

## **Examining the Role of Self-Reflection as an Impetus for Cultivating Equitable Practices for Multilingual Learners**

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### Abstract

Scholars and teacher educators continue to research ways to effectively promote culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2010; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) with pre- and in-service teachers. Daniel (2016) postulates that teacher preparation programs need to strive to guide teacher candidates to enact culturally responsive practices across their coursework and field-based experiences. We complemented Daniel's (2016) research by implementing self-reflection practices as graduate students learned about and strived to implement culturally responsive and sustaining strategies with their tutees. The purpose of our study was to investigate how tutoring students in a community-based field placement and reflecting on these experiences affected graduate students' understandings about culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. Key themes emerged pertaining to asset-based perspectives, relationship building, and equity, reflecting key concepts from both culturally responsive practices and culturally sustaining pedagogies.

*Keywords:* self-reflection, teacher preparation, multilingual learners

Scholars and teacher educators continue to research ways to effectively promote culturally responsive practices (CRP; Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP; Paris & Alim, 2017) with pre- and in-service teachers. Daniel (2016) postulates that teacher preparation programs need to strive to guide teacher candidates to enact CRP across their coursework and field-based practicum experiences. One way to achieve this goal is through self-reflective practices that engage students in the discipline of *noticing* events and actions in their field-based placements and reflecting on specific connections to their course readings and academic experiences (Daniel, 2016). Although Daniel (2016) argues, "Teacher educators must design pedagogies that [...] guide teachers toward grappling with the specifics of how they can enact — not just conceptualize — culturally responsive pedagogy" (p.

592), few studies provide contextualized examples of fostering reflective processes in graduate students and explore how self-reflection promotes transformative learning (Mezirow, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of our study was to investigate how tutoring students in a community-based field placement and reflecting on these experiences affected graduate students' understandings about culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices.

### **Literature Review**

Our study was grounded in CRP (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) and CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017). In addition, self-reflection practices (Daniel, 2016) on community-based learning experiences (Schneider, 2019) were explored.

#### **Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies**

As Gay (2010) explains:

Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* strengths of these students. (p. 31)

Furthermore, Paris (2012) advocates that “research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality” (p. 93). Paris and Alim (2017) encourage educators to extend beyond asset-based practices and to focus on pluralistic outcomes, not white middle class monolingual norms when assessing student achievement. They also argue that culture is not static or in the past, but constantly evolving and changing. As an individual's sense of identity contains various intersecting factors, educators need to make adjustments to their curricular practices to incorporate those influences and help nurture students' identities. These practices can include cultural and linguistic pedagogies that honor students' use of both their

native language and culture and therefore strive to sustain important aspects of their lives (Paris & Alim, 2017).

### **Community-Based Learning Experiences**

To support transformation in graduate students' learning, community-based learning experiences serve as a means to broaden their awareness of sociopolitical factors impacting multilingual students' lives. These experiences can enable graduate students to gain clearer understandings of course content, as they wrestle with concepts in meaningful ways.

Schneider (2019) contends, "Community-based service learning offers a unique method for helping TESOL students see language learners in relation to the larger social world... It allows emerging teachers to recognize that their own identities exist in relation to the larger social world (p. 3). However, Lucas and Villegas (2013) argue that community-based learning experiences "accompanied by facilitated discussions of those experiences can support development of an advocacy stance" (p. 104). They believe that through these experiences, preservice teachers would develop "a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of ELLs, their families, and communities, gaining insight into the challenges they face and the resources they bring to those challenges—insights that can enhance their empathy and desire to advocate for ELLs" (p. 104). Moreover, Janzen and Petersen (2020) emphasize:

While the experiences afforded by a community-based practicum might disrupt teacher candidates' assumptions, we maintain that these experiences must be carefully and ethically constructed by giving attention to the purpose and content of the course, ensuring support for teacher candidates and constructing reciprocal engagements with the community organizations. (p. 64)

Schneider (2019) further proposes, “An important step in this direction is moving beyond the comfort of the campus environment to engage with community organizations as equal partners. As a starting point, we must enter their institutional spaces and listen to their perspectives” (p. 11). All of the above aspects of community-based learning experiences also reflect the principles of service-learning. Students have a reciprocal relationship with the recipients of the service they provide and through reflective processes gain understandings that benefit their own education (Cho & Gulley, 2016).

### **The Role of Self-Reflection**

Howard (2003) posits that although the need for critical reflection is essential for all educators, “teachers of students of diverse backgrounds stand to gain immeasurable benefits from a process that requires them to put the needs of their students ahead of all other considerations” (p. 201). As Daniel (2016) explains, “...teacher educators can consider how to incorporate structures, assignments, and in-class activities that give TCs [teacher candidates] time and space to discuss what and how they notice in their daily practicum experiences” (p. 592). In this study, the researcher conducted a series of seminars containing empathetic, critical integrations (ECIs) of multiple perspectives with her preservice teachers. ECIs were created to help preservice teachers to become culturally responsive and to discuss perspectives they encountered in schools that differed from what they were learning. These ECIs are a “potential route for facilitating teacher candidates’ abilities to integrate understandings they have gained from students in their field-based practicums, mentors and teachers at the practicums, and instructors and peers from their university-based teacher education coursework” (Daniel, 2016, p. 150).

Similarly, Cho and Gully (2016) argue that teacher educators need to integrate “formal components of facilitating student reflections” on field-based experiences into their TESOL coursework because without “thoughtfully integrated TESOL education and reflection” (p. 630), field-based experiences by themselves may reinforce stereotypes of multilingual students.

However, Min Shim (2020) warns about the feelings of discomfort and vulnerability exploring the notion of self-reflection in race ideology. In her study on three white male preservice teachers, she explains, “Even though all the participants are committed to the project, ‘major disruption to the “normal” way of life for the majority of Whites’ (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 28) is not welcomed as shown by the participants’ statements” (Min Shim, 2020, p. 842). The researcher argues that people’s ways of thinking cannot be changed through rational reflection:

Educators must still acknowledge and face the desire for wholeness that are intensified through the unconscious internalization and embodiment of white racial supremacy that seems very persuasive in generating resistance to ambivalence, incommensurability and vulnerability which in turn can invoke resistance in self-reflective practices pertaining to issues of race and racism. (p. 844)

Schneider (2019) further insists that if teacher educators want to help preservice teachers engage in self-reflection on their community-based field experiences, “we, as instructors, must be responsive to students’ evolving efforts to navigate this challenging terrain, and we must also maintain and display a critical awareness of our own positions within the model” (p. 11).

Therefore, our study was situated in CRP (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) and CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017) with the focus on self-reflection practices (Daniel, 2016) on community-based learning experiences (Schneider, 2019). Since the inception of our partnership with a

community migrant education program, we have wondered about our graduate students' abilities to make connections between coursework and their community-based learning experiences. We were curious to understand how they wrestled with cultural and linguistic equity issues, if at all. Consequently, we explored the following research question in our study: How did self-reflection on tutoring in a community-based experience affect graduate students' understandings about teaching multilingual learners?

### **Methods**

We employed a qualitative case study approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to provide an in-depth description of two graduate students' reflective practices as they participated in weekly tutoring sessions with their assigned migrant education students. Since the study sought to explore the perceptions of graduate students when teaching migrant education students and their learning in the early field experience, it was appropriate to conduct qualitative research. We were interested in the meaning they derived from these experiences. In addition, our study also represents a case study because it is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37); it focused on a specific community-based field experience with migrant education students in the fall semester of 2018 and 2019. Our case was bounded by time and activity; we collected detailed information using a variety of data sources over a sustained period of time (Creswell, 2009).

### **Context**

This study focused on two participants: Mary as a white cisgender middle-class monolingual English female and Ting as a Chinese-American cisgender middle-class multilingual female. They both worked with Spanish-speaking low-income youth from Latin American countries. The former was a practicing elementary teacher in our local school district

while the latter was a pre-service teacher working on her initial P-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) licensure. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were used for all names.

We, as researchers, also were instructors of these students in either a second language acquisition or cross-cultural education course as well as supervisors of their community-based field experiences. We are both white cisgender female teacher educators who have been working with graduate and undergraduate TESOL students at our master's comprehensive university in the eastern part of the United States. One of the researchers is a former language learner who was born and raised outside of the United States.

We partnered with a local community-based organization that supports migrant education students. In order to qualify for services, families would have to demonstrate their displacement in pursuit of work in the agricultural field or poultry industry. Our graduate students served as tutors to migrant education students in helping them with homework and other academic work either at public places, such as schools or libraries, or at migrant education homes. In our study, one of the participants met with her two students after school in the same school in which she taught and students attended while the other participant worked with her student in his home.

### **Data Collection**

We collected multiple data sources, such as an action research project from the language acquisition course, weekly journals and a philosophy of diversity paper from the cross-cultural education course, and individual semi-structured interviews.

Our research incorporated weekly journals in which participants recorded descriptions of their experiences and tutees' reactions. We urged them to reflect on key connections to their coursework that stimulated their thinking about language or culture concepts, as evident in their tutoring sessions. Students delved deeper in their understanding of these concepts in their action

research project and philosophy of diversity, assignments that were grounded in participants' migrant education experiences.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and further transcribed verbatim. This interview took place after these courses were completed and final grades were assigned. The list below depicts the interview questions that were used with participants. Additionally, five to six follow-up questions were asked based on each participant's quotes in their written work. We read five to six quotes and asked each participant to elaborate on their remarks. In addition, we followed up with additional questions based on their explanations.

1. Please tell us about your experiences with your migrant education student. Who did you work with? Where? How long? What did you work on with your student, and why?
2. Could you describe an experience you had with your student that you felt really influenced or impacted you? If so, tell us about this experience and why it was significant.
3. What cultural and linguistic knowledge, if any, did you gain through your experience with your student?
4. What pedagogical skills, if any, did you gain through your experience with your student?
5. How did the experience with your student influence your attitude toward teaching diverse students?
6. Varied questions based on participant quotes.
7. Is there anything else you would like to share that we didn't ask you yet?

**Data Analysis**

The data obtained through two individual interview transcripts, a total of 21 journals, two action research projects, and two philosophy of diversity papers were coded and analyzed for themes using an inductive and comparative analysis process following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidelines. The first phase of data analysis was to code each data source separately using our research question as a guide. We looked for segments in our data that were responsive to our question and provided notes and informal labels to serve as beginning themes. The process involved reading and rereading all data in their entirety multiple times in order to clarify themes. Each theme was given a definition to explain the meaning of the identified data, and some themes were collapsed into a larger category upon review and dialogue among the researchers. In addition, we conducted member checking with participants of individual interviews by reviewing interview transcripts with them to eliminate any inconsistencies and to confirm their previously made statements.

The researchers worked together to reach inter-rater reliability. We conducted two cycles of coding interview transcripts together to determine a common language for the coding and to establish consensus. Each investigator then coded half of the remaining student written work based on the previously established protocol. We then conducted several more rounds together before reaching final consensus on the data themes.

Additionally, we incorporated several strategies to protect against validity threats, such as triangulation, member checking, and adequate engagement in data collection along with using rich, thick description to convey our findings (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We triangulated our data sources by examining evidence from each source in order to build a justification for our themes. By converging our sources of data, we added validity to our study.

Moreover, we used member checking to validate the accuracy of our qualitative findings by asking our participants to review our findings. Finally, we incorporated adequate engagement by describing only the findings that “felt saturated”, those themes where we had substantial evidence for our interpretations and few, if no, alternative explanations. Furthermore, by providing a thick, rich description of our participants’ experiences, we strove to add to the validity of our findings.

This study highlights the themes that emerged: asset-based perspectives, relationship building, and equity. The asset-based perspective theme included a total of 23 codes. The equity theme comprised a total of 24 codes while the relationship building theme encompassed a total of 16 codes.

### **Findings**

These findings revealed that both participants challenged their personal assumptions and became involved in pedagogical, cultural, linguistic, and ethical concerns to support their students. They worked with Spanish-speaking, low-income youth from Latin American countries. From their practices they gained asset-based perspectives and insights into the role of relationships with clearer understandings of equity in educational settings.

#### **Asset-Based Perspectives**

We defined asset-based perspectives as incorporating students’ backgrounds, motivation, interests, and identities into instruction in addition to providing a choice in how students would demonstrate their understanding and knowledge. Both participants grew in their understanding of how their students’ biographies and intersectionalities affected their instructional practices.

**Mary**

Mary explained ways that she tried to connect to students through the selection of multicultural books that resonated with them, as follows: “During my Migrant Ed placement..., I incorporated several texts into our sessions that I thought [my students] could relate with and enjoy. Watching [them] genuinely connect with texts relevant to their lives proved how crucial it is for students to be represented on classroom bookshelves.”

By incorporating books that included Spanish, her tutees were more engaged in the activity and also able to serve as a mentor to their teacher by helping her understand Spanish, a language they knew well, as echoed in the following remark:

[My students] loved the bilingual book *Mango, Abuela, and Me* (2017) by Meg Medina and Angelina Dominguez. After I introduced the book, the girls immediately lit up and their joy was obvious as they took turns reading the text aloud. Maria and Carmen took pride in teaching me words in Spanish.

She engaged in dialogue with her students and put herself in a position to show her own vulnerability in order to provide more meaningful and authentic experiences for her students.

Seeing herself as a facilitator with students taking charge of their learning, Mary situated her students at the center of the teaching-learning process. She summarized it in her philosophy paper, “As an instructor, I will act as a facilitator and pose questions, provide guidance, and offer insight while learners take the lead in designing classroom discussions and learning experiences that reflect their interests.”

Consequently, drawing on students’ cultural and linguistic capitals, Mary discovered that the lessons that incorporated both the families’ funds of knowledge and native language contributed to her students’ sense of belonging, as stated in the interview:

Throughout our sessions, [my students] found the lessons that allowed them to share about their family traditions and explore their native language to be the most meaningful. These were the sessions that ended with jovial feelings and a sense of belonging and togetherness between the girls and I.

### ***Ting***

Ting also emphasized the importance of finding ways to connect to a learner's identity through native language and cultural experiences. Both required her to broaden her perspectives as she strived to integrate relevant learning experiences using Spanish, a language she did not know. In an interview she stated, "Learn something about the student's culture, like a language or their social customs, like traditions like festivals." She embraced her own advice by learning a few words in Spanish and seeking books that could resonate with her tutee's cultural background. In one example, she found a book that focused on the Day of the Dead, an important holiday for some Latinx students, that honors loved ones who have passed away. She was attempting to support Juan's culture, but discovered he had no knowledge of this holiday. Ting recognized that students' identities are nuanced, and she needed to learn more about her tutee's traditions. However, she remained committed to finding relevant literature. As she stated in her interview, she valued using multicultural literature "so students can feel the existence of their culture in the curriculum so that everybody would feel kind of proud."

When engaging Juan in discussions of the picture books she read to him, Ting intentionally asked questions to stimulate connections between her tutee and characters in the book. As she wrote in one of her journals, "When I read the page about reading picture books, I asked Juan, 'Does your dad read books to you too before bedtime?' Juan said, 'Yes. My dad read books to me, too!'" In her writings, she elaborated on the excitement that Juan expressed when

realizing similarities between himself and book characters. Ting applied this strategy frequently as a way to connect to her tutee's life.

A final way that Ting incorporated asset-based perspectives was her awareness that this kindergartner needed to be active in order to engage in her tutoring sessions. She often incorporated movement, drawing, and use of artifacts to engage Juan as he learned English. Ting explained in her interview, "You have these interactive activities for them to participate in. Then they will be more...motivated or interested in your class, in your lessons." By providing opportunities for movement, Ting cultivated a meaningful learning environment that incorporated Juan's strengths.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationship building was another key theme that emerged in our study that paved the way for more equitable and power-sharing experiences. We define relationship building as learning about the needs and experiences of students and their families and fostering a partnership with them in order to establish a culture based on trust and mutual understanding.

#### ***Mary***

Mary believed that in order to create a safe and welcoming learning environment, positive relationships with her tutees needed to be established. By asking about the best of part of their day and one thing they learned that day, she helped build a sense of safety and trust, as stated in her interview:

And so, building those relationships they weren't grounded in an academic, you know, learning expectation, but they did help the three of us feel more connected to each other.

And I think that that's important, because if that doesn't exist, then approaching

academic learning is really difficult. If students don't feel safe or like they can express themselves in a vulnerable or open way.

These “authentic connections” would enable students to take risks in learning and show their vulnerability of not having the background knowledge of unfamiliar contexts. In the interview, Mary emphasized that building connections with students as individuals and as a whole class would help “the overall atmosphere of the classroom become more positive and more supportive and more successful.”

As Mary continued working with her tutees, she learned about their funds of knowledge as they discussed books and played games, as stated in her philosophy of diversity paper: “I was thankful to learn about the girls’ lives during our time together. Throughout our time together [students] demonstrated that their true abilities cannot be measured by a multiple-choice assessment.” Seeing students for who they are and what they bring to the learning process is a powerful example of a teacher who is driven to create equitable and affirming learning spaces for all her students.

### ***Ting***

Because Ting’s tutoring time took place in the student’s home, her focus on relationship building included direct relationships with the student and the family. At first, she struggled to communicate with family members, in part due to her lack of proficiency in Spanish. However, when she brought a bilingual book in English and Spanish to one session, she noticed a dramatic shift in the families’ interactions with her. Not only was Juan excited, but his mother opened up to Ting. As she noted in a journal entry:

I am very glad to know that when I tried to use their language to communicate, I felt the tension or awkwardness in the air suddenly gone. When they knew that I could speak

their language, even just a few words, the distance between them and me seemed to get shortened immediately.

In this case, the use of a few words in her native language fostered a more open relationship between Ting and Juan's mother. Ting also welcomed feedback to improve her Spanish abilities. As she stated, "[Juan's mom] also taught me how to pronounce the R sound in Spanish." By being vulnerable and open to support from Juan's mother, Ting strengthened her relationship with the family. She also provided her a pathway to contribute to the tutoring sessions by using some Spanish. Finally, this practice encouraged Juan's mother to learn more about Ting, as she noted in her journal, "Juan's mom even sat down and asked me whether I am Chinese or Japanese in English, which was the first time that she tried to talk to me." In our interview, Ting spoke about the importance of relationship building and emphasized that she valued both the relationship between the teacher and student and the relationship with the student's family.

### **Equity**

Another theme that emerged in our study was equity, which we defined as enacting an ethic of care, providing differentiated instruction, advocating for students, and collaborating with other stakeholders to promote student learning and achievement.

### ***Mary***

Mary emphasized the use of multicultural books in her classroom as leveling the playing field for both the majority and minoritized students, which in turn contribute to equitable learning experiences for all, as echoed in her philosophy of diversity paper:

Students who are considered a part of the majority can learn about the lives of others by reading. When this happens, students see that all lives are "normal" and that we can learn about many valuable and meaningful things through books.

Thus, providing multicultural books to students would ensure that all students are exposed to stories of individuals who are part of the fabric of this country. This in turn would promote more equitable instructional practices focusing on decentering whiteness in the curriculum and allowing her students to see themselves in these books, as described in Mary's interview:

I have been working to include children's literature in my classroom that represents the lives of many individuals around the world in an attempt to allow my students to see themselves in our classroom learning materials while also being exposed to issues of racial and social justice.

However, decentering whiteness in the pursuit of social and racial justice would require teachers to go the extra mile and be vulnerable in order to provide equitable learning experiences to students, as stated by Mary in her interview: "And I think also just being willing to put in the extra time myself to learn more about the realities of history and to think about [...] whose voice is missing here."

### ***Ting***

Ting addressed the theme of equity by focusing on teachers' obligation to differentiate and explain content in meaningful ways to multilingual learners. She summarized her beliefs in one of her papers:

Since the language in content subjects is a big challenge to most ELL students, which is the main barrier that hinders their understanding of content instructions, and thus leads to their poor academic achievement, it is important and necessary for content teachers to accommodate ELL students' needs and explain their content terms in a way that ELL students can understand.

In these remarks, Ting advocated for teachers to make accommodations, especially in their instruction of academic vocabulary and content, to enable multilingual learners to understand the subject matter.

Related to Ting's focus on student accommodations was her commitment to learning about the student's family background in order to gain a more holistic and accurate understanding of the student's culture. That knowledge could serve as an effective tool to support the student's academic needs. In her interview, she explained:

Some other things I think ESL teachers can do... you can visit the students' family home, talk to their parents, or you can go to their community and know about their community. So they, you know, might have a more authentic view or perceptions of the students' family background or cultural background that will better help us support a teacher to accommodate these students' needs.

This quote also alludes to another key belief Ting holds with respect to equity: collaboration between content and language teachers. Multiple times she spoke about the importance of all teachers working together to support English learners. Teachers must consult with each other and collectively support multilingual students. In one paper she wrote, "Collaboration between ESL teachers and content teachers is a very effective and applicable way that many teachers and schools are practicing to better meet ELL students' needs."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Since the inception of our collaboration with a community migrant education program, we have wondered about our graduate students' abilities to wrestle with cultural and linguistic equity issues. In this study, we examined a case study of two graduate students' abilities to make connections between TESOL coursework and their community-based learning experiences. More

specifically, we explored how self-reflection on a community-based experience affected graduate students' understandings about teaching multilingual learners.

The themes of asset-based perspectives, relationship building, and equity became prominent in our study. Reflections on course readings, assignments, and community-based learning experiences encouraged participants to grapple with how they could create meaningful learning opportunities for their tutees that utilized student background knowledge. They recognized inequities, taught to and through students' strengths, and became change agents by cultivating positive relationships with their students and their families (Gay, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). It was clear that participants embraced asset-based approaches to instruction (Gay, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2018), as they described and built upon the strengths their students brought to the learning process. They also gained knowledge about ways social structures can perpetuate inequalities for marginalized groups, and journal entries illustrated ways that students were critically thinking about structural barriers their tutees faced, examples related to CSP and equity literacy (Gorski, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Self-reflection served as a means for participants to process their experiences and to become better equipped to enact their understandings of CRP in their teaching practices (Daniel, 2016). The use of formal reflections, class discussions, and interviews provided participants opportunities to question cultural generalizations and instead "see" their students as individuals, not stereotypes (Cho & Gully, 2016). We followed Cho and Gully's (2016) call for integrating formal reflections on field-based experiences in our coursework to ensure that our students do not reinforce stereotypes of their multilingual learners. Our role was to support and further our graduate students' evolving self-reflection by "maintain[ing] and display[ing] a critical awareness of our own positions" (Schneider, 2019, p. 11), which helped our students to grow

in their awareness of their own positionality as they engaged with their tutees.

This study may serve as one model for other education programs that are striving to promote CRP and CSP with their graduate students. As Ladson-Billings (2014) noted, “If we are able to help novice teachers become good and experienced teachers to become better, we need theoretical propositions about pedagogy that help them understand, reflect on, and improve their philosophy and teaching practice” (p. 83). Our study was an effective starting point for assisting young professionals in self-reflection practices that helped them prioritize their students’ needs ahead of all other needs (Howard, 2003) in order to enact CRP and CSP with their multilingual learners. However, the question still remains whether these educators continue prioritizing their students and reflecting on their teaching practices through the lens of social justice pedagogy by collaborating with students and their families to transform the systems that perpetuate injustice and white supremacy (Freire, 2002; Olding, 2017).

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