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Little Rascals in the *City of God*: Film Reflection and Multicultural Education

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Abstract
Research has highlighted the factionalizing of pre-service teachers into two groups: Ethnic Minorities who understand diversity, and Whites who do not. In an exploration of the relationship of this distinction to the resources pre-service teachers actually bring into diversity courses, this study utilizes an innovative instructional strategy, "Film Reflection And Multicultural Education" (FRAME) to access the cultural assumptions in pre-service teachers' understanding of "others." Using FRAME, data analysis of 133 pre-service teacher reflections revealed distinctions that fell within expectations related to pre-service teacher ethnicity, but also uncovered variations within ethnic groups. Findings suggest that bifurcating pre-service teachers along ethnic lines, therefore, does little to advance our understanding of the resources with which students enter teacher education programs. Assuring diversity instructors recognize the capacity of all their pre-service teachers to understand diversity is critical to protecting the rights of students (of all ages) to an equitable education. The results of this study show FRAME can help us achieve this goal.

Keywords: diversity, teacher education, equity, reflection, film

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Recent studies suggest that although diversity instruction is predicated on recognizing that preservice teachers (PSTs) enter the field with different types of experiences and understandings of diversity (McAllister & Irvine, 2000), "difference" often becomes a codeword for "deficient" when used in conjunction with White PSTs. According to Lowenstein (2009), statistics detailing the "demographic imperative" and the homogenization of "White" PSTs serve to reduce them to an undifferentiated mass – the same type of homogenization process that diversity research opposes. Other researchers have also noted the irony of diversity instructors who jockey to recognize the resources ethnic minorities bring into classrooms while neglecting to see that White PSTs also bring in resources of their own (Reganspan, 2002). When PSTs of any ethnic background find their beliefs denigrated or ignored (at the very moment when diversity instructors want them to be open and consider other perspectives), appreciating diversity can be difficult, and assuring equity for their future students, perilous. Instead of assuming that White PSTs enter teacher education programs with no resources, Lazar (2004) advocates finding out what these teachers really do bring into classrooms.

Valuing what PSTs come into classrooms with is not without precedent, of course. Multiple researchers have identified the significant role experiences and understandings play in shaping student learning (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Dewey, 1938/1997; Freire, 1970/1993; Lowenstein 2009; Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008). In relation to diversity instruction specifically, researchers have highlighted the importance of acknowledging what students bring in as a resource (Lowenstein, 2009), as a filter for how they subsequently consider new material (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Kagan, 1992), and as a key mechanism for diminishing resistance to diversity instruction (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005). Even though the literature is mixed as to how much growth is possible in a single diversity course (Garmon, 2004; Brown, 2004), researchers agree that the likelihood of growth increases and resistance decreases when students interrogate their beliefs and confront their biases (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Banks, 1994). Some researchers have even gone so far as to identify reflection as the critical component for assuring equity, charging that "if programs fail to address teachers' personal beliefs, particularly those related to diversity and diverse others, it is unlikely that schools will ever meet the challenge of equity and excellence for all students" (Pohan, 1996 p. 67). Consequently, really understanding diversity is contingent upon instructors recognizing the distinct cultures, discourses, and experiences *all* PSTs bring into the classroom (Weedon, 1999).

Problematically, however, diversity instruction is not generally offered in a way that resonates with those described as most in need of this instruction – middle and upper middle class, White PSTs (Lowenstein, 2009). In other words, diversity instruction can be as "foreign" as diversity interaction for those who make up the bulk of the entering teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Shrestha, 2006; Woolfolk-Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). Asking these students to reflect upon issues related to diversity can prompt intellectual and emotional dissonance as individual biases, stereotypes, and prejudices are challenged by the personal nature of the inquiry process. Merely introducing these concepts can prompt discomfort as students struggle to locate themselves on a cultural spectrum they have not "needed" to think about previously; many White PSTs who are unfamiliar with diversity have

never really considered themselves as "raced" or "cultured" (LaDuke, 2009). Instead of engendering educational growth, dissonance prompted by reflecting on diversity can result in "emotional fallout" manifested in feelings of guilt and despair that hinder rather than facilitate development (Boler, 2004).

In an effort to better understand how teacher education programs can build upon the resources all PSTs bring into diversity instruction while avoiding the sort of dissonance that hinders rather than helps learning (Erikson, 1968), this study examines reflections from two groups of students (White and Ethnic Minority) on the subject of diversity itself. Using a new instructional strategy – "Film Reflection And Multicultural Education" (FRAME) – built upon viewing the "other" in films produced outside the student's country of origin, this study looks at what PSTs see when asked to view difference. Film's simultaneous function as document and representation, its symbolic richness, and its accessible familiarity make it a useful tool for prompting such reflection (Bluestone, 2000; Summerfield, 1993). Indeed, the very openness of films provides for a range of interpretation, evaluation, and reflection (Kuzma & Haney, 2001). Given these general parameters, the use of "foreign films" can push the educational envelope even further, providing exposure to narratives, experiences, and cultures otherwise unavailable to many students in a way that is both familiar and, well, *foreign*.

Review of Literature

According to Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002), diversity instruction works best at the college level because college students are at the right place developmentally to understand their relationship to the world and thus to tackle the complexities of issues related to diversity and equity. The fact that college students are developmentally well suited for this work is important because for many PSTs, diversity instruction is an unfamiliar experience. White students often have limited interaction with those from other racial backgrounds before college (Gay & Howard 2000; Orfield & Kurlaender, 2001), and when they enter diversity courses they inevitably encounter gaps – interactions, scenarios, or activities – that do not align with what they have experienced in the past.

How students handle these gaps reflects what they have learned (Lundqvist, Almqvist, & Östman 2009), as well as their openness to new ideas and willingness to consider the unknown. More importantly for teacher education, the ways in which PSTs approach these gaps will impact not only how they understand diversity instruction, but potentially "diversity" itself. Habituated to particular ways of learning, we extract from and build upon past experiences in the construction of new experiences in new contexts (Lundqvist et al., 2009; Packer 2001). PSTs exposed to a broader range of educational experiences and instructional modes will enter new scenarios with a more diversified repertoire of resources for understanding these encounters (Brown, Reveles, & Kelly, 2005; Wenger 2006). But because many classrooms offer only a narrow range of transmission-oriented instructional experiences (Florio-Ruane, 2001), the likelihood of PSTs negotiating diversity issues with an open perspective will be restricted to situations that are more familiar to them or that somehow parallel their experiences. Researchers recommend, therefore, that teacher education programs design and provide educational opportunities (like reflection) that support PSTs' expression and analysis of their own beliefs about

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students and schooling processes, and that facilitate their understanding of others' beliefs and worldviews (Banks, 1994; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gurin et al., 2002; Sleeter, 1995).

The Role of Reflection in Understanding Diversity: Categorizing & Framing Difference

Fostering expression, providing opportunities for considering difference, and scaffolding directed reflection have all been highlighted as mechanisms for identifying and building upon the resources of pre-service teachers (Brown, 2004; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1999; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Saffold and Longwell-Grice (2008) refer to this as "unearthing the heterogeneity of 'traditional students'" – collecting and considering their stories from their perspectives and their experiences. Yet generating opportunities for meaningful diversity reflection is a complex endeavor (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Regenspan, 2002). Meaningful reflection must simultaneously scaffold and support students' capacity "to probe assumptions, to seek multiple sources of evidence, to consider different perspectives, and/or to challenge dominant (and, thus, typically taken for granted) viewpoints" (Hytten & Bettez, 2008, p. 179). In order to avoid the potential pitfalls inherent in asking PSTs to reflect upon complicated, personal, and often unspoken constructs (e.g., dissonance that closes rather than opens thinking), reflection should be constructive and contextualized, both responsive and responsible to the past as lived experience.

According to Milner (2006), this type of reflection can be achieved by asking PSTs to reflect on their own lives concurrently with what he calls *relational reflection* – comparing and contrasting what is known (in this case, one's worldview) with what is not, the unknown or the "other" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). This will also help keep reflection substantive and meaningful, grounding reflection in practice, concrete situations, particular contexts, and real life experiences (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Designing reflection activities that prompt consideration while buffering student anxieties, or creating reflective exercises that generate dissonance in ways that consciously and constructively consider students' apprehensions going in (Erikson, 1968) will facilitate individual student development and increase instructor awareness (Duckworth, 1996). Sharing PST beliefs via reflection also expands the likelihood of the construction of collective understandings or *intersubjectivity* (Wertsch & Polman, 2001), between teacher and student. Cultivating such a shared discourse widens the possibilities for learning, while narrowing the likelihood of resistance (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005).

With these aims in mind, this study investigates the resources PSTs bring into diversity courses. Using foreign films as a proxy for the "other" in the construction of relational reflections (Milner, 2006), this study looks at the elements in foreign films that illuminate and/or problematize PSTs' understandings of identity and diversity. Specifically, this study asks, how do PST's conceptualizations of what they see in foreign films reflect their epistemological orientations regarding diversity? And what sort of challenges might these reflections prompt in a field that characterizes some of our PSTs as "learners who bring little or nothing to their learning about diversity" (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 167)? It is anticipated that addressing these questions will influence the ways we think about and teach PSTs, as well as aiding in the

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development of diversity instruction that better responds to all of our students' real needs, as opposed to their perceived deficits.

Methods

Building upon diversity instruction tenets – exposure to distinct cultures and critical reflection – this study employs a new instructor-designed strategy, "Film Reflection And Multicultural Education" (FRAME), to examine the cultural assumptions PSTs bring into teacher education programs. Designed by the author to introduce students to international perspectives, FRAME supports the development of relational reflection (Milner, 2006); films produced internationally offer access to distinct communities, as well as the opportunity to consider one's worldview in relation to those represented in global cinema. Structured around reflection (cinematic and personal), FRAME provides both Ethnic Minority *and* White PSTs (Brown, 2004) with a means to approach diversity that is engaging, emotionally resonant, and accessible (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Florio-Ruane, 2001). Most particularly, however, FRAME acts as a mechanism for reflecting upon culture absent travel opportunities or exposure to distinct ethnic enclaves.

Developing FRAME

FRAME was developed for a cultural diversity general education course (that is also a prerequisite for the teacher credentialing program) in a large California university. The goals of the course include bolstering students' capacity to: 1) appreciate their ethical obligation to develop greater understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity toward the cultural heritage, community values and individual aspirations of all people including those with different linguistic experiences, sexual orientation, and/or physical and learning abilities; 2) reflect critically on their own beliefs, biases, and expectations relative to diversity; and 3) demonstrate an understanding of cultural patterns and community values and their impact on individuals and student learning. The course meets these goals through readings, activities, and assignments that support students' exposure to and understanding of those individuals and groups traditionally marginalized from educational opportunity.

Scaffolding FRAME

Students in the course have multiple responsibilities. Besides the requisite written assignments, students must also create outlines for all of the course readings, locate and summarize an international news article each week, attend a cultural event, and participate actively in class (the syllabus is explicit about the hierarchy of participation, the need to refer to readings in oral contributions in class, and the right of all students to be heard). Before the FRAME exercise, student expression is cultivated in a series of interactive classroom discussions in which students learn how to express their ideas, build upon or counter others' ideas, and use the readings to challenge or support particular lines of inquiry. Class discussions are set up to show consistently that student responses are supported and not denigrated – and students are regularly reminded that only by sharing our thoughts can we learn what we do not know.

Prior to participating in FRAME, PSTs must complete a variety of assignments intended to increase their exposure to “others” and their ability to view films critically. Beyond class discussions and small group activities in class, there are three assignments in particular designed to scaffold PSTs’ interrogation of difference. First, they are required to attend a cultural event representing an ethnic group distinct from their own. For example, Latina/o PSTs might attend an event celebrating a Lithuanian holiday, while White PSTs might participate in a Tet Festival. In an explicit effort to make PSTs “feel like square pegs in round holes,” this assignment aims to give PSTs a glimpse of what students from outside the dominant culture here in the United States experience upon entering new classrooms. PSTs regularly describe the benefits the assignment provides (e.g., exposure to unknown aspects of particular cultures), while also identifying the costs (e.g., feeling awkward because they didn’t “look like” anyone else at the event).

Second, in order to cultivate PSTs’ understanding that how we experience life in the United States is influenced by our multifaceted identities, PSTs must interview someone who is different from them in at least two ways (sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity). Although one might imagine that this task would be relatively easy in the culturally rich and diverse state of California, a majority of students express difficulties finding someone who meets the assignment requirements. This is their first challenge with this assignment. The second is in analyzing their respective experiences (the interviewee and the PST’s) with cultural diversity. Few of the PSTs who enter my university classrooms have a firm grasp on what constitutes analysis, and thus making and developing arguments is supported with explicit assignment direction, in class scaffolding (in which, e.g., students use course readings to make oral arguments about the processes of assimilation and pluralism in the U.S.), and detailed evaluation of their work. These joint efforts make clear that although PSTs can stake a claim on any worldview, they must support (with specific examples) whatever position they take.

Finally, in order to bolster students’ awareness of global issues, students are required to read and summarize an international news article each week. Students are instructed to find an article (at least four paragraphs in length) that was filed in a location outside the U.S., highlight key points, and write a brief summary. This activity is often an introduction not only to details about events outside of the U.S., but to reading the newspaper; few of the students who enter my classes read a daily paper (online or in print). Fewer still enter the course aware of anything but the most headline-grabbing stories unfolding in other countries. This activity exposes students to events as they occur in other parts of the world, temporarily transporting students beyond their local communities.

Getting FRAME into View

FRAME builds upon the three activities described above by asking PSTs to view films from countries with which they have little experience, in languages they do not understand. Moving pictures engage people deeply and intensely, ‘‘submerging’’ them in the action and characters of the film. Indeed, film can provide a means of understanding course concepts that is more accessible, emotional, and realistic than what is presented in textbooks (Bluestone, 2000). Since at least the 1940s, films have been used for sociological study, methods analysis, and race or

ethnic studies (see Valdez & Halley, 1999 for a comprehensive list). The use of films in college classrooms can make course foci more comprehensible, resonant, and meaningful for students (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990; Lovell, 1998), and films can be examined to discover course themes, or course themes can be used to analyze films (Fleming, et al., 1990). The plots and storylines in films can prompt students to go beyond merely identifying course concepts to engaging in critical analysis of a range of perspectives (Summerfield, 1993).

Given the promise films hold for instruction, FRAME was constructed to give PSTs opportunities to question their understandings, to probe how these understandings are structured, and to independently discover connections between academic concepts and their own experiences (Chandler & Adams, 1997) without constraining or pushing them toward any particular response. According to Shi-xu (1995), how we organize experience (e.g., what goes into which category, how things are connected and/or distinguished) comprises a "sociodiscursive" resource, a mediating mechanism that facilitates understanding in new scenarios. This resource is then used for a range of purposes including, for example, establishing affiliation with or opposition to others (Choo, Austin, & Renshaw, 2007). Analyzing what PSTs *see* when watching foreign films can highlight these affiliations and oppositions; the way PSTs frame (Goffman, 1974) difference can provide insight into their cultural assumptions and epistemological orientations regarding diversity, and thus influence how we teach them.

Few of the PSTs involved in the study had seen a foreign film before, let alone traveled out of the country beyond those countries easily accessible by land from the United States (i.e., Canada and Mexico). Thus, for many, FRAME reflected a threshold of opportunity for considering other ways of being. In order to further increase their exposure to difference, PSTs were instructed to select a film in a language they did not understand. Students were given a course meeting to view the film (which they could select and watch at the university library, or rent on their own and watch outside of school) and grading was credit/no-credit (with no emphasis on grammar – an element of writing that takes up a lot of attention in every other assignment) in order to facilitate open reflection and to diminish the "subtitle" anxiety that many people experience the first time they watch a film while also reading subtitles. These components were built into FRAME to serve as motivating mechanisms for PSTs who had never watched a subtitled film before (they needn't come to campus or class). But based upon student response, these efforts did not completely mitigate anxiety that they were "missing something" by reading subtitles as they watched, and some chose to watch their selected film more than once to better coordinate reading with watching.

In FRAME, films are selected based upon the presence of the following criteria (a) children as the center of the storyline; (b) education, either in formal, informal or nonformal modes; (c) a focus on issues of ethnicity, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation; and (d) availability. PSTs are told to consider film reviews on the internet before choosing a film, and films are made available for viewing at the university library, free of charge. In this study, the films selected for course viewing are listed below (a brief summary of the films is provided in the Appendix):

- 400 Blows (France – director: Francois Truffaut)
- Au Revoir Les Enfants (France – director: Louis Malle)
- Central Station (Brasil – director: Walter Salles)
- Ciao Professore (Italy – director: Lina Wertmuller)
- City of God (Brasil – director: Fernando Meirelles)
- El Norte (Mexico – director: Gregory Nava)
- Ma Vie en Rose (France – director: Alain Berliner)
- Not One Less (China – director: Yimou Zhang)
- Salaam Bombay (India – director: Mira Nair)
- Small Change (France – director: Francois Truffaut)
- Together (China – director: Kaige Chen)
- Turtles Can Fly (Iran-Iraq joint production – director: Bahman Ghobadi)

Beyond viewing the film, the FRAME assignment requires PSTs to reflect upon a general prompt designed to allow them maximum flexibility in determining their understanding of the film: "What can foreign films teach us about education?" Three questions follow, aimed at gauging previous exposure to foreign films (i.e., How many foreign films have you seen previously? List any examples; How did you select this film?; and How did you like this film, as a movie?). Given that the goal of this study was to collect PST perspectives not create them, the general prompt was intentionally broad and open-ended; terms used in the prompt were not defined by the researcher (Freire, 1985). Thus, PST responses reflect their "personal, idiosyncratic definitions of these terms" (Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1999, p. 214).

Data Sources and Analysis

Film reflections were purposefully sampled to achieve a balance of Ethnic Minority and White PST responses (White PSTs are more prevalent in the data, as they were in the classes) from five classes the researcher taught over a period of one academic year in a large public university in California. The majority of students in the course (95%) are juniors and seniors who intend to enter a teacher credential program in order to become elementary school teachers. Most are child development or liberal studies majors, and few have taken any diversity course before the one in which this study was situated. Based upon their attention to the prompt, the rich and holistic provision of details, and the depth and substance of response (Miles & Huberman, 1994), 133 film reflections ultimately were included in this study. PST reflections that primarily summarized the films, or otherwise neglected to reflect upon the relationship of the film to their understandings of education, were excluded from consideration (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). To protect student confidentiality, identifying student markers (names and email addresses) were excised from the reflections during analysis of the complete sample, and pseudonyms are used in the results below.

Analysis of the reflections was social and relational (not linguistic), and focused on patterns of meaning. Initial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) revealed that student reflections generally focused on the values or practices of the cultures they viewed in the films. Subsequent coding efforts showed that within this general divide students tended to identify similarities or differences between the cultures they viewed and U.S. culture. If a response did not fit easily into a category (e.g., initial coding distinguishing between values and practices), all of the data were reviewed

again, and assignations were modified to assure the code reflected a preponderance of the responses. These two levels of binaries (values and practices; similarities and differences) were then further analyzed in relation to the ways in which divisions were conceptualized and characterized in student's responses (Allard, 2005). These multiple reviews of the data highlighted nuanced distinctions in the ways students supported their reflections, and resulted in a stronger level of support for coding decisions. Once coding was complete, given Lowenstein's attention to biases against White students in diversity education (2009) and the general divide in the literature that distinguishes Ethnic Minority from White students, the reflections were divided into two groups: Ethnic Minority responses (n = 64), consisting of Latina/o, Asians, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Black students; and White responses (n = 69). Ethnic affiliation was based upon student self-reporting.

Findings

Earlier assignments in the course had revealed that few of the PSTs involved in the study had seen a foreign film before; fewer still had traveled out of the country (beyond Mexico or Canada). These two factors meant that for most of the participants, sociodiscursive resources (Shi-xu, 1995) were culled from their experiences with diversity within the United States; few had any exposure to "worlds" outside the U.S. borders (except as filtered through U.S. representations). This lack of familiarity appears as a key variable in "locating" the participants. With little to no awareness of "unfiltered" global perspectives or out-of-country experiences prior to FRAME, participants self-identified as being culturally and experientially restricted. The FRAME exercise encouraged them to look outwards, quite literally, as "innocents abroad."

Given that the literature tends to focus on students as representatives of particular (and often singular) variables related to ethnicity/race, gender, or social class, these are the primary distinctions identified in the data below. Given also that many believe religious and/or political affiliations influence perspectives on diversity (e.g., liberals support equity issues, conservatives do not) or influence their epistemological orientations, representative reflections below also include the respondent's, religion, age, and political affiliation, as well as specifying the particular film viewed. All demographic information was self-reported by the PSTs, thus PST "identities" are determined by the PSTs themselves.

All We (all) Need is Love – Similarities in Values

One of the largest areas of congruence across both White and Ethnic Minority responses was in a focus on values and feelings. Although the groups varied as to whether they identified values as similar or different from those in the U.S., more students across both groups brought up values than any other variable. Of the many PSTs who said that watching a foreign film made them think everyone is the same (40% total PSTs; 23% of White PSTs; 56% of Ethnic Minority PSTs), most described these similarities as "universal." Susan, a 22 year old, middle class, White, Christian woman (who identifies as a Democrat), explains:

> Foreign films remind us that even though they were created miles away in another country, the people in them still experience the same emotion and human wants (film selected: *Together*).

Even though Susan has never been outside of California, she saw things in the Chinese produced film, *Together,* that tapped into her understanding of a "universal" human condition, and her description of this universality mirrors the rest of the responses in this category. PSTs who saw similarities were explicit about things being the "same" everywhere. Furthermore, PSTs who identified similarities in feelings or values in their reflections generally expressed a sympathetic understanding of the culture represented in the films. This may have been because by identifying similarities they could more easily process difference as something recognizable, and thus benign – making connections with what is known to that which is unknown. Below, Josie, another young (21 years old) middle class, White, Christian woman (who identifies as a Republican) provides a representative understanding:

> The most important thing a foreign film can teach us is we are similar….This movie, in particular, taught me that children's needs are universal and that teachers need to be responsive….Watching a film like this shows that education is a useful tool in uniting people, finding acceptance, and overcoming barriers (film selected: *Ma Vie En Rose*).

Josie connects what she sees in *Ma Vie en Rose* to her future career goals, and highlights the role teacher responsiveness plays in assuring educational advance. Yet her attention to the need for teachers to be responsive is undercut by her assurance that needs are "universal." Beyond recognizing needs, being responsive means acknowledging difference and seeing needs in relation to particular experiences, lives, and understandings (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2005; Patchen & Cox-Petersen, 2008).

Yet, in general, whether viewing films from the eastern or western hemisphere, responses in this category emphasized commonalities between cultures, overlooking or not "seeing" any difference that could not be resolved by parent or teacher attention. Indeed, in this category of reflections, PSTs said that issues addressed in the films (whether illiteracy, abandonment, poverty, or violence) could be resolved by "love," "care," or understanding on the parts of the adults in the films. These PSTs saw no difference that couldn't be mitigated by love. Melissa, a 23 year old middle class, Latina, Agnostic woman (who identifies as a Democrat) explains:

> Teachers can benefit from such films because it [*sic*] helps them realize that all children need love and support, regardless of their differences. Children may act one way on the exterior due to the influence their unique cultures have had on them, they may expect different things from their learning experience and may have overall different views on the world, but all children have the need to be accepted and supported in order to be successful (film selected: *Ma Vie En Rose*).

Above, Melissa oversimplifies complex issues of gender identity and homophobia into a familiar trope with a distinctly Beatles-influenced melody. This tendency has been identified in previous research as "the 'love-is-enough' misconception"

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(Garmon, 2004). Of course, love is not *all* you need. Gender identity violence, homophobia, poverty, abandonment, illiteracy, and neglect persist in the face of furious love, regularly constraining opportunities in ways many U.S. college students cannot "see."

The More Things Change – Similarities in Practices

A much smaller subset of PSTs (less than 1%) saw similarities between practices depicted in the films and life in the U.S. Statistically insignificant, these responses warrant consideration -- if only because the six PSTs who identified similarities in practices would be hard to group within any particular demographic. PSTs in this subset differ by ethnicity (White, Japanese, Korean, and Hispanic), religion (Christian, Mormon, Buddhist, and Catholic), and film viewed (*Together, City of God, Ciao Professore,* and *Small Change*); the only thing all six have in common is their age (they are each between 20 and 22 years old) and gender (they are all women). In light of how the alignment in responses by this diverse set of students contradicts the sharp ethnic demarcations in the literature, it merits consideration.

Unlike all the other PSTs, these six identified commonalities between the practices of the cultures portrayed in the films and those of the U.S. In contrast with the larger subset that saw similarities between values, these PSTs focused on practices that had to do with educational access and schooling opportunities. Even though the elements PSTs identified in this subset do reflect values (funding provided to schools, for example, can reflect the importance society places on education), responses clustered in this subset did not explicitly discuss values. Instead, they focused on what they saw as practical problems.

Emily's analysis below reflects the general themes that appeared within this category. According to Emily, a middle class, Japanese, Mormon 20 year old woman (who identifies as a Republican):

> Foreign films give another perspective on education. I think the general public sometimes forgets that the problems that the United States faces also occur other places as well….I think the most important thing I learned from watching this film was no school system is perfect. Every school has its own problems and obstacles to overcome (film selected: *Small Change*).

At first glance, responses like Emily's above appear to ground their reflections in "concrete situations" (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Yet, giving too much traction to this distinction would be misleading. Instead, what is most notable about this category is that although PST responses identified similarities in general structural elements between cultures, they avoided specifics. As in Emily's response above, the closest PSTs in this category came to specifics was in identifying a general resource (e.g., time or money) as important in education. Thus, fundamentally, they did not differ much from those students who identified similarities in values. Appearing to focus on practical conditions while keeping the lens *out of focus* on any actual practice allowed these students to define, or at a minimum to justify their definitions of, other cultures as being the same as the U.S. Staying general may have facilitated finding accord between the culture represented in their select film and the U.S., but it did not push PSTs in either of the above categories to deeper critical analysis.

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***The Little Rascals* in the *City of God* – Different Values**

In an examination of the responses in which differences were noted, fully one-third of all White and Ethnic Minority PSTs (37%) saw differences in values between the U.S. and the cultures represented in their films. Again, as stated earlier, more students focused on values than any other category. But in identifying differences between values, the affiliations noted above reversed. In this category, White students identified more differences in values and Ethnic Minorities, fewer. In their discussions of difference, these PSTs (31% Ethnic Minority and 42% White) identified variables as diverse as education, morals, parental attention, and respect for the law as reflective of the difference in values they perceived in their foreign film.

In contrast with the ways in which PSTs discussed similarities, when differences were identified, distinctions were infrequently articulated as innocuous. In almost every case, "other" cultures were found lacking in comparison with the U.S. Differences tended to mean "not as good as," the same type of "deficit" model Lowenstein noted was being used to categorize White PSTs in diversity courses, and the same kind used historically to categorize Ethnic Minorities. Additionally, in almost one-third of these responses, PSTs decried the lack of parental involvement and with a complete disregard for the realities of many children's experiences in the U.S., argued that such "neglect" would never happen here. Kathy, a 21 year old middle class, White, woman (neither religiously nor politically affiliated) elaborates on this perspective below in a way that was typical of those who saw a difference in values related to parents and child rearing:

> In *City of God*, I do not remember seeing many parents. This movie actually reminded me of a movie called *The Little Rascals*. In both, there were very few parents shown….Parents were not involved in the children's lives, which gave them the freedom to do whatever they wanted….Education was even frowned upon….What is important in a country like that is what gang you're going to join or how you're going to take over the drug business. What is important where I live is going to school and having a job and not killing people (film selected: *City of God*).

Kathy's linking of the lives revealed in *City of God* to *The Little Rascals* is particularly trenchant. The madcap, freewheeling childhood agency depicted in *The Little Rascals* is a far cry from the gun-toting, Hobbesian existence led by the children in the *favelas* of Brasil in *City of God.* Across the responses in this subset, moreover, PSTs revealed a decidedly ethnocentric perspective – no matter their individual ethnicity; the identification of a difference in values was regularly and repeatedly understood as a deficit. When PSTs identified a difference in values, it generally reflected poorly upon the other culture, not on the U.S., even though there are many areas in the U.S. in which children also worry about what gang they are going to join, or grapple with whether they should sell drugs to help make ends meet.

There were, however, three examples within this category that deviated from the tendency to see difference as an absolute deficit. These PSTs identified a difference in values, but noted that such observations could reflect their own biases. Tina, a 21year old middle class, Cambodian woman who says she has "no" religion (and identifies as a Democrat) explains this perspective:

> We tend to think of education purely in the academic sense – reading, math, history, science. This is the mark of a privileged culture. It is easy to forget that not everyone in the world has the luxury of attending school. Foreign films can help put things in perspective….By watching foreign films, and assuming they are a fairly accurate depiction of the culture(s) it [*sic*] portrays, we can get a sense of what education means in other parts of the world. Some films may remind us that we Americans are a lucky bunch, and should be thankful for the opportunities we have while others may even point out our shortcomings and spur us to do better for ourselves and our children (film selected: *City of God*).

Indeed, even as almost every student in this subset detailed negatives in their comparisons between the films' cultures and the culture of the U.S., it was also in this category that PSTs highlighted the risks such identification could bring. For example, Ana, a 31 year old, middle class, White, Christian woman (who identifies as a Republican) counseled:

> We must be cautious that we do not create stereotypes and prejudices based on the limited views presented by a film. This would cause more damage than good in our interaction with people of different backgrounds (film selected: *Salaam Bombay*).

Like other PSTs in the class, Ana's perspective did not appear bound by ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Moreover, given research that identifies problems associated with teaching White PSTs in diversity courses (LaDuke, 2009; Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008), Ana's reaction to the film isn't what some might expect from a White, Christian, middle class Republican woman. And Ana was not the sole outlier; PSTs on both sides of the "ethnic divide" (approximately 25% from both sets) regularly confounded PST stereotypes (for a comprehensive overview of these, see Lowenstein, 2009).

Different Practices – Trying on Others' Shoes

Although some of the PSTs who identified differences in practices between the cultures they watched in foreign films and the U.S. culture were chastened by what they saw in the films, few of the responses in this category diminished or denigrated the individuals represented in the films they viewed. Instead, in contrast with all of the categories mentioned above, and most particularly those who saw differences in values, the majority who identified differences in practices substantively considered the distinct practical realties that shape lives and force choices. As a group, these PSTs argued that the decisions characters made in the films seemed inevitable given the desperate conditions in which they lived. For example, even as PSTs in other subsets appeared to blame children or adults for violence, poverty, or limited education, White (33%) and Ethnic Minority (< 1%) PSTs within this group found fault in social forces, the government, or elites. Tiffany, a 29 year old middle class, White, Christian woman (who identifies as a Democrat) provides an elaborated response below that is representative of this group:

> By introducing your students to foreign films, you are opening their eyes to ways of the world. You knowledge [*sic*] the fact that all people do not live the

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> way we do. It is easy to recognize that Americans have an easy life but it really puts it into perspective when you see a film like this…. It was hard to think that poverty could play such a tremendous role in this society. Poverty seemed to be the number one problem causing the society to collapse. I know that some people have a better start in life than other [*sic*] but I did not realize how drastic those starting points can be. Since we do not all have the same starting points in life, I think it is important not to treat people as though they had an equal beginning (film selected: *City of God*).

Tiffany is specific about what prompts the problems presented in the film, and unlike variables identified by those PSTs who saw similarities in practices or values, she does not attribute responsibility to the characters or their culture. Instead, Tiffany identifies poverty as the "number one problem." She also acknowledges that watching the film gave a substantive form to the abstract ideas she possessed but didn't really understand. Her willingness to identify systemic issues that result in inequities far exceeds what Lowenstein argues is the dominant narrative of White PSTs (2009)

PSTs whose responses coincided with this category were also the most explicitly conscious of the responsibilities – ethical and practical – for future elementary school teachers. They detailed how important it is for teachers to more comprehensively consider diversity. One of the few men in the classes, Frank, a 22 year old, middle class, Mexican, Christian, man (who identifies as a Republican) explains,

> Many teachers go into the teaching profession with little knowledge of different cultures and backgrounds…. Foreign films go much deeper into the problems that other people of different countries might face. Many future teachers read textbooks where they talk about problems that children of other countries might face, yet they really do not understand it….Foreign films are good examples of being able to step into other's shoes. Knowing what other people go through in their particular environments is helpful when teaching….Teachers can use the information acquired from a foreign film to change their teaching styles, if needed, to better suite [*sic*] the needs of children of different cultures (film selected: *Ciao Professore*).

Frank pointedly identifies the usefulness inherent in the viewing of foreign cinema in diversity classes. He recognizes that many PSTs enter the teaching profession with limited diversity experiences or knowledge, and foreign films can serve as introductions to other worlds, prompting empathy and allowing students to go into subjects more deeply than readings alone.

One other dimension that the group of PSTs who identified differences in practices focused on was language. For many of the PSTs in this group, hearing another language, watching people interact in another language, and having to read subtitles in English pushed them to more pay more attention to the relationships they observed in the films. According to Jessica, a 22 year old middle class, Chinese, woman who says she has "no" religion or political affiliation:

> Watching a foreign film – especially one in a language I don't understand, gets me to pay attention to how everything differs compared to what I

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> know…. Education in this film was portrayed as a rare and precious tool that few people had access to (film selected: *Central Station*).

Such attention reveals an awareness of one of the very real implications of contact with diversity: real difference requires attention to the ways we understand and live our lives, and to the ways others understand and live their lives. Viewing a foreign film in an unfamiliar language allows PSTs to briefly experience the difficulties English Learners face in trying to learn what they cannot understand because of a lack of familiarity with the language of instruction.

Discussion

Across all of the groups, whether they perceived what they saw as good or bad, there was a preponderance of comparisons in PST reflections. Even though the assignment did not ask PSTs to compare anything (the specific prompt was "What can foreign films teach us about education?"), most of the reflections were based upon what PSTs knew: their experiences in the United States. In discussing the relationship of foreign films to education, PSTs identified either a country's values or its practices as being the key factor in determining how "we" were the same as or different from the culture represented in their selected film (Turner, 1999). In this way, the majority of PSTs crammed complex issues into simplistic, binary codes, comparing and contrasting "us versus them" (Milner, 2006; Turner, 1999) in ways that were then reified in the data analysis (e.g., "similarities versus differences"). Indeed, what PSTs found appeared to reveal what they were looking for (Fischman, 2001). Although such simplistic bifurcation may have been expected given the introductory nature of the course and the limited exposure most of the PSTs had with foreign films or foreign cultures, it was still initially disappointing. The majority of PSTs were not seeing much beyond the most basic of things: characters in foreign films were either just like us, nothing like us, or in need of a big hug.

The simplicity of the ways PSTs framed issues, however, did force a deeper analysis of PST responses (Allard, 2005). Looking more closely at the data revealed distinctions across the data that both fell along and deviated from expectations, and particularly in relation to PST ethnicity. White and Ethnic Minority PSTs did privilege certain perspectives: White PSTs saw more differences than similarities, and Ethnic Minority PSTs saw more similarities than difference. But a substantial percentage of each group (28% and 25% respectively) identified the opposite: Ethnic Minority PSTs saw differences, and White PSTs saw similarities. This was the most important finding, and beyond bolstering Lowenstein's contention that White PST stereotypes do not adequately reflect either capacities or variations within that population (2009), this finding holds the most potential to influence the ways in which diversity educators perceive and teach PSTs, White and Ethnic Minority. The list below briefly outlines additional findings:

- A majority of PSTs likened the viewing of a foreign film to the opening of a window onto another culture;
- More PSTs saw differences in the films than saw similarities;
- Whites saw more differences than similarities; while Ethnic Minorities saw more similarities than differences;

- Yet, a substantial percentage of each group deviated from their ethnically affiliated majority positions: 31% Ethnic Minority PSTs saw differences, and 23% White PSTs saw similarities;
- When PSTs from both groups saw similarities in values, they tended to find fault with the other culture for not doing as much to rectify things as the U.S. does (e.g., in relation to their perceptions about access to or support for education).
- When PSTs saw differences in practices, they tended to attribute difficulties to systemic issues (e.g., poverty)
- The "effort" involved in reading subtitles prompted one-fourth of all the PSTs to link their experiences watching a foreign film to English Learners' experiences in schools in the United States.

While countering conventional stereotypes, however, the fact that at least 25% of each ethnic group deviated from the majority reflects the heterogeneity of resources in each group merits attention. Yes, oppositions between White and Ethnic Minority PSTs were revealed, but the diversity within ethnic groups also shows that bifurcating students or PSTs along ethnic lines does little to advance our understanding of the resources with which students enter teacher education programs. These layers of findings complicate the notion that differences between ethnic groups preclude differences within them, a reality that bears further exploration.

Implications

Analysis of PST data revealed that viewing foreign films provided PSTs with an opportunity to consider difference in a way that, while "foreign," still made sense to them. In general, PSTs found that viewing a foreign film helped them to better understand the culture of the people portrayed in the film, particularly for PSTs who said they had limited exposure to individuals from different backgrounds (Gay & Howard, 2000). Foreign films, simultaneously accessible and unfamiliar, not only help PSTs "see" diversity, they just as importantly provide a means for teacher educators to explore PSTs' perceptions of that diversity (Lowenstein, 2009). PST perceptions of difference, conceptual slivers of their deeper understandings of who they are and where they fit into the larger world (i.e., their worldviews), were in evidence in their film analyses. Interesting, too, was the variety of meanings PSTs extracted from the same films. The range of responses to the films suggest that while the selection of films is important to orienting students' focus on a particular topic (in this case, education), the scaffolding of instruction preceding FRAME is just as important. Instructors must provide relevant course readings, critical analysis development, and open and supportive class discussions about difference in order for FRAME to prove beneficial.

Given the scarce interaction White students have with those from other racial backgrounds before college (Gay & Howard 2000; Orfield & Kurlaender, 2001), teacher education may be one of the few places PSTs encounter cultural diversity, pluralism, and/or multiculturalism. Thus, the ways in which diversity instruction is presented is as important as what is taught (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Reflections that reveal how students understand course topics provide instructors with a means to respond more accurately to student needs and concerns as they approach new

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concepts. Using FRAME establishes an opportunity for identifying and recognizing the perspectives of all PSTs, while allowing them to take in and respond to what they see without worrying about how others (beyond the instructor) will perceive their responses. But it will not benefit student or PST development in isolation.

In order to further develop the potential of FRAME, instructors would be wise to assure course readings detail the socio-economic realities of other countries and cultures. Augmenting readings with in-situ ethnographic studies would provide students with a means to compare cinematic representations to more than just their own experiences. Even better, building in a question that asks students to discuss the film relative to a particular reading, as well as to their lives in the U.S., would facilitate the structuring of more balanced perspectives in FRAME.

FRAME is only one step in scaffolding students' understanding of difference, but it is an important one. Providing college students (whether PSTs or not) with an opportunity to consider internationally produced films exposes them to other worldviews and perspectives, however briefly. Collecting and reviewing student responses to these films subsequently gives instructors a much more concrete *picture* of what students think about what they see. Knowing what students see means instructors can better fit the lenses they want students looking through before the course ends. Instructors can use what they discover to build upon students' understanding of difference by expanding simplistic binaries to more accurately reflect the complexities of schooling and educational processes, and blowing out stereotypes by following up film viewing with instruction that exposes students to the contemporary realities of diverse populations, in and outside of their home countries. Neglecting to ask students to share their perspectives, in contrast, results in the propagation of stereotypes and deficits – from the instructor's as well as the student's position.

Once they enter the field, new teachers must rapidly adapt to a rocky terrain of state standards, federal mandates, and increasing workloads – all in the midst of growing changes in student demographics and shrinking budgets. Attending to issues of diversity is a key element in these struggles and is, moreover, central to good teaching (Irvine, 2003; Banks & Banks, 2004). Although limited in scope, FRAME does expose students to the ways in which people from other cultures understand and represent their lives. This is particularly crucial because schooling processes continue to marginalize ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities; students are left out or pushed away from educational opportunity because of the way they look, talk, smell, communicate, live, pray (or don't), and love. Assuring we provide all preservice teachers with open, responsive, and responsible diversity instruction before they enter the workforce is critical to protecting the rights of all students to an equitable education. Recognizing the range of diversity experiences and understandings with which pre-service teachers enter teacher education programs is central to these aims, and FRAME can help us achieve them.

Appendix

400 Blows (France – director: Francois Truffaut)

In this classic of French cinema, Antoine Doinel, a neglected and misunderstood 13-year-old boy, begins to rebel against traditional societal constraints. When he gets into trouble at school, he runs away, hiding out with his friend, René. The two boys steal a typewriter from the office where Antoine's father is employed, but when his attempts to sell the typewriter fail, Antoine tries to smuggle it back into the office. When he is caught in the act by the night watchman, Antoine's parents determine that he should go to a home for juvenile delinquents. Antoine escapes, however, and flees to the seashore, where the film ends with one of the most powerful scenes in all of cinema.

Au Revoir Les Enfants (France – director: Louis Malle)

In yet another classic of French cinema, an adolescent boy, Julien, is evacuated from his home in Paris to a rural Catholic boarding school during the Nazi occupation of France. Earnest in his studies, he suffers the derision of other students as he garners attention for his efforts from his teachers. There is, however, another student who suffers more than he does -- Jean Bonnet, similarly quiet and focused, is harassed and teased for reasons that are not immediately obvious to Julien. Although the two boys do not initially get along, over the course of the film they become good friends. But Jean has a secret that Julien eventually uncovers: Jean is Jewish, one of a number of refugee boys sheltered by the school. When Nazi police arrive at the school, the lives of both boys are altered irrevocably, Jean by the knowledge that he cannot escape and Julien by the grim realization that society can allow such atrocities.

Central Station (Brasil – director: Walter Salles)

This film highlights the role of literacy in establishing and maintaining relationships, and illustrates the power exerted by those who can read over those who cannot. Dora writes letters for the illiterate; every day, she symbolically folds people's futures into slim envelopes which she then either delivers or doesn't. When one of her customers is killed by a bus, Dora begrudgingly takes the woman's orphaned son into her apartment because he has nowhere else to go. Eager to get the boy, Josue, off her hands, Dora hands him over to people who say they find families for orphaned youth. Alarmed when she discovers that they are actually engaged in criminal activities, Dora rescues the boy. She persists in her efforts to find him another place, all the while growing more and more attached to him.

Ciao Professore (Italy – director: Lina Wertmuller)

This film centers on the struggles of a northern Italian teacher who, due to a bureaucratic mix-up, is sent to work in a poor elementary school outside Naples. His new students are unlike those he has worked with in the past; these children have trouble with attendance, delinquency, and literacy. Despite their stubborn (and often amusing) resistance, the teacher's third-grade charges soon welcome his dedication and attention. Both sides benefit; teacher and students alike recognize that learning – about concepts *and* people – can illuminate possibilities, create opportunities, and build understanding.

City of God (Brasil – director: Fernando Meirelles)

A riveting and violent portrayal of life in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, *City of God* pulls out all the stops in its examination of the struggles of adolescents and

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children to survive in a world where drug running, guns, and gangs rule. Rocket, the camera-toting protagonist, tracks the twenty-year struggle of those who live in the *favela*. Rocket's efforts to stay out of the gangs parallel the rise to power of the gang leader, Li'l Ze. These two stories demonstrate how good and bad persist in spite of a system that does little to support the former or diminish the latter.

El Norte (Mexico – director: Gregory Nava)

Gritty and realistic, this film follows the efforts of two teenagers to get to the United States from Guatemala. Ever fearful of deportation, the two find themselves trapped within a web of exploitation and hardship. Scathing in its depiction of the oppression and discrimination on both sides of the border, *El Norte* illustrates the multiple struggles of immigrants to travel north and find employment in the United States.

Ma Vie en Rose (France – director: Alain Berliner)

A sweet tale of gender identity struggles, *Ma Vie en Rose* centers on the aspirations of young Ludovic, who intends to be a girl when s/he grows up. When his family has a house-warming party to celebrate their move into a new neighborhood, Ludovic causes a sensation when s/he enters the festivities wearing a dress, jewelry, and make-up. More problems ensue when Ludovic develops a crush on the son of his father's boss. At this point, his parents worry he has gone too far, and determine they must do something to "cure" his attraction. Ludovic, however, has other plans – s/he remains convinced that s/he will be a girl some day.

Not One Less (China – director: Yimou Zhang)

This film focuses on a new teacher who has been promised a bonus if she can keep her class of students intact. Her challenge begins when one student goes missing. In an attempt to find her young charge, the teacher, Wei, travels to the city, where she encounters multiple challenges. *Not One Less* highlights the struggles of a new teacher working in a difficult situation; it demonstrates that teachers, even those working under harsh conditions for inadequate wages, inevitably become attached to their students, and their students' struggles frequently become their own.

Salaam Bombay (India – director: Mira Nair)

Shot on the streets and alleyways of Bombay, this gritty slice-of-life depicts the struggles of impoverished Indian children. Our focus is Krishna, a teenaged ex-circus employee who has been abandoned by his family; the film highlights the desperate measures street children must take to survive in a world which hardly sees, much less cares for them. Like other street children with no options and fewer resources, Krishna gets a job delivering tea, trying to save enough money to get home. His job puts him into contact with the city's pimps and prostitutes who, while they may have roofs over their heads, still live with as much instability as their peers on the street.

Small Change (France – director: Francois Truffaut)

Tender and troubling, this film focuses on the daily experiences of a group of school children in a small town in France. Because of the range of youthful perspectives, we see how students experience school and life, often without much influence or attention from adults. Issues of sexual attraction, trust, neglect, and abuse are illustrated through the, at times, bittersweet interactions of the children.

Together (China – director: Kaige Chen)

Suffused with classical violin music, *Together* highlights the intersection of education, personal commitment, responsibility, and individual capacity. The film centers on the efforts of a young adolescent boy and his father to gain recognition of the boy's musical talent. The father does everything he can to assure his son's music is heard, sacrificing his own well-being, livelihood, and ultimately even his relationship with his son. The film is a touching tale of the lengths a parent will go to nurture their child's talent and support their success.

Turtles Can Fly (Iran-Iraq joint production – director: Bahman Ghobadi)

Lyrical but unblinking, this film delves into the desperate and often unbearable lives of Kurdish children growing up in the shadow of war. All they know is a blasted landscape riddled with land mines, where every step may mean death or dismemberment. Led by Satellite, a charismatic teenager, the children (who are maimed, orphaned, and/or abandoned) struggle to stay alive in the face of continuing violence and neglect.

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