

Multicultural Teacher Education: Developing a Hermeneutic Disposition

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A colleague referred to multicultural teacher education as a set of those classes that preservice teachers take that help them to better hide their bigotry. The comment, though cynical, echoed a fairly pervasive sentiment that educators feel toward multicultural education and its function in teacher education. Preservice teachers, no matter the field, are required to complete multicultural teacher education (MTE) courses in preparation for teaching students from diverse backgrounds. However, a focus on skills-based training for cultural competency in handling diverse classrooms (for example, skills and competency building or field experiences) is inadequate, since it is not enough to learn to simply shield one's bigotry by acquiring a skill set that helps one "deal" with people from other racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and otherwise different groups.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, referencing the difficulties of acquiring intercultural competence, notes that "typical teacher education students have led monocultural, ethnically encapsulated lives that have not afforded them the opportunities to broaden their linguistic and communicative repertoires" and further "it is unlikely that a university-based course will adequately prepare teachers to achieve this communicative facility."¹ This is precisely because such courses tend to focus on skills-based "what-if" scenarios. It is no wonder that teachers who go into the field feel woefully unprepared to "manage" diversity in their classrooms. There are not enough practical situations that students can simulate during classes to give them the skills they need to be culturally competent toward all backgrounds represented in their future classrooms.

However useful one finds rhetorical strategies and techniques to shield one's own bigotry and to "handle" classroom diversity, we assert that a deeper kind of transformation on the part of preservice teachers must take place. Sonia Nieto argues that an important part of becoming a multicultural teacher is becoming a multicultural person.² Susan Melnick and Kenneth Zeichner argue more broadly that the profound transformation that needs to take place goes beyond transferring information or skills from professors to preservice teachers, but rather involves a transformation of worldviews and assumptions that preservice teachers have carried with them for their entire lives.³ Paul Gorski outlines three major philosophical frameworks that inform MTE for preservice teachers: conservative (assimilation of minorities), liberal (acceptance and celebration of difference), and critical multiculturalism (critique of power relations).⁴ Here, we outline a type of MTE that is grounded in hermeneutics and seeks to instill a disposition based on such. We believe hermeneutics, specifically the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, offers a flexibility that can help to develop in preservice teachers a disposition that addresses the ever-changing nature and demographics of the American schooling

landscape. Hermeneutics grounds the idea of transformation and offers a unique kind of flexibility of openness that preservice teachers can acquire in their teaching.

Gadamer describes the locus of hermeneutical effort in the following quotation:

Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness.... There is a tension. It is in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.*⁵

Gadamer is discussing a reader's interactions with a text, where the text is both familiar and strange, and where the reader and text are both situated within intellectual traditions. The work of hermeneutics — that is, of interpretation — is located in between these poles. However, Gadamer extends hermeneutics beyond just a theory of interpretation and builds a comprehensive theory of understanding. We emphasize three aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutic theory for inculcation through an MTE curriculum that we argue can help to develop a hermeneutic disposition in preservice teachers. Within the hermeneutic disposition, we find that by highlighting interaction, intuition, interpretation, and understanding, preservice teachers are given tools by which to develop empathy and understanding of the other, and in doing so come to understand in a deeper way their own historical situatedness as well as that of their students, though not necessarily consciously. The three aspects of hermeneutic theory that we examine here are Gadamer's reworking of the concept of prejudice, his understanding of the hermeneutic circle, and the process of being pulled up short, a concept that Gadamer mentions briefly but Deborah Kerdeman develops more fully.⁶ We argue that by grasping these three aspects of hermeneutic theory, preservice teachers will gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others, and thus undergo the kind of transformation about which Nieto, and Melnick and Zeichner write.

OF DISPOSITIONS AND HERMENEUTICS

In contrast to adopting an entire theory as the thing guiding the content and practice of MTE courses, and teaching the tenets of any such theory, we argue for the focus to be on inculcating a hermeneutic disposition in preservice teachers. A disposition does not require the same depth of understanding nor a grasp of the, at least on the surface, esoteric jargon of hermeneuticists. It is not the case that we think preservice teachers incapable of understanding hermeneutic theory, nor do we mean to imply such. However, we believe that by emphasizing the three aspects of hermeneutic theory we discuss here, the applicability to preservice teachers is more readily realized.

Kerdeman describes a disposition as “a way of being that shows itself as a proclivity or inclination to reason, feel and behave in certain characteristic ways.”⁷ A disposition guides one's interactions with, intuitions about, and interpretation and understanding of, for example, a classroom discussion about bullying and how bullying affects students' self-image and feelings of safety. Dispositions incline one to understand the situation in a certain light, and though they do not dictate a specific understanding or interpretation, they do tend to limit the interpretations that one both creates and accepts. Nevertheless, this is not a weakness of dispositions, but instead

is the necessitated outcome of any interpretational activity, as one is limited in one's interpretations by one's past experiences, current understandings and worldview, and historical circumstances. Arguably, adopting any theory eventuates in a disposition if studied and put into practice consistently over time, and hermeneutic theory is no exception. However, in part because of the frustration preservice teachers express concerning the applicability of the material learned in courses that teach multiculturalism, it seems best to focus on developing the hermeneutic disposition immediately.

Originally, hermeneutics was developed as the study of the interpretation of religious texts. Since the nineteenth century, secular hermeneutics has addressed the processes of interpreting literary and legal texts, as well as artworks, personal interactions, rituals, individual lives, and history. Generally, hermeneutic thinkers seek to clarify the rules governing interpretation and the logic governing understanding.⁸ We regard hermeneutics as basic to human interaction, especially in interactions dealing with diverse others who challenge our accepted understanding of both them and their relation to us.

Central to the theory and practice of Gadamerian hermeneutics is an emphasis placed on understanding and interpretation. Gadamer was strongly influenced by Martin Heidegger's universalization and radicalization of hermeneutics. Jack Mendelson notes that in breaking with both Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher's influence on hermeneutics, wherein the aim of interpretation was to reconstruct the author's psychic state and reduce the text to a complex expression of the author's inner life, Heidegger analyzed the contemplative concept of *verstehen*, or interpretive understanding, placing his project within the context of ontology rather than epistemology. In doing so, Heidegger located *verstehen* in a "fundamental structure of human existence, a mode of being more basic than scientific activity."⁹ As Mendelson points out, Heidegger's framework was essential for Gadamer's critique of both Dilthey and Schleiermacher, as Heidegger broke from the latter two's "objectivistic ideal of extinguishing the self of the knower in the process of interpretation."¹⁰

With regard to understanding, Gadamer states, "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (*TM*, 292). Concerning interpretation, Gadamer argues that whether we are dealing with texts or spoken word, dialogue unfolds between one's own presuppositions and those of others. Furthering this insight of Gadamer's, Charles Taylor states that the discovery of one's identity is negotiated through such dialogue, partly overt and partly internalized, with the other.¹¹ However, before such a dialogue can begin, one must come to understand one's own prejudices.

PREJUDICES

An important aspect of understanding that relates to one's perspective and lived experience is what Gadamer calls prejudices. Aware of the potential controversy of using this term, Gadamer carefully unpacks the term as he conceives of it. Prejudices

do not necessarily connote a negative meaning, Gadamer tells us. Instead, he writes, “Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our ability to experience.”¹² Additionally, Gadamer tells us, “Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something.”¹³ Put differently, they are the implicit assumptions or presuppositions that are contained in the background understanding and knowledge we possess.¹⁴ While prejudices are inescapable, they may be refined through the process of interpretation. William Schroeder notes that interpretation in hermeneutics becomes both the amplification and refinement of these prejudices, or horizons.¹⁵

The point where new understandings are achieved is what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons, which are, according to Gadamer, “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (*TM*, 301). Fusion entails the process of interpretation. Schroeder explains:

The refinement of interpretations can be very complex. This usually involves an encounter with otherness (that is, something foreign to the interpreter’s horizon). The process transforms the interpreter and the object, as the object gains something from having a new horizon applied to it and the interpreter’s perspective is enriched through encountering a unique object.¹⁶

This explanation fits nicely when considering interpretations of art works, but also holds as a description of human interaction. For many, this process of reflecting on one’s own prejudices, how they contribute to understanding and worldview creation, is painful, and there is no certain formula that can guarantee the type of self-awareness and reflection that will be productive of a fuller, more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism. Often, events surprise us with their ability to cast our worldview into doubt. These moments are what Gadamer calls being pulled up short.

PULLED UP SHORT

Gadamer’s concept of being pulled up short is best understood through a further discussion of his conception of understanding. For Gadamer, as mentioned previously, understanding is not primarily an epistemic state, where to understand means to have grasped some piece of knowledge. Instead, Gadamer takes understanding to be a way of being in the world, where one is born into contexts filled with meanings not of one’s own making. Understanding is a practical activity of navigating the world, of negotiating reality. Through such activity one develops one’s sense of self and worldview, and gains a better sense of one’s historicity, what Gadamer calls a “lived understanding” and Kerdeman equates to “pre-reflective practical know-how, intimately tied to self-knowledge and moral orientation... Lived understanding signifies the existential condition of being human.”¹⁷ However, when one runs up against something for which one is unprepared and that challenges one’s understanding of the world or does not meet one’s expectations, one is pulled up short (*TM*, 270). Kerdeman describes being pulled up short as follows:

Sometimes ... our beliefs are thrown into doubt without, and even despite, prior deliberation on our part.... When we are pulled up short, events we neither want nor foresee and to which

we may believe we are immune interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming.¹⁸

These events are beyond one's control, since they usually happen outside of one's expectations and understanding, and are both cognitively and emotionally disruptive. Moreover, these events happen along a spectrum, in that being pulled up short does not always happen on a grand scale, nor does it take catastrophic failure to cause one to question one's worldviews. And while being pulled up short can impart self-knowledge, it more often reveals the limitations and boundaries of one's understanding (*TM*, 351). This interplay between the understanding of the objects of interpretation and the horizon through which it is interpreted is what Gadamer describes as the hermeneutic circle.

THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

The hermeneutic circle is a central idea in any hermeneutic theory. When coming to understand something — say, a text — one already has a conceptual scheme (or horizon) in place through which to interpret and categorize the text.¹⁹ As already discussed, part of one's conceptual scheme is the prejudices or habits of mind one has formed from prior experiences. Through the process of coming to understand a text, light is shed on one's conceptual scheme and prejudices, and one comes to understand these more fully. Furthermore, such a clarification helps one to understand the text, construed broadly, in a new way; perhaps one develops a deeper understanding of the plot and characters, or perhaps one sees the film as exemplary of its historical moment in all its complexity (*TM*, 271). This interplay between the whole and parts is what constitutes the hermeneutic circle. In terms of coming to understand the other, our inherent categories and prejudices (in both senses of the word) play just as important a role. Whether the other is an individual, group, or culture, we have already interpreted them through our conceptual scheme. And as much as this is a description of how we interact with the world, there is an obvious danger. In that, through interacting with others, without developing a certain attitude of openness, what can often happen is that our preconceived ideas are simply confirmed. That is, the hermeneutic circle does not guarantee one a varied, more nuanced understanding of the other; instead, one could stay mired in harmful preconceptions. As Gadamer notes, what is needed is “that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meaning or ourselves in relation to it.”²⁰ The hermeneutic circle is unavoidable, though not always productive of richer, more robust understandings of one's conceptual scheme, prejudices, and so on. Interpretations are refined and sharpened by allowing parts and whole to clarify each other, and in this way, understanding proceeds in a continuous spiraling process of comprehending these relationships. In a sense, the hermeneutic circle entails a dialogue between parts and wholes, and in being open to the productive aspect of the hermeneutic circle, one is opened up to new ways of understanding the other, whether a text or a culture.

THE HERMENEUTIC DISPOSITION AND MTE

Hermeneutics and multiculturalism intersect because both encompass a myriad of perspectives and lived experiences converging within society, a community, or

a classroom. An important strength of a hermeneutic disposition for MTE is its emphasis on the dialogical nature of the human condition. Using the analogy of textual-interpersonal relations, Stephanie Kimball and Jim Garrison refer to spoken conversation as a kind of “text” to be interpreted.²¹ It is in this kind of relationship, Taylor reminds us, that we work out our identities

always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter — our parents, for instance — and they disappear from our lives, the conversation continues within us as long as we live.²²

This brings us back to what we mentioned at the outset. Nieto argues that a teacher must become multicultural, not just learn a skill set. To become multicultural is to undergo a process of transformation in which one begins to relate empathetically to the other, and to others. Gorski writes that as an educator he must “engage in a critical and continual process of examining how [his] prejudices, biases, and assumptions inform [his] teaching and thus affect the educational experiences of [his] students.”²³ This is what he calls “the transformation of self.” Gadamerian hermeneutics describes this very process. Educational theorists and researchers, from Ladson-Billings and Gorski to Melnick and Zeichner, have claimed that a deeper kind of transformation must take place within the preservice teacher rather than simply acquiring a skill set of useful strategies for handling classroom debates and situations.

Multicultural teacher education must also go beyond mere cross-cultural competence, and instead needs to address a kind of deep engagement with the other and way to be with the other.²⁴ We would like to draw from a real-life example of MTE and situate it within a hermeneutic framework. We both recall courses where readings on social injustices were discussed and debated with classmates, where classmates drew from their own life experiences and beliefs to substantiate their points of view. We particularly remember one debate between two students in just such a course: one who believed it was essential to the demands of social justice to expose oppression in all forms, and another who felt that such demands exemplified (1) the failure of minority groups to “move beyond” America’s imperfect past and (2) a victim mentality. After several weeks of back-and-forth argument between the two, the student who espoused colorblindness, burst into tears, crying something akin to, “I’m a good person, but I don’t want to teach in the inner city. I just want to teach in the suburbs. Why does that make me racist?”

Such complaints are not surprising if we take into account the population that primarily comprises preservice teaching programs. One decade ago, it was estimated that ninety percent of the preservice teaching population consisted of white, middle-class students.²⁵ Ladson-Billings further reminds us that “teacher education programs are filled with prospective candidates who have no desire to teach in schools where students are from racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds different from their own.”²⁶ Here is where hermeneutics can assist us. Gadamer reminds us that prejudices are not necessarily negative aspects of our human condition that keep us away from meaningful interactions with others or out of meaningful professions

such as teaching. However, there certainly are beliefs that we as human beings develop about other individuals, groups, and peoples based on our prejudices, experiences, education, training, and historical situatedness, and some of these beliefs, indeed, are simply bigoted, preconceived notions. Kimball and Garrison note

To acknowledge oneself as “conditioned by historical circumstances” is simply to recognize that one’s values, beliefs, interests, perceptions, and so on are at least partially determined by the social context of a given historical moment. We cannot eliminate this conditioning or the prejudices that result; we can only deceive ourselves into believing that we have. *These prejudices constitute our identities.*²⁷

The kind of transformation we envision would lead to preservice teachers successfully expanding their horizons by encountering others in genuine ways. Nevertheless, we recognize that no theory, including hermeneutics, can guarantee such an experience. Nor do we mean to imply that even if preservice teachers experience an expansion of horizons, they will then be moved to teach in the most demanding environments.

We envision instructors of MTE courses directing activities and assigning written exercises that allow preservice teachers to explore their own lived experiences and prejudices. We recognize that in seeking to move students toward confrontations with their own prejudices, in seeking to encourage an openness to engage the hermeneutic circle productively, it may seem as if we are both advocating and implying that teachers produce in their students pulled up short moments. However, this is not the case, in part because such moments cannot be forced. Nevertheless, experienced instructors will have a feel for the types of activities, materials, films, and texts of various kinds that students in the past have experienced being pulled up short through engaging with. Acknowledging the painful nature of such moments, we advocate for making the students aware that the classroom is a “safe space” in which they can examine their self-understandings.

We imagine conversations taking place over readings that address such things as systematic oppression and injustice in this country and around the world, as well as the historical context in which these systems and institutions were created. Other possibilities we envision consist of instructors showing preservice teachers documentaries and films, playing music, and reading literary texts that expose lived realities of disenfranchisement. Instructors, whenever possible, could bring in guest lecturers and seasoned as well as novice teachers to discuss their lived experiences and the ways in which they have confronted and continue to refine their own prejudices. And on recognizing human history, students can, in the spirit of Barbara Houston, take responsibility for themselves by examining their personal histories and lived experiences.²⁸ But students cannot stop there, as Houston points out; they must take a forward-looking perspective and attitude of, after Adrienne Rich, “what will you undertake.”²⁹

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Maxine Greene encourages the creation of spaces that allow for open conversations about diversity. Borrowing Hannah Arendt’s concept of a “sphere of

freedom,” Greene tells us, “classrooms can become ‘spaces’ where they [teachers and students] can come together to establish a ‘sphere of freedom,’ involving them in their plurality.”³⁰ The creation of such spaces for critical conversation helps open our imagination to possibilities of deeper understandings of the other within our society.³¹

Since we cannot avoid our prejudices, or refuse to acknowledge them, there is still hope that we might engage in dialogue to refine them through critical engagement and interpretation, which could potentially result in a fusion of horizons. This might be the way in which we become multicultural, as Nieto suggests we do. Returning to the classroom example, did facilitating a critical debate about where one chooses to apply for jobs plant a seed? Perhaps the student’s moment of breakdown resulted in becoming aware of prejudices, or historical situatedness, for the first time when confronted with a different perspective. Gadamer tells us, “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand — not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (*TM*, 305). Kimball and Garrison claim that we broaden our horizons by looking at the landscapes of other people’s lives. They tell us that we create common understanding by consciously bringing out different sets of prejudices rather than naively denying these exist.³²

Classrooms filled with preservice teachers from various backgrounds, perspectives, and values are an ideal place to unearth such prejudices through the process of dialogue over important issues and thus they constitute a site where we hope a fusion of horizons will occur. MTE must facilitate the preparation of teachers to engage on a deep level the needs of students from various backgrounds and perspectives, not through applying a predetermined model of classroom diversity activities, but through helping future teachers recognize their own prejudices and how these help to determine their understandings of diversity in their future classrooms. And, as we have outlined in this essay, developing a hermeneutic disposition in preservice teachers facilitates just such a recognition, with the hope of the experience being transforming. Preservice teachers must become aware that this is in fact a process that occurs in safe spaces, and thus such spaces must be created, and that understanding the nature of multicultural interactions will help them understand both their own personal relationships and those they develop within their classrooms.

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Preparing Teachers for Diverse Student Populations: A Critical Race Theory Perspective,” *Review of Research in Education* 24, no. 1 (1999): 225.

2. Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (New York: Longman, 1992). Quoted in Susan L. Melnick and Kenneth M. Zeichner, “Teacher Education for Cultural Diversity: Teacher Education Institutions to Address Diversity Issues,” *Research Report 95-4* (East Lansing, Mich.: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 1995), 13.

3. Melnick and Zeichner, “Teacher Education for Cultural Diversity,” 13.

4. Paul C. Gorski, “What We’re Teaching Teachers: An Analysis of Multicultural Teacher Education Coursework Syllabi,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25, no. 2 (2009): 53. Gorski draws significantly

on the work of Charles Jenks, James O. Lee, and Barry Kanpol, "Approaches to Multicultural Education in Preservice Teacher Education: Philosophical Frameworks and Models for Teaching," *Urban Review* 33, no. 2 (2001).

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 295 (emphasis in original). This work will be cited in the text as *TM* for all subsequent references.

6. Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003).

7. *Ibid.*, 305.

8. William Ralph Schroeder, *Continental Philosophy: A Critical Approach* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 150.

9. Jack Mendelson, "The Habermas-Gadamer Debate," *New German Critique* 18 (1979): 52.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 46.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 9.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. Schroeder, *Continental Philosophy*, 151.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 152.

17. Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short," 295.

18. *Ibid.*, 294.

19. Our use of the concept of schema is drawn from Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

20. One common criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that, even though he wishes to broaden the scope of hermeneutics beyond the text, he does not do so in any robust way, and therefore misses how human interactions are not similar to reading a text. However, by emphasizing the three aspects we do, and developing a hermeneutical disposition through these, we are able to broaden hermeneutics beyond the text to encompass more complex forms of interpretation that are not represented by reading. Nevertheless, we do focus much of the essay on textual and reading analogies in order to clarify and better understand Gadamer's hermeneutical theory.

21. Stephanie Kimball and Jim Garrison, "Hermeneutic Listening: An Approach to Understanding in Multicultural Conversations," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 15, no. 1 (1996): 52.

22. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 33.

23. Paul Gorski, "Multicultural Education for Equity in Our Schools: A Working Definition," in *EdChange: Reforming Ourselves, Transforming Our World*, <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/initial.html>.

24. Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol, "Approaches to Multicultural Education," 88.

25. Edwin D. Bell and Geraldine C. Munn, "Can We Create Dreamkeepers for Diverse Classrooms?" *National Forum Journals* 8 (2000): 2-9.

26. Ladson-Billings, "Preparing Teachers for Diverse Student Populations," 224.

27. Kimball and Garrison, "Hermeneutic Listening," 53.

28. Barbara Houston, "Taking Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 9.

29. *Ibid.*, 7.

30. Maxine Greene, "The Passions of Pluralism: Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community," *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 1 (1993): 3.

31. Jana Noel, "Physical and Cultural Dimensions of Movement Related to Horizon," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 312.
32. Kimball and Garrison, "Hermeneutic Listening," 56.

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