

Connecting Multicultural Education Theories With Practice: A Case Study of an Intervention Course Using the Realistic Approach in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper reports on a 2-year-long research conducted under a qualitative research design. The study investigated the effectiveness of an immersion course that followed a realistic approach on preservice teachers' deconstruction of negative and preconceived notions held about culturally and linguistically diverse students. Specifically, the study involved White female preservice teachers shadowing culturally and linguistically diverse students for a semester and reflecting on the experience. The study provides persuasive accounts by the participant preservice teachers on the positive effects the course's approach had on both their multicultural perceptions and their ability to connect theory with practice.

Introduction

The need and urgency to more effectively prepare teachers to meet the academic and personal success of racially, culturally, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse students in the public schools has received and continues to receive a great deal of attention in the educational landscape (Buttery, Haberman, & Houston, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Delpit, 1992; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000). In teacher education, the response to that pressing need has been to include multicultural education courses in the teacher education programs (Goodwin, 1997; Grant, 1994; Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998). However, most of the programs have followed the traditional "theory-then-practice" paradigm. It is assumed that preservice teachers, by virtue of being exposed to relevant theories in multicultural education, will be able to transfer those theories into practice and become effective teachers for

diverse learners. Research shows that those theoretical courses have been particularly ineffective in changing preservice teachers' beliefs about diversity and students of diverse backgrounds (Ahlquist, 1991; Deering & Stanutz, 1995; Goodwin; Grant & Koskela, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1991; McDiarmid, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1993; Moore & Reeves, 1992), enhancing preservice teachers' culturally relevant teaching (Goodwin; Guillaume, Zuniga-Hill, & Yee, 1995; Zeichner et al.), and promoting critical reflections upon diversity issues within a broader sociopolitical context (Goodwin; McIntosh, 1988; Sleeter, 1995).

To overcome those shortcomings in multicultural formation, some teacher education programs have developed field experiences in which preservice teachers are placed in schools with students of diverse backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 1996; Bennett, 1995; Chávez-Chávez, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1991, 1995; Colville-Hall, MacDonald, & Smolen, 1995; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1996; Vavrus, 1994). However, placing preservice teachers in a diverse setting alone does not guarantee any improvement in either preservice teachers' ability to connect multicultural theories with practice or their effectiveness in dealing with diversity and multicultural issues. In most of the cases, preservice teachers are asked to perform just routine tasks, and therefore they cannot experience multicultural situations that could be connected with the theory they are being exposed to in the college courses. In addition, many teacher educators do not connect the college course with the field component. All these factors make it hard for preservice teachers to learn how to connect theory with practice.

In order to solve the disconnection between theory and practice, it has been suggested the implementation of a realistic approach (Korthagen, 2001; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999) in which preservice teachers are asked to experience multicultural situations and reflect on them before they discuss those situations with the teacher educator. However, there is no empirical evidence that corroborates the benefits of this approach. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to uncover the perceptions that White female preservice teachers had on the effectiveness of a multicultural course that followed the realistic approach to connect field practices with college theories.

Theoretical Background

The succinct review of the literature that follows provided a theoretical framework for considering the connections preservice teachers typically make between multicultural education theory and practice. It also served as a lens for viewing the results and implications of the four-semester study of a multicultural course in which the practices and challenges of preservice teaching, particularly in regard to implementing multicultural education that connects theory with practice, were explored.

Since its insertion in the teacher education program, the multicultural education course has been mainly taught using a traditional approach, lecturing about multicultural theories and issues. Knowledge about multicultural teaching, as many other subjects, has been thought of as a created subject and not as a subject to be created by the learners, that is, the preservice teachers (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, the literature on teacher education notes that preservice teachers learn from their college courses a substantial amount of theories, including multicultural education theories, as well as other strategies and methods for teaching, but they are seldom able to apply that knowledge in everyday teaching practice (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). This inability can be explained by making a distinction between what Korthagen and Kessels, following Aristotle, called *episteme* and *phronesis*. Epistemic knowledge consists of general and abstract conceptions that apply to a wide range of situations—*theory with a big T*. When, for example, most of the multicultural education proponents think about theories of multiculturalism, they are thinking about epistemic knowledge. Phronetic knowledge, on the other hand, is *theory with a small t*; it is situation-specific and related to the context in which a teaching problem is experienced. Whereas episteme is conceptual, phronesis is perceptual and focuses on features of the situation that will suggest appropriate action. Korthagen and Kessels said that “episteme aims primarily at helping us to know more about many situations, whereas the emphasis of phronesis is mostly on perceiving more in a particular situation and finding a helpful course of action on the basis of strengthened awareness” (p. 7).

In the traditional approach to teaching multiculturalism to preservice teachers, because of the lack of phronesis, they are unable to build their own knowledge and transfer new knowledge to classroom situations they encounter in their teaching practice. In other words, preservice teachers are unable to integrate theory with practice (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

In order to enable preservice teachers to integrate theory with practice, studies suggest redirecting the way teacher education programs structure and focus preservice field experiences (Agee, 1997; Calderhead, 1989; Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Valli & Tom, 1988; Wolf, Carey, & Mieras, 1996). Instead of beginning with the teaching of educational theory in classrooms, the new approach begins with realistic, meaningful practices from the field, followed with reflections and discussions of theories that revolve around those situation-specific issues (Korthagen, 2001). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) define the knowledge that results from that approach as “situated knowledge.”

Realistic teacher education (Korthagen, 2001), then, follows an inductive approach that builds on the preservice teachers’ own perceptions, thinking, and feelings about concrete teaching situations in which they were actively

involved. In sum, realistic teacher education starts from preservice teachers' experiences and prior knowledge rather than from the objective theories on teaching and learning from the literature. According to Korthagen, the preservice teachers' experiences are "a more productive starting point for learning about teaching than theories coming from outside student teachers" (p. 9).

For decades, preservice teachers, teachers, and teacher educators have had the perception that field experiences are the most influential component of teacher education programs (Conant, 1963; Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; Su, 1990). It is believed that field experiences provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to practice what they have learned in their college classes; however, the focus of preservice teachers' experiences often shifts toward procedural concerns and routine tasks (Fuller, 1969; McBee, 1998; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981).

The realistic approach proposes redirecting field experiences from routine tasks to the experience of real classroom teaching situations. In this way, the preservice teacher would develop his or her own knowledge in the process of reflecting on practical situations in which a personal need for learning was created. The emphasis, therefore, shifts towards inquiry-oriented activities, interaction amongst learners, and the development of reflective skills. In this learning process, the teacher educator has an important role completely different from the traditional role of the lecturer. The kind of support that he or she should offer (including theory) has to be very much adjusted to the specific problems that preservice teachers are having. Therefore, an important issue raised through this view is the positioning of the student teacher as a learner in a curriculum constructed as a result of real experiences and reconstructed through interaction between student teachers.

Method

Setting

The study was conducted among students taking an undergraduate-level elementary education course titled "The Child in the Elementary and Middle School" that had been in place for several years at the senior level at a state university in the southern part of the United States. The course description in the class syllabus stated:

The purpose of this course is to examine the child in the elementary and middle school. As American demographics change, school populations increasingly reflect our culturally diverse and pluralistic society. To be prepared to teach all children in the schools of today and tomorrow, teachers must have an understanding of the diversity present in heterogeneous classrooms. During this course, special

emphasis will be placed on the implications of teaching and learning for all children. Recognition and celebration of the individual child will be of paramount importance.

The description of the course as well as the course itself placed a great focus on multicultural education.

Within the course, the main approach to multiculturalism had traditionally been a class discussion of textbooks and articles. The course also had a field component that was totally disconnected with the main course in which students were placed in a classroom and assisted the cooperating teachers with any kind of busy work (e.g., grading quizzes, making copies). Observations of the preservice teachers during student-teaching demonstrated that, despite the course in multiculturalism, they were ill-prepared to deal with diverse learners. Moreover, it seemed that the “learning” that took place in the course, instead of deconstructing misconceptions (e.g., the lack of interest of Latino students in education), was reinforcing them since preservice teachers were still firmly believing that Latino students were not as motivated to learn as their White counterparts.

In an attempt to overcome the aforementioned problems, the course was totally redesigned following a realistic approach. The main emphasis of the course was changed from a focus on teacher-center practice (discussion of theories, i.e., epistemic knowledge, that would hopefully be carried into the experience, i.e., phronesis) to a field-oriented focus (practice followed by reflection and discussion). Each preservice teacher, for an entire semester, was assigned to an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) child and required to compile a portfolio resulting from a series of assignments and tasks that were developed revolving around the preservice teachers’ experiences with the assigned child. First, and before even going to field experience, preservice teachers were required to explain in an essay how well-prepared they felt they were to engage with diverse learners. Second, the preservice teachers were required to shadow the same child (e.g., going to all classes the child attended, recess, lunch, etc.) during the entire semester. Third, the preservice teachers interviewed all the teachers who were in contact with the shadowed child, and were encouraged to look for educational issues while working with that particular child. Fourth, the preservice teachers were to document a detailed conversation with the shadowed child in order to learn more about him or her. Fifth, the preservice teachers paid a visit to the child’s parents in their home in order to gather information on the shadowed child, which could help them to become better educators. Sixth, the preservice teachers researched and became knowledgeable about the child’s culture. Finally, the preservice teachers kept a weekly journal of visits to their field and wrote a final reflection of the entire experience as well as their feelings, thinking, and attitudes regarding multiculturalism. Discussions among the preservice

teachers and the instructor regarding multicultural issues or events that arose during the visits to the school were held in the college classroom setting.

In order to investigate the preservice teachers' perceptions of the overall approach of the course, the research question was as follows: What were the preservice teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a multicultural education course that used a realistic approach?

Participants

A total of 240 female preservice teachers participated in this study, 60 per semester during the course of 2 years. They were in the elementary education program seeking teaching certification and were enrolled in the "The Child in the Elementary and Middle School" course as a part of the teaching certification program. Ethnic distribution of the students was as follows: 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, 1% African American, and 97% Caucasian.

Data Collection and Analysis

The major sources of data for the study came from student entries in their portfolios as described above. In addition, the researcher took notes during the semesters on overall classroom interactions among preservice teachers and the interactions among the preservice teachers and their assigned children as well as on subjects that were discussed in the class.

Each document underwent a qualitative analysis for identifying patterns and themes. In order to increase the credibility of the study, the researcher applied peer debriefing on their analysis and used data triangulation since triangulation and peer debriefing are important factors in ensuring the quality of a qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990). The researcher's notes on observations and the transcriptions of the preservice teachers' interventions in class discussions were shared and discussed with the participants in order to discuss the accuracy of the records. Likewise, the content of the class' notes, the transcriptions of the class discussions, and the observation of the preservice teachers' interactions with "their" children were compared to corroborate the accuracy of the patterns and themes.

Findings

The coding and analysis of 2-year's worth of data yielded several interesting patterns. Almost with no exception, in the prefield experience essay, preservice teachers expressed that they felt well-prepared to teach diverse learners. Prior to this course, the preservice teachers had taken two courses that addressed theories of multiculturalism, and they were quite confident that they were ready to translate that knowledge to the classroom. They felt that they were already sensitive to issues of diversity and knew how to handle

almost any situation that could arise in their future classrooms. Moreover, each semester on the first day of class, the researcher requested the preservice teachers to respond in writing what their expectations were for the course. The most common response was more of a complaint than an expectation. The preservice teachers contended that they did not need another course in multiculturalism. In fact, due to the previous courses, they were already very knowledgeable in that matter. Reality, however, proved to be quite different.

The vast majority of the very same preservice teachers who felt already well-prepared to deal with multicultural issues suffered a “cultural reality shock” during the first 2 weeks of the shadowing experience. Since the first day in the field, preservice teachers were assigned to shadow an ESOL student. From the first day in the field, cooperating teachers expected that preservice teachers were able to help them with the assigned child. However, the weekly journals of the preservice teachers during the first 4 or 5 weeks show the despair.

I am supposed to help Sam but I am not even able to communicate with him. He doesn't understand a word in English, and I don't speak any Chinese . . . I guess he speaks Chinese . . . he looks Chinese to me . . . I don't know what to do . . . before this course I felt I knew everything I needed, but the truth of the matter is that I don't know anything . . . I don't [know] how to help Sam. . . . That's frustrating.

That was how Amanda, one of the preservice teachers, expressed her feelings (Sam turned out to be Korean). Likewise, many other preservice teachers expressed their frustration about not knowing how to be of any real help to their assigned children despite the courses in multiculturalism they had already taken.

Data show that very early in the shadowing experience, preservice teachers began to develop a sense of “ownership” of the shadowed child. In class discussions at the college, they referred to the assigned children as “my child.” This type of denotation was not used just to name the child in question, but to express the kind of bond and identification that preservice teachers had developed with their children. Data suggest this type of identification allowed preservice teachers to deconstruct and construct meaning to issues of multiculturalism they had “learned” previously, but did not have a personal experience to relate. Samantha reported in class:

That teacher just ignores my child! She doesn't call on him . . . maybe she thinks my child doesn't know the answers or that he is not smart enough . . . that's outrageous . . . I have been working with him . . . I think he is one of the smartest.

When asked if in her previous courses she had discussed that research shows that teachers tend to call less on minority students, Samantha replied affirmatively, but also acknowledged that this was the first time she had “experienced” that kind of “discrimination.” Likewise, Erin reported one incident that happened with “her” child.

Yesterday, I went with my child to music class, and the teacher had the nerve to embarrass my child in front of the whole class . . . she was explaining the directions of the activity, and all of the sudden, she looked at my child and said ‘I forgot you don’t speak any word in English, you only understand Chinese.’ I felt so badly [*sic*], the teacher was not only humiliating my child, but also showing her ignorance of him. My child already knows enough English to understand her directions, and he is Korean and not Chinese. My child told me that confusing Koreans with Chinese offends them greatly.

Once again, Erin recognized that she had read and heard previously how sometimes teachers who work with diverse learners can be insensitive and stereotyping, but now she faced it firsthand and that fact made new sense to her.

The experiences of having conversations with the assigned children, interviewing their parents, and researching the culture of their children allowed the preservice teachers to see many already constructed issues of multiculturalism from a new perspective and therefore connect theory with practice. For example, Christina reported:

Despite my previous courses in multiculturalism, I still thought that all Asian people looked alike . . . all of them were Chinese to me. However, Martha [the American name of her Korean child] and her parents taught me how offensive it is for them being confused as Chinese, but also how different they are physically. I was amused to discover that they are able to tell, just by looking at a person’s eyelid, his/her nationality. . . . Now, I always look at their eyelids to see those differences.

Preservice teachers were now able to deconstruct facts like those aforementioned since they had a new point of reference for their children.

By interviewing the parents of their assigned kids, preservice teachers were also able to deconstruct some cultural assumptions like the contention that parents of diverse students do not value education as much as the American counterparts since they do not get involved with the schools. Sarah explained in class that after visiting Luis’ house and having a nice conversation with his parents, she understood that the assumption was not true.

Luis’ parents told me that they want Luis to get a good education. They want him to go to college. They explained that the main purpose for

them to come to the States was to give their children the opportunities they were not able to provide for them in Mexico.

Sarah went on to explain Luis' parents' lack of involvement with the school.

They don't get involved because they don't want to interfere with their children's education. They have a high regard of [*sic*] teachers and trust their role in educating their children . . . visiting the school is regarded by Luis' parents as an intrusion.

In the final reflection essay, despite the researcher's search for contradicting evidence of the course's effectiveness, every single preservice teacher who participated in the study highly valued the effectiveness of the realistic approach implemented in the course. It would be overwhelming to cite all positive comments made. Two of these testimonies suffice since they are representative of the whole group of participants. Tiffany, one of the preservice teachers wrote, "The opportunity to shadow and observe an ESOL student was a unique one that allowed me to better understand the characteristics and needs of students with linguistic differences." Tiffany went on to express that "as I reflect on the course, I realize that because of the approach used, I have grown in my understanding of exactly what multiculturalism is." She concluded, "I think that the most important part of this course was having the opportunity to grow as individuals, learning about our own identity and cultures and how to better educate those of different backgrounds than ours." Likewise, Tara wrote:

If I had not experienced this class throughout my college education and went straight into teaching, despite the courses I have taken that included multiculturalism, I would be so unbelievable [*sic*] unprepared. I would not have the knowledge that I now have of the issues that children from other cultures face daily because of racism, prejudice and stereotypes.

Tara also noted, "My child helped me tremendously . . . I did not learn multiculturalism by reading theories in textbooks and taking tests, but I learned from experience and from my child." In sum, it is clear that the realistic approach employed by the course allows preservice teachers to deconstruct preconceptions and assumptions regarding multicultural education and to build a reality-based knowledge of multiculturalism.

Recommendations

Due to the nature of the study, the recommendations could apply mainly to educational programs similar to the one in this study attended by White female students. Thus, based on the emerging themes discussed above, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Opportunities should be provided in teacher education courses to allow preservice teachers to participate in authentic field experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse students.
2. Reflective inquiry practice should be built into teacher preparation courses to enable preservice teachers to test out their assumptions before they graduate from the programs.
3. Extended and sustained immersion-based experiences should be provided to allow preservice teachers to develop a depth of understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Finally, it should be noted that given the inequities and injustices embedded in the school system, teachers must be prepared to advocate for their students. In this study, the field experience proved to be helpful for preservice teachers to develop close relationships with their students to the extent that it engendered a sense of advocacy. When preservice teachers begin to see students as their children and stand up for them, it breathes hope into the efforts that prepare preservice teachers for a diverse educational landscape.

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