

A VOLUME IN **SOCIAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION**

TEACHING ABOUT DIVERSITY

Activities to Start the Conversation



MELISSA J. MARKS | SCOTT DEWITT

Teaching About Diversity

A volume in
Social Issues in Education series
Todd S. Hawley, *Series Editor*

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Activities to Start the Conversation

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Preface

This book is intended as a practical guide for teachers and other educators interested in engaging students in conversations about the realities and implications of individual and group differences in society. The impetus for the book is our collective experience as teachers in middle school, high school, and higher education. We find our students often want to discuss these issues, but do not have a vocabulary that allows them to discuss these delicate and uncomfortable topics in a productive way. Prospective teachers often do not raise these issues with their future students in fear that someone will be offended, or just because it is easier to stay within the parameters of the written curriculum, despite their belief that students need to have these conversations in order to contribute positively to society.

Contexts matter in any conversation about diversity. As such, we begin by providing a brief description of the development of our interest in and approach to this topic. These descriptions are necessarily incomplete, but we hope that they provide some sense of who we are as individuals, teachers, and members of a broader society.

Melissa is a White, middle-class, Jewish woman who as a child attended public school in a suburb of Cleveland where everyone was part of a historically marginalized group. The school population consisted primarily of African-American and Jewish students with a handful of Latinxs and Sikhs, and an even smaller number of White, Christian students. In that school, race, religion, money issues, and holidays were openly discussed; students knew that everyone was part of a minority and stood up for each other.

Years later, Melissa taught eighth grade social studies in a very economically, racially, and religiously diverse school district. In teaching about slavery, she spoke openly about race, racism, wealth, and power. She did not realize the impact of talking about diversity with middle school students until years and years later when one student, Katie, found her on Facebook. She told Melissa that the piece she remembered most from her class was when Melissa described skin color in comparison to coffee and milk: We are all just colors along that spectrum. Katie said that no one had ever spoken openly about race to them before and here was Melissa, a 20-something year old White woman, giving them a language with which to discuss issues of race. Melissa now teaches at a regional campus of a public research university. Her students are primarily White, Christian, and come from middle or working class backgrounds.

Scott fits the categories of privilege: White, male, Protestant Christian, cisgender, straight, middle class upbringing, fully able. In his junior year of high school, Scott moved from a racially homogeneous, White, affluent suburban high school to a rural community school that was also majority White, but had a significant number of Latinx students. In college, a class on the Israeli-Palestinian situation from the Palestinian perspective opened Scott to the fact that many stories are “hidden” from mainstream view.

A short post-college foray into seminary introduced Scott to Black Liberation Theology, and the idea of Christianity as a rebellious and disruptive force. Membership in an urban church active in working with and advocating for the poor and homeless helped him see the tremendous variety of situations that people find themselves in and the frequency with which courage and humanity are demonstrated in dealing with those situations.

Scott began his teaching career in a relatively well-to-do, but very racially and ethnically diverse school and district. One year he had students with backgrounds in 24 different countries represented in classes. The Latinx students at this school taught Scott the new (to him) lesson that those from South and Central American heritages identified with individual countries’ cultures rather than as generically Hispanic. Scott currently teaches at a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest. His students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some graduated from small, rural high schools. Others come from major metropolitan areas in the Midwest and West Coast. A smaller percentage are international students, primarily from South and East Asian countries. As a college professor, he has taught White students who challenged the instruction as too focused on diversity and students of color who challenged the instruction as insufficiently confrontational.

Genesis of This Book

In the over 20 years we have known each other, we have had numerous conversations about our students and the courses we teach. This book is one result of those conversations. We seek to share what we have learned with others who see the value of, and need for, all students to develop the vocabulary needed to engage in conversations about diversity. Just as important, we want to help those students develop the dispositions to seek out opportunities for those conversations.

Katie's comment to Melissa, over five years ago, gave us pause to reflect on why many educators, and particularly White educators, do not talk openly with their students regarding race, religion, sexual orientation, and other ways humans are marginalized in society. In researching this obstacle, we have found that it is mainly a combination of two factors: lack of knowledge about various issues of diversity and fear of offending someone. These are both understandable reasons not to dive into diversity, but they are not acceptable reasons. As the United States becomes more diverse, the need increases to communicate about issues of diversity openly and honestly for the purpose of civil discourse and improved democracy.

The Need for Diversity Education

The K–12 student population is increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language, religion, socio-economic status, and family structure. In 2015, for the first time, the majority of public school students in the United States were students of color (NCES, 2019). However, the overwhelming majority of teachers continues to come from White, non-urban, middle class backgrounds (Assaf, Battle, & Garza, 2010; Hughes, Page, & Ford, 2011; Lin & Lucey, 2010; Lyon, 2009). This disparity in cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds is one factor that may lead to the low academic outcomes for poor and for non-White students (Hughes et al., 2011).

In order to maintain national and state accreditation, teacher preparation programs are required to address this disparity by offering classes in multicultural education and diversity (Assaf et al., 2010; CAEP, 2018). However, research indicates this inclusion is neither consistent nor fully effective (Assaf et al., 2010; Kang & Hyatt, 2009; Wallace, 2000). Lack of deep cultural competence and the inability to implement culturally responsive pedagogy lead to “novice teachers’ lack of familiarity with students’ cultures, learning styles, and communication patterns [that] may result in negative assumptions and expectations for students, use of culturally inappropriate

or insensitive materials, and poor student-teacher interactions” (Kang & Hyatt, 2009, p. 1). These deficiencies can have serious repercussions for student learning because students who feel that their culture or background is not acknowledged or accepted at school are likely to disengage from expected academic and social activities (Hughes et al., 2011).

Researchers caution that multicultural and diversity education is not only for non-majority “others”; it is for all students to understand and accept their own complex cultural identities as citizens (Banks, 1993; Banks, 2009; Hughes et al., 2011). Multicultural education functions to decrease prejudice, reduce fear and suspicion, promote equity pedagogy, and empower students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (Banks, 1993; Hughes et al., 2011). In addition, understanding issues of diversity promotes social justice.

Teaching for social justice, which is broadly defined as the desire to provide equal access and opportunities for outcomes and to change unjust conditions, is a difficult endeavor. It is often met by resistance or silence, especially by dominant majority students who may feel blame, guilt, confusion, and/or denial (Lyon, 2009; Martinez, 2014; Mazzei, 2008).

In order to teach for social justice, ideas regarding power structure, privilege, and oppression need to be discussed openly. Discussing these topics may create a cadre of concerns for students, parents, and educators alike. First, as mentioned above, research indicates strong resistance by students when asked to form White racial identities, accept White privilege as fact, and understand the social construction of race (Lyon, 2009; Martinez, 2014; Mazzei, 2008). Similarly, accepting ideas like economic privilege may conflict with students’ views about who “deserves” financial success, and how people succeed or fail financially. Resistance to acknowledging nondominant gender roles, religious beliefs, and/or family structure may also occur. Second, a deficit in culturally responsive pedagogy by instructors handling social justice issues may lead to confusion about the issues, creating condescending or inappropriate in-class discussions and arguments, and/or challenging students in ways that create walls rather than doors. Third, discussing these issues may conflict with familial beliefs. For example, a Latinx student once questioned Melissa’s desire for equality as a female because in his view, “real men” were in charge of families and “wives knew their place.” Fear of upsetting students, bringing a lawsuit to the school or themselves, or not knowing how to handle the issues of social justice are commonly heard excuses for teachers self-censoring and not discussing “difficult” subjects (Marks, Binkley, & Daly, 2014).

Benefits of Diversity Education

The benefits of teaching about diversity and promoting social justice far outweighs these concerns. First, all students gain greater awareness about themselves and others regarding everyone's place in society and within our country's history. Instead of white-washing history and focusing only on wealthy, White, and male leaders, writers, inventors, and innovators, students see everyone's history, contributions, and issues. The recognition of wrongs done in the past (e.g., slavery) can be discussed in terms of a realistic appraisal of social development and increased understanding of how positive change is made. By including all people, students are not disenfranchised or excluded. "Students need to feel that their cultural traditions, views, and background are understood and accepted at school and that they do not have to hide their ethnicity when they enter the school-house door" (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 14). Additionally, making the content more relevant allows for greater student engagement.

Many students go to schools with people just like themselves and describe the situation as "living in a [homogenous] bubble." Issues of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and class are often not discussed as it isn't considered "polite" (Mazzei, 2008) and when it is discussed, student understanding is often based on social media or popular culture and inaccurate. In our courses, White, Christian students have told us they "don't have a culture" and that they were "normal Americans." Their view was that "White Christian" was a single, homogenous group and that only people from non-dominant religious/racial/cultural groups had a culture. This lack of self-awareness is not exclusive to Whites, nor is prejudice or bias. Similarly, students' lack of knowledge about religion, even their own, astounds us. They ask whether Catholicism and Mormonism are cults and admit to knowing nothing about Islam despite expressing negative, anti-Muslim sentiments. These students, who are in the process of becoming teachers psychologists, police officers, and business executives, are woefully uninformed about the people with whom they will interact on a daily basis.

Diversity education allows students to gain a more accurate understanding of our country and the world around them. When the primary representations in popular culture and social media show non-dominant groups in negative ways, students buy into it. To paraphrase Ted Hoover, an LGBTQ advocate, when one gets hate from all sides, some of that hate will be internalized (2014; see also Steele, 2010). Further, research shows that teachers' attitudes and expectations significantly influence student learning, including students' understanding and perspectives on diversity (Fletcher, 2014). For example, while the color-blind perspective (Bonilla-Silva, 2010)

is usually associated with White students, students of color in Fletcher's (2014) study accepted this perspective because of teacher influence. Conversely, when teachers promote social justice and speak directly about race, poverty, and so on, students gain not only perspective, but also permission and ability to communicate about the issues, too.

Students are empowered when they know they can improve the world. In our experience, we have found that young adults do not suffer injustice quietly. "That's not fair" is often followed by a call for action. When issues of classism, sexism, racism, and so on are brought to their attention, that call is for social justice. Young adults can make a difference in many social justice arenas and are thus empowered as active citizens, although many assume a lack of power until they have seen relevant examples and been taught tools for making change. Examples of youth-driven activism are being shown in rallies and social media across the United States.

Currently, issues related to diversity are highlighted in the daily news. This includes racial tensions, gender discrimination, LGBTQ hatred, religious intolerance, and cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication. The economic gap between social classes in the United States is an increasingly important topic, as "income inequality in the U.S. exceeds any other democracy in the developed world" (Zuckerman, 2015, p. 1). In short, issues related to diversity are at the forefront of public debates related to civil rights, government policy, individual opportunity, and even what it means to be an American. As such, addressing these issues is vital for students individually and as members of civic society.

Readers will notice repeated references in the following chapters to social expectations and cultural norms, for example, females as homemakers, or fluency in academic English as necessary for economic success. These postulations rely on an assumption that White, middle- and upper-class culture has been the primary determinant of norms in the United States. We recognize that these norms are not universal and make no argument that they are inherently better than other cultural expectations. We have chosen this frame as a means of facilitating readers' comprehension. It is much easier to establish common understanding or contrast potential approaches from a basis of well-known criteria.

Purpose of This Book

The purpose of this book is to address the gaps that students, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers have regarding issues of diversity. For each topic (see the Table of Contents), concise information is provided.

Ideas and activities are presented that allow teachers to open discussions in non-threatening ways that assist students in gaining self-knowledge and world knowledge. Using a cognitive constructivist framework and employing considerable amounts of classroom dialogue, these ideas and activities are based on our combined 60 years of experience teaching Grades 7–12 and post-secondary education. We suggest writing prompts, activities, and/or discussions that have been successful with our students. These examples are meant to provide instructors with ideas of how to help others gain understanding about what students believe and to help them decide about their own approach to people who are in some way different from themselves.

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Thank You

From Melissa: I would like to thank Scott for exchanging ideas and processes with me and to Todd Hawley for providing support and encouragement. Thank you, too, to the countless students who have impacted my life and taught me so much. Most of all, I want to thank Abby and Ben Rickin-Marks for keeping me current and thoughtful, and Eric Rickin for supporting me throughout this process.

From Scott: I would first like to thank Melissa for developing the idea and the proposal for this book, and for asking me to join her work on it. My colleagues at Knox College, Eric Dickens, Nathaniel Williams, Jennifer McCarthy Foubert, and Deirdre Dougherty read sections of the manuscript and provided insightful comments. Megan Molloy, now a high school English teacher, spent a year as a student assistant proofreading and editing and generally being invaluable. Jessica Heim contributed insights from her personal and academic experience related to dis/ability. Finally, and most significantly, Nancy DeWitt asks great questions and keeps me focused on what's important.

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SECTION I

Overview of Diversity

When students enter classes that use the term diversity in their titles, they frequently assume that the primary topic of the courses will be race. In their experience, when reference is made to diverse people or groups, that is an indirect way of identifying racial difference—and usually that difference is from an expected norm of Whiteness. Other forms of difference that we address in this volume, such as gender or socioeconomic status, can be named specifically. Race, as a putatively more sensitive topic, is less likely to be identified.

The dictionary definition of diversity is not as narrow as the students' assume, although with similar connotations. Merriam-Webster defines diversity as essentially synonymous with variety, with a clarification that it applies especially to "the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization" ("Diversity," n.d.). In our work with educators and prospective educators, we seek to broaden this perception of diversity. This provides a way to make conversations about race more explicit as well as bridge the gap that frequently makes it difficult to apply ideas from any one category of difference to others. For example, our students have little trouble accepting and appreciating that we each have differences in ability, physical features, or gender. Thinking of those as differences without negative connotations then makes it easier for students to apply similar thinking of acceptance and appreciation to other differences such as religion, ethnicity, or race.

Diversity is a word that is used differently depending on the context. Politicians use the term “diverse voters” to refer to people of color who vote. Within schools, “diverse students” can refer to race, but more often refers to the socioeconomic status of families in a district. With television and movies, “diverse viewers” may refer to gender, age, religion, region, and/or sexual orientation. The term, used correctly in all of these situations, is broad and can sometimes be seen as a euphemism or a generalization. Despite the broad use of the word, diversity is an important concept: It allows us to look at humankind and see how each of us are individuals, how each is different, while still appreciating the fact that we are all people, worthy of dignity and respect.

Diversity is not one single thing, but rather the multitude of groups into which we identify ourselves: Melissa is a cisgender female, White, Jewish, straight, married, and college-educated. Each of these labels is part of who she is. Scott is a White, cisgender male, Protestant who is also straight, married, and college-educated. Thus, our identities are not single-labels of our race, religion, sexual orientation, *or* gender, but rather a combination of all of these. The intersection of these labels creates complex identities that are not easily described or checked off in one box. Further, the interactions among and within these labels creates nuanced differences within each individual. The context in which individuals live increases this complexity. For example, being gay in a liberal, welcoming environment imbues a person’s sexuality with different meanings than being gay in an environment that is openly hostile. A person’s collective identity, thus, is exponentially more complex than any generalization or set of generalizations can encompass.

It is important to recognize that each person carries a multitude of overlapping labels which are used to describe ourselves and others. Which labels are utilized is influenced by the cultures in which we live, the institutions (e.g., family, religion, schools) that are part of our lives, and also who we are as individuals. In addition to labels, these three spheres affect our worldviews: How we organize and understand the world, our expectations for how people should act, and our values, attitudes, and mindsets. Despite the similarities among any group of people sharing some or all of these group labels, individual worldviews are somewhat different.

Sometimes, difficulties arise over differences in these world views, especially when prejudices, biases, stereotypes, and assumptions are firmly established and unconscious. Prejudice, or pre-judging someone negatively based on a group association, indicates that we assume that our knowledge of an individual is accurate prior to meeting them. Bias is a feeling towards one group or against another group. Most of us have a bias towards our own group: We

feel that “others” don’t recognize our special contributions to society, don’t fully see our accomplishments, or don’t appreciate us as individuals. We often do not recognize our own biases about other groups. Institutions that are established based on particular cultural biases or perspectives, such as U.S. schools, formalize biases, which results in prejudicial outcomes.

As people, we employ stereotypes and assumptions: These processes act as shorthand so that our brains do not need to analyze and think about each person we meet. For instance, if we are going to meet someone new, we make guesses about who they are and how they will act based on their race, gender, age, profession/position, and any other available pre-knowledge. Sometimes a person will fall into our generalizations pretty well and sometimes we feel surprised: That surprise is because our assumptions were incorrect. However, stereotypes and assumptions need to be examined. To stereotype means to assume that all people from a group are the same: all Blacks, all Whites, all men, all women. Assumptions may be based on prior experiences, world-views, and/or stereotypes. While it is normal to make assumptions, it is important to be self-aware: Are our assumptions going to negatively impact our actions towards others? Are our stereotypes leading us to disregard others or to disrespectful actions? Oftentimes, people are unaware of their own assumptions and therefore act towards people in automatic, impulsive, and thoughtless ways (Steele, 2010).

When people long ago lived in small clans, these prejudices and biases were helpful. Knowing who enemies were and how to identify them from afar was necessary. Favoring one’s own groups created an inclination to support one’s own extended family and friends, who would, in turn, provide support. However, we no longer live in small, family-based societies: We now live in a bustling, multicultural, multiethnic, diverse society and need to discover how to move forward together. Understanding the nature of diversity and of our own perspectives toward diversity facilitates this move forward.

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