Knowing Myself to Know Others

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Diversity through Multicultural Autobiography

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Introduction

The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) reports that over 50% of school-age children will be other than non-Hispanic Caucasians by 2023. In an effort to help meet the imperative need for preservice teachers who are well prepared to work with these students from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as for teacher education programs to more fully conceptualize their approach to preparing future teachers for diversity and multicultural education, this study initiates a discussion of preservice teachers' perceptions about multicultural education through the use of multicultural autobiography.

Since teaching practices are unlikely to change without altering teachers' beliefs, the recognition of preservice teachers' epistemologies is highly significant in the preparation of teacher candidates who will effectively address diversity in teaching and learning. Thus, examining preservice teachers' perceptions about their knowledge and beliefs regarding diversity and multicultural education provides them with the opportunity to deconstruct their prior meanings, assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs in this area. This study assumed that the dynamic and continuing process of constructing and deconstructing beliefs and knowledge can assist preservice teachers in becoming competent in dealing with diversity.

Self-Reflection and Interpretation

> We believe that educators need to be very clear about what multicultural education means to them. What goals they actually have in mind? What target student populations? What vision of society? What ideas about how to achieve a better society? What assumptions about learning? It is important for you to be clear about your own beliefs to achieve what you are attempting. (Sleeter & Grant, 1999, p. viii)

This study examined preservice teachers as cultural beings and as future teachers in multicultural classrooms in order to help them understand themselves and others in relation to diversity and multicultural education. The questions investigated in this study were:

1. What kinds of multicultural experiences do preservice teachers perceive to have?
2. How do preservice teachers' multicultural experiences influence their identities as future teachers?

In order to reflect on and empower the self-identity, cultural beliefs, values, assumptions, and attitudes in a cultural context, as well as personal and professional multicultural experiences, five preservice teachers majoring in education—Mattew, Maranda, Elizabeth, Mary, and Jennifer[1]—each wrote an autobiography.

> To write about the interactions of individual lives and their cultural background is like trying to find a beginning and an end of a sphere: There is none. (Tung, 2000, p. 2)

Within this sociocultural theoretical framework, the preservice teachers' multicultural autobiographies provided them with new practices for digging into the cultural meanings of their own multicultural experiences, for understanding themselves and others, and for accepting differences and similarities.

> Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. (Merriam, 1998, p. 72)

In order to question how the preservice teachers' personal and professional experiences about diversity and multicultural education shaped their sense of self and cultural group, face-to-face in-depth interviews with each of the five preservice teachers were conducted. In addition, I collected personal journal writing throughout the course of the study. This helped me gather and analyze data focusing on the preservice teachers' comments and actions, keep notes on the questions that might require further investigation, and develop ideas on how best to represent data during the "writing up" phase of the study. Participating in this qualitative study also helped the preservice teachers pursue the multicultural meaning of self in relation to others through an insider's perspective on their own experiences.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively since "qualitative research is extremely useful for obtaining insights into regular or problematic experiences and the meaning attached to these experiences of selected individuals (e.g., biography, autobiography, case study, oral history, life history, auto-ethnography)" (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p.558).

The preservice teachers' autobiographies and interview transcripts were read repeatedly and organized into themes and categories regarding their multicultural experiences and self-identity as a future teacher using a constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In order to ensure credibility of the researcher's arguments and interpretations through the "systematic search for meaning" (Hatch, 2002), member checks were used (Merriam, 1998).

Generalization and Stereotypes

The Importance of Social Interactions in Developing Students' Attitudes about Different Racial Groups of People

> *Mattew*: Kindergarten through first grade everyone was still just kids and I did not see color or many differences in any of my classmates. I remember the time that I first notice color and that not everyone was the same. It was the second grade and all of the students were being asked to leave the gym by teacher and I had an African-American girl standing next

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to me. They called out Mrs. Hill's class. Mrs. Hill was the only African-American teacher in the primary school at the time and coincidentally had the majority of the African-American students in my grade. When all of the students began to leave for Mrs. Hill's class the African-American girl next to me did not move. I turned to her and said, "They just called your class." The girl looked at me funny and said that she was not in that class which I thought was crazy because she was an African-American and she was not with all of the other African-Americans in Mrs. Hill's class. Even as a second grade student I was embarrassed by saying that because I made a terrible generalization. This is when I first realized other cultures and that not all people are the same or even what you expect them to be.

Mattew believed that the older students get, the more they start to focus on "differences." He thought that students develop prejudices about other racial groups because of daily social interactions with others in society. "Truth" is a product of social processes and not an objective phenomenon of the world, which is constantly filtered by preexisting conditions of knowledge and beliefs and is constructed through social interactions (Burr, 1995).

Mattew's point is supported by Derman-Sparks and the A. B. C. Task Force (1989) which noted that young children's racial awareness is developed by social experiences from their environments and that "societal stereotyping and bias influence children's self-concept and attitudes toward others" (p. 1). Alejandro-Wright (1985) claims that students' development of racial awareness begins at preschool age with the recognition of the differences in people's skin colors and is fully understood by the age of ten or eleven, as students develop knowledge of physical attributes of various racial groups and social comprehension of racial membership and categorization.

Family Beliefs and Attitudes toward Multicultures

The Importance of Resisting Stereotypes, Prejudices, and Discriminations

Maranda: My family has been pretty influential in the way I see people. However, I like to think I have dodged the bullet of some of the racism that is prevalent in my family. My relatives are what most people would consider "rednecks." As far as multicultural experiences go, there have not been a good deal. For the most part, cultural diversity is relatively limited here. There is the White majority and there are three main minorities: African Americans, Mexicans, and Indians. The social interactions between those groups are also somewhat limited. I say all that to say that this limited social interaction has taken its toll on the attitude of some of my relatives. My grandmother frequently talks about the Civil War and how although our family owned slaves. They were not bad people. My grandfather occasionally tells racist jokes about Mexicans and African Americans. A few months ago, my cousin began dating an African American and was subsequently disowned from our family. A few years ago, my aunt brought her Mexican boyfriend to Thanksgiving dinner. There was not a great deal of interaction there with him.

Maranda recalled her family's stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes toward other cultural groups. She felt that awareness of her family's prejudicial attitudes provided her with more opportunities to think about diversity. Focusing on social impact in establishing negative attitudes toward diverse cultural groups, Noel (2005) argues that students learn prejudices from their family through daily social interactions.

In order to develop schools as agents for building connections among students' schools, families, and communities within diverse cultures (Wright & Stegelin, 2003), teachers' genuine dialogue and discussions with students' families about cultural issues are essential to understanding one another's beliefs (Derman-Sparks & the A. B. C. Task Force, 1989; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005).

Considering that it is unlikely that beliefs and norms will be universally the same and that conflicting ideas may develop due to incorrect information or lack of information, as Adelman (2000) indicates, it is necessary to facilitate collaboration among schools, families, and communities through the sharing of in-depth information and knowledge. This can lead to expanded opportunities for various curricular activities, acquisition of meaningful resources for students' education, and the construction of mutual support and community relations.

Discrimination

The Importance of Not Alienating Students in Relation to Their Personal Backgrounds

Elizabeth: The multicultural experience that changed me the most was meeting Abdul, a teacher on exchange from Oman. We became great friends even though we come from completely different cultures. She is a Muslim and I am a Christian. She has a very specific dress code she must stick to and I can wear whatever I like. We eat different foods and have different views on technology. One of the experiences I shared with Abdul that I will never forget is when she asked me to participate in an Arab Culture night she was doing for the college. I helped her by modeling Arabic dress for a lecture, so people in the community could see how people in Arab cultures dress. Due to the perception that I was Arab/Muslim, people treated me differently—I could deal with the stares, the pointing, and the whispering, in fact I expected it. But, when I was called Bin Laden and a terrorist and denied service when I went to a local restaurant it was the final straw for me. I was furious and made a formal complaint not only to the manager but to the corporate office of the chain. My White, privileged, Christian, small town bubble was burst and I came to the horrible realization that not everyone is considered equal in America. My heart sank even further when my Muslim/Arabic friend told me, "Now you know what it is like to be me in America." We had been friends for a while and I'd never noticed people treated her differently. I just assumed, since I love and accept her, everyone does, but after walking around in her "skin" or dress I now know that is not the case. I now know for the first time in my life what it is like to truly be discriminated against.

Similar to Jackon's (2010, p. 3) comment, "whether one views representations in contemporary U.S. media as directly educational to youth, or as more reflective of common beliefs and attitudes deemed acceptable or normal in mainstream society," Elizabeth described the discriminatory reality about Muslims as terrorists since 911 and argued for diminishing social discrimination based on negative stereotypical images and boost the power of the minority cultural groups as advocated by Sleeter and Grant (1999).

In order to prevent misunderstandings, prejudice, and stereotypes toward other cultural groups, Elizabeth believed that students should have culturally appropriate knowledge assuming that victimization and discrimination against other cultures comes from ignorance.

If we work to inform students about other cultures, then, perhaps that knowledge will open their mind to other cultures. Those cultures would not be so foreign or "weird" to them.

Rejecting the notion that knowledge is objective, neutral, and universal, Banks (1995) emphasizes the importance of knowledge as the reflection and interpretation of "ideology, human interests, values, perspectives" (p. 12) and power within

the sociocultural context in multicultural education. Banks asserts that positive experiences and open communications further understandings and support for diverse groups of people and their unique cultures.

Science and Religion

The Importance of Honoring the Beliefs of Students, Parents, and Teachers

> *Mary*: I believe being a Christian will definitely influence my identity as a future teacher. There are a lot of controversial issues between Science and religion and I know this will affect my teaching styles/approaches. For example, the way I approach evolution will be indirectly affected by my belief in God. I know that it is important not to discuss my religious beliefs to students but my students may be able to pick up on things by the way I present the material in my classroom. As a teacher, I want to have an open-mind and approach my students without judgment towards their cultural views.

According to Sleeter and Grant (1991), students are "becoming disabled and silenced within a public institution, interpreting school knowledge as a series of tasks to complete for authority figures rather than as an instrument for advancing their own interests" (p. 53). Without understanding students' home and community culture, school experiences cannot be meaningful and productive for them.

> Ideally, education should help all students acquire knowledge that empowers. This implies that knowledge should include a perspective of history from the students' point of view and be selected and constructed in relationship to the students' desires, visions, descriptions of reality, and repertoires of action. (Sleeter & Grant, 1991, p. 50)

Concerning the tension between school knowledge and students' cultural knowledge or beliefs, Mary pointed out that the primary source of learning should be centered on respect for students' personal beliefs. It is important for teachers to take into account, accept, and celebrate diverse knowledge and beliefs of students. At the same time, teachers need to examine "a specific set of values, norms, ethos, and shared meanings" (Banks, 1995, p. 17) that they, the students, and the community possess.

Mary emphasized that teachers who know their own beliefs and the beliefs of the school in which they work can empower and contribute to the development of a multicultural learning environment. As Sleeter and Grant (1991) mention, teachers need to reflect on ways to bridge school knowledge and students' real-life knowledge and experiences together, as well as being able to see and set them apart from each other.

Inclusion

The Importance of Putting Special Efforts into Understanding Diversity Issues across Individuals

> *Jennifer:* I have had interactions with the Deaf community because I am studying to become an American Sign Language interpreter. Deaf culture is different from my culture because they use sign language to communicate. They also have customs that are different from the hearing culture. In the hearing culture we sometimes tell "white lies" so as to not hurt someone's feeling or offend them. In Deaf culture, they are blunt and very honest. Some people in the hearing culture might consider it rude, but they are not being rude, it is just their culture. People in the Deaf community are also very close with one another. When meeting someone new in the community they like to make connections to see if they have any mutual friends in common. It is important in the Deaf community to always keep everyone informed of what is going on in the world and within the community. Deaf people also give hugs in greeting and when parting.

Inclusion is "the deepest level of understanding on diversity" (Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff, & Pearson, 2001, p. 264). Jennifer emphasized that teachers need to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of every student since, as Sapon-Shevin (1995) point out, each student is worthy of being celebrated differently no matter which issues each one is struggling with. By celebrating each student's uniqueness, they can be proud of themselves for being themselves.

Pointing out the challenges of meeting all the needs of students with special needs as well as the curricular goals in general education programs, Jennifer noted that modifying her teaching practices would be necessary to maximize all individual students' potential. For her, equal educational opportunities mean providing the help needed for all students to learn based on an assessment of individual needs. "Differences are not deficit" (Obiakor, 2007, p.150).

Learning to Be Culturally Sensitive to Oneself and Others

Exploring moments of multicultural "experiences" (Scott, 1992) that are "subjective, linguistic, conscious, and reflective," the five preservice teachers became more sensitive to the "knowledge of learners and their characteristics" (Shulman, 1987, p. 8) and the deeper meanings behind them. They considered it important not to make pre-assumptions or pre-judgments until knowing students' personal cultures and conducting independent research on students' personal and cultural backgrounds and past experiences.

As Irvine (2003) suggests,

> It does matter who is being taught – the students. The students' age, developmental level, race and ethnicity, physical and emotional states, prior experiences, interests, family and home life, learning preferences, attitudes about school, and a myriad of other variables influence the teaching and learning processes. (p. 47)

Addressing the challenge teachers face in creating culturally responsive and meaningful learning environments for every student, Phuntsog (1999) describes the need for teachers to ensure whether individual students' cultural experiences and backgrounds are used as a basis for learning. In addition, he states that classroom teachers should examine their own preparation to work with culturally diverse students in their classrooms. For the five preservice teachers, learning about their own and other cultures without making generalizations involved developing respect for self and for others, believing that when students respect themselves they also appreciate others.

As future teachers, the five preservice teachers now recognize the importance of balancing students' home culture and experiences with other cultures. Concurring with this feeling, Banks (1993) and Irvine (2003) assert that culturally responsive teachers should understand and appreciate students' cultural knowledge from home and community and use their personal cultural knowledge as motivation to experience other cultures. These scholars argue that students' personal and cultural knowledge can play a significant role in bridging the differences between their culture and other cultures.

Having Appropriate Knowledge and Experiences to Reduce Prejudice at Both the Personal and Social Levels

"A major goal of multicultural education, as stated by specialists in the field, is to reform the school and other educational

institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality" (Banks, 1995). Pattnaik (2003) asserts that the goal of multicultural education is to understand one's own culture as well as others' cultures. According to this author, acceptance and respect of self and others' beliefs, cultures, perspectives, and values are not separable.

If students lack experiences and exposure to other cultures, they may also retain stereotypic, prejudicial, and ethnocentric attitudes towards others. With lack of or inappropriate knowledge, students cannot understand others' cultures nor can they develop positive attitudes towards others. In relation to Banks' (1995) multicultural education dimension of "prejudice reduction," the preservice teachers in this study concur that without proper understanding about other cultures, students may exhibit the attitudes of "we are normal" and "they are abnormal."

In discussing the issues of diversity and multicultural education, acknowledging and appreciating similarities and differences, sensitivity, open-mindedness, and respect among diverse cultures are typically raised as common themes. However, without genuine understanding about "self," how can people even notice similarities and differences? If people do not perceive themselves as cultural beings, how can they respect and have equal attitudes towards cultural others?

In this study, the preservice teachers challenged their assumptions by considering themselves as sociocultural beings. Once aware of their lack of knowledge or experiences within diverse cultures, they reconstructed their beliefs and knowledge, taking into account that teachers should be careful not to offend students' cultures by thoughtfully considering each individual's personal background in the process of teaching and learning.

The five preservice teachers also felt the need to examine their own cultural backgrounds and experiences. They recognized that the realization of their own cultures and beliefs help them create more culturally relevant teaching and learning practice for all students. They felt that diversity involves understanding themselves as well as others.

Learning from the preservice teachers' reflective experiences with their multicultural autobiographies, this study emphasized that there is no classroom that lacks diversity if we consider individual students' ability, learning needs and interests, developmental level, learning styles, family and community backgrounds, beliefs, as well as distinctively visible factors such as race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status.

Note

[1] All student names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of study participants.

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