Villain or Hero

Student Interpretations of African Trickster Tales

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Introduction

This collaborative action research study describes the results of how pre-service teachers at three institutions of higher learning construed three pre-colonial West African folktales that portrayed the villain or trickster in a heroic manner. Folktales represent common forms of literature that are used in the classroom as conscience stories to communicate behavioral expectations to youngsters.

Trickster tales are short, imaginative narratives that usually use animal characters to convey folk wisdom and to help the reader (especially younger audiences) interpret human nature and debate proper human behavior (Young & Ferguson, 1995). These stories can be powerful tools for teaching children about diverse cultures, (DeVries & Zan, 1984; Lickona, 1992; Noddings, 2002) and the perceived heroes and heroines within them (Mello, 2001).

One common theme in trickster tales is the smaller or weaker character that uses his or her wits to disadvantage and overcome a powerful figure who usually controls others through more conventional means.

In a classroom setting where the teacher is cast as the conveyer of knowledge and the determinant of accuracy, the manners by which teachers interpret the social message of folktales may inform the student about the extent to which his or her approximations of the stories are valued. Although it has been said that all art forms and meanings of literature are guided by the purpose of the authors, we argue through this study that in keeping with Louise Rosenblatt's assertion (1995), the meaning taken from reading is in the mind of the reader.

Thus teachers should exercise the professional diligence to research the origins of the folktales covered in their classrooms to ensure that they respect the original intention and purpose of the author to assure cultural responsiveness and appropriate interpreted meanings on the part of their students.

Through informed dialogues with students, teachers may facilitate discernment and respect of culturally diverse literature. Remembering that each folktake will revolve around a moral being shared, such processes may facilitate a situation in which students (1) learn the moral perspective of the source culture of the folktales, (2) filter the meaning through their own moral schema, (3) refine the meanings in consideration of shared ideas with classroom peers, and (4) learn to negotiate the source meanings within their daily experiences.

Research efforts that concern the folktales should go beyond text-based information to ensure accuracy. Editorial efforts to modify folktales into forms that are "appropriate" for student learning may remove key story elements that affect the original intention of the tale. For example, absent consideration of the source of the modern trickster characters in United States entertainment, the student audience lacks a cultural reference for the meanings of the actions and will apply their own interpretations based on their own experiences and philosophies, often guided by the "good guy usually wins."

Without background information about the social contexts in which trickster tales develop, those who experience the tales will lack appreciation for the essence of the moral associated with the story. Trickster tales are intended to be told orally with the morals discussed, rather than read and analyzed in terms of protagonists and plots.

John Dominic Crossan's (2012) work with parables told by Jesus of Nazareth presents an illustrative example of how modern society softens the meaning of oral stories by taking them out of context. For example, his research of the parable of the steward who is admonished for not investing the money given him suggests that the story is not a lesson about talents, but about the charging of interest. The oral parable challenges the listener to question capitalist notions of assigning a cost for borrowing money. Modern society has often amended the story to fit its contemporary social schema.

A teacher who lacks knowledge of a story's origins or original intention may convey an improper interpretation of the tale and even validate student misunderstandings that may be inappropriate. This situation can greatly distort the meanings of trickster tales, which assign values to those characters who may challenge the established norm. Thus, in "traditional" classrooms that commonly portray behavior as either good or evil, teachers could misinterpret the social messages of a folktale that derives from a culture that recognizes the value of appreciating those who hold ideals that deviate from the social convention or satirize acceptable behavioral standards.

This research contributes to the literature by describing the responses of pre-service teachers to three folktales that originated from pre-colonial West Africa, as contrasted with folktales from Native America or Europe that the teachers may have already encountered. The relevance

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of this study lies within the preconceived notions about social morals and the challenges of socially contextualizing the meanings of the tales.

Literature

Foundational scholarship for this study describes the nature of trickster tales, the utility of reading folktales in humanities classes including pre-service teachers' social studies methods classes, action research, and current research on transactional reading theory that was initiated by Louise Rosenblatt and utilized by Bacigalupa (2007).

Trickster Tales

In the humanities curriculum, trickster tales represent a means of introducing students to many cultures. For social studies educators, these tales provide vehicles for communicating messages about citizenship and expectations for social behavior. As with other folktales, they contain references to societies' values: what people appreciate; what they laugh at; what they scorn, fear, or desire; and how they see themselves.

Thus, it can be argued that reading trickster tales can promote student understanding of the personal dimensions and standards of behavior of another culture, while reducing stereotypes (Bosma, 1992). Furthermore, as a resource for humanities instruction, the multiethnic diversity of tricksters and the analysis of their structures and characteristics introduce problem-solving techniques to students, since tricksters rely on some action to resolve a problem (Young & Ferguson, 1995) or moral dilemma (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971).

Finally, to encourage the highest levels of intellectual and cognitive development, the climax of a trickster tale involves an unusual solution requiring admirable mental prowess and not a single solving of a problem (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971).

Traditional literature subgenres include fables, myths, legends, tall tales, and folk tales (Bosma, 1992; Goforth& Spillman, 1994; Lukens, 1999). In addition to these, a very popular international folk story motif is the trickster tale, which humorously portrays protagonists who use wit, pranks, deceit, and mischief to triumph over their more powerful foes.

Trickster tales appear in literature back to the beginning of recorded time. Before that, they were passed from one generation to the next through oral tra-

dition. The tales that Aesop told were traced back to India, while generations later the Greeks and Romans wrote down what then became known as Aesop's tales (Krauss, 1999). People around the world do not necessarily use the term "trickster"; this term was introduced in 1874 through Catholic missionary Father Albert Lacombe's translation of the Cree buffoon figure Wisakejak as "trickster" or "deceiver" (Krauss, 1999).

Tricksters are traced to many cultures: African/Anansi; African/Zomo; African-American/Brer Rabbit; African-American/ Molly Cottontail; Asian/Badger; Asian/ Sung; European/Fox; Jewish/Hershel; Caribbean/Anancy; Latino/Coyote; Middle Eastern/Hodja; Native American/Iktomi; Native American/Raven; and Pacific Islander/Maui (Young & Ferguson, 1995).

According to research over the last three decades (Bennett, 1995; Coles, 1989; Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994; Koc & Buzzelli, 2004; Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971; Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992; Norfolk & Norfolk, 1999; Parr, 1982), because of their historical relevancy in cultures around the globe, parents and teachers often (especially, in the humanities) are frequently socialized to combine both older and modern stories as vehicles for teaching children moral concepts.

Douglas Hill (1982) provides insight into the rich tradition of the trickster, "(who) can be noble, majestic, wise and godlike and he/she can be powerful, brave, knowledgeable and heroic" (Hill, 1982, p. 4). But at the same time (often during the same story), the trickster can be foolish and stupid, selfish, and vain, deceitful, and even cruel (Hill, 1982). This paradox is the most basic and important factor that lies within all the diverse trickster tales. Tricksters do not always prevail, for they are often victims of another's trickery. Thus, the meanings of the story may not lie within the trickster, but in his or her acts and the prospect of additional deceptiveness that they may foster.

Classroom Use of Art and Folktales

Because they lend themselves to different interpretations and levels of thinking, art and literature used in social studies curricula can teach characteristics of different societies, various interpretations of good and evil, as well as the approximation of morality or ethical behavior. James D. Laney's Discipline-Based Art Education Model (1996, 2007, 2008) provides one instructional strategy for engaging learners in the different dimensions of art

experiences to stimulate their awareness of various social perspectives and foster expression of their own interpretations.

This approach requires that teachers conduct research on the artists' backgrounds and motives for art creations. When facilitating classroom discussions about the artworks, teachers guide students' interpretations with this information, challenging the learners to appreciate the differences between their views and the artist's intentions. The process concludes with the learners' creation of artworks that express their views of the subject at hand.

Laney's model lends itself to discussions about citizenship. Using the *Hunger Games* and related dramatic and art-based instructional strategies provides opportunities for discussion about sacrifice and other citizenship notions that students may find difficult (Lucey, Lycke, Laney, & Connelly, 2013). Through reciprocal understanding and articulation of morals students learn to appreciate the plurality of values, the articulation of their views, and the skill of negotiating patterns of difference that they encounter.

Through the arts, teachers may teach about the art of storytelling, the oral tradition of folktales, the social phenomena that they present, and the philosophical discussions that they can invoke.

Methodology

The exploratory goal of this study was to interpret patterns of intercultural understanding through three folktales from pre-colonial West African culture by using Stringer's model: look, think, act (2007). Through qualitative methods, first we collaboratively analyzed pre-service teachers' interpretations, then reviewed their discourses, and finally discerned the pitfalls and promises of using trickster tales to teach multicultural literature to future teachers.

Reflection in and on action (Schon, 1987) revealed that Rosenblatt's and Bacigalupa's (2007) transactional theory of reading was imminently informative in interpreting data gathered at the three universities. The results provide information about how respondents' contexts and their expectations for literature may relate to their abilities to accurately determine the meanings of trickster tales from other cultures and the relevance of considering the historic and cultural context of folktale interpretations.

Reflection for future action (Dewey,

1933) was also utilized in the concluding sections of the study and is built on Bacigalupa's scholarship grounded in Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, as well as social studies precepts.

Sample

Data were collected from a convenience sample of teacher-education students at three institutions: one institution was a large Midwestern public university; the second was a large public institution on the South Plains; and the third was a large public institution in the rural Southwest.

Three undergraduate social studies methods (two elementary and one middle level) courses were surveyed at the Midwestern institution, three undergraduate social studies methods (two elementary and one secondary level) at the institution on the South Plains, and two foundations classes were surveyed as the institution in the rural Southwest.

Procedure

For the study, 213 students responded to questionnaires developed by the researchers at the three different university's colleges of education. The questionnaires were geared to see how the students interpreted one of three randomly provided West African trickster folktales.

In *Leopard's Wedding* (Folktale I), the central character, Leopard, wants to marry and his soon to be father in law (Njambi) contributes a dowry of animals agreed upon by Leopard. Leopard is the trickster character of the story to the detriment of Etoli the Rat. However, in the end, Gazelle proves to be a trickster as well and outsmarts Leopard, resulting in the demise of Leopard's wife whom Leopard unknowingly kills.

In *Rich Man and the Pauper* (Folktale II), a poor farmer and a middle class farmer are neighbors who come across a rich man disguised as a beggar. The poor farmer is nice enough to feed the beggar while the middle class farmer ignores the beggar. The beggar, or rich man, is the trickster character of the story and tries to reward the poor farmer; however, the unlucky poor farmer never seems to get his just rewards while the middle class farmer does get them.

In *Spider and the Hyenas* (Folktale III), a Spider uses language tricks on a Hyena mother and a Dog to steal food from Hyena's young. Spider runs away and escapes.

The researchers or their designees distributed envelopes to the students. Each envelope contained one of the three folktales. The number and distribution of responding students are displayed in Table 1. The students read the folktales and then responded to six questions. The first three questions served to identify the story read, the institution location, and the professional interpretation of the respondents. The second three concerned the students' interpretations of the tales:

1. What do you think is/are the moral/morals of the story that you just read?

2. Who behaves morally in the story?

3. How would you compare the readability of the story with other folktales you have read?

The purpose of these questions was to gauge the extent to which respondents may realize the original intent of the assigned folktale as well as to consider how the presentation of the tale may relate to the valuing of the presented message.

Analysis

The data were compiled and sent to the primary investigator for coding and tabulation of research questions. For the questions shown above (1-3), the primary investigator calculated the frequency and proportional representation of student responses. Qualitative data were derived and triangulated among all researchers by identifying emerging patterns or themes. (Mills, 2014).

Results

We have organized the presentation of results by the prompts to which students responded. Our findings begin with the accounting of students' interpretations of the stories, followed by their understandings of the characters. Finally, we disclose the students' ideas for use of the trickster tales in their classrooms.

Interpretation of the Moral(s)

Overall, a minority of the responding students from the three institutions had similar interpretations of the moral/morals of the assigned story. Students commonly viewed the stories as warning readers about the consequences of deceptiveness and the virtues of adhering to a universal code of conduct. Such interpretations convey a philosophy common to the dominant culture and a belief in consequences for challenging the status quo. The following paragraphs describe frequencies of each story's interpretations.

Folktale I, *Leopard's Wedding*: Of the 58 respondents who received Folktale I, only 24 (41.37%) of the respondents found themes of a common nature. These interpretations included "don't trust" or "be careful who you trust" (11 times or 45.83% of the 24), "deceitful acts will come back to a person" or "come back to get you in the end" (9 times or 37.50%) and "what goes around comes around" or "Karma" (4 times or 16.67%). "Trick" or "trickery" is mentioned as being in Story I by seven of the respondents.

Other interpretations of the story were variations of "expect the unexpected," "do not kill," or "be honest, crime doesn't pay." Also, three students did not find any moral to the story and one stated that he or she was not sure.

The common theme involved the vengeful or untrusting aspect of human nature. Leopard deceived many of the characters in the folktale, and then succumbed to Gazelle's trickery in the process.

Folktale II, *Rich Man and the Pauper*: Of the 69 respondents assigned Folktale II, 28 (40.58%) described moral messages that were similar to other respondents. Consistent patterns were variations on the Golden Rule: generosity is good or be kind to others (17 times) or 25%, do unto others (3 times), don't judge (3 times), and share the wealth (5 times).

TABLE 1
Frequencies of Responding Students and Folktales Read

	Midwest	Southern Plains	Rural Southwest	Total
N	69	112	32	213
Folktale 1	22	21	15	58
Folktale 2	24	35	10	69
Folktale 3	23	36	7	66
Invalid Surveys		10		

For this tale, respondents recognized the potential for compassion and charity within the tale. This differs from *Leopard's Wedding*, in which the respondents viewed none of the characters as demonstrating morality in a compassionate sense.

For *Rich Man and the Pauper* four respondents interpreted the tale as meaning that the poor will always make bad choices. The poor man had the opportunity to benefit from the basket of money; however, because of his willingness to share, gave to the neighbor who took the money and replaced it with flour. Statements of respondents who expressed this interpretation of the moral were "People have to help themselves out of the situation that they have gotten themselves into," "To gain something, you must work hard," "Can't change someone's luck if that person is not looking for their luck to change," and "People don't change."

Nevertheless, seven respondents indicated that the poor man's circumstances related to fate, rather than choices, and suggested that the moral related to acceptance of fate. Illustrative explanations of the moral were "You end up where you do for a reason," "God made you what you are and that is who you are," "Be satisfied with what you have," and "Sometimes luck isn't in your cards."

Interestingly, none of the respondents focused on the conduct of the rich man as trickster who did not bring the presence of money to the attention of the poor-man. It is acknowledged that despite the very rich man's laments for the poor man's fate at the end of the tale, respondents responded differently to stories that involve animal and human characters when the trickster gets away, as we shall see with Folktale III which involves animals.

Folktale III, *Spider and Hyenas*: In this case 28 (42.42%) of the 66 responses yielded various messages with regard to the selfish nature of humanity. These messages include: don't trust strangers (9 times or 32.14% of the 28), don't be tricked (3 times or 10.71%), do not be manipulated (2 times or 7.14%), and the keen will take advantage of the naïve (2 times). Also, three students did not answer, two were unclear or not sure of a moral, and one replied the story had no moral.

Most of the respondents who did perceive a moral in the story interpreted Spider as deceiving Hyena and her cubs and construed Hyena as a victim of Spider's trickery. This interpretation relates to notions of possession and property and

the importance of protecting those items under one's control. However, the alternative perspective (observed by only two participants) lies in the value of cunning in challenging or tricking an environment in which ownership represents a symbol of character.

Moral Character(s)

Respondents held various interpretations of the moral character(s) in each story. The following paragraphs account for these perspectives and attempt to explain the various points of view.

Folktale I, *Leopard's Wedding*: Of the 58 students who read Folktale 1, more than half (35 or 60.34%) responded that the Gazelle behaved morally, while 11 (18.97%) responded that neither or no one was moral in the story. Nine (15.58%) either refused to answer or did not know, while eight (13.79%) chose the Rat, four (6.90%) indicated the Gazelle and Rat, and one thought the Leopard.

The view of Gazelle as the moral character indicates that most of the respondents considered revenge as legitimizing a moral behavior. Like Leopard, Gazelle demonstrates trickster characteristics; however, respondents may have perceived Gazelle's deception of Leopard as a meritorious act because of just punishment for the Leopard's selfish deeds.

Eleven replied that the story did not involve a moral character. This outcome may involve a couple of reasons. First, because the story did not explicitly state the moral, respondents were left seeking an explanation of the tale. The abrupt ending of the story did not provide a precise answer for students who may have been used to moral stories designed to be instructive. This thinking may relate to the difference between tales that represent tools for prescribing social behavior versus tools for debating social behaviors.

We believe that the other reason that respondents did not perceive of a moral message may be that the behaviors of the characters did not make sense to the students in terms of a dichotomous right and wrong/good and bad/moral and immoral frame of thinking. Because all of the characters have elements of both selfishness and heroism, none represents a purely moral entity.

Folktale II, *Rich Man and the Pauper*: Of the 69 respondents, 48 (69.57%) believed the Pauper or Poor Man behaved morally, eight (11.59%) chose the Pauper/

Poor Man and Rich Man, three (4.35%) selected the Rich Man, and one thought that all characters behaved morally. For this folktale, nine (13.04%) either refused to answer or did not know.

Folktale II, unlike the other folktales provided, involved human characters. Although participants who read this Folktale did not have access to Folktales I and III, it is possible that respondents viewed the characters in Folktale II through a different lens than readers of the animal stories. Thus, the pauper, or poor man's, humility and generosity represented a moral quality, despite the outcome of his decisions.

Folktale III, *Spider and Hyenas*: Out of 66 replies, 32 (48.48%) found the Cubs or Children behaved morally, 21 (31.82%) felt the Hyena or Mother did, two (3.03) found the Dog did, and one the Spider. Only one respondent thought neither character or no one was moral in the story, while nine (13.64%) either refused to answer or did not know.

We think that the interpretations of the cubs' moral behavior relates to the disclosure of the Spider's deceptiveness. The cubs exposed the trickster Spider who deceived Hyena out of their food. The perception of morality in this instance relates to the disclosure of a social wrong and blaming

Readability

The final prompt sought respondents' ideas about the readability of the folktales they read. The prompt did not provide a definition of readability, so the respondents interpreted the term in a manner relevant to themselves. Themes that emerged with regard to respondents' interpretation of the tales' readability were associated with four causes: (1) blatant un-readability of the tales, (2) the vagueness of the morals (32 respondents), (3) the inappropriateness for mathematics and music, and (4) the reference of God in the story.

The most frequent concern about readability involved the clarity of the moral being taught in the folktale, with 32 respondents mentioning this difficulty. The student respondents indicated that Folktale II (*The Rich Man and the Pauper*) seemed to have a clear or clearly identified moral as compared to the other stories.

Interestingly, this folktale contained characters and elements (i.e., human characters, wealth and poverty, the concept of God) with which they had some familiarity. The question may be raised as to whether the folktale may be legitimately identified

as West African given these features. We recognize that the nature of folktales is such that their content and meanings change through oral tradition. The mention of God in this folktale would indicate that it represents a variation that may have occurred after contact with the European culture or it may be due to Muslim contact.

Students considering using these or similar folktales as material in their own classrooms passionately expressed varying degrees of agreement as to whether the tales were written at appropriate reading levels for elementary, middle, and secondary level students. Four mentioned hesitation in their willingness to use Folktale II in the classroom due to the controversial and inappropriate nature of the mentioning of or reference to God.

The overall concern for reading level of these three stories was recorded a total of 16 times, with Folktale I (*Leopard's Wedding*) being the easiest to read as judged by our students. It should be noted, however, that Folktale I was a page and a half long, while the other stories were one page only. Finally, one respondent mentioned the appropriateness of teaching about morals and its use in music classrooms.

Discussion

Respondents offered interpretations of folktales that were both similar and different from each other's. These findings appear to be consistent with Bacigalupa's in that (2007) respondents honed in on particular aspects of each story in ways consistent with thinking guided by their own life experiences and cultural conditioning. However, the data do not provide information about student backgrounds and influences on their patterns of thinking. Nor do we have information that describes the meanings associated with these particular folktales.

Nevertheless, the evidence would appear to indicate that folktales and other stories designed to provide moral outcomes may represent tools to engage teacher candidates in conversations about socialization and the individual psychologies that shape it. Such processes could stimulate conversations about classroom pedagogies in terms of responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and the appropriateness of socially compliant and subversive behaviors.

Protectionist views or age/grade appropriateness concerns with regard to the prospect of children's exposure to these folktales were commonplace among all participants. These findings are consistent with James' (2008) work with elementary teachers' protectionist views of children. Yet such protective notions discredit the abilities of children to think about social systems and may also potentially invalidate the violent domestic realities that many children experience at home (Heyman, 2008; Mills, Legare, Grant, & Landrum, 2011; Murphy, Rowe, Ramini, & Silverman, in press; Thornton, 2014).

In expressing wishes to protect their students from violence, respondents risk presenting literature in a manner that sanitizes life into a 'fairytale' form that provides an interpretation disrespectful of the socio-historic and cultural contexts of its origins. Presenting folktales from a perspective of the dominant culture is akin to findings of history textbook research (e.g., Loewen, 2007) that mythicizes early heroes in ways to fit a benevolent view of the United States. Such an approach does not provide a full accounting of the folktales and the motivations for their cultural origins.

Because our findings reveal a great diversity of interpretation, we suggest that trickster tales may also hold an important place in the humanities classroom for adult students to initiate conversations about cultural shaping of oral storytelling, folktales, and their misinterpretation in postmodern society. Research (e.g., DeVries & Zan, 1984; Lickona, 1992; Noddings, 2002) indicates that trickster tales very effectively engage adults' attention and encourage both their consideration of and articulation toward developing thought about moral concerns.

However, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of folktales-based discussion in changing existing moral perceptions of children and adults. Furthermore, because adults use their past experiences to make sense of literacy, we must also pay attention to the role of real-life events and activities in humanities classrooms for adults.

Implications of Reflections for Future Teaching and Research

The different interpretations of the trickster tales held by our respondents would indicate that the folktales represent fertile ground for discussions about social relationships and even the psychologies that cause such individual behaviors. Bacigalupa's (2007) argument that young children often understand stories with moral themes very differently than authors intend and that imposing author perspectives upon those different understandings may prevent children from fully appreciating the moral messages the stories intend to convey illustrating the challenges teachers face when using folktale literature and the moral messages involved.

The meaning of a text can vary from reader to reader depending upon age and experience. Limited knowledge and experience due to age and experience bring very different understandings to the texts individuals read. In addition, it is possible that the meanings adults construct vary significantly as they understand stories differently. If so, then it is also possible that the ideas they take away from stories with moral themes do not necessarily match the moral messages traditionally intended by the folktale.

Consistent with Laney's (1996) Discipline-Based Art Education Model, the use of trickster tales from cultures other than those commonly told within Euro-derived contexts requires the teacher's awareness of historical and cultural background information about the artworks (or folktales) employed and how they depict the subject matter so that the teacher may guide students' thinking toward the intended meaning of the work(s) employed.

By providing students with opportunities to create and share their own art works (e.g., folktales), the teacher can empower students to express ideas in authentic manners that validate their own views on the topic. Thus, using Bacigalupa's (2007) work as an example, students could draw pictures to show their ideas about the moral of the story and expand on the relationships to their own backgrounds and ideals.

Using trickster tales in the classroom presents a challenge for teachers because the tales' imprecise origins may prompt challenges for those who seek to identify the original intention of the story. For example, a tale created in a time of economic prosperity may carry a message that concerns the importance of loyalty and trust. The same tale, told to successive generations in a context of economic and political oppression, may bode a moral of subversion and deceit.

Thus, when the true origin of a trickster tale is uncertain, the teller may have liberty to modify its meaning to suit his or her own intention. A story modified to be "politically correct" so that it is appropriate for a particular classroom may actually be altered in a way that conceals moral problems that need attention. Indeed, requiring

students to limit their thinking to politically correct content and processes potentially conceals or prevents discussions of moral challenges faced by contemporary society. Such conditions thereby inhibit practice of critical social thinking that is necessary for preservation of democratic society.

The results of this research indicate that teacher candidates apply their moral lenses when utilizing folktales of pre-colonial West Africa in their teaching. While it is acknowledged that respondents did not receive background information about these tales to inform their responses, the presence of animal characters in two of the three tales provided sufficient cues as to the potential for cultural dissonance in the stories and respondents' preparations.

We encourage additional research that compares the moral interpretations associated with stories that feature similar plot outcomes, yet employ animal versus human characters. We also recommend studies that compare interpretations of folktales that explicitly provide the story's moral with those that do not.

Importance to Education

Trickster folktales have been utilized throughout recorded history as a way to teach morals. They hold potential to engage future teachers in prolonged and serious discussion about morality, morals, moral behavior, our perceptions of morality, teachers' perceptions of teaching morality, and interpretation of folktales from questionnaires. For each folktale, there are different understandings concerning the moral message/(s), moral character/(s), and/or hero/heroes. These stories provide opportunities for community dialogue about social conduct, its motives and consequences.

Our current study finds parallel interpretations of literature among college students to Bacigalupa's (2007) findings with kindergarteners; yet the stories used in Bacigalupa's work represented published texts with moral messages related to the outcomes. The tales used for our current research arise from oral traditions and contain messages intended for community dialogue. As classroom discussions about the morals associated with published texts may involve teacher clarifications to prompt young children's realization of the intended moral in order to develop a basis for classroom community, college classrooms may consider the relevance of contemplating the intentions and purposes of folktales developed through oral tradition and the importance of diverse perspec-

tives that allow for community and social dialogue. Particularly, the results illustrate how, without accurate understandings of the context for artwork's (folktale) development, teachers may apply their own (or conventional) meanings to the literature employed. Such strategies can misinform students about the ideas intended in the literature studied.

Thus, as both students and adults misinterpret Woody Guthrie's *This Land is Your Land* as a patriotic song, so too classrooms distort the meanings of tales from underrepresented cultures in ways that fit ideals of the dominant culture, thus concealing or obliterating the fuller meanings students may need to hear.

Finally, some important considerations to make in classroom instruction about diverse literature are the degree to which readers of folktales are familiar with the place, ethnic identity, and multiple ways of accessing the culture represented in the literature (Agnello, Todd, Olaniran, & Lucey, 2009). Social studies skills from geography and history, as well as international awareness, are critical to pulling readers of literature into the circumstances of the characters.

Having researched the readers' responses with little awareness of other cultures or different cultures reminds us that we must work on the contexts of literature within the setting of the readers to establish an interest as well as an interchange of ideas relevant to moral development. Teacher-led discussions about tricksters in our own culture would help foreground future action to promote multicultural understanding of tricksters in other cultures. Teacher reflection in, on, and for teaching practice is critical to engaging learners in ways that advance multicultural understanding among pre-service teachers.

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