

Using Reflective Writing to Explore Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes towards Social Justice Caused by COVID-19 Mask Mandates

JaDora Sailes Moore

Bayh College of Education, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, USA

Email: jsailes@indstate.edu

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Abstract

Reflection is a powerful medium for promoting professional growth and improvement. In an educational setting, reflective practice enables teachers to become aware of their core beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. The underlying premise of attending to teacher's dispositional characteristics is the development of attitudes and beliefs essential for ensuring the social and emotional well-being of all students. Given the ever-changing demographics in schools and society, it is critical that teacher education programs consider strategies, which expose pre-service teachers to experiences that challenge existing beliefs about those who are culturally different from themselves. Attitudes and beliefs about diversity have profound influences on teacher's judgments and actions. The purpose of this article to provide a conceptual framework for using reflective writing as a tool towards the development of dispositions needed to support the complexity and diversity of students that pre-service teachers will encounter in their future classrooms. Reflective writing samples from 15 students enrolled in a college multicultural education class detail the reflective writing process and offer insights on how the practice contributes to the development of dispositions and skills, which promote culturally responsive and equity-oriented pedagogy.

Keywords

Teacher Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Reflection, Diversity, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Reflective practice is an essential tool for teachers to become aware of their core beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. Further, it offers a pathway

for goals towards improvement in their professional practice. As posited by Reagan et al. (2000), “good teaching requires reflection, rational, and conscious decision making” (p. 20). The underlying premise to attend to teachers’ dispositional characteristics is the development of attitudes and beliefs essential for ensuring the social and emotional well-being of all students (Stall et al., 2010). Moreover, it is a moral and ethical obligation to pay attention to the dispositional behaviors of teacher candidates, as their beliefs are powerful in how they view and engage with future students who are culturally different (Villegas, 2007). Researchers (Howe & Lisi, 2014; McGuire et al., 2009; Clayton & Ash, 2005) have noted that reflection becomes a critical skill for functioning effectively in diverse realities when promoted by challenging assumptions, testing the logic of conclusions and considering multiple perspectives. As such, reflective writing can be instrumental in interrogating ideologies related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability levels, and languages and can serve as an agent of change in acquiring those dispositions needed to support the complexity and diversity of all students (Avalos, 2011). Most importantly, reflective writing when coupled with critical pedagogy (e.g. readings, discussions, videos, etc.) can serve as an effective vehicle for penetrating colonized minds situated in a privileged and narrow perspective towards culturally different “others”.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the use of reflective writing can facilitate pre-service teachers’ understanding about the formation of beliefs and attitudes towards those who are racially and ethnically different and how this knowledge serves as a professional development tool for acquiring the dispositions needed to support the complexity and diversity of those they encounter in the classroom setting and daily lives. In this instance, a pre-service teacher is a student enrolled in a teacher preparation program who must successfully complete degree requirements including course work and field experience before being awarded a teaching license (Kukari, 2004).

The topic of “mandated mask wearing” will serve as an example for interrogating ideologies related to race and social justice. This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge base on how to prepare pre-service teachers to become culturally responsive and inclusive professionals through reflective writing.

2. Face Masks during COVID-19 Pandemic

On February 11, 2020 the World Health Organization announced COVID-19 posed a serious threat to the global public. To date, COVID-19 is responsible for nearly 8 million deaths globally with over 1 million of those deaths occurring in the United States (WHO, 2023). During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a piece of cloth weighing less than one ounce with two bands at two ends used to cover the mouth and nose to prevent the spread of the coronavirus became a source of controversy often resulting in verbal exchanges and physical altercations. Political figures contributed to the polarizing of facemask. The then President Donald Trump politicalized mask wearing when he announced, “somehow, I don’t see it for myself” (...wearing a mask) and faithfully appeared in

public without a mask. Conversely, the presumptive democratic presidential nominee, Joe Biden indicated he would, “do everything possible to make it required that people have to wear masks in public.” (Aratani, 2020; Bromwich, 2020). Not surprisingly, the debate over mandated mask wearing divided a nation. A poll taken by the Pew Research Center revealed that democrats were more likely to say they wear masks than republicans (Aratani, 2020). The debate of wearing a mask has historical roots. During the Spanish flu pandemic (1918-1920), there was opposition to wearing mask in San Francisco (Taylor & Asmundson, 2021). An Anti-Mask League formed to argue and protest that masks were ineffective, inconvenient, and violated civil liberties (Taylor & Asmundson, 2021). The 1919 anti-mask movement was short-lived and limited to a single city. However, the justifications for not wearing a mask reflect present day sentiments; 1) Not believing they are effective; 2) Beliefs that masks violate civil liberties; 3) Beliefs that masks could possibly be harmful; and 4) Beliefs that the threat of COVID-19 has been exaggerated (Taylor & Asmundson, 2021). In short, mask wearing has become a national “culture war” whereby no one is exempt and one is exempt and all have an opinion.

3. The Process of Reflective Writing

Reflection asks students to engage with their own learning processes by thinking about and commenting on them (Amicucci, 2011). Further, reflection asks students to make decisions and commitments about where their learning process will go in the future and how they will move in that direction (Amicucci, 2011). In the author’s multicultural education course, students begin to develop their own reflective and critical thinking skills. During this developmental process, critical reflection is a multi-layered analysis that permits one to make sense of complex experiences by thinking about their assumptions and biases; framing problems of practice through multiple professional perspectives; critiquing their frames of reference from broader social, political, and moral perspectives; and making commitments and taking action that is informed by such reframing. The scaffolding of this process helps students establish a framework for making thoughtful and purposeful responses to a particular incident (i.e. reading, video, classroom activity, etc.). Kolb’s (1984) and Schön’s (1983) models of reflective writing served as models for the multicultural education class. Below is a description of steps adopted for the reflective writing process.

A. Description of the Critical Incident

Completely describe the critical incident selected as the focus for this entry. Your entry should include sufficient detail so that the reader can easily understand your focus. This section should be purely descriptive. Simply explain what you saw or experienced or the way something worked. The description should be about two paragraphs in length.

B. Feelings

In this section, briefly describe your feelings in relation to the event. Your

feelings are emotional responses whereas your thoughts are cognitive responses. Therefore, do not mix your thoughts and feelings (e.g. happiness, anger, frustration, etc.). For example, do not write: “I feel that I should have been more concerned.” This sentence describes a thought not a feeling. Your feelings should be candid and written in short sentences or bullets.

C. Thoughts

In this section, describe initial feelings in relation to the thoughts that undergird your emotions (e.g. I was *shocked* to see how disrespectful someone could be towards a person simply doing their job). Essentially, you are trying to convey what you were thinking at the point in time in which the event occurred.

D. Deconstruction

This section invites you to analyze your first thinking about the critical incident and to explore from multiple perspectives.

D1. Underlying Assumptions

Study your description, feelings, and thoughts for assumption and biases. Ask yourself what assumptions or biases are embedded in the way you perceived the event. Remember that finding assumptions or biases is OK. We all have biases and assumptions that are sometimes difficult to recognize or reconcile. In this assumption-checking step, you are NOT required to find every assumption.

D2. Multiple Perspectives

Once you have identified your assumptions, reflect on them. What would be the different perspectives of those involved in the event?

D3. Further Analysis

In what ways, has your socialization influenced your description, feelings, or thoughts? Consider the influences of your cultural background—including the culture you grew up in and the things that were exposed to and not exposed to during your childhood, adolescent, college, or professional experiences.

E. Reframing and Taking Action

The last step of this critical reflection process is the most important. It is the proactive step. What do you see as the new possibilities arising from this situation; how might you apply personal discoveries to future professional practices.

4. Methods

4.1. Setting and Participants

Samples of written reflections were derived from students enrolled in the author’s asynchronous online multicultural education course. However, non-education majors (i.e. speech pathology, nursing, criminal justice) were also represented in this multicultural education course, which resides in a College of Education at a large Midwestern public university in the United States. Background information gathered from students’ Cultural Autobiographies revealed that study participants’ (15) identified as white, attended mostly rural schools, Christian beliefs dictated family and social life, and the student or his/her parent is the first to attend college.

4.2. Description of the Multicultural Education Course

The conceptual framework of the course holds a social justice orientation; whereby over a 16-week period, the students participated in a variety of learning experiences (i.e. readings, discussions, videos, and case studies) which addressed various dimensions of cultural diversity and social justice. The learning was designed to encourage students to engage with and unpack academic literature and make sense of this in relation to their own experiences of identity, diversity, and difference (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010). Furthermore, the course critically examines the nature of diversity itself, fosters sensitivity and respect for diverse learners, and helps individuals to recognize similarities and differences in patterns of development, communication, and learning in a multicultural society. In terms of professional education goals, the course is designed to:

- 1) Increase self-awareness about one's own cultural background.
- 2) Learn about the values, beliefs, and behaviors of various ethnic, and cultural, and groups.
- 3) Identify personal cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs about diverse populations and become aware of their impact on behavior.
- 4) Assess the impact of culture on individual, family, education, and societal interactions.
- 5) Develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will facilitate one's ability to work and communicate more effectively with individuals who are culturally different from oneself.

4.3. Procedure

The instructor provided a YouTube video to serve as the “critical incident” for the reflective writing assignment. The video clip titled, “video shows a woman shout racial slurs at Black cashier after refusing to wear mask at bakery employee” was produced by an NBC News (2021) affiliate. The incident occurred March 2021 at the height of the pandemic on the lower east side of Manhattan, New York at a bagel shop. In the video clip, an African American bakery employee notifies an unmasked woman who appears to be white that she must follow the store's policy and wear a mask. She retaliates and responds to the employee with racial slurs multiple times. The customer later explains that she was “just having a bad day”. In an interview, the employee stated he reminded the woman kindly that she needed to wear a mask and in return, she questioned whom he was to be asking her to do so. The video concludes with the reporting news team attempting to contact the woman for an interview, which she declines. After students watch the video, they are required to submit a written reflective assignment following the established guidelines described earlier. Commentary noted in key findings offers insights to the formation of beliefs and attitudes about the critical incident and implications for future professional practice.

5. Key Findings

To gain insights into how participants' socialization from childhood to present day influenced their beliefs and attitudes towards the critical incident of "mandated mask wearing", content contained in section Deconstruction "Further Analysis" was examined. Respectively, commentary from "Reframing and Taking Action" offers a glimpse into potential future professional practices arising from the examination of assumptions, testing the logic of conclusions, and considering multiple perspectives during the reflective practice process. Below are samples of participant's commentary in each respective area.

5.1. Deconstructing Beliefs

"I was very sheltered child, and I come from a family that is very old-fashioned both in beliefs and in the ways they think society should work. My family and even me sometimes profile people based on race, and I have heard many outdated words thrown around in my family conversations...This is all stereotyping that society needs to leave behind."

"I believe that all through growing up I had a very big lack of exposure to people of different races and ethnicities. My school system that I went to was 82% white and the towns around me were also not diverse either. I never grew up around people who were not white and did get exposed to other cultures. The only real exposure I had to racism when I was growing up when our school's rugby team held up the Nazi salute for a picture in our high school. After seeing that I started to understand that there are people out there with these hidden agendas...the team all got suspended for one week and they all went on a ski trip (during the suspension)."

"I was raised in a conservative city. In my hometown, if you were not white, you were most likely to be Hispanic. There were rarely any Asian, Black, Native American, or other races of people that lived in my town and went to our schools. It was not until 4th grade that I met a child that was not white or Hispanic. The only place I saw Black people was on TV, and my parents and grandparent implanted negative connotations in my thinking. I think this caused my biases...which I believe that I am almost rid of thanks to the experiences I have had in college thus far."

"Although I may not have not experienced as much diversity as others may have in our early childhood years, I have experienced a vast amount of diversity in my three years of attending college after high school. I would say that my life experiences, maturing, and becoming more educated has helped me have a more worldly perspective and a deeper understanding...I understand that I will never understand the struggles that Black men and women face to this day, but I do understand the frustration and anger they must feel when situations, like the one presented to us, arise."

"I am a white female, so I will never know what it is like to be in black skin. Though I am white, I stand up for all Black lives through times of hate. I am

from a small rural community with a low percentage of Black families, but I have grown up being taught that you love and treat everyone equally no matter their race or their skin color. I have witnessed racism in my own life such as teachers making racist jokes and adult family members saying hurtful words about people of color. In times like that, the best thing you can do is speak up and make your voice heard... Sometimes it is hard to speak up to people especially when it is people you are supposed to look up to.”

“I may be more bias than others as I do have a Black husband and two biracial daughters and I think of one of them enduring those racial slurs and get completely livid and upset thinking it could happen to them.”

“As a child, I went to a school district with 99% white population. I feel I am extremely uneducated when it comes to different races and cultures. Growing up in a town like this caused me to become sheltered from the world outside my little town. After going to college and meeting new people of different ethnicities and from different backgrounds, I have become less sheltered.”

“Growing up, my mother was extremely strict about making sure I was polite and aware of the impact my words had on other people. Due to this, I am unforgiving when it comes to people speaking to other in insensitive and demeaning ways. I grew up in a very white community. I have not been exposed to many Black individuals beyond surface level interactions. This certainly affects the way I view the video as well as how I interpret the way the employee must have been feeling. I cannot truly understand how being in that situation must have felt.”

“Looking back, my predominantly white upbringing and my first exposure to social justice being through an entirely white lens played a role in how I react and expect others to react to injustice. I was taught to fight for what I believe in and make noise until I forced people to listen, but I was never taught that for some minorities that can mean a death sentence. I knew there were risks, but the ways I am marginalized are almost entirely invisible, whereas people of color, especially Black people, have no way to hide their marginalization. They cannot hide their race like I can hide my sexuality.”

“I have always been around white people, especially white women that casually throw slurs around like it is a competition and then go and hide behind the façade of going to church and posting bible passages on social media. I don’t know if I am going to stop thinking of these people in such black and white manner, but it does help me realize that I am not approaching everyone with the same amount of respect nor empathy.”

5.2. Reframing and Taking Action

Further analysis of reflective writings revealed the students who are white and mostly attended rural schools prior to college had given little consideration to

the future professional implications of their current beliefs and attitudes towards acts of social injustice. Reflective writings suggested the “critical incident” heightened a sense of duty to master effective professional strategies and skills to create a welcoming and safe environment in their place of employment. Their writings asserted,

“This video has helped me see that I do not know all the experiences that people go through. I will never know how people feel when they are being racially targeted and that I can’t assume that they have the same experiences as me in life. I want to be a therapist...my job is to be there for people and the problems they are going through. I need to not assume that I know more about their experiences than them. I need to be able to not let my assumptions cloud over other people’s experiences so I can truly hear other people’s troubles and occurrences.”

“This video helped me to realize the biases that I have as an individual, and also helped me to realize that even when I don’t always see it, people of color are still treated poorly. In my future as a social worker and therapist, I will most definitely come across people that are a different race than me. It is important for me to know that their experiences have not been the same as mine, and that their lives have been made harder because of the color of their skin while mine has not.”

“In the future, I plan to work on speaking up more in a situation like that because being silent is the same as condoning the disrespectful behavior. As a teacher in the future, I plan to be aware of discriminatory practices, and I will try my best to do everything in my power to make sure every one of my students is heard and feels important.”

“I realize that I judge a book by its cover. In my future career, I hope to own a business. I have to learn not to create a judgement on someone as soon as they walk thru the door...I have to learn to take a step back and hear people out.”

“As an educator, I know I will have many students, parents, and even colleagues with similar behavior to the customer in the bakery store. My first response cannot be to shut them down when encountering them. As educators, we are held at a higher standard. As I continue my degree, I need to understand how to quell conflict and promote empathy and kindness.”

“This video reinforced in my mind how important it will be for me to be inclusive in my classroom and to make all students, regardless of their race, feel loved and respected on all occasions. It helps me realize the steps I need to take in my classroom to teach children that we need to treat everyone around us with respect and compassion despite their race, gender, sexuality, and more. Children learn by example and I know that as a teacher it will be my responsibility to show children the correct way to treat others, as some of the students do not have role models at home...this video brought to light the realization that in just a few short years I will be teaching the fu-

ture of our world how to properly act around others.”

“Now that I have recognized my tendency to view social justice through a predominantly white lens, I can apply that knowledge to my career as an educator. I know that as a white person I can fight for things with a ferocity by Black colleagues may not be able to due to their race, and while I will always need to be mindful that I am not speaking over them, I do have an opportunity to use my privilege to elevate their voices.”

“I realize I have an idealistic world view. I wish all people could treat others with kindness and refrain from using insensitive language. However, I also realize society is far from achieving that and each person must make an effort. In order to take action, I must become more educated and acquainted with people that are different from myself. Understanding an individual’s personal and cultural background can help foster a broader world view which would help everyone both at personal and professional levels.”

“As a future educator, it is clear to me how important inclusivity in the classroom is after watching this video. It will be my job to make sure everyone feels included and worthy...I believe hate is taught, so as teachers it is vital that we show love in our future classrooms.”

“I am shocked by this video that people feel entitled to talk to others that way. Due to watching this video and having worked in the service industry for ten years, I will continue to appreciate those who work in the service industry and treat them with kindness which is the most important thing to do.”

6. Discussion and Conclusion

It would be difficult to create an exhaustive list noting the benefits of reflective writing in professional practice. However, it is certain that the interrogation of attitudes and beliefs towards cultural diversity is not only imperative for teachers but for any profession. Professionals in all disciplines must be equipped with the ability to rigorously reflect on their practice in an ever-changing global society and manage the complex technical requirements of professional practice (McGuire et al., 2009). The fore-mentioned student commentary offers insights to the development of beliefs and attitudes towards those who are culturally different. As noted earlier, the benefits of reflective writing are numerous. However, based on reflective writing samples from the present study, students enrolled in the multicultural education class are better positioned to adopt dispositions and skills, which support culturally responsive and equity-oriented pedagogy because of reflective practice. The introduction of reflective writing early in teacher preparation programs is imperative to the success of teachers and the students they encounter in their classrooms. As posited by Cooper (2013), reflection plays a critical role in effective teaching and represents a career-long developmental process, as effective teachers must utilize their knowledge, skills, experiences, and dispositions to continue to learn and improve their teaching (p. 13).

In conclusion, it is vital that teachers reflect upon and examine their own teaching, reflect upon their students, and critically examine their own biases and assumptions to support equity and engage in culturally responsive pedagogy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). In schools, reflective practitioners will be better positioned to create culturally responsive and “socially just” classrooms which are evidenced by rigorous subject matter, differentiated pedagogy, an ethic of care, equitable inclusion, and social action pedagogy whereby teaching encourages the development of democratic citizens who understand and engage social issues (Kose, 2007; Banks, 2006).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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