

The Art of Teaching, Outlining Measures of Pre-Service Quality, Individual Teacher Quality, Teaching Practices, and Ascertaining Student Achievement Gains for Early Career Teachers: A Teacher Educator's Narrative Grounded on Indigenous Ways of Knowing.

Mercy Tsiwo-Chigubu, PhD. Alumni of
Michigan State University &
Assistant Professor of Early Childhood & Middle Grades at
Georgia College & State University

Abstract

It should be our goal in all education to produce caring, moral persons, but we cannot accomplish this purpose by setting an objective and heading straight toward it. Rather we approach our goal by living with those whom we teach in a caring community, through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. (Nel Noddings).

This article provides insights on the art of teaching. Like every other profession, teaching offers its personal challenges which include managing the trauma of stress, overcoming fear of failure, developing resilience and emotional stamina, as well as carving satisfaction out of the overarching routine, and being cherished or respected by pre-service student teachers. Teacher education involves intensely personal aspects of one's life, aspects that have no barriers to breeding both empowerment and despair.

It is true that the calling of a teacher is so intimate, its duties so delicate, the things in which a teacher might prove unworthy or would fail are so numerous that they are incapable of enumeration in any legislative enactment (Board of Education Trustees versus Stubblefield, 1971). Further, teacher educators are entrusted with

responsibilities to expose students to teaching theories and practices. They document the progress of pre-service students during the program, and help solve problems that arise during student teaching. The onus is on them to ensure that students are placed with cooperating teachers who will provide optimal learning, demonstrate teaching practices that help students acquire deep insights to quality teaching, and to establish collaborations with principals, host teachers, as well as school district personnel in the schools where their students will be placed.

Teaching and learning can be ambiguous and complex. However, there are practical approaches that can be combined to produce good recipe(s) that maximize students' learning potential, and yet stay motivated throughout their learning process. I am going to highlight various approaches that I find exciting in my pre-service preparation classes for quality. First and foremost, I believe that student learning of graduates in any given university calls for an environment managed by caring adults who are knowledgeable of the content of the subject matter that would enhance student achievement gains for early career teachers. Further, student learning of graduates of any given teacher education program in a particular institution must be sheltered by well trained professional teachers from the common elements of oppression, discrimination, anger, fear, domination, prejudice, bias and ethnocentrism that more often than not, uproot them.

We all know that teaching is indeed a complex, multifaceted and yet wondrous activity. It is imperative that teacher educators develop a "can-do" perspective which encourages the learners to reap the greatest success from the first year of teaching. With that in mind, I would like to highlight how I socialize myself in the culture of teaching, and how I burn the "midnight candle" at both ends, without feeling a sense of overwhelming isolation. In this paper, I will discuss my teaching strategies, the uncommon realities witnessed, the hardships endured, the joys encountered, and the route I take in order to improve on teacher quality, ascertain student achievement gains for early career teachers, and how to enmesh both Western approaches and Indigenous ways of knowing. One question that I might pose is: "Who am I?"

"I am the reflective teacher educator, and...
I want to help my students
to grow their own wings that will fly them
to empowering heights which would
lead them to freedom and liberty"

(Mercy Chigubu, 2005).

I see myself as a reflective practitioner, and in my classes I employ reflective thinking as a teaching strategy. Reflective thinking is definitely not a new notion in the world of academia. Francis (1995) argues that Socrates contrasted perceiving of things outside the self with reflection, the discovery of what is within, and brought to birth by questioning (p.230). One of the driving forces behind this orientation is the result of having been brought up in Africa where undocumented theories of indigenous ways of knowing are the order of the day. African indigenous ways of knowing emphasize engagement in purpose, origin, critical reflection, facilitation of personal and group

decision making, and ethical competence. There are grounded in reflective thinking, which in turn involves a state of numbness, hesitation, doubt, meditation, bewilderment, perseverance, persistence, mental freeze and defrosting as thought processes disseminate, act of assertion, collaboration, inquiring to search and find resource material that will eradicate feelings of despair amidst hopelessness, critique, enforce hunting for solutions or answers or substance, gathering, counterbalance self-ego, gather momentum, settle, and suspend doubt as well as get rid of ambiguities, regroup wisdom of practice, sustain hope (Chigubu, 2000).

A body of literature exists regarding the crucial importance of developing reflective teachers. Zeichner and Liston (1987) state that critically reflective practitioners are those willing and able to reflect on the origins, purposes, and consequences of their actions. Copeland, Birmingham, De La Cruz, and Lewin (1993) speak of the reflective teacher as a dynamic and continually growing professional (p.347). However, Roth (1989) emphasizes engagement in inquiry, reflection, decision making and dialectics, and he sees this process as a spiral rather than a circle, such that the critically reflective practitioner, as Macpherson (1994) highlights it as "...is always becoming" (p. 17). Similarly, Francis (1995) acknowledges that once one move beyond acceptance of the desirability of thoughtfulness about beliefs and actions, the notion of reflection can mask very different approaches to the education of teachers (p. 230).

On the other hand, Bullough (1989) points out that it is disturbing that because of its charm and power to inspire action, agreement on the meaning of reflectivity and implications for the development of programs for its promotion among student teachers is assumed, with unfortunate results. He writes: "Reflectivity becomes a slogan prone to meaninglessness where it may serve comfortably as an aim for any and all types of programs (p. 15). I would beg to differ from Bullough. In contrast, I would vigorously support the works of Dewey (1933, p. 9) who reminds us that reflectivity and/or reflective action incorporates active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further consequences to which it leads.

Regarding my position on reflective teaching, I enmesh several theories into a cohesive framework thus embracing various schools of thoughts, thereby enhancing me to become a successful reflective teacher. A cohesive framework brings in a wealth of choices to make when I want to teach any given topic. This approach ignites the students' intellect, keeps them motivated, and maintains their curiosity suspended. As a critical reflective teacher, I am sensitive to developmentally appropriate practices that are grounded in the empirical evidence prescribed by NAEYC (1998b); the works of Piaget (1983); Bruner (1978); Kamii (1985); Vygotsky (1978); and many other constructivists. By injecting a dose of constructivism in my approaches, my students zeal to learn elevates, and this notion fosters their self concept, hence loosening all fear of learning and dismantling the chains of intellectual bondage. There is an African saying which states that at any given situation, a learner's body might be bound by an unbreakable rope void of physical freedom. However, no matter what, the mind of that person will still remain free. Given this analogy, every teacher ought to critique a host of thoughts regarding freedom in the art of learning.

This brings us to another level of critical reflective thinking: “Why do some students come to terms or accept their bondage?” Here I mean instances like attaining poor grades despite the good learning environment, or absenteeism despite all the availability of resources like school buses, incompleteness of homework despite the availability of well-lit homes and school, lack of interest to read books despite the numerous books packed to the brim in the US libraries, the lack of enthusiasm to be in school despite the availability of financial aid, the anger vented against some teachers to the extent of bringing concealed guns aimed at shooting within the learning institutions, submitting written work for grading that is full of grammar and spelling errors despite the availability of computers (for spell check) in the schools, libraries, as well as students’ homes to some extent, the rage vented against the professor who genuinely gives a D or F for poor quality work, and the list could go on and on.

It is indeed to ask ourselves this question: “Do any or some students out there lose measures of their freedom when their ropes are cut?” Reader, I am sure you might be wondering where I am trying to drive you. Let me make my argument clearer than the ambiguity my questions might be portraying. Let us say that the state or US Congress approves to pass a bill that undercuts funding to programs like Music, Art, Physical Education, Early Childhood Education, and Home Economics (despite all the obesity, teen pregnancies, school gun violence, diabetes, low self-esteem that we find among US school children these days), Special Education (despite all the good we benefit from inclusion, and No Child Left Behind Act), and others not mentioned that might impact students’ morale in the classroom.

For instance, if a teacher is an Early Childhood Education instructor, and his/her students who are majoring in that area read in the newspapers that education funding has been drastically reduced, that teacher-educator might end up faced with a class full of demoralized students, who might no longer see the purpose of majoring in Early Childhood Education. Some students might choose to come and sleep in class because in the eyes of those students, “school is dead”. Consequently, those affected students might end up failing to find the connection between “mind, soul and body”. When situations like this occur, successful teaching and reciprocal learning become somewhat toxic.

On a more positive tone, there is need to recognize those students who enjoy learning despite the odds, and those teachers who go that extra mile to make teaching and learning an exciting experience. How does that happen? I believe that the best trick to achieve optimum teaching-learning results is to engage the mind-body relationships when working with students. Among the ancient Greek philosophers, there were often many more serious discussions about the existence of mind-body (or mind-matter) relationships. A nineteenth century teacher summed these up with a quip: What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind. This essay on the art of teaching should be read with the same enthusiasm that not only went into writing, but that was derived from the ancient Greek philosophers.

There is little question that deficiencies in the art of teaching, lack of dynamic approaches that inspire students’ love of learning, and lack of teaching experience are all closely related to the downward spiral of students’ performance and learning. One of the bequeathing questions to ponder especially in institutions of early, middle, or higher learning would be: “How are your program goals reflected in the classroom?”

In response to the question I have posed, I always aim at producing the “whole student”. This approach helps me to shift the attention of the teacher away from teacher-centeredness, to a constructivist standpoint of student-centeredness. It is all about what the student is, and what he/she needs from the safe, learning environment in order to thrive. For that reason, my teaching strategies focus on portraying the student-teacher as the creative self, emotional self, physical self, cognitive self, and social self. I value a learning environment that fosters self-control, emotional growth, mental alertness, and a healthy environment that considers ways to sustain and cope with crises that prevail in institutions of higher and lower learning.

A teacher must be a good role model in terms of coping with aggression and in assisting to empower students with high self-esteem. Research study in this field indicates that individuals with low self esteem experience the world as a dark gloomy place, are filled with anger, hate, threat, insecurity, and they tend to focus on failure of success, and problems instead of challenges, difficulties instead of possibilities (Chigubu, 2000; Smith, 1988). Further, an African study of orphans ages 3 to 18 years whose parents died of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe found that “individuals who were unhappy, worried, angry, withdrawn, and with low self esteem tended to be more suicidal than others (Chigubu, 2000). Moreover, an English study of young adolescents found that individuals who were anxious, depressed, neurotic, with low self esteem tend to be more prejudiced than others. They have to a greater extent chosen the cultural symbols of racism as a mechanism to protect their identity, or enhancing their view of themselves (Begley, Verma, Mallick, & Young, 1979 p. 174).

That brings me to another approach, which I utilize in my teaching to promote students’ love for learning. In my teaching, I immensely incorporate and proudly affirm culture, which is partly grounded in humanistic tradition. I am sensitive to the fact that students are good. They deserve to be respected as people who should be treated as unique individuals. Hence my philosophy is to involve students in the learning process and at the same time, affirming their culture. One might ask this question: “How does culture come into the picture and why?”

The answer is plain and simple. I agree with scholars who state: “Time for multicultural education is right now” (York, 1991, p.13). Culture has tremendous influence on students who come into any teacher’s learning environment. Multicultural education is important to students because they deserve to be in programs where it is absolutely safe for them to be “who they are”. I strongly advocate that students deserve to know the truth about them, to learn to be constantly on cloud nine in terms of mega-motivation, and never to feel like victims. This notion is echoed by the late Ogbu (2003) who stressed that lower black achievement in Shaker Heights, Ohio was due to deeply entrenched cultural attitudes which deemphasize, and sometimes disparage educational pursuits. Ogbu (2003) carried out a research study to examine the reasons why black students in Shaker Heights, Ohio continued to perform less well than their white peers despite the fact that they all came from somewhat very similar socio-economic backgrounds. Ogbu went on to say, “What amazes me is that these kids who come from homes of doctors and lawyers are not thinking like their parents. They are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models (Ogbu 2003, p. 97).

This research shows us that culture is dynamic, and culture is also very influential as part of student growth and development, hence educators and learners would benefit if

the learning environment is culturally responsive. Affirming culture promotes positive self-concept, prepares for the future, prevents isolation, cultivates acceptance, discourages fear of differences, and discourages or eliminates denial. In any given subject or topic, educators should try by all means to avoid “tourist approaches” and try by all means to inject culture into their lesson content. I have found out that culture teaches students to recognize the beauty, value, and contribution of each and every student. For instance, if a student with two languages comes to the educator’s classroom, obviously that student will come with an accent. To some, that student might be seen as someone with a handicap, which might lead some educators to patronize him/her. To others, that student might be seen as someone who does not speak “good English” and right from the word “Go!”, that student is perceived as an underachiever who deserves nothing but a C grade or below, no matter how hard that student works. The outcry here is that we should not despise other cultures that are somewhat different from ours, and we must negate attaching a stigma to students whose accent sound like the English language is being slaughtered. Instead, educators should set the tone in their classrooms, and embrace diversity with open, warm arms.

The approaches I particularly use when incorporating culture into my teaching include the human relations approach, multicultural approach, single group studies approach, anti-bias education approach, and the bicultural or bilingual education approach. Choosing a particular approach for a specific topic at a given time varies depending on the subject matter per given day. Remember, the idea is to keep students highly motivated, and to be intensely involved in the love for the learning, so it is very crucial to be able to diversify the approaches to suit the various students who might come with various learning disabilities. There is a popular saying in Zimbabwe, which goes: “Variety is the spice of life” (author unknown). Some approaches are incompatible with particular topics and it all depends on the order of the day; as highlighted by Sleeter and Grant (1993), that it is best to try one approach at a time.

I am sure some of us eager to implement multicultural education into their teaching might ponder: “How and where do we start?” The answer is that we could start by igniting our intellect by just being curious in understanding the process. This is done by allowing plenty of time to go through in-service, and reading a variety of books on culture and pedagogy. The challenge is vested upon the idea of starting by using what we already know, and by being able to change “things” first, and not to change people first. According to York (1991, p.32), “It is easier to change things than to change people”. Things that an educator might change include the resource materials, information that goes on the bulletin, stereotypes that might be depicted by the type of visual aids that are in the classroom, the information that goes on the handouts that are given to students and many other things that might be culturally intrusive. To avoid feeling lost, alienated, burned out, or getting rapidly disillusioned when trying out new ventures on culture, the best thing to do is to find support and avoid trying to do it alone. Networking is key to successful teaching and learning.

Why is networking important? Well, reader, the reason is that teaching is the people’s profession. Students definitely emulate and will get inspired when exposed to an educator who does not take teaching as “simply a job”, but a teacher who is

achievement driven, and a teacher that leaves a legacy long after completion of their work.

As I work with students I also apply theoretical foundations that influence teaching. To be able to create a dynamic learning environment, I believe a teacher should incorporate various theorists. I am a strong supporter of Comenius (1592 – 1670) who believed that education is the primary means for improving society. With this view in mind, when I give assignments to my students, I give them tasks that are geared on improving the society. For example, I ask them to identify societal problems within their neighborhoods, and find solutions to alleviate those problems. This invokes critical thinking, which is crucial to students' success in learning.

The other practical approach that I find rewarding in the art of teaching is to keep my students happy. I borrow this school of thinking from John Locke (1632 – 1704), an English philosopher who argued convincingly that the human mind at birth is a slate (*tabula rasa*), and not a repository of innate ideas placed there by God (McNergney & Herbert, 2001). Locke proposed that children learn by interacting with the environment, through imitation. I have tangible proof from the experience I have had with the different cohorts of students I have worked with that good teachers teach by example and suggestion, and not by coercion. This is a principle that is backed up by empirical evidence through research compiled by the National Association of the Education of Young Children which is an organization that endorses developmentally appropriate practices in learning environments (1992).

Another practical approach that I utilize to keep my students happy is the holistic model, which is a useful model that represents the universe as a unitary, interactive, developing organism. It is doubtless that unity is found in multiplicity, being is found in becoming, and constancy is found in change (Reese and Overton, 1970). Students thrive in a learning environment that is becoming, constant, and which has room for change. Dewey's thinking is enmeshed in emphasizing the role of interest, motivation, and effort as part of students' vehicle to solving own problems. For instance, when utilizing John Dewey's (1910) philosophy I assign a question to each of my students at the end of the class session. Each question would be based on the chapter to be worked during the next session that we would meet. Students would have the freedom to work on the questions during their own spare time, and not under duress. When we meet in the session that follows, we engage in instructional conversation, which is teaching through conversation. Each student would be required to give a report back on what they read about, and the classmates would critique, add comments, and verify by demystifying ambiguities that other group members might not understand. That way, every student would have equal opportunity to share his/her own findings and ideas and equal time to engage in instructional conversation which allows all to participate verbally in class, a very powerful tool for language and literacy development.

I learned from experience that if some students are not invited to participate in class discussions, the semester would go by without ever hearing a word from them. It is very important to avoid ignoring the introverts. This approach helps students to generate student-centered questions, and in the long run, I find that in my classes there is democratic commitment to the group, commitment to the subject matter, commitment to the profession, teacher-student commitment, and commitment to the school and

community. I find that when I hold such forums in my classes, some “at-risk” students would feel at home, and I have had situations where students confessed that coming to my class is like going into therapy (Cindy, a McNeese State University student, 2004). From this kind of feedback, one can deduce the fact that effective pedagogy involves contextualization: which is the art of making meaning in the classroom by connecting school to students’ lives. If a student comes to you as the teacher, and confesses that “...Aha! Definitely by coming to your class, it is therapy for me”, one might conclude that there should be some issues going on at home or in the student’s life. When she comes to class, and sees the connection between school and her whole life issues, that is contextualization at its best.

This is in line with the NEA’s preamble to its Code of Ethics, which describes characteristics of teachers as professionals as follows:

The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and the nurture of the democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all. The educator accepts the responsibility to adhere to the highest ethical standards (1975, p.3, Fig. 1.1).

There is a strong relationship between teacher’s thought and action in the art of teaching. Teacher planning, assessment, reflection and problem solving effectiveness can be impacted immensely by the educator’s proactive, post active and interactive thoughts. Teacher planning involves proactive and post active thoughts. It is therefore important that teachers keep abreast with effective pedagogical content, which they should utilize to effectively think through their schemata each time they come to class to either teach, supervise, or assess the students.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the fact that as a critical reflective teacher, enmeshing a cohesive framework from a variety of models with effective pedagogy and learning defines a very strong and innovative pillar for my endeavors to teach motivated students who would then look forward to come to school, and sustain immense love for learning. I am aware of the fact that; “The mistakes of a medical doctor, we dig a grave and bury. However, the mistakes of a teacher live on to roam on the streets” (Chigubu, 2004). However, mention should be made that we should not ignore the fact that the differences that exist between a teacher’s culture and that of individual students can simultaneously create conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as harmony and peace (Chigubu, 2004).

With that perspective in mind, given my critical reflective teaching that occurs within premises of a cohesive framework of a myriad of various models, I employ the five standards for effective teaching as spelled out by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence (2002). These standards are as follows: a) joint productive activity between teacher and students in planning and assessment, b) language and literacy development across the curriculum, c) contextualization:

connecting school to students' lives, c) challenging activities and teaching complex thinking, d) instructional conversation which is teaching through conversation.

I present critical reflective teaching and learning strategies that I borrowed from theorists like Bandura, Montessori, Boyd, Gardner, Skinner, Lerner, Bronfenbrenner, and many others. I have also borrowed from the Indigenous Ways of Knowing from Africa through Oral Traditions, Indigenous Ways of Knowing I picked up when I lived and taught among the native people of Alaska, and the latest I have learned from Educational Macromedia and Multimedia Designs that definitely make critical reflective teaching and learning motivational for students.

References

- Bruner, J. S. (1978). Learning the Mother Tongue. *Human Nature*, 1(9), 42-49.
- Bullough, R. V. (1989). Teacher Education and Teacher Reflectivity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 15 – 21.
- Chigubu, M. (2000). Exploring the Self-Esteem of Orphans whose Parents Died of HIV/AIDS, Examined Through the Kinship Caregivers' Economic Well-Being, Social Support Networks, and Child Rearing Practices in Zimbabwe. Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI. Michigan College Press.
- Chigubu, M. (2004). Teaching Early Childhood Education In English to both Non-Natives and Native Alaskan Students in Rural Alaska: The African Perspective. *International Journal of Scholarly Academic Intellectual Diversity*, 2(8), 3.
- CREDE. (2002) Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence The Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy.
- Copeland, W., Birmingham, C., De La Cruz, E., & Lewin, B. (1993). The Reflective Practitioner in Teaching: Towards a Research Agenda. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9(4), 347 – 359.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath
- Francis, D. (1995). The Reflective Journal: A Window to Pre-service Teachers' Practical Knowledge. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(3), 229-242.
- Kamii, C. (1985). *Young Children Reinvent Arithmetic: Implications of Piaget's theory*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Macpherson, I. (1994). It's Time for a Total Curriculum Approach to Pre-service Teacher Education Programs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 19(2), 15 – 24.
- National Education Association (1999). *Beginning Teacher Coaching Program*. Available online <http://www.nea.org/newunion/mtdiablo.html>
- Ogbu, J. O. (2003). Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Engagement. In *The Journal of Blacks in Higher*

- Education, 41(2), 97.
- Piaget, J. (1983). Piaget's Theory. In P.H. Mussen (Series Ed.) & W. Kessen (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (4th ed.): Vol. 1. History, Theory, and Methods. New York: Wiley.
- Roth, R. A. (1989). Preparing the Reflective Practitioner: Transforming the Apprentice through the Dialectic. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 31-35.
- Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (1993). *Making Choices for Multicultural Education : Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender* (2nd ed.). New York: Merrill.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- York, S. (1991). *Roots & Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs*. Red Leaf Press, Minnesota.