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Book review: Talking diversity with Teachers and Teacher educators

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Talking Diversity with Teachers and Teacher Educators

reviewed by Ryan Flessner & Susan C. Adamson

Title: Talking Diversity with Teachers and Teacher Educators

Author(s): Barbara C. Cruz, Cheryl R. Ellerbrock, Anete Vasquez, Elaine & V. Howes

Publisher: Teachers College Press, New York

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In the Foreword to *Talking Diversity with Teachers and Teacher Educators*, Geneva Gay notes, “Credibility and ‘place’ gaps are continuing problems in teacher preparation for and classroom practice of diversity in PreK-12 education because frequently the ‘trainers’ are not currently in these classrooms and have been away from precollegiate teaching for many years” (p. xi). Rather than falling into the trap of describing what should be happening in P-12¹ classrooms, the editors and authors of this book detail their own practices—at the university level—aimed at assisting future teachers in attending to issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. In doing so, they avoid the noted credibility and place gaps by modeling the types of work they hope the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom they work will engage.

Written for teacher educators, professional developers, and as a text for graduate level work in teacher education, the editors of *Talking Diversity with Teachers and Teacher Educators* describe the text as a “how to book” (p. 3). While some activities are translatable to P-12 classrooms, the book’s focus rests on the work teacher educators must do alongside pre-service and in-service teachers in order to deconstruct assumptions and biases, to understand and reflect upon privilege, and to become effective teachers for *all* learners. This is difficult work, and the chapter authors caution, “The tasks that we describe should not minimize the complexity of this work or suggest that a few activities will address [these challenging issues]” (p. 119).

Throughout the book, the editors and authors remind us that the focus of the text is on the work we do personally and professionally, as teacher educators, as we engage with pre-service and in-service teachers. The book is not about assisting teachers or teacher candidates in gaining content area expertise (e.g., becoming a better teacher of writing). Instead, readers are encouraged to reflect on the ways that the activities within the book assist all educators in becoming more engaged, socially conscious members of a democratic society. Rather than simply relating content to everyday life (e.g., math problems that ask students to share cookies with friends), the authors urge readers to push against the status quo. The authors frequently remind teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates that, “...what we perceive as reality and irrefutable truth is always affected by our cultural lenses” (p. 111).

At the start of the book, the editors encourage readers to digest the entire volume rather than limit reading to chapters related to the content areas for which we are responsible. We found this advice extremely helpful. For instance, Ryan (a math methods instructor) saw connections between the “One-Syllable Conversations” activity (p. 86) in the English Language Arts chapter and the difficulties non-native speakers of English have in describing their math knowledge—especially given the recent turn to language-heavy problem solving work in math classrooms. Susan (an instructor of reading and writing methods) appreciated several activities from the chapter on

exceptional student education. Activities that utilized the short story *Country of the Blind* (Wells, 1904) to address notions of normalcy (p. 178) and the documentary film *I'm Tyler* (Greene, 2006) to uncover personal biases about what it means to be able-bodied (p. 180) could inform the work of critical literacy in English Language Arts courses. By encouraging readers to examine the entirety of the text, the editors push us all to engage in dialogue with the text and with one another. They rightly state, "...just learning about what our colleagues do in their classrooms often inspires us to create a new activity for ours" (p. 7).

Having said this, reading the entire text brought forth feelings of unevenness for each of us as readers. As with many edited books, inconsistencies across chapters were noticeable. For example, major terms or phrases in the teacher education literature such as Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon & Rousseau, 2006) and *courageous conversations* (Singleton, 2005) were inconsistently cited. Similarly, classic texts from the teacher education literature (e.g., Gay, 2000; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Murrell, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) were well cited throughout the book. However, within several of the content specific chapters, few of the experts who have shaped our understandings were cited (e.g., Gee, 2012; Gutstein, 2005; Heath, 1983; Martin, 2009; Wager & Stinson, 2012; Vasquez, 2004). In several cases, self-citations by the chapter authors seemed to replace the texts we expected to see.

This situation aside, the extensive presentation of activities throughout the book marks this text as one that should be on every teacher educator's shelf. The suggestions within vary from classic activities such as "Collaborative Rule-making" (p. 34) and "I Come From... poems" (p. 177) to original practices culled from the classrooms of the chapter authors. While the authors at times leave classic activities such as "Think-Pair-Share" (Lyman, 1981) uncited, this volume provides a plethora of resources both within the chapters and in the extensive appendix. As teacher educators think through the use of these activities, they should also note that many of the engagements rely on written or oral reflections. Especially when dealing with issues of equity, diversity, and social justice—where putting thinking into words can be very difficult and sometimes threatening (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2014)—*multiple* sign systems may prove to be helpful in processing these engagements.

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the fact that many of the voices within the book are those of authors/editors from non-mainstream backgrounds. In so being, these individuals effectively communicate ways that their differences—along with their privileges—have impacted them throughout their personal and professional lives. Several chapter authors provide vignettes highlighting their classroom practices that allow readers to see how the lived experiences of these authors support the efforts they are making to ensure that all educators are prepared to provide the best possible education for each child with whom they interact.

Much of what is found in *Talking Diversity with Teachers and Teacher Educators* will resonate with those who have had opportunities to reflect on the issues within the book. However, as the authors warn, those who are new to the exploration of these ideas should avoid simply gravitating to activities within the chapters associated with their specific content area. Doing so could lead to very uncomfortable situations, as many of the activities require the ability to lead an informed discussion once the activity is completed. Still, we found ourselves discussing ways to use this

book in our own college—not only to encourage peers to engage in this work, but to also continue to reflect on our own development as teacher educators thinking about issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. In doing so, we hope to address the desperate need for raising faculty awareness in teacher education programs across the country and around the globe.

Note

1. While the authors in the text use “K-12” to describe the children with whom the teachers will (or do) work, we make a purposeful effort to use “P-12.” In doing so, we—as early childhood educators—hope to bring attention to the need to prepare the growing population of preschool teachers to engage in similar forms of personal and professional development.

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