Being Othered and Finding My Voice: Using Self-Study to Better Understand My Experiences as an Early Childhood Teacher Educator

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My Worldview Perspective

My journey as a teacher educator was an unusual one. Very early in my life, I knew that I was called to be a teacher. Becoming a teacher was a burning desire that permeated every area of my life. As a young child during every play opportunity, I was the teacher, and all of my friends were the students. Without question when entering into college, I knew that my field of study would be education. Education in my family was the key to countless possibilities. It was considered precious, and the opportunity to get an education came with the responsibility to advocate for others.

During my college years, as a student I recognized that not all educational opportunities for young children were equal. I was determined to excel in school and make a difference in the lives of young children. I was able to accomplish my goal, and as a result I was contacted by a school to obtain my first teaching assignment working with preschool/kindergarten children. This opportunity led to my promotion as administrator for the school. Under my leadership our school became well known within the city, and we served as an exemplar to many programs seeking to enhance early childhood programs. I loved working with families and providing quality experiences for young children. I felt I was making a difference one student at a time. However, as time went on, I was finding that this was not enough of an impact on children. I needed to make a change. The notion that preparing those who ultimately teach young children would be a greater impact began to tug at my heart.

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An Open Door

After 17 years of administration and teaching, I was contacted by my undergraduate catholic private college to consider joining their faculty as the director of their early childhood program. They had heard about my work, and I was recommended by a faculty member who was leaving the college and moving out of the city. The president of the college who remembered me from when I was enrolled said: "Julia what do you think about teaching in higher education? I believe you can do it and help develop our program." With hesitancy I said yes, and the new chapter in my life began. The department had a mighty number of 10 faculties. But they were very welcoming and were open to new ideas and appreciated my experience and expertise in early education. The student body, although not very ethnically diverse, was very open to my style of teaching and focus on creating a community of learners. During my tenure I easily connected with the students, and they valued my wealth of experience in creating a developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum. I was an administrator and faculty member at this institution for 15 years.

During that same period of time, I harbored a desire to pursue earning a doctorate in education. It had been a personal goal of mine. Although the current institution was considered more of a teaching college rather than a research college, I wanted to deepen my knowledge in early childhood as well as improve as a teacher educator. I researched several doctoral programs and selected one that met my need to remain working and caring for my preteen children.

Carpe' Diem: Seize the Day

While in the doctoral program, I was encouraged to apply for the director of early childhood within the school of education. The private catholic university had a similar mission focus as my previous college. At first I declined; however, after 2 years the position became open again, and I was again strongly encouraged to apply. I was very hesitant. I loved my current position. I was earning the highest teaching evaluations from the student body, I was working on several grant initiatives, and I had become a professional development facilitator for several child care programs. I was very comfortable in my little fish bowl.

Still, over the years I had often encouraged my students to never stop advancing in knowledge that will have a positive impact on children. The motto at our college was Carpe' Diem, which caused me to wonder how I could continue to encourage my students when I was not open to doing the same. So, I applied and was selected. I talked with the president of the college and the chair of my department. I shared with them my reason for departing was to be closer to my dissertation committee, so I could more seamlessly complete my dissertation. The president wanted me to remain with the college and offered an increase in salary. I declined because the move to this new institution was more about personal growth than financial gain.

You Are Not in Kansas Anymore

When I reflect on the first year at the university where I am currently a teacher educator, it brings a smile to my face. I think about the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and the scene where the movie changes from black and white to color. I remember sitting at the first full faculty meeting of the year and thinking, "*Oh my goodness what have you done*!." I was no longer in my comfortable fish bowl of 10 faculties but now facing over 50 faculties from all over the country and some international. Most of the faculties were tenure-track or in advanced tenured positions. I did enter the school of education with a few other nontenure track faculty, but I was the only African-American in my department. And there were only three African-Americans in the entire school of education. However, I was excited and ready to meet the challenge. I was confident in my teacher educator abilities based on my accomplishments at the previous college, and I was excited to work with my new students. The first few years at the university were invigorating. I was engaged in a research project, had a sizeable 5 year grant, and was having a positive experience with some my students.

At the same time as I was beginning my work at this institution, the university undertook a major shift in focus. As part of strategic planning to increase ranking, the administration decided to become more of a research focused university as well as to attract more students from prestigious high schools with a moderate to high G.P.A. Due to this shift in focus, our school attracted more diverse international research faculty which made our school the most diverse faculty on campus. In addition, our student body came from more affluent non-people of color families. As a result we had more white affluent students than ever before. This change in the student body significantly changed the dynamic between myself and the students. I became very discouraged with the challenge of connecting with my students and how they can feel connected to me and the content I was teaching. As an African-American female nontenure track assistant professor, I am finding it more and more challenging to connect/relate to my students who enter into the early childhood program from backgrounds that have limited exposure to diversity. I find that in many instances, I am the first African-American teacher they have experienced and certainly the first one as an administrator.

The 2012 academic year was the most frustrating year for me as a teacher educator. I was teaching a team taught course where my colleague and I created the syllabus, course assignments, and rubrics together. We felt confident that we had created an engaging course, and we were excited about the opportunity to share our expertise in class and for our students to receive the benefit of listening to different perspectives which we felt would be a dynamic experience. However, during the course I was beginning to feel resistance from some of the students. Many times students challenged my decisions and challenged my knowledge during class (see Ladson-Billings 1996; McGowan 2000; Stanley 2006).

At the end of the semester when the teacher evaluations were disseminated, I was disheartened by the ratings and comments with regard to the syllabus and content of the course. My evaluation comments included that the syllabus was not clearly

written and that the assignments were unclear and considered busy work. The questions on the teacher evaluation that related to my engagement with the class included comments in which I was described as rude, not receptive, and disruptive to the other instructor; all when I had felt I was simply sharing my opinion. That was particularly interesting to me since both of us shared our insights during each class, and we had not noticed the same things.

By way of contrast, my colleague received raving reviews. Although the syllabus was jointly created by her and I, and much of our teaching was communal, the comments she received stood in stark contrast to my own. For my colleague, students described the syllabus as well written, the assignments as very engaging, and her expectations as clear. They also felt that my colleague was very knowledgeable about the content even though I had already earned my doctorate and had more teaching experience in the content. As a result of all of this, I questioned how it was possible for the same syllabus to receive two different ratings.

The next academic year was slightly better but not at the level of quality ratings I had received at my former institution. I started questioning my ability to teach and connect with my students. I decided to utilize the professional development resources that we have at our institution to reflect and improve on my teaching practices. However, the methods that were recommended seemed to me very mechanical and really did not get at the heart of reflective practices. In addition, I was very interested in the teacher/scholar model. Although as a nontenure track faculty member, research is not a firm requirement; I was very interested in engaging in research that serves to advance my teaching.

Help Is on the Way: A Light at the End of the Tunnel

In 2014 I received an email announcement indicating that a group would be formed to learn about and possibly participate in S-STEP research. I quickly responded to the message that I would like to participate. I truly wanted an opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practices and to work with other colleagues using this model. I was looking forward to discussing my challenges and listening to the challenges of others as well as framing how to address our individual concerns. In my mind, this would be an opportunity to work closely with other colleagues who have common interests and journeying together to meet our goals for improving our teaching practices.

The first year and a half felt to me like identity formation. We came to the meetings sharing what particular struggles we were facing in our teaching practices and how the S-STEP process could help us with our concerns. Our faculty facilitator, Dr. Jason Ritter, did an excellent job in facilitating each session. He was careful not to provide definitive answers. He listened and provided resources that could serve as a guide for our individual work. As a group we agreed to write reflections about each session to get a pulse of how we were developing as individuals as well as a group. Dr. Ritter tried to keep us involved on this level, but consistently sharing our thoughts

on a discussion board was more of a challenge for the group. However, during our face-to-face sessions, we had the opportunity to share our progress and struggles.

A breakthrough for me was in the Spring of 2015 when our department invited Dr. Mary Lynn Hamilton to come to our campus and provide a workshop on "Self-Study and Teacher Education." The exercises from the workshop helped me frame questions around what I would like to address about my teaching. The questions I had were: (1) How do I address the tension between preparing leading teachers and supporting past experiences? (2) How do I walk with the learners when they see me as "the other/different"? (3) How do I keep my own uniqueness while desiring to be accepted/appreciated by the students? (4) How do I help my students appreciate learning from the lens of the African-American female experience when they only seem to embrace white female and white male perspectives? As a result of the workshop, the S-STEP group seemed more energized and felt like we had direction and momentum. Within the first year and a half, I felt like I was heard, validated, and encouraged. I was even more determined to deeply reflect and improve on my teaching practices. I was fortunate to have a graduate assistant assigned to me and we selected one course in the fall and spring semesters to focus on for a study. I intended to share my plans with the group for suggestions when the new semester began, but my plans did not work out as expected due to changes in our group.

Being the "Other": Again?

There was a shift in the dynamics of the group when more tenure track faculty became interested and joined the group. The shift in dynamics had unexpected consequences for me. As I mentioned earlier, the initial members of the group shared their struggles and encouraged one another. Dr. Ritter continued to guide and encourage us to reflect on the process. I felt we were on a journey focused on the process of "becoming" but not on any particular end product. But as the new faculty members entered the group, the dynamics changed – not necessarily for the worse but definitely a change from my perspective. The group became much more "product" versus "process" driven. We spent several sessions discussing what will be the result of our collective and individual participation and how it can be connected to the requirements of the tenure process. We also discussed our goals including timelines to produce a presentation or paper. Our sessions became more focused on how to code interviews and identify themes. Several members had varying experiences on how to effectively code data. Although this was very useful, especially since we can apply this process in our own S-STEP work, I felt the "voices" of getting to the "product" overshadowed the illumination that can be had by the "process." For me process means to embark on a journey, not knowing where the twists and turns may occur, but reflecting and learning throughout until you get to an end "product." This stands in contrast to focusing on the "product" and finding the most efficient method to get there. "Products" are important, but real lessons are learned, and

enlightenment happens through the "process." Those moments when what you are experiencing clicks and you have an "aha" moment may resonate with others.

At some point early in that second year it occurred to me! The unexpected! I found myself again as the "other" in that I was the only nontenure track member of the group; a group that suddenly seemed to embrace norms and have priorities that were at times at odds with my own participation. During our sessions there were unspoken assumptions and behaviors that were manifested in the group. When my teaching schedule allowed me to attend the meetings, I would often find my colleagues engaged in discussions about coding, ethnography, and other such research jargon. When I gave suggestions and/or opinions about these topics, I felt like my comments were mostly ignored. During one meeting we discussed the fact that self-study research lends itself more easily to those who have experience in qualitative research methods. One faculty member counted the members present that they felt had experience in qualitative versus quantitative research and said a number. Our faculty facilitator Jason Ritter mentioned that I also had experience in such research methods, and the faculty member raised an eyebrow. Although there had been times in the later stages of the group that I didn't feel as an equal member, on this occasion I felt particularly devalued and othered. This experience reminded me of the following scripture from the Bible: "But now indeed there are many members, yet one body and the eye can not say to the hand I have no need of you… those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary" (I Corinthians 13:19–22). Although tenured and nontenured members of the S-STEP group all have our own unique set of skills that can enhance the work of the collective group, everyone has something valuable to contribute.

Finding My Voice

In the article, *Constructing the Meaning of Teacher Educator: The Struggle to Learn the Roles,* Guilfoyle (1995) states how "voice provides the power to critically examine a situation and confront it, rather than be dominated by it" (p. 39). I had to find the courage to voice what I have been experiencing within the group as well as in the classroom. I no longer could continue to choose to be the observer in this situation but had to confront it through writing about the experience.

So I am sure you are wondering why I am still in the group? Well I have found the overall experience thus far very freeing and for the most part energizing. Since I have been able to talk about my struggles I have been having with my students, I have found myself more open in class. I talk with my class about building a community. I feel less frustrated and I am certainly more reflective. I believe this is mostly due to being a participant in the S-STEP group. Being a member of the S-STEP group has opened opportunities to seek out collaborations with other faculty in the early childhood community and address the different perspectives we are challenged with in teaching our students. Even writing this has been a challenging but freeing experience for me. When we were first asked to write about our

experiences with the S-STEP group, I was excited, but my excitement quickly was overshadowed by fear of inadequacy. I can remember reading over and over again the suggestion Jason provided to guide our writing. I remember how frozen I was at the computer to even write a sentence. So much was on my mind to share, but the emotion of expressing it was difficult as I put it in writing. I was gripped with the fear of not being able to write in the same quality as my colleagues. I also was concerned about their response to my feeling of "the other" within the group.

The S-STEP group has illuminated my perspective as an educator, a facilitator of learning, particularly as an African-American woman nontenure track assistant professor. Self-study as a methodology in teacher education has provided me with insights about how to walk along side of my research track colleagues. The first step in this process with my colleagues is to shine the light and address our unique differences. I am looking forward to our continued unpacking of the individual and collective meaning of this process, and I believe we will truly become a community of researchers that will be able to transform our teacher candidates as well as inform the teacher education community.

One key factor for those who may be considering entering the S-STEP research process is that the right facilitator, such as the one we have, be in place. A facilitator who has experience in the S-STEP process can help the group develop an individual and collective identity and set of practices. They will be able to guide, refocus, and energize the group. Dr. Jason Ritter, as our facilitator, with his nonverbal accepting behaviors such as nodding his head in affirmation during discussions, making sure to remain silent and waiting for responses even when the silence seems to be a long period of time, and his outward offering of support has helped make this an inclusive experience for me.

Although this journey continues to have many unexpected experiences, I must say it has been worth it, and the overall reflective experience I am sure will ultimately make a positive impact on me as a teacher educator as well as my students. I encourage others to embark on this meaningful journey.

References

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