



Facilitating Student Understandings of Equity and Social Justice Through Guided Discussion Groups

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Introduction

Undergraduate students bring their middle-class perspectives of pre—12 education into their teacher preparation classrooms. These perspectives often include misconceptions about issues of diversity and equity and of the systemic bias present in the educational system and in the lives of many children and families. Undergraduate students frequently lack the experiences necessary to fully understand the complexities of bias and equity. They must rely on classroom instruction to challenge misconceptions in order to be prepared to create inclusive classrooms for their future students.

In this SoTL project, students in the course *Administration and Advocacy in Early Childhood* participated in guided small group discussion to facilitate inquiry, reflection, and equity-minded perspectives of diverse children and families. This study examined the impact of student-facilitated discourse on their understandings of equity issues relevant to them as future educators. A qualitative analysis of student responses to a pre-and post-project survey offers insight into the evolution of their understandings

This research was based on the following questions:

- What are student understandings of equity and social justice in early childhood education?
- What are the master narratives that they possess?
- What classroom activities might encourage students to recognize the counter-narratives to their assumptions and understandings?

Objectives

Project Goals:

- To introduce and facilitate discourse on topics of diversity, equity and social justice in order to promote critical thinking and new perspectives.
- To challenge students to question their assumptions and to consider counter-narratives.
- To instill in students a sense of agency as they delve into topics of diversity and equity.

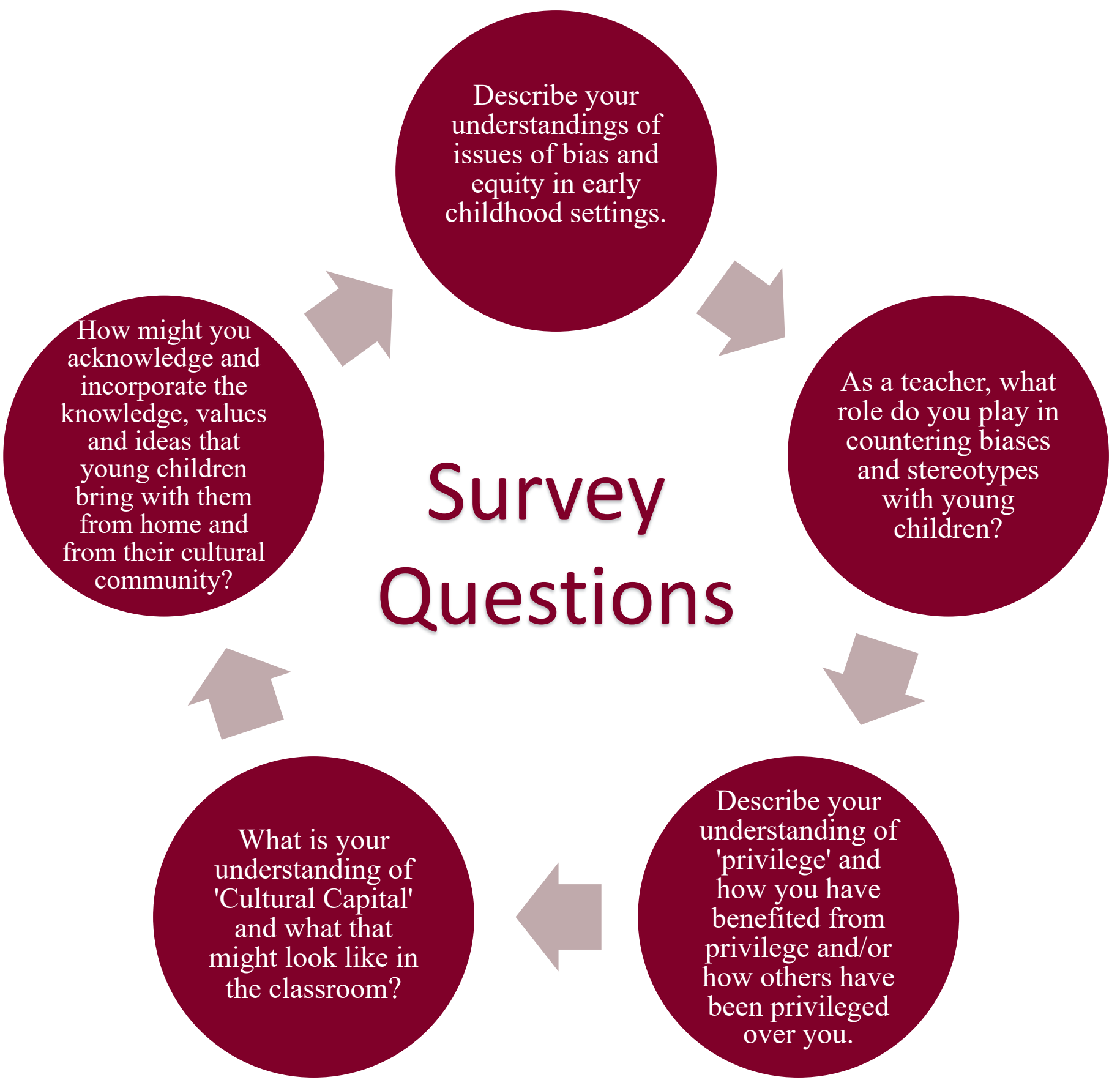
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Methods

Students participated in guided group discussions on assigned readings. Small groups of 5-6 students were randomly assigned and were required to establish group norms as their initial task. Discussion guidelines were provided by the instructor. Students rotated the role of facilitator for each of the four discussions. Facilitators prepared 5-6 discussions questions which were reviewed and approved by the instructor. All group members prepared by completing the readings and preparing for a thoughtful conversation. Groups finished each discussion by documenting key points. In the subsequent class period, group members reconfigured to form new groups with whom they shared key points. Finally, a whole-class dialogue ensued in order to deconstruct and discuss critical points. This entire process took place four times during the semester.

- **Sample size and demographics:** 14 senior undergraduate students



Results

At the end of this project:

- Students articulated a much richer and more clearly defined description of their role in counteracting bias in their future classrooms.
- Pre-assessment responses were vague iterations of “I should try to advocate for students.” Post-assessment comments included themes of reflecting on personal biases and of being proactive by authentically incorporating diversity into the classroom.
- Students conveyed a more assertive stance on advocacy that included speaking up in the face of bias, even with parents and administrators when necessary, and using the power of the ballot to vote for candidates who support equity measures.
- Descriptions of privilege in the post-assessment encompassed the opportunities that most of the students possessed based on their backgrounds, and a recognition of what this might look like in their future classrooms, for them and for their students.
- Post-surveys indicated that many students remained uncertain of the meaning of the term *cultural capital* and how this impacts the educational system, indicating a need to more explicitly reinforce this concept.

Student Comments About The Project

- I thought (the project) brought in varying perspectives of diversity from all over the country.
- It was interesting to hear about certain cases that happened in other states and how the situations were handled.
- I felt that the discussions brought in new information that I wasn't familiar with.
- I was able to learn about real life scenarios and what we could do as educators to maybe change the outcome or incorporate it into our teaching.

References

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