect their resources, and to blame people of color for their failures.” Psychologically, people from privileged groups are more likely to be resistant when they are “focused on their own struggles, are in a particular stage of social identity development, try to avoid cognitive dissonance and need to protect their sense of self” (Goodman, 2001, p. 78).

Resistance and disengagement was expressed by the teachers in this study in one or more ways, by:

- dismissing the relevance of the information and experiences offered,
- critiquing the ways in which ideas were expressed rather than the ideas themselves (“diverting attention”)
- focusing on the value of assimilation in ways that ignored the value of immigrants’ cultural heritage and home language,
- reproaching the faculty for offering one-sided views, and/or
- stating that there was no need for change or action on their part.

Examples and further analysis of this resistance will be presented in each of the following sections.

Receptivity/engagement

Most of the teachers indicated in their feedback collected from each of the three days that they were *receptive to and engaged with the curricular experiences* that were offered. With this receptivity and engagement, many teachers said that they learned about aspects of immigration that they had not known, and in some cases had never even thought about before. For example, Kim wrote this excerpt in response to the second class day:

The readings, film clips, and class day discussions really opened my eyes to the plight of the immigrants in our county. I never realized how difficult it was for them to complete the most straight forward actions towards obtaining citizenship in our country. The system makes it so difficult for them - it must be very frustrating! During one of our class activities, I attempted to find information on obtaining U.S. citizenship. I found myself very frustrated and wanting to give up. I can't imagine how the immigrant must feel especially if English is not their primary language!

A majority of teachers suggested that many of the experiences “put a face to the issue” and helped them to “stand in the shoes” of immigrant people, acknowledging the toll on young immigrant students and their families as a result of anti-immigrant policies and sentiment in their communities. For example, Bonnie wrote this excerpt in response to the second class day:

The panel discussion was the most powerful part of the day. Hearing the voices and seeing the faces of the people living through this frightening experience gave the newspaper stories I've been reading the depth that made this horrible situation real to me. I felt so sad for what the immigrant families are going through. I am grateful to them for expressing their feelings about their plight with such grace and honesty.

Receptivity and engagement also allowed teachers to make connections to schools, allowing them to feel increased empathy and understanding for the challenges immigrant students face. For example, Sharon wrote this excerpt in response to the first class day that was focused on second language learning:

More than ever, I finally realize just how my students feel when coming into a classroom where they are totally misunderstood due to language. So often, we “snatch up” a child and have them tested for LD [learning disabilities] when in all actuality they don't understand what we are saying. We take for granted that a child can't learn due to having a different language, rather than opening our eyes and ears to listen to them (as best we can). I think if I had been more open to this, I would have realized many of my students from the past know more than I have given them credit for.

As can be seen in these data examples, the majority of teachers opened themselves to opportunities to step outside of their own experience and perspectives to “know” in ways they had not known before. This often involved engaging with emotions; in the first quote the teacher felt “frustrated” with the process of obtaining US citizenship, while in the second quote the teacher felt “sad” when hearing the stories of the immigrants living in her community. According to Zull (2002), activat-

ing these emotions is key to learning and therefore became an important aspect of engaging the teachers to be receptive to different experiences and perspectives.

There were instances, however, when the emotions involved resulted in teachers resisting the curriculum rather than engaging with it. Susan in particular was angry about our approach because she believed that we were not honoring the knowledge and experiences she brought to the issue. She said:

It is a very complex issue as I know from the experience my own mother had when she immigrated to this country. Not all of us who sit at IET are void of any experiences such as these and yet I feel that we are all treated as though we know nothing of the plight of those with whom we come into contact.

Many other teachers used their families' stories of immigration to connect with the issue; in fact we encouraged this, so it is not clear where this anger was coming from. What is clear is the fact that this teacher's emotions served to distance her away from the curriculum rather than to engage her with it.

Furthermore, some teachers distanced themselves from any emotional connections thereby inhibiting the possibility of learning on a deeper level. In contrast to the many teachers who used humanizing phrases like "put a face to the issue" and "put myself in their shoes", Tara's response after the third class day was more *dehumanizing*:

I learned that often the issue of immigration is quite one sided. I understand that this is the US of A but I feel as though that title is abused by some. I totally understand those who are legal being upset by the stereotypes and threats of being illegal when they are not. However, I believe that those that are illegal should be held accountable. I feel as though *it is those that are illegal that are giving immigration a bad taste in the American mouth.* (emphasis added)

We found it interesting that teachers used metaphors related to the body (i.e. face, feet, and mouth) in ways that either brought the issue closer to them or allowed them to place the issue, and particularly the people related to the issue, at a greater distance.

Acknowledge complexity/deeper understanding

The majority of teachers indicated that the *curricular experiences helped them to examine and appreciate the complexity of the issues*, leading them to develop their critical reflection skills and *come to deeper understandings about the issue*. For example, Debbie wrote this excerpt after the third class day:

For me personally, the immigration and race discussions and readings, the visitors in March, the entire two years really ... all of it has forced me to examine my thoughts and feelings on these really difficult issues. I have found it is so easy to arrive at a conclusion on an issue simply because it seems to be the majority view of your family, or your community. You can say you believe something without ever having truly examined your position to its core. My opinions have definitely shifted, and I'm much more apt to question what I would easily have accepted unexamined before this experience.

We found that the opportunities to interact with multiple perspectives and to be placed in "other's shoes" were the most effective in getting teachers to come to deeper understandings of the issue. For example, after researching the path to legal

documentation, many teachers talked about better understanding the “red tape” that often created unnecessary obstacles. John stated:

... I realized that becoming a citizen is not simple and uncomplicated. After listening to the discussion of the multiple scenarios and realizing how complicated it is to become a citizen or to stay in America for any period of time, it made me understand the complications people go through to become a citizen.

Kristen admitted that she “had never appreciated the other side of the argument.” After feeling frustrated about the changes in her home and school community, the curriculum helped her to understand that, as she said, the current situation “[is] just as equally challenging for the immigrants themselves.”

Acknowledging the complexity and coming to deeper understandings about the issue was often linked with a desire to take action based on these new understandings. In analyzing the data, we had a lot of discussion about what constituted “action.” There were many examples of teachers changing their behavior toward others, but there were even more examples of shifting dispositions as a result of critical reflection. We decided that critical reflection itself was indicative of an action/change, albeit an internal one. It was our hope that if teachers were actively critiquing current practices, taking responsibility, valuing their new awareness, and shifting their dispositions, those internal actions would increase the probability of eventual external action/change. The next two sections tease out these internal and external actions.

Critical reflection (internal action)

Teachers appeared to *embrace critical reflection* as a way to gather multiple perspectives on an issue, particularly when those perspectives clashed with some of their existing beliefs. As Bonnie stated, “The times I learned the most are the times I was most uncomfortable.” Critical reflection, therefore, was not about passionately arguing a point, but rather about examining an issue from all angles to reveal the sociopolitical underpinnings of a phenomenon or social reality. This skill was admittedly difficult for many of the teachers, though they expressed commitment to improving the process. Ted articulated in his feedback after the third class day:

Sparked by the morning’s conversation, I really focused on my lack of patience with people who have strong, opposing opinions. I know that I often tune these people out and that in doing so, I lose valuable insight. Even if I don’t agree with a person’s beliefs or arguments, it is still possible that they will provide great insight or a new perspective that could help the school to function better and more effectively. I’m going to try to become a better leader by becoming a better listener.

These attempts to truly listen and critically reflect in the moment often led to teachers practicing this skill outside of our classroom discussions. For example, Addie wrote this excerpt in response to the second class day:

Listening to the guest speakers was very powerful, especially [speaker]. She was able to give us a different lens to see the immigration issue through. By looking at the dilemma facing PWC economically, she was able to allow us to look at the new laws differently. The information she gave us will hopefully help us to question the things we hear on the news and read in the paper.

Not all teachers embraced the opportunity to critically reflect on their beliefs, and some openly resisted questioning the “truths” they held as members of the dominant community. One member of the panel that presented on the March class day was Mr Q.; he was active in the religious community and spoke more positively about the process of assimilating into US culture. There were a handful of students who immediately latched on to what he had to say because it fit neatly within their existing schema of the immigration story – person legally enters the USA, person learns the language, culture, and values of the USA, and person becomes “American.” In fact, Delia wrote:

I respected [Mr. Q.] and would have preferred to have him speak to us as a representative of the Hispanic community rather than the other members of the panel. He was articulate and eloquent and presented his views and opinions without feeling he needed to attack the immigration laws of the United States.

This teacher failed to see the irony that the one person she wanted to speak for the entire Hispanic community shared her perspective. She did not appear interested in the perspectives that conflicted with her own and that would challenge her to critically reflect on her own beliefs.

The resistance around critical reflection was probably one of the most challenging for us to navigate as teacher educators. We struggled to identify the best way to value all voices particularly when some of those voices violated the human rights of others. In fact, we were contacted by a local blogger whose organization was listed on the Southern Poverty Law site as a hate group. He actively fought against the “invasion of illegal aliens” in his community, helped to author the Rule of Law Resolution of 2007, and was friends with one of our teachers. While he did not exemplify our definition of a critically reflective person, we did not want to be accused of silencing any voices in the debate. As one author pointed out in a discussion we had via email:

My worry is that if we do not listen to what our students are saying they experienced because it is a minority voice and it does not fit our political agenda, we send the message that they can ignore student/family voices if it is a minority group or if it does not fit their political agenda.

In the end, the blogger did not attend one of our class days; he had too many demands for the event that we could not accommodate. In reflecting on this experience, we still struggle to decide how best to support our teachers to be critically reflective and to engage with multiple perspectives without being accused of being one-sided ourselves.

Change behavior (external action)

Teachers who evidenced receptivity and engagement with the curriculum and acknowledged the complexities and multiple perspectives of the issues that were raised also tended to respond that the *class experiences helped them to envision and take action*. We prompted teachers to envision ways that they might take action as a result of their curricular experiences and critical reflection, so it is not surprising that their responses included these possibilities for taking action. Many of their responses included explanations of how they had gone beyond envisioning to actually making

intentional changes in their attitudes and behaviors toward immigrant students and families both as citizens and as teachers. They described both plans and changes already made that included: developing relationships with and advocating for students and their families, collaborating with others to provide more effective instruction, developing different curricular strategies that would be more effective with second language learners, and using their voices to share information with others (e.g. teachers, administrators, and family members) so that they too could become more informed. For example, Tara wrote after the first class day:

As a result of these insights and my book reflection, I plan on reviewing my text [about dual language learning] and sharing it with my colleagues and ESOL teachers. I plan on using my students with multiple language skills to educate and entice others to see them as an asset in the classroom. I need to reevaluate the languages in my classroom and the cultures brought with them to show honest interest in allowing these students to problem solve in their native ways. I want to strive to become educated by my students in multiple ways as they are educated by me.

Bonnie wrote after the third class day:

The discussion about the immigration issue showed what a highly charged issue it is. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to see more of *9500 Liberty* [documentary] and to participate in a dialogue with its creators. It was tense at times, but I'm glad we could witness and experience that tension because it was just a small taste of what must be happening at meetings between the Prince William officials and citizens/immigrants. I imagine similar heated debates going on among neighbors, between co-workers, and within families ... I have learned a great deal about the immigration issue and something about myself – I support the immigrants even though I have a hard time answering others who ask about the cost to “us”. Yes, there is a cost, but I believe the humanitarian issue is a more important one. I'm glad for people like Stephen Fuller [an economist], who can make the case against those who want to “send them back where they came from” by using logic and economics, which takes some of the emotion out of the equation. I have learned that I can speak up about a political issue such as immigration laws. I have been reading everything I see pertaining to this issue so that I can speak more intelligently when someone brings it up. I used to disagree without saying too much, but now I have some facts and have heard the other side of the story from the immigrants themselves. I'm surprised that I have actually changed some people's views on the subject, or at least left them with some questions in their previously made up minds.

Again, we faced some resistance with the notion of encouraging teachers to take external action based on their new understandings. When asked what she might do differently in her classroom based on the work we did in class, Donna responded:

Nothing. For the past 10 years I have worked closely with immigrants and the issues with immigration. Nothing that any of you have to say is news to me. I've been in the trenches for 10 years.

She goes on to say:

The majority of the teachers in my school are quite aware of the immigration issues. We do not know, nor care the legal status of the parents. What we as educators care about is getting all of the students to pass the SOLs [Virginia Standard's of Learning] and maintain good status for NCLB [No Child Left Behind].

What is striking about this teacher's resistance is how easily she can separate the issue of student identity from the issue of school achievement. If we do not acknowledge the experiences and knowledge that students bring to the classroom as a way to connect them to content, then we will never be able to improve their performance within our current school structures. As Gay (2000) so poignantly reminds us, student success rests on the creation of culturally responsive curriculum. This is the ultimate external action which we hoped the teachers would embrace.

Discussion

This qualitative study was designed to better understand the impact of using current and controversial issues to support teachers' individual development, to broaden their understanding of their role, and to enhance their skills as educators. The ultimate goal was to examine teachers' development as critical educators in a particular context: within the structure of a professional development program, and in the context of shifting demographics where these particular teachers live and work. We found that the majority of teachers were receptive to the curriculum we developed and engaged in the issues presented through the opportunities to stand in other's shoes, to put a face to the immigration issue, to make connections to their own school contexts, and to explore knowledge and perspectives they had never before considered. Their engagement with the curriculum led them to acknowledge the complexity of the immigration issue and to come to deeper understandings of how this issue connected to their roles and responsibilities as educators. Through the critical reflection process, they began to shift their dispositions, value the importance of awareness, critique current practices in both their schools and their own classrooms, and take responsibility for making changes in their thinking and their practice. These internal actions were often accompanied by external actions, or changes in their behaviors; many teachers described their attempts and/or their intentions to develop more meaningful relationships with immigrant students and their families, to change curriculum strategies to better meet students' needs, to collaborate with colleagues and families, to advocate for their immigrant students, and to inform others of their new knowledge. In these cases, teachers exhibited attitudes and described behaviors that were indicative of their transformation into more critical educators. They were able to put themselves "in other's shoes" to recognize that there are other valid perspectives besides their own. By creating an environment that supports multiple perspectives, teachers were encouraged to embrace the ambiguity that is inherent in controversial social issues. This critical reflection process highlights the connections between critical pedagogy and cognitive processes. Critical pedagogy involves moving educators beyond dichotomous views toward more complex and ambiguous understandings, which can be accomplished through the learning cycle described by Zull (2002) where learners reflect, develop abstractions, test abstractions, and relate these back to concrete experiences.

We recognized that the learning environment we designed was quite opposite from the culture of the public schools in which these teachers taught; US schools, particularly within the current climate of high stakes testing and accountability, tend to dichotomize information into "right" and "wrong." We certainly saw that some teachers were so embedded in this culture that they became overwhelmed and begged us to present them with the "truth." In addition to fostering an environment that embraces ambiguity, the curriculum humanized the immigrant experience,

which helped teachers put students at the center of their work. K-12 schools have become so focused on the extensive content that “needs to be covered,” that teachers often forget that content only exists in context and that it is critical to understand the students before one can begin to know how to teach them. As emerging critical educators, our teachers were beginning to shift from teaching content to teaching students.

Of course, there were teachers who were sometimes not as receptive to the critical perspectives we presented through the curriculum. Their resistance was manifested in several different ways; some teachers were quite vocal about dismissing the perspectives we presented, accusing us of presenting only one side of the issue, and adamantly declaring that the work we did in no way influenced them to take any action or do anything differently in their school settings to meet the needs of immigrant students. Other teachers were more “subtle” in their resistance; while they were open to listening to the perspectives presented, they continued to hold tight to status quo beliefs and practices. In one breath, these teachers claimed to have more empathy for the immigrant experience, while in the next breath they expressed the need for immigrants to assimilate into US culture. Similarly, they claimed to understand arguments made by people who challenged the status quo, but they tended to divert these discussions to critique the ways in which the ideas were presented; as one teacher commented in response to one of the presenters we invited to class, “I just hope that she knows to soften it a bit if she is looking for support. Unfortunately, people don’t like that aggressiveness. They get turned off by it, whether or not it’s fair.”

Teacher educators, who place social justice issues at the center of their curriculum, know that resistance is an expected reaction (Goodman, 2001; Howard, 1999). Eliminating resistance is probably not realistic, but we can minimize that resistance and respond to it in ways that move teachers through it rather than allowing the resistance to shut them down and distance them from the issue (Alquist, 1991; Giroux, 2001; Titus, 2000). We used end of class day feedback to gauge where teachers were along the way and used that feedback to help us design next steps and to help us determine how far we could/should challenge them without losing them. It is evident that we did not always get it “right,” but we learned from the experience, not only about our teachers but also about ourselves and the ways we could effectively communicate our passion for equity.

Teachers’ development as critical educators is greatly impacted by the life and educational experiences they bring with them to the work of teaching. We were struck by the lack of knowledge teachers had about working with English Language Learners (ELL). Many, even those who were recently certified as classroom teachers, admitted that they were not required to take coursework that addressed ELL needs. As a result, many felt ill-prepared to teach these students; some teachers continued to carry negative assumptions about the ability of their ELL students and often placed the responsibility for their learning on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers. Because of this lack of knowledge, we found the teachers to be especially engaged on the February class day when we deconstructed the myths of language development. It became clear to us that more work needs to be done with both pre-service and in-service teachers to help them better understand the strengths and needs of diverse student populations. This work is complex and requires time and space not only for knowledge gathering, but also for deep personal reflecting. As Cazden (1999) points out in the foreword to Ballenger’s text on liter-

acy and learning in a bilingual classroom, we cannot resort to merely giving information to teachers about cultural differences; rather teachers need “to learn experientially about children and families, and in the process to reflect on their own personal and cultural background instead of unthinkingly living it as an unexamined norm” (p. vii).

Related to their own backgrounds, many teachers, with the exception of our secondary history teachers, had limited knowledge of or experience with the history of oppression in the USA. Their lives in most cases were situated within white, middle-class experiences and the history curriculum to which they were exposed as students was often written from the perspective of the dominant culture. This leads us to wonder how we might begin to break this cycle of sharing a “single story” of history that some might argue has a hidden curriculum to promote patriotism (Haynes, 2009). In fact, a healthy democracy encourages questioning and critique; what would happen if schools encouraged these skills from the start? We can only imagine that had our teachers been exposed to multiple perspectives throughout their schooling experience, they would have more easily seen the connections between current social issues and the events of the past.

It was not expected that the data gathered would be easily generalized to all teachers and their development, but that the information would add to knowledge and understanding of the process in a way that will help other teacher educators and researchers in their own contexts. Munchmore (1999) describes two alternative ways to “generalize” knowledge gained through qualitative research methods that are congruent with our understanding of this research project: analytic and case-to-case transfer. Analytic generalization allows one to “generalize the findings of a particular study to a broader theory” (Munchmore, 1999, p. 22), while case-to-case transfer occurs when ideas or strategies that emerge in data inspire the reader to think and act in new ways (Munchmore, 1999).

We also did not necessarily expect to see a drastic and immediate impact on teachers’ dispositions as a result of our efforts. As Banks (2008) suggests, multicultural experiences such as the ones we designed offer teachers opportunities to develop their capacities to reach across cultures but this developmental process can be slow and is never-ending. While the data was collected at three separate time points, the research relied on teachers’ self-reports; the collection of other forms of data, such as peer observation, would provide a more triangulated approach to the data.

The study is of utmost relevance and importance to teachers and teacher educators because it demonstrates ways that a multicultural perspective using critical literacy practices can engage learners to rethink and re-vision unexamined assumptions and attitudes while raising learners’ awareness of the pervasive influences of power and hegemony. It reveals challenges and impacts of using critical pedagogy to address controversial issues in the classroom, including those regarding immigrant students and their families in schools and communities. The study also suggests that some learners may resist critical reflection and constructive dialog about controversial issues, and sometimes with teachers, this resistance is manifested through questioning the relevance of the issue for their teaching practice. The evidence suggests that resistance was minimized and teachers’ development was supported using curricular experiences that “put a face to the issue,” that put learners “in others’ shoes,” that engaged teachers’ emotions, and that made clear how policies, practices, and attitudes directly and indirectly impact the lives of children and their families.

Notes

1. For this paper and for purposes of clarity, “teachers” will refer to the students in the graduate program as they are all practicing teachers, while “students” will refer to the PK-12 student population in schools.
2. All teachers’ names are pseudonyms.

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