

Destination Literacy: A Service Learning, Culturally Responsive Literacy Project

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Abstract

This paper is a documentary account of a project currently under investigation. The project engages pre-service teachers in a self-study about their participation in community based literacy activities with elementary school children and their families involved in after school programs. Participants in the study are members of a student volunteer group, Destination Literacy, which is subsequently being investigated as an informal, student led organization that conducts literacy activities with children, families and parents. The purpose of this research is to uncover its potentially transformative effects on pre-service teachers' identities as culturally responsive educators. Data gathered from participant pre and post interviews, journal reflections and focus group dialogues are analyzed for themes to document perceptions, changes in attitudes and the nature of the socio-cultural consciousness of pre-service teachers. Preliminary findings from the study have rendered themes that reflect pre-service teacher learning about the lives of children, their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, the dynamics of working in a voluntary "extra curricular" group, and their own development as professionals. This paper documents findings derived primarily from a series of focus group sessions in which participants share their perceptions of their activities in Destination Literacy.

Description and Context

Situated in a rural context within a community of approximately 50,000, the second largest city in the least populated state in the U.S., opportunities for culturally diverse field experiences in the pre-service teacher education at the University of Wyoming's Casper Center are distinct from urban settings. Diversity issues tend to manifest across lines of socio-economic and geographic experiences, with issues of rural poverty, access to resources, and limited economic opportunities most prevalent for families of working class backgrounds. Families of American Indian and Hispanic descent are clustered in pockets around the state, however, pre-service teachers have sparse contact with children whose first

language is not English, or who identify as non white. It is hoped the study of community based, culturally responsive field experiences might inform and transform pre-service teachers' development for future work in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, as well as in their own communities.

In fall 2005, a volunteer student group "Destination Literacy," began organizing monthly literacy activities with different social agencies in the community of Casper, Wyoming, reaching out to children of families who are experiencing a variety of survival issues. In spring of 2006, they became a recognized student organization at the University of Wyoming, Casper College Center (UWCC) and developed their mission statement, which reads: "The children of the community will become life-long learners and readers through the positive interaction with literature workshops provided by the Destination Literacy Student Group."

Destination Literacy bridges the experiences of teacher education with extra curricular volunteer activities within University of Wyoming Outreach Program in an off campus location. Through collaborative partnerships with Boys/Girls Clubs, a transitional housing center, and an elementary school Title One parent involvement program, we focus our efforts on authentic literacy activities that address real life issues of children and families outside of the classroom context. This study examines how a group of pre-service teacher volunteers learn about their future roles as mediators of culturally responsive literacy practices, and how they foster relationships with children and their families outside the classroom setting. As students learn from each other, families, and community partners, the potential for developing and sustaining this student volunteer group and its collaborative partnerships in the community as influential components in the preparation of culturally

responsive practices is also examined.

The goals for this project are: 1. Help pre-service teachers develop cultural sensitivities and practice strategies that acknowledge children's life stories, 2. Study perceptions of their experiences in Destination Literacy, and its potential for sustainability as a volunteer service learning experience, and 3. Document pre-service teacher development of identity within a diverse cultural context, or socio-cultural consciousness.

Theoretical Framework and Connection to the Literature

At the heart of this project is the theoretical orientation of a diverse social constructivist view of teaching and learning (Au, 1998) in which the knowledge claims of teachers are mapped against the socio-cultural context of children's lives outside of school. It is hoped that pre-service teachers' growth and development can be documented by looking at the larger questions of how the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which we live, and from which we derive our identity play a significant role in shaping the many different "self's" of the teacher. From this perspective, this study is also a process of recognizing that every person is an expert on their own life and protagonist in their own story (Ada, 2004). Pre-service teachers and the Investigator engage in literacy activities with children, using multicultural books and other media that promote the sharing of narratives of children and families. It is hoped that these activities will inform the question of how the development of culturally responsive practices are perceived by the participants of this project.

A culturally responsive approach recognizes that students' knowledge claims must be considered valid within students' own cultural contexts, and according to Au (1998), "a diverse constructivist orientation takes this line of reasoning one step further, by inquiring

into the ways that knowledge claims, of educators and their students, are related to cultural identity and shaped by ethnicity, primary language, and social class” (p.306). In school settings, the experiences students bring to literacy events (e.g. the forms of their narratives) may depart significantly from educators’ expectations. By getting to know the lives of children in their settings outside the classroom, and developing a socio-cultural consciousness (Villegas and Lucas, 2002) teachers can learn to accept students as cultural beings. In addition to the importance of developing culturally responsive practices, pre-service teachers also anticipate that part of their job will be to address social issues that arise as a part of the job, and learn to talk to parents. How does a teacher effectively intervene regarding children’s social dilemmas and still maintain boundaries around their role as “educator”? What might pre-service teachers learn from children outside the classroom? And how might they develop ways to collaborate with parents and thereby enhance the support structures that foster the social and academic well being of children in need of individual attention?

Studies of authorship as a culturally responsive literacy practice (Ada, 2004; Laughlin & Winkley, 2007, Laughlin, Martin & Sleeter, 2001; Winkley, 2005), promote the engagement of outstanding multicultural literature selections that touch upon important and sometimes sensitive social issues; books whose messages prompt dialogue and personal connections and inspire children to share their own personal stories. In this project, participants are reading books to children, creating their own books in a writer’s workshop to share with the children, and assisting children as they “author” stories of their lives, thus empowering participants to be the “protagonists” (Ada, 2004) who act upon their situations to create positive outcomes.

Mode of Inquiry

The investigator solicited Education student members of Destination Literacy on a voluntary basis to participate in the study. After initial interviews and setting up schedules for activities with Destination Literacy, participants attended a writers' workshop in which they began writing their own personal narratives for children and eventually created self-published texts that tell these stories. The writing process for student participants is designed to have them experience first hand the process for narrating and writing their own life stories. The books created by students were subsequently shared with children at the project sites, and selected as topics for dialogue about the writing process and cultural identity during focus group sessions. Participants also attended monthly Destination Literacy activities in which they read books to and with children, and participated in other creative activities that related to the reading, including narrating and illustrating life experiences, poetry, or personal accounts of events that related to the books being read. These activities include the use of art and other media for creative expression. The Boys and Girls Club staff, and staff of the transitional housing center assisted in the supervision of children and parents for the project, and provided space for the literacy activities to occur.

After each interactive session at project sites, participants meet to discuss the session or wrote in a journal to document their learning during the session. These guided focus group sessions, facilitated by the investigator, provided a context for sharing and reflecting upon what was learned. The sessions used a dialogue format to discuss social conditions that affect children, and teachers' perceptions of children, in order to identify and document the transformation of attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of the participants and how they might use this knowledge in their future careers. Questions that were discussed at the onset of the

project were revisited by exploring one or two questions more in depth during these dialogues.

Written and transcribed dialogues were analyzed for themes that shed light on the value of this process for informing the research question(s) about pre-service teachers' experience in Destination Literacy as one may contribute to their development as culturally responsive educators. Additionally, participants' perceptions of the student volunteer group, Destination Literacy, as a viable and meaningful service learning opportunity were examined for its potential to continue as a student led organization, within the larger context of the UWCC Education Program.

Evidence and Conclusions

Preliminary data collected from written feedback in spring 2007 suggest that members of the Destination Literacy have had positive experiences and gained insights into the social realities of children and families in the community. The majority indicate a positive feeling for making a contribution, giving books to children in need, and knowing that their actions have impact in the community. The data collection as a research project, however is yet to be fully analyzed in spring 2008. Final taped dialogues and journal entries will reveal more depth and clarity on the identified goals of the project, and the nature of pre-service teachers' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. By spring 2008, there will be ample evidence to discuss with respect to: 1. helping pre-service teachers develop cultural sensitivities and practice strategies that acknowledge children's life stories, 2. study perceptions of their experiences in Destination Literacy, and its potential for sustainability as a volunteer service learning experience, and 3. documenting pre-service teacher development of identity within a diverse cultural context, or a socio-cultural consciousness.

Contribution to the Field

Teachers typically spend time working with children and see a diverse representation of cultural and socioeconomic sectors represented in the classrooms. Issues of poverty, transience and other “at risk” conditions can contribute to a deficit view of learning how to teach these populations. What is often ignored is the cultural capital, the family resources and informal “literacies” that children from diverse backgrounds bring to the classroom. Through a careful documentation of the activities of Destination Literacy, the transformation of pre-service teacher attitudes, and the value of informal settings for the development of a culturally responsive pedagogy is examined. Findings from this project will inform the larger question of how we prepare teachers for culturally diverse settings, and how participation in community settings may influence pre-service teacher development.

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