

## RESEARCH NOTE

# ‘Situative cognition’: barrier to teaching across cultures

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In an unsettled world, the migration of significant numbers of individuals across national and even continental boundaries has changed the demographics of many nations with profound effects on their schools. Frequently, teachers are confronted with classes characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity for which they are either underprepared or totally unprepared. Despite their dedication, teachers have been shaped by their own cultural upbringing, and there may be a disconnect between their cultural values and identities and those of the children in their transformed classrooms. This disconnect has been called ‘situative cognition’. The challenge for teacher educators, particularly in western nations, is to enable prospective teachers to understand the complexity of educational dynamics in diverse classrooms, to examine their own experiences with diverse groups especially regarding culture, race, ethnicity and social class, and to develop strategies for working proactively with students in their own increasingly diverse communities.

### Introduction

In the US, the K-12 student population is growing increasingly diverse, while the teaching force remains predominantly white, middle class and female (Horton, 1992; Powell, 1997). Teachers’ knowledge is based on their own cultural frameworks, thus their knowledge is both personal and norm-based. Consequently, it is difficult for candidates to discern and to divest themselves of those beliefs exacerbating the disconnect (Zeichner, 1993). This article examines a study among three teacher education programs in the several regions of US that ascertained candidates’ attitudes and felt needs in preparing to become teachers of diverse learners.

Powell *et al.* (2000) have identified this disconnect as related to ‘situative cognition’, associated with the psychological concept of ‘situated’ cognition, but specific to those who aspire to be teachers. Situated cognition embeds learning in the

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activity, makes deliberate use of the social and physical context, and the person and environment are viewed as acting reciprocally on each other. Powell *et al.* perceive situative cognition as relating to ‘certain ways of thinking about school teaching ... (they) come to believe that their mental pictures are comprised of immutable facts, mostly unchangeable, unmalleable, which can create obstacles to learning alternative teaching approaches’ (p. 3). In other words, the schools in which they aspire to teach may be quite different in composition from the candidates’ experiences in them, and candidates are likely to be unprepared to meet the needs of the schools’ existing students.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed a way of perceiving the world that is ‘experientialist’. This approach views the construction of knowledge as a dynamic and ongoing creation, incorporating many ways of knowing (existential) that unfold as people interact with others and the larger society (experientialist). Understanding self and others as well as the development of interpersonal communication skills are distinctions of this view of knowledge creation (Klug & Whitfield, 2002).

### **The study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of situative cognition and identify its aspects in pre-service teachers as it relates to addressing the cultural mismatch with regard to race, ethnicity and social class that exists between pre-service teachers and their potential students (Berger *et al.*, 1966; Bredo, 1994; Brown *et al.*, 2001). A considerable amount of research has focused on the mismatch between the teacher force and the students within the classrooms they teach (Grant & Seceda, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Greeno, 1997; Blackridge, 2000). The concept of situative cognition has considerable relevance for teacher educators as they work with candidates who have little prior experience with those significantly different from themselves in communities that are changing demographically. The ultimate intent is to provide information that will enhance teacher education curriculum and field experiences in relevant ways.

The study describes the first stages of a multi-year study that will include survey data, personal narrative from semi-structured interviews, autobiographies with emphasis on storied lives and localized thinking. Candidates in three teacher education programs preparing candidates to teach primarily in rural areas completed a 68-item questionnaire designed to assess their needs in working with diverse populations. The questionnaire was divided into five parts: demographics; beliefs/opinions about diversity; prior or current teacher education courses; additional courses/elements to enhance learning about diversity; and areas about which candidates desire further information.

Seventy-five beginning teacher education students at a state university in the Southwestern US, another in the Intermountain West, and a private college in the Southeast completed the Human Diversity Needs Assessment (HDNA) designed by Dr Beverly Klug at Idaho State University under a diversity grant funded by US West (1999). The demographics of each of the three regions represented populations

that were predominantly Caucasian, i.e. more than 90%. Of non-dominant culture individuals, the predominant group in the southwest was Latino; in the intermountain west, Native American; and in the southeast, African American. With few exceptions, the candidates participating in the study did not belong to these non-dominant communities.

## Participants

The majority of participants were 18–24 years of age (63%); 18% were between 25 and 34; 9% between 35 and 44; and the remainder over age 45. They reported their overall experience with diverse populations as 'some' (57%), or 'a lot' (34%), with four individuals identifying 'very little' and no one claiming 'none'. In describing their field placements, four individuals indicated that, as yet, they had experienced no field placements in settings with diverse populations. Fifty-nine per cent indicated that they had 'some' diverse field experiences, while 16% admitted they had 'very little' opportunity to interact with diverse learners, while another 16% claimed they had had 'a lot'.

Describing their knowledge of diverse populations in general, 23% rated it as 'inadequate', 70% 'as adequate', and just 7% as 'superior'. Rating their knowledge of diverse populations in educational settings, 32% described it as 'inadequate', 57% as 'adequate', and 12% as 'superior'.

## Results

### *Beliefs about diversity and education*

Candidates reported their responses on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly disagree' = 1 to 'Strongly agree' = 5. Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that students generally agreed that their teacher preparation programs were adequate in familiarizing them with the needs of all learners (3.90). They also believed it was the responsibility of undergraduate teacher education programs to influence the attitudes of prospective teachers concerning diverse populations. (3.84). They tended to strongly agree in: (1) believing that all students should be able to benefit equally from the instruction presented in the classroom (4.5); (2) acknowledging that racial/cultural heritage is an important influence on a child's education (4.47); and (3) recognizing that, when they teach, it will be important for them to know about the cultural heritage of all students (4.47).

### *Assessment of teacher education courses experienced*

In assessing their teacher preparation program thus far, candidates tended strongly toward 'Agree' on several items: having adequate information to use about the influence of the family on education (3.95); college instructors conveying the importance of developing an understanding of issues related to diversity (3.93); the modeling of

cooperative learning in their methods classes (3.86); understanding how information about many types of learning will help them as teachers to work with diverse groups (3.86); and understanding the influence of economics as a cultural determinant when working with diverse cultures (3.77). They strongly agreed that building an atmosphere of trust is essential in a classroom (4.47).

#### *Perceived need for courses in teacher preparation program*

In examining their own felt needs, candidates most strongly believed that teachers need to be aware of their own biases and prejudices concerning multicultural populations (4.40) and of instances of subtle racism and the effects of such racism in the classroom (4.36). They also expressed a need for preparation in communication skills (4.27).

#### *Desire for further information concerning diversity*

Finally, candidates were asked to identify areas in which they believed they needed further information. Table 1 reflects the distribution of their responses.

#### *Contradictions and paradoxes*

While the data collection has produced rich results, for the present, the study is focusing on contradictions and paradoxes in the data. More specifically, one area appears especially fruitful as we move into the collection of storied lives and localized thinking.

While candidates rated highly such factors as cooperative learning, awareness of learners' racial and cultural heritage, the importance of preparing prospective teachers about working regularly with culturally different students, and also believed they were being well prepared for working with all populations, they tended toward a neutral (No feeling) position on providing a competitive atmosphere where students work hard for their grades (3.2). Thirty-four per cent agreed, 10% strongly agreed,

Table 1. Distribution of candidates' responses

Survey item	% responding
Cultural Influences	34
Learning Styles	37
Classroom Management	34
Working with Parents	37
Sociological Influences	27
Cooperative Learning	25
Communication Skills	27
Instructional Methods	39

14% disagreed, and just one individual strongly disagreed. Could it be that this indicates the conflict candidates feel between how they themselves demonstrated their knowledge and earned their grades in K-12 and what is expected from them in their teacher preparation programs?

The authors trust that the proposed collection of their storied lives and localized thinking will provide further insight into this phenomenon. Highest among the data collected from candidates in this study were five factors:

- When I teach, it is essential to have the ability to work with parents of all students in my classroom (4.63).
- All students should be able to benefit equally from the instruction present in the classroom (4.52).
- Racial/cultural heritage is an important influence on a child's education (4.47).
- An atmosphere of trust is essential in a classroom (4.47).
- When I teach, it will be important for me to know about the cultural heritage of all students (4.47).

Conversely, those factors rated lowest were:

- It is not necessary to have differing viewpoints across the curriculum (1.15).
- The use of cooperative learning groups in the classroom is simply a fad, which should be ignored. (1.60).
- Undergraduate teacher preparation programs should not be expected to provide information about working with culturally different students (1.47).
- To expect prospective teachers to know understand the needs of all learners in the classroom is unrealistic (1.47).
- It is not necessary to adjust instruction to students' learning styles. (1.52)

Overall, these data indicate that undergraduate teacher education candidates in this study indicate that they value efforts toward developing their knowledge, skills and dispositions about diversity. These perspectives will surely be challenged when they participate in field experiences, student teaching and in their own careers.

## **Conclusions**

Generally, pre-service candidates in the undergraduate teacher preparation programs assessed in this study indicated a tendency toward favorable attitudes about diversity, including parents, using cooperative learning and the prospects of all students benefiting equally from classroom instruction. They viewed unfavorably factors related to lack of knowledge about diversity and meeting students' unique needs. Still, there were virtually none who eschewed competition as an attribute in their classrooms despite information about the ineffectiveness of this approach with certain underrepresented school populations.

Consequently, exploring this apparent contradiction marks a starting place for further exploration of candidates' situative cognition and its implications for the preparation of the next generation of this and other nations' teachers.

### Notes on contributors

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