This Must Be a Suburban Classroom!: Using Photographs to Investigate Teacher Candidates Developing Professional Identities

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Abstract

The study described in this paper used photo-elicitation to investigate teacher candidates’ developing understanding of learning, students and classroom environment. Specifically, we sought to determine if our students internalized the concepts taught in two courses in our teacher preparation program. Analysis revealed that despite our efforts to expand our students’ perspectives on culturally diverse classrooms, they continued to hold traditional views on the nature of the environment, and the nature of the learner. Photo-elicitation was an excellent means to uncover the impact we as teacher educators have on our students’ developing professional identities.

Keywords: Photo-elicitation, Cultural Diversity, Pre-service Teacher Education

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This paper reports findings of a study that investigated how photographs of a classroom revealed teacher candidates’ conceptions about students, learning, and classroom environments. The participants in this study were teacher candidates in two foundational pre-service courses. These integrated courses were intended to facilitate teacher candidates’ developing professional identities including their understanding of cultural responsiveness as well as commitment to social justice. Central to the study was the use of a panoramic photo-elicitation device used as a final course activity. This culminating assignment was designed to examine ways in which the teacher candidates’ thinking aligned with or varied from the goals embedded within our diversity course and the co-requisite instructional design and assessment course. To this aim we (researchers/instructors) asked the following questions: What facets of the teacher candidates’ emerging professional identities were evident in their elicited responses to the panoramic photographs of the classroom? In what ways did this activity provide insight into the teacher candidates’ understandings of the course goals?

Theoretical Framework

The demographics of the United States public schools continue to become more diverse while our pool of teacher candidates remains mostly white, middle class, and female (Cardina & Roden, 1998; Hodgkinson, 2002; Landsman & Lewis, 2006). One goal of many teacher education programs is to address the urgent need to develop teacher candidates with professional identities that contain aspects of both cultural responsiveness to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and are capable of advocating for a more socially just world. However, many of our attempts to change teacher education to align with these crucial goals fail due in part to an inability to develop teachers with a critical awareness of the major issues that have a long reaching impact on public education (Kincheloe, 2005). Specifically, teacher candidates often have the inability to come to terms with the role of schooling in social justice and equality in our society (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Zeichner, 1993). Historically, teachers have conveyed the acceptable cultural norms of our mainstream society thus sharing some responsibility for perpetuating social inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pedroni, 2007). It is our belief that when teachers are adopting a culturally responsive approach to teaching they are - creating a more socially just learning environment for their students as well as acting as agents for social change. However, we were not certain if our teaching was enabling our students to see themselves as potential leaders who can initiate such change.

It is presumptuous to believe that teacher candidates will understand these larger issues without the self-awareness to understand their personal role within the process of schooling. There has been considerable discussion about self-awareness as it relates to the development of identity (Zembylas, 2003), its connection to teacher candidates’ prior conceptions of what it means to be a teacher (Britzman, 1986), and the role of teacher education programs in fostering self-awareness and identity development (Korthagen, 2004). It is our belief that to develop self-awareness we must begin by facilitating future teachers’ understandings of their own biases toward teaching students of diverse backgrounds, thus enabling these teacher candidates to ultimately develop professional identities that exhibit a commitment to social justice (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).
Once developed, this aspect of a professional identity will be a catalyst toward teacher candidates’ willingness to teach diverse populations of students in both urban and suburban settings (Milner, 2005), and will provide the impetus for these individuals to take active roles in the development of a socially just world (Sevier, 2005).

A critical element of the formation of professional identity is the self-awareness of the preconceived notions about teaching that teacher candidates bring to their educational program (Aslup 2006; Brown, Morehead, & Smith, 2007; Kagan, 1992). It has long been believed that preconceived notions frame a teacher candidates’ view of teaching (Danielewicz, 2001; Lortie, 1975). While researchers have acknowledged that changing conceptions is difficult (Richardson & Anders, 1994), we believe the effort is imperative to assure teacher candidates success in an ever-changing diverse environment (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Thus, it is especially important to assist teacher candidates in their self-examination of these conceptions and beliefs towards diversity (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Wiggins & Follo, 1999; Wiggins, Follo & Eberly, 2007).

One tool that holds promise for helping teacher candidates to uncover preconceived conceptions is photo elicitation (Brown, 2005; Harper, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Through the examination of photos, teacher candidates can probe and reflect upon their developing professional identities in ways that allow for recognitions of their conceptions about issues of race, culture, religion, and poverty. Participating in this photo elicitation activity will, hopefully, better prepare them to teach in culturally diverse classrooms.

Photographs often shed light on the taken for granted assumptions the viewer brings to the photograph (Sontag, 1977). It is the viewers’ interpretation of the photograph that gives meaning to a perceived visual reality of the scene in the photograph (English, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The viewer can only speculate on the photographer’s intentions in representing an interpretation of reality. As Sontag (1977), explains, “There is the surface. Now think --or rather feel, intuit -- what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way” (p. 23). The photograph creates a dichotomous space where objective reality and the individuals’ constructed reality merge. This interaction becomes a mental playground in which teacher candidates can conceptualize and re-conceptualize aspects of teaching, students, and classrooms enabling them to form and reform meaning within the photograph. The ambiguity inherent in this interplay, between the visual reality and the viewer, mirrors and reflects the ambiguity of teaching itself. Thus, understanding what it is the teacher candidate is noticing about a classroom photograph gives teacher educators insight into their students developing understandings.

**Methods**

This study took place at a comprehensive institution serving over 17,000 students, with approximately 300 elementary education students graduating per year. We focused our efforts on a group of students enrolled in two classes taken together as a block during the teacher candidates’ first year of professional course work. One course focuses on instructional design and assessment, while the second deals primarily with diversity and creating classroom communities. These courses are linked because our program stresses the importance of connecting instructional design of content to understanding the needs
of all learners early in the teacher candidates’ program. The students were enrolled in both courses. This dual enrollment made it possible for us to meet with them for seven contact hours per week throughout the semester. We were also able to establish underlying tenets that crossed the boundaries of the two individual courses. For example, one primary tenet underlying both courses is that there are alternative ways of describing and negotiating the world and that these other ways of thinking are socially constructed. A primary goal of the combined courses was to encourage students to examine their own belief structures with the hope that they would acknowledge the possibility of the existence of an alternative reality besides their own. The opportunity to question assumptions was purposefully designed into the class sessions.

Additionally, as part of these courses, students participated in a thirty-hour semester-long field placement. Working in teams of two, to help facilitate reflection and peer interaction, students were placed in K-3rd grade classrooms in an urban charter school in our nearby city. The school population was 100% African American with a low SES as measured by state documentation. We regularly debriefed with our students about the experience of working in a school that was out of their comfort zone (Tyson, Brown & Secord, 2007). This charter school placement afforded a very different model of instruction and classroom management than the approach our courses presented. We used this difference as an opportunity to question preconceived notions about learning, instructions and student diversity.

Participants

Participants in this study were elementary education teacher candidates (n=13) of which 11 were female and 2 were male. Of the female candidates, one was African American and one was Middle Eastern; all other participants were of European descent. All candidates other than one male were of traditional college age and all were of middle-class backgrounds. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Instrument/Data Source

A digital panoramic photograph was assembled and printed from still images taken at an urban school in a local metropolitan school district. While the classroom had its own character, it was specifically chosen to be representative of a generic elementary school environment without trappings to suggest its locale or clientele. Teacher candidates were given a packet containing two panoramic photographs (one wide range and one close-up of the classroom) and a questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire asked for detailed responses that described what the teacher candidates noticed about the classroom and the learners who utilized the classroom. Students were also asked to reflect on how they would re-structure the classroom to represent their emerging professional beliefs.

Within the course experience students were not previously given photographs to interpret. This was done purposely to avoid directly teaching our students that there was only one correct interpretation of a photograph. We did not want the students simply to mimic back what they had learned. However, we did spend considerable time on the construct of noticing. Sherin and van Es (2005) studied teachers’ ability to notice. using videos of mathematics teaching. They sought new ways for teachers to see classroom practice beyond mere surface observation. They found that video-based professional development provided teachers with opportunities to learn. Of particular interest to our study is their use of noticing as a construct to help teachers develop expertise within
mathematics education. We expanded noticing to our context within pre-service teacher education. We applied this construct throughout the diversity course to facilitate teacher candidates’ developing understanding of culturally responsive classroom practices and awareness of social justice.

Noticing became a part of our everyday language. Students would preface descriptions of their field placement with “I noticed....” They would question each other about what they noticed. We modeled this way of seeing by engaging students in an extended discussion about what they noticed about their own communities, the communities they drive through, the schools they attended and the urban school in which they did their field placements. For example we seeded the questions – What do you notice when you leave your house in the morning? What do you suppose a person living in an urban community notices? We were careful not to express value judgments, only a comparison of the visual details.

The reason we spent so much time on this construct was that by noticing the details of the lives of these urban students and comparing those details to their own experience in schools we hoped our pre-service teachers would come to know these students as individuals. We wanted our students to understand that there are strengths and weaknesses in both urban and suburban schools and recognize that urban students need not automatically be labeled as disadvantaged and in need of correction. We were hopeful that they would be able to envision the classroom as something other than a fixed entity consistent with their pre-determined vision of one correct school environment: to instead, see classrooms as flexible environments intended to serve the needs of the individual students. In short, our goal is to have future teachers contributing to social justice and equity. To do so, they must be willing to take steps to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of each student rather than attempting to adjust the student to be in compliance with predetermined norms of a mainstream definition of schooling.

Procedure

The packets were distributed on a Tuesday with instructions to complete and send the response via e-mail by the following Sunday. Participants signed an academic honor statement to assure independent thinking and responses. Participation in the study was voluntary while participating in the final class activity was not. Of the 13 students in the class, none asked that their responses be removed from the analysis. On the contrary the students were excited to be a part of this research project.

Data Analysis

Our approach to analyzing the data followed the constant comparative process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Each of the three researchers independently read and reread the student responses with the intent of identifying themes through a three step process. (1) Data were initially analyzed using a scoring rubric that allowed us to compare participant responses with course expectations. The coding rubric was kept intentionally uncomplicated and open-ended. We simply recorded anything the students reported they noticed. We looked for any elaboration the participants offered and any connection they made to their personal philosophy. The second part of the rubric documented any statements the participants made about the imaginary learners in this classroom; what claims did they make about the learners? How did they support those claims? Did they notice anything that seemed to contribute to social justice and culturally relevant teaching
in this classroom setting? Finally, the rubric guided us to statements concerning what the participants would change and what they would keep the same in this classroom.

(2) Data were next analyzed using direct interpretation (Stake, 1995) to garner themes within individuals’ responses to understand their emergent professional identity. Each researcher took the statements recorded on the rubric and classified them by identifying emerging themes. Our initial categories concerned comments about classroom organization and the arrangement of the furnishings, classroom decoration and visual appeal, indications of student diversity, and statements about instruction and learning.

(3) As a final overarching analysis data were aggregated (Stake, 1995) across individuals to understand commonalities and differences in teacher candidates’ responses which allowed us to clarify the definition of each constructed category. Once the three researchers came to agreement, the responses were categorized and the categories were grouped into two larger overarching themes – understandings about the nature of the environment and understandings about the nature of the learner.

Results

Findings suggest that the photo-elicitation did engage the teacher candidates in a reflective process that provided insight into many aspects of their developing professional identity. What was particularly interesting is that the participants’ belief system acted as a lens through which they interpreted the photograph. This use of a lens was evident on two levels. The first was the abstraction of the teachers’ work around the nature of the environment and second was the participants’ projected assumptions about the nature of the learners. It is important to note that these teacher candidates had only participated in the planning of lessons in the theoretic world of a college assignment or from experience as participant observers during required field placements. What is presented within these results is a glimpse into the teacher candidates’ developing and transforming understandings. We organize the results around the two emergent categories as representative of the thinking of these teacher candidates: 1) the teacher candidates’ understandings about the nature of the environment, and 2) the teacher candidates’ assumptions about the nature of the learners.

Understandings about the Nature of the Environment

Participants’ responses all described and discussed the importance of classroom organization for effective teaching. In fact, teacher candidates referred to the work of the teacher as being in charge of the classroom organization that included “making the classroom visually appealing”, “neat and tidy”, and “arranged to facilitate lessons.” Providing a well-organized environment was credited with: “encouraging student responsibility,” “making students feel welcome,” and “facilitating good instruction.” All of these are laudable goals. One student wrote, “This room is very organized. There does not seem to be anything out of place. Having the room as organized as it appears helps the days run more smoothly and learning to happen here” (Amy). This student mirrored the thoughts of many others who conclude the importance of a “tidy” work environment to the overall learning process of the classroom. Marcy wrote,
The first thing I noticed about this classroom was how visually appealing it was to me. It is very bright and cheery. I also appreciated how even though there is plenty going on in this room it is very neat and organized. Every item has its place in the room and there was nothing to be tripped over or moved around. This is very important to me because I believe that a clean organized environment creates better performance, and just feels better to be in. I do not know if this is a proven fact among children but I know that as a teacher I will perform better in a neat and organized environment where everything has a place and for the most part are in it.

Marcy clearly used her own needs as the barometer of student needs. From this comment, we are unable to determine if she has considered that a clean and tidy environment might be important to her but not as critical to her students. Kayla’s statement goes a bit further, “I would be comfortable with the highly organized room and the clutter free atmosphere. I feel this comforts students because it demonstrates routine.” In this comment, Kayla shared her need for routine and organization as a form of comfort without questioning if this need is universal to all individuals. She assumes that her perception of the room will match that of her students.

The emphasis on cleanliness seems to identify two aspects of the teacher candidates developing professional identity: 1) using the self as a filter for student needs, and 2) the need to control learning. At this early stage in their professional development the students seem to use their own needs as an indicator of student needs. This is not surprising. These students were, as yet, fairly new in our teacher education program. We anticipate potential new teachers might seek order and routine as a reasonable strategy for handling the challenges they will face.”

Teacher candidates applied a similar filter to the issue of visual appeal. If the candidates thought the room was warm and inviting, surely, the students would as well. “The first thing I noticed about this classroom was how visually appealing it was to me. It is very bright and cheery” (Susan). Visual appeal is based on the student’s personal sense of style separate from cultural norms. Several students did address the fact that the classroom in the photograph did not visually reflect other cultures besides a white, middle class one. Even when this lack of diversity was noted, the teacher candidate contradicted this observation and returned to how comfortable they, and thus the students must feel in this room. This is illustrated in Amy’s two contradictory comments. First:

I do not feel that this class promotes diversity. It does not feature any words or vocabulary from other languages and it is very Americanized. The room has generic school supplies, and does not suggest influences from different cultures. I did notice on the ‘Who we are…’ wall that there is a good mixture of ethnic backgrounds, however I feel that they are similar in socioeconomic status…From face value, the room is not diverse, and needs to incorporate more culturally diverse items.”

This is inconsistent with her following comment:

I feel that this is a great classroom. I would feel very comfortable in this room, and it parallels many aspects of my philosophy. Other then the lack of a computer, this would be a picture of my ideal room. I would definitely use a layout similar to this one.”
On one level this participant questions the visual environment however still finds a need to filter the environment through her own eyes.

Participants used their own preferential needs as a filter for student needs and many persistently related their needs by discussing the importance of teaching their ideas for organization and responsibility to students. For example, Marcy continues by discussing the need to write and post an organized schedule, believing this will teach students a sense of importance and responsibility. Amanda shares, “Helping students to learn and use organizational skills is an essential part of education. This is a life long lesson that will assist them in every different area of their life. It teaches them to be responsible and aware of their actions, (putting everything in its place), and that organization is a skill that they can learn and use.” Evident in this statement is a belief about learning. This teacher candidate, and others, conceptualizes learning as an organized, controllable process that is facilitated and enhanced by a model environment.

Lastly, our findings indicated that our participants’ understanding of the nature of the environment was being filtered through their own need for control. We conjectured that the substance of this theme is really a reflection of the teacher candidates’ own personal learning bias and need to control the learning environment. We wondered if the students’ motivation to over-emphasize classroom organization addressed their own anxiety about classroom management. Were students attempting to consolidate their own power in the classroom by adding layers of control through both teaching their conception of organization and by organizing the room to meet their own needs? Even when our students’ responses reflected the diversity tenets that we teach in our courses, there was a discrepancy between their stated understanding of a desire to reach all students and an internal need for order.

Viewed in this light, their responses, while reasonable for new pre-service teachers, raised some questions about our teaching and their learning. Had they considered that too much routine might stifle spontaneity? Would adherence to order cause unexpected teachable moments to be overlooked? Was this desire for organization an expectation we fostered in our program? If so, was that intentional? Is this reaction benign or do we need to attend to it to insure that we are developing balanced, flexible decision makers? Is the need to develop good classroom management skills overshadowing the competing need for a culturally relevant, child-centered classroom?

Nature of the Learners

On a second, more complex level, we examined the participants’ projected assumptions about the backgrounds and needs of the learners in this fictional classroom. For example, all students made the assumption that they were looking at a middle class suburban classroom when in reality, they were viewing a photograph of an urban, low SES classroom. The reasons supporting the student candidates’ hypothesis varied. Examples include: “floors were carpeted”, “trees were visible in the windows”, and “the quality and character of the furniture were of a good condition.” These statements were rather curious because these teacher candidates had concluded an urban field placement in a highly renovated, technology savvy building. In our class sessions we spent considerable time noticing and discussing the differences between urban and suburban buildings emphasizing what the environmental attributes of each setting afforded the learner. In the
discussions, students openly question their own assumptions about how a school “looks” and “feels.” In their responses to the assignment, the participants portray value judgments about the classroom in the photograph that appear to uncover their underlying preconceived notions that urban classrooms are environmentally different from their view of a “good” classroom. More importantly, they appear to be making corollary value judgments about the level of instruction that takes place within each set of walls. Although they question some instructional practices shown in the classroom, they reach conclusions that these practices are good and that the learners are ultimately at fault.

One instructional practice that raised attention from all of the participants was the desk arrangement. In the photograph, all but seven desks are shown in clusters of six. We were pleased to see that our students valued the clusters as indicative of a more constructivist view of learning. Constructivism is a foundational tenet within our courses. Joy articulates this shared sentiment:

I am a fan of having students sit in pods. I think that this allows students to not only learn how to work together, but it also gives them the opportunity to learn and scaffold off of each other. Students are able to build up their communication skills by being exposed to group settings. This desk layout also promotes cooperative learning. I see desk pods as being an important part of having a classroom community or family.

Francine concurs, “Diverse learners are sustained by the layout of the desks in clusters.” Many other students reflected these sentiments and spoke of the importance of shared learning, students scaffolding instruction for one another, and building a positive, diverse classroom community. These instructional approaches were all tenets underlying the design of these courses.

From a practical standpoint, even when students are working in groups there are times when whole class instruction is called for and everyone must attend to the teacher. One student commented on that:

It seems the classroom is oriented in a way to optimize student learning and achievement. The desks are all arranged in a way that none of the students’ will have their backs to the white board. This makes instruction easier because the teacher is not talking to a student’s back and the student does not have to turn around and sit uncomfortably while looking at the teacher.

While this observation reflects a potentially positive aspect of our fictional classroom, this response to the photo-elicitation activity might also have identified a student who still sees transmission as the preferred approach to teaching. Unfortunately he did not say more about this and our process did not allow us to probe more deeply.

However, the photo itself was intended to elicit further consideration of the room arrangement. Seven of the desks were isolated from the rest and from each other. While espousing the benefits of desk clusters, the teacher candidates also justified the separate desks as beneficial for the majority of the learners, and implied that the students seated separately from the group somehow deserved to be excluded and no longer warranted what the teacher candidates described as advantageous instruction. Joy writes:

I understand that some students may not learn well in a group setting due to an endless amount of factors. I am guessing that is the case here. However, by just looking at the classroom, I will never know the reason.
Joy leaves the question open but Faith espouses a more exclusionary sentiment: I believe the purpose of the individually placed desks are to separate the disruptive students from the rest of the group in order to give the majority of the class a fair opportunity to work with and learn from their peers. When one disruptive student is thrown into a group of students that are trying to complete their work, not much learning can take place because the disruptive student manages to throw the others off task and distract them from getting their work done.

These two examples illustrate the fine line in the teacher candidates’ developing philosophies between seeing students as individuals who have specific learning needs and viewing some students as lesser and not entitled to the same learning benefits as others -- in Joy’s response, "non-group learners, while in Faith’s case, “disruptive students.” Had something in our instruction conveyed the notion that some students should be isolated and marginalized allowing teachers and other students to ignore them? Did other teacher candidates believe that bad students do not deserve to benefit from good instruction or social interaction? Do prospective teachers believe the solution is to simply label students so they are no longer the teacher’s concern? There are certainly times when isolating a troubled student is best and this classroom provided the teacher candidates with an exit strategy for disruptive and difficult students. We wondered if there was a plan of reentry into the classroom community – another place we would like to probe. We pondered whether our participants’ comments represented the complex process of developing a professional identity. Were they melding our course expectations with their previously held belief systems and, thus, distorting the original intent of our course goals? If in fact melding beliefs is a process within changing belief systems, how do we plan for and help our students through this process?

Findings related to the participants’ beliefs about the nature of the learner appear to be contradictory. Our teacher candidates used visual clues from the photograph to explain their growing understanding of constructivist teaching. However, they also used visual clues to make exclusionary value judgments about students, while professing a belief in diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, the photograph allowed us to identify outlier students with serious misconceptions about learning, students, and teaching.

Discussion

We begin this discussion with an overarching observation; it appeared to us that our students perceived the setting in the photograph to be close to an ideal classroom that needed little alteration. This may have occurred for a number of reasons. First, our students knew this was a real classroom that we chose to photograph. Recognizing our power position in this situation, they would have little incentive to challenge our photographic choice. Unless they determined that this was a trick question they might have assumed that we presented them with what we considered to be a quality setting, and responded accordingly. With the addition of Sontag’s (1977) proposition that events become more important simply by virtue of being recorded, it is reasonable that our students felt this classroom setting was worthy and chosen primarily to identify the positive aspects. Consequently, it appears they interpreted this assignment in terms of “can you recognize what is good?” and not with an eye toward “how would you make
In response to the first question of this assignment: “What do you notice about this classroom?” Students primarily noticed the superficial characteristics of the room and spoke about it in terms of classroom control. Although our teacher candidates described grouping desks to allow for collaborative work, their comments were more consistently about the seating arrangement that drew the pupils’ attention to the teacher at the front of the room and creating easy pathways for the teacher to reach the pupils’ desks. In the photograph a few desks were set aside. These were seen as valuable tools for classroom management purposes in terms of gaining control. Although throughout the semester the teacher candidates had professed a commitment to the learning of all students, they were generally comfortable with some students being isolated from the group and rationalized that this was a positive approach to dealing with students who are not able to behave or learn within a group setting. Is this an indication that our teacher candidates might be willing to discount and marginalize any potential contributions to the learning community of students whose behavior or academic progress placed them outside the norms of the mainstream learners in the classroom. This marginalization of learners’ contrasts with one of the foundational course tenets - that all students are individuals with a unique and valuable contribution to make to the whole. Yet in this instance the candidates appeared comfortable reducing the class they imagined fit in this photograph down to only those students who accepted the candidates’ view of power sharing and conformity.

This insight will help us to facilitate a redesign of our instruction to sufficiently emphasize the diversity in learning among learners, and the formation of cultural norms for group interaction. Consequently we have learned that the links between teacher candidates’ instructional choices and the larger discussions of power and control must be more explicit.

There was some indication that our candidates’ approach to classroom organization and management was deemed appropriate because this was a suburban classroom. That is, suburban students knew well the cultural norms that determined the behavior expectations for a classroom and were deserving of punishment if they did not meet those expectations. We were taken aback to uncover an unexpected belief held by the teacher candidates: they perceived teachers as having a dual role of teacher/judge – one who instructs those who do know the rules while handing out punishments to those who should know better. Yet, in retrospect, perhaps we should have anticipated this. Our teacher candidates’ comments during class sessions and in other assignments revealed they believed that a lack of awareness of classroom norms placed urban students at a disadvantage. The candidates’ expressed the understanding that more personal attention and further instruction were needed for these students, rather than punishment. This belief prevailed even though their field placement was in an urban school that had rigorous rules for behavior and they repeatedly witnessed urban students who had no problem meeting the schools’ expectations. Yet given the opportunity to self actualize their developing professional identity, the candidates mirrored a puritanical view of punishment as motivation for correction toward the status quo. This view was directly opposed to what we thought we had taught in the two teacher preparation courses. We
suspect the candidates beliefs may have been overtly reinforced as a consequence of both their socio-economic status and educational class standing.

There were aspects of the classroom to which our participants gave scant attention. For example, our teacher candidates noticed the bulletin boards in the room but they spoke about them as places for the teacher to display curricular materials or to post information (classroom rules and expectations or the daily schedule.) Students would look at and learn from, rather than interact with, the bulletin boards. They made little mention of the number of books in the classroom and only passing mention of classroom technology. There was one computer visible in the photograph and, interestingly, most students assumed that, since this was suburban classroom, there was likely a computer lab elsewhere in the building. Some also acknowledged a consolidation of power with the teacher by assuming that the one computer must be for the teacher’s exclusive use. On the whole, they made almost no mention of those aspects of the classroom that would contribute to student’s independent learning.

These comments are consistent with Britzman’s (1986) discussion of cultural myths. For Britzman, the first myth is that “everything depends on the teacher” (p. 449). It was clear that our students viewed this classroom in terms of the traditional image they had of the classrooms of their youth. All but one came from a suburban environment and, when presented with a space that looked familiar, reverted to a vision of teaching and teacher that fit with that environment.

In response to the second question: “Who are the learners in the classroom?” The prospective teachers used visual clues to ascertain the grade level of the students. For the most part they correctly identified the third grade but were troubled that some aspects of the visual instruction were below grade level. They were confident that the classroom displays would have a positive impact on learning. The alphabet chart, word wall, and bulletin board were all in keeping with the notion of appropriate visuals in a third grade classroom. However, they accepted this at face value and never questioned the actual impact of the visuals on student learning.

For the most part, our students suggested very few changes to this classroom. Question three asked them how they would structure the classroom to represent their emerging professional beliefs. It appears they interpreted “structure” to refer to the organization of the curriculum rather than the learning environment and spoke primarily about what they would teach and how they would present the curriculum to the students.

This is understandable for at least two reasons. First, the assignment may have been unclear. We did not specifically define what was meant by structure the classroom and it could easily have been interpreted as curricular structure. Second, we were naïve to think that students would have much sense of their own emerging professional beliefs. These were second semester students who were just beginning to become self-aware, who had had little experience with self-reflection, and were not in a position to connect that reflection to practical experience (Zembylas, 2003). It is not surprising that they were unable to connect their professional beliefs to something as abstract as a photograph of a classroom that, again, they might have assumed was intended to represent an ideal classroom. It is possible that our students followed a logical thought process that began with what they assumed was a good classroom, looking a lot like the classrooms they knew, evoking memories of teachers they had admired. Here too, they revealed that the
myths of a good teacher are deep seated. They spoke of the teacher as expert (Britzman, 1986, p. 450) and essentially described themselves as disseminators of knowledge.

It is generally accepted that prospective teachers’ dispositions are influenced by their past experiences (Lortie, 1965, Goodman, 1988) and, to some extent, can be influenced by their experiences in teacher education programs. These dispositions guide the decisions teachers make when they act or react in various teaching/learning situations.

**Educational Significance**

The implications of this study to the teacher education community are twofold. First, we have expanded the literature concerning the use of photo-elicitation as a tool for revealing teacher candidates thinking about teaching, leaning and community. Other researchers have used, and studied, photo elicitation as a creative process to facilitate teacher candidates’ growth in issues of diversity. Our approach separates the creative process of taking the photograph from what we feel is more important, the actual interpretation of the photograph. The photographs were created as a tableau for the expressed purpose of stimulating and capturing teacher candidates’ understandings. The creative process of taking photographs requires a skill, albeit one with which our students may be familiar, which adds its own layer of stress to the learning process. While the possession of photographic skills would add to the candidates’ photographic understanding, it does little to enhance their understanding of belief systems elicited by the photograph. Additionally, by controlling the process of creating the photograph we define the avenue for the elicitation of candidates’ reflections. We now have a much greater understanding of the limitations of the activity and the interpretations that stem from it. Our students’ interpretations were limited by the fact that the photograph is, by definition, one moment captured in time. Our interpretations were limited by our inability to probe further into the thinking behind our students’ written responses. This was compounded by our decision to structure this project as a final class activity rather than an ongoing interactive discussion. In retrospect, we could have focused our course on the two themes that emerged from the study – the nature of the classroom environment and the nature of the learner. We did not solicit our students’ views on these issues at the beginning of the semester and thus, did not capture how much they brought with them and how much they learned from us. In addition, we did not scaffold our students in the process of interpreting photos. This was an intentional decision that will lead us to investigate the benefits from semester-long work with photo-elicitation. These limitation notwithstanding, what is perhaps most important is that this activity provided us with substantial insight into our own teaching and the assumptions we made about the messages we were conveying to our students.

Our future work will focus on some of these issues. We have in mind using a series of photographs that depict a variety of classrooms that suggest different perspectives of the role of the teacher and the learner. This could be paired with a semester long assignment that asks students to consider how their individual professional identities align or conflict with each of these perspectives, and asks them to suggest changes in their classroom to support their emerging identities. New teachers are reluctant to challenge authority even in something as minor as the arrangement of a classroom. We want them to aspire to be change agents, and to perceive themselves as
having the agency to challenge their instructors and, ultimately, their teacher colleagues and supervisors. We need to do more to model that process.

Second, this study aims to contribute to what is understood about the development of professional identities, which include a commitment to social justice and a dedication to being culturally responsive to the needs of all learners. Our course goals reflected the belief that all students have intrinsic value as individuals and are entitled to an equitable education as equal participants within our society. Participants in the study portrayed dual conceptions with respect to diversity. These amalgams of belief systems were extremely disturbing to us as instructors. We wondered if students’ sentiments about the positive aspects of diversity were simply giving the instructor what they knew she wanted. On the one hand, the photographs enabled the students to express their honest beliefs; however, the educational ramifications of those same beliefs dismayed us. On the other hand the amalgam of beliefs may represent an ongoing process teacher candidates undergo as they develop more inclusive professional identities. We are left with quandaries of interest to the teacher education community including: Is the melding of beliefs a stage of learning or an anomaly to these students? Is noticing a fruitful construct for changing beliefs?

Ultimately, what we take away from this study is as much about what the students did not notice as it is about what they did. It is about the actions they failed to take and the changes they did not make. They did not consider that this might be an urban classroom. Therefore, they did not suggest changes to the classroom that would be more consistent with their professed beliefs about the needs of students in an urban environment. In fact, they made no mention of the external environment—be it urban or suburban. They did not consider how this fictional classroom and its imaginary teacher interact with the rest of the school or the larger context of the community. Could we have promoted that approach to thinking about the images of the teachers our students are striving to become? Even recognizing that these students were at the beginning of the teacher education program, the photo-elicitation process tells us a great deal about the impact of our instruction on promoting social justice as an integral part of our future teachers’ professional identity.
References


