

Mary Vandergraff

EDCI – 58500-006

Week 8 Assignment – Multicultural Teaching Philosophy

Four and a half years ago, I was at my lowest point as an educator, unemployed, and not sure I would ever find my place as a teacher. Public schools seemed foreign to me, plus two of the biggest school districts in Texas never even called me back for an interview despite having several openings. I tried teaching PreK, and while I survived, it was just okay, not somewhere I felt I truly belonged. I looked at private parochial schools, an environment I was very familiar with having attended parochial schools from kindergarten through college, but that, too, no longer seemed like a fit. On a whim, I looked at Space Center Houston, thinking maybe I could work as a tram tour driver or in guest services. I loved going to the Space Center, even though it was almost an hour's drive from my apartment. To my surprise and excitement, they were hiring education instructors! I applied, eventually heard back, interviewed, and was hired. Those first few months I felt at home and yet underprepared at the same time with the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education aspect as my teaching license is for Early Childhood and Elementary Education. I quickly started learning as much as I could, rattling my newest facts off to my patient husband. I never had a job where I was as excited to come to work.

After a while, opportunities for advancement opened, and last year I was promoted to an Education Programs Coordinator, coordinating our Space Center University program. Space U, as we call it, is a week-long space exploration program for Middle School and High School students from around the world. I enjoy training new instructors, sharing my experiences with them to help them grow, interacting with groups coming in from other countries, eager to learn about space exploration, and developing new curriculum for new programming. Eventually I would like to be in a position focusing more on curriculum and program development to expand our Space U program.

Because my program is international, there are many multicultural facets to the program. Students from other countries may have a different way of completing tasks and time management, some will be loud and direct in their communication while others may be quiet and reserved, not answering questions for fear of being perceived rude. But we also have students from all around the

United States that will come, mostly from Houston, during the summer and school breaks. And with the addition of our Girls' STEM program, a grand-funded program that serves Title 1 schools, we also teach students from all different socio-economic backgrounds, races and ethnicities, and families.

To make every person feel like they belong, I work to create, as Knaier (2019) explains, "a safe learning environment for all my students" (p. 218). This is not an easy task. In most teaching environments, teachers would have months to build a safe environment and foster relationships. We have five days at the most unless they come back for another week.

One way to make students feel they can find a place among the STEM community is through representation. Sally Ride commented in an interview, "Young girls need to see role models in whatever careers they may choose, just so they can picture themselves doing those jobs someday. You can't be what you can't see" (Beard, 2012, n.p.). This can be done through videos, images, biographies, and the people the students interact with. Brayboy (2005) gives the example, "[one] teacher said, 'We need teachers who look like us, talk like us, and think like us. To know what it means to be [tribal name] is an important part of this'" (p. 426). I don't know what it's like to be Black man or a trans woman, but having my students meet someone they can identify with and make a connection can help them feel more accepted and confident, more ready to take risks and fail, which happens often in STEM. That's how we learn.

For students to learn and connect with someone whom they can relate to, my program invites professionals from NASA to come and speak with our students, talking about what they do and answer questions they may have. We also have astronauts that come and speak with the students, although since we rely on the retired astronauts, most of the time they are a white male.

An addition I plan to make is adding a biographical moment to the start of each lesson. Another coordinator started this, and I thought it was a great idea then. Kaomea (2000) explains, "As a Native

Hawaiian, I understand the impulse of underrepresented individuals to want to see one's self, one's people, one's culture included and represented in the curriculum" (p. 319–320). Now that I have the authority and responsibility to make changes, this is one way I hope to let students know everyone has a place in STEM. I can make sure there are many different races, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities represented. "The question of how we make meaning and construct our identities through seeing is indeed a pressing issue for media literacy education" (Watt, 2012, p. 33). These people would be chosen for a specific purpose and reason, not simply to tick off a box.

That means I will have to be invested in current multicultural educational trends. I know what it is like to not be neurotypical, having Attention Deficit Hypoactive/Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) myself. I have seen how others react when someone is different by watching reactions to my brother who has Autism, is non-verbal, visually impaired, cognitively delayed, and has Cerebral Palsy. I cannot say I know what every person who has ADHD or Autism is going through, everyone is different. But I do at least have some understanding and experience.

One area that I continue to struggle with is how to talk about race. Haviland (2019) writes, "literature from critical studies of Whiteness suggests that Whiteness may be a barrier that prevents teachers from engaging in TME [transformative multicultural education] or SAME [social-action multicultural education]" (p. 41). For me, it is a fear of not wanting to offend anyone and of saying the wrong thing. To grow from this, I am focusing on first person accounts of their experiences, and reserve judgement, just listen. All voices are important, all feelings are valid.

My hope with these changes is that students will feel invested in what is going on not just with the program for that week, but that they can find a place where they feel they belong. Maybe that's in STEM at NASA, or maybe that's in a different career path. And be comfortable taking risks, knowing that is how we grow.

References

- Beard, A. (2012, September 1). Sally Ride. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2012/09/sally-ride>
- Brayboy, B. M. J. (2005). Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-005-0018-y>
- Haviland, V. S. (2008). “Things Get Glossed Over”: Rearticulating the Silencing Power of Whiteness in Education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(1), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487107310751>
- Kaomea, J. (2000). A Curriculum of Aloha? Colonialism and Tourism in Hawai‘i’s Elementary Textbooks. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30(3), 319–344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0362-6784.00168>
- Knaier, M. (2019). What Makes Girls and Boys so Desireable? STEM Education beyond Gender Binaries. In W. Letts & S. Fifield (Eds.), *STEM of Desire: Queer Theories and Science Education* (pp. 209–221). BRILL. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/purdue/detail.action?docID=6118561>
- Watt, D. (2012). The Urgency of Visual Media Literacy in Our Post-9/11 world: Reading Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*. <https://doi.org/10.23860/jmle-4-1-4>