

Hermeneutics and Resistance: Multicultural Teacher Education Reconsidered

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I applaud Adrienne Pickett and J.G. York for raising the topic of multicultural teacher education, since this topic has not received enough attention among philosophers of education. The underlying assumption upon which Pickett and York base their argument — that a focus on skills-based training for cultural competency in handling diverse classrooms is inadequate — is on target and supported by some of the major theorists in the field, such as Sonia Nieto and James Banks.¹ As these theorists have argued, a deeper kind of transformation on the part of teachers must take place if we want them to become genuine multicultural educators and agents of social change. Pickett and York rightly maintain that the kind of change that is at stake here “goes beyond transferring information or skills from professors to preservice teachers,” and “involves a transformation of worldviews and assumptions that preservice teachers have carried with them for their entire lives.”

As opposed to the kind of multicultural teacher education that is focused on cross-cultural training or that helps future teachers acquire those rhetorical skills that enable them to become more sensitive to their own biases and manage classroom diversity, Pickett and York propose a much more critical approach based on Gadamerian hermeneutics. They claim that Gadamer’s hermeneutics “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.” To their credit, Pickett and York do not attempt to apply Gadamer’s entire theory, which pertains primarily to textual interpretation and analysis, as a guide to transform multicultural teacher education. Instead, they make a case for the need to focus on inculcating a “hermeneutic disposition” in preservice teachers.

Following Deborah Kerdeman, Pickett and York define disposition as “a way of being that shows itself as a proclivity or inclination to reason, feel and behave in certain characteristic ways.”² A hermeneutic disposition, they assert, includes three essential components: prejudices, being pulled up short, and the hermeneutic circle. The core of their argument is that if multicultural teacher education focused on getting preservice teachers to become more aware of and refine their prejudices, experience pulled up short moments, and be more open to a dialogue between one’s own understandings and those of others, it would better prepare them for negotiating the diverse realities in their future schools. In short, Pickett and York believe that acquiring a hermeneutic disposition can help teacher candidates recognize their own prejudices and how these beliefs shape their understanding of diversity in their classrooms.

Although I am very sympathetic with a hermeneutic approach to multicultural teacher education, Pickett and York’s analysis is flawed in that it does not adequately explain how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can lead to the kind of deep transformation in

preservice teachers that they are seeking. That is, they never really spell out how the concepts they are borrowing from Gadamer (prejudice, being pulled up short, and the hermeneutic circle) can help preservice teachers and educators in general develop the kind of hermeneutic disposition they desire. For instance, even though Pickett and York maintain that prejudices are not *necessarily* unjustified or wrong (implying that some *are* false), they do not discuss how we can distinguish between our seemingly “benign” assumptions and those that are erroneous or harmful. Thus once we become aware of our individual biases, what mechanism can help us determine whether or not they are mistaken or merely our particular way of viewing and understanding the world?

Similarly, Pickett and York seem to suggest that the experience of being pulled up short will automatically lead to self-examination and the realization that one’s habitual ways of making sense of the world are partial and flawed. Yet, experience teaches us that our underlying beliefs are deeply embedded and that we are just as likely to rationalize or incorporate into our existing schemes an unexpected event that challenges our core assumptions as we are to question and reevaluate our lives. In their discussion of the hermeneutic circle, Pickett and York acknowledge this fact, noting that when we interact with people who are different from us, our preconceived ideas can simply be confirmed and we may fail to reach more nuanced understandings of others. Still, they do not fully explore the implications of this danger, nor do they provide us with a convincing account of how a multicultural teacher education that is informed by Gadamer’s hermeneutics can enhance our openness toward others.

The only example from an actual multicultural teacher education class that Pickett and York include in their discussion involves a confrontation between two students, one who demanded exposing all forms of oppression and injustice, while the other adopted a color-blind perspective. Yet, once again they fail to adequately explain how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can advance our understanding of this rather common confrontation or how his concepts can lead students to get beyond the defensive stance they are exhibiting. Indeed, Pickett and York have little to say about how multicultural educators can get students to become more aware of their prejudices and expand their horizons in light of the experiences of others in such tense yet critical moments. Likewise, they say almost nothing on how educators can encourage open and honest dialogue when students are more comfortable with sticking to their guns.

These questions bring me to my second general critique of Pickett and York’s analysis, namely, that it does not account for the *resistance* on the part of many middle-class white students to being educated about diversity and multiculturalism. The problem, in my view, is not only that multicultural teacher education programs tend to be too narrow and limiting in their focus, but also that preservice teachers often resist honestly examining their own assumptions and beliefs about racism, white privilege, and diversity. In our essay “Resisting Diversity: Teaching Multiculturalism to White, Middle-Class Students,” Susan Clarke and I analyzed three of the most common forms of resistance among preservice teachers that we

encountered in our courses on “Diversity in the Classroom” and “Social and Philosophical Issues in Education.”³ Our examination of the forms of resistance we came across in our courses led us to characterize them as “victimization as defense,” “a patronizing acceptance of white privilege,” and “political correctness versus the struggle for social justice.” Here is not the place to describe these common forms of resistance, but only to highlight the fact that Pickett and York’s essay does not address this issue in adequate depth. Although they suggest that some students may adopt a color-blind perspective (one that Clarke and I associate with political correctness), they do not clearly explain how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can help preservice teachers move to a more critical understanding of their beliefs. In short, Pickett and York have yet to attend to how the subjects they are hoping to change may be unwittingly or deliberately complicating this effort.

Ultimately, I believe that Pickett and York’s analysis of multicultural teacher education has left us with many more questions than answers. Perhaps this is one of the strengths of their essay; nevertheless, these problems must be addressed if we are to make any headway on the issue of making multicultural teacher education a transformative experience for preservice teachers. How are hermeneutic dispositions different from our individual worldviews or values that also incline us to view situations in particular ways versus others? How does the process of refining our interpretations about works of art compare to that of encountering other human subjects? When Gadamer argues that we need to “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text,” how does he think that we can cultivate this openness? If a hermeneutic circle entails a dialogue between parts and whole, as Pickett and York claim, how can we account for this “whole” in the context of an interaction between two individuals whose perspectives are always limited? If it is really the case, as they imply, that “overcoming” our prejudices is futile,⁴ what constructive role can multicultural teacher education play with respect to these prejudices? Finally, if we are expecting preservice teachers to confront their own prejudices and develop a hermeneutic disposition, doesn’t this process imply the need not only to create “safe spaces” but also spaces where taking risks and moving out of our comfort zone are encouraged? These are just some of the many questions that need to be considered if we wish to make multicultural teacher education deeper and more critical.

1. See Sonia Nieto’s *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 3d ed. (New York: Longman, 2000); and James Banks’s *Multicultural Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

2. Deborah Kerdeman, “Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 305.

3. Susan Clarke and Mordechai Gordon, “Resisting Diversity: Teaching Multiculturalism to White, Middle-Class Students,” *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 7, no. 1 (2003): 77–86.

4. In making this point, Pickett and York quote Stephanie Kimball and Jim Garrison, “Hermeneutic Listening: An Approach to Understanding in Multicultural Conversations,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 15, no. 1 (1996).