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Looking Back at Their Futures: Preservice Middle Level Teachers' Examination of Past Educational Experiences

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Abstract

The researchers investigated the reflections of preservice middle school teachers (PSMTs) who were enrolled in an activity-based middle level social studies methods course. These reflections concerned the students' past educational experiences. Through weekly journals, the PSMTs were encouraged to reflect on course activities and relate them to the perceived effectiveness of teacher-centered and student-centered methodologies experienced in K–12 and college settings. Findings indicated that the analysis and evaluation of past educational experiences grew in complexity throughout the course. As the course progressed, the participants actively integrated the current activities into reconceptualizations of their past experiences. The researchers recommend future work with preservice teachers' reflections to address preservice teachers' perceptions of the reflective process and the effects on future practice.

Introduction

Discrepancies often exist between inservice and preservice teachers' beliefs about effective pedagogical methods and their classroom practices, observations, and experiences (Cady & Rearden, 2007; Collay, 1998; Daniels & Perry, 2003; Fung & Chow, 2002; Mayer, 2006). Though inservice teachers indicate that they regard student-centered classrooms as highly desirable, they continue to engage in teacher-centered practices (Hedrick, Harmon, & Linerode, 2004; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2005; Raymond, 1997). Preservice social studies teachers acknowledge this incongruence by indicating preferences for innovative methodology, while employing traditional methodologies in their own classrooms (Meuwissen, 2005). Although preservice teachers report enjoyment and benefits from student-centered practices, they initially express reluctance in shifting to these methods (Howell, 2006).

Using current educational experiences as tools to reevaluate past experiences may assist preservice teachers in analyzing the discrepancy between the student-centered methodologies stressed in college courses and the teacher-centered practices found in many social studies classrooms. The current investigation interpreted how preservice teachers in a middle level social studies methodology course reflected upon, related to, and applied current student-centered activities and discussions to their perceptions of previous educational experiences. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do preservice teachers describe their past educational experiences prior to study of student-centered methodologies?
2. How do preservice teachers describe their past educational experiences in light of exposure to student-centered methodologies?
3. How do preservice teachers describe the effects of student-centered experiences on their own understanding of their past educational experiences?

The investigation focused on how preservice teachers conceptualized their own educational experiences in light of exposure to student-centered methodologies. Previous studies (Brown, 2006; Burnett, 2006; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000) integrated preservice teachers' previous educational experiences into philosophy formation. This investigation focuses on how preservice teachers' conceptions of past educational experiences change when encouraged to use current classroom activities as tools with which to reevaluate their past experiences.

Literature Review

Dissonance between Components of Educational Philosophy

After many years of formal and informal educational experiences, preservice teachers have a deeply ingrained sense of what roles students and educators take in the classroom setting (Angell, 1998; Bramald, Hardman, & Leat, 1995; Cady & Rearden, 2007; Mahlios & Maxson, 1995; Yeager & Wilson, 1997). Preservice teachers' descriptions of the ideal roles of students and teachers often conflict with what is actually expected and practiced in the classroom (Cady & Rearden; Collay, 1998; Daniels & Perry, 2003; Fung & Chow, 2002; Mayer, 2006). Additionally, Daniels and Perry revealed that although teachers may state that they are providing student-centered learning opportunities, young students often have different perceptions about what is taking place in the classroom.

In describing their desire for more student-centered experiences while resisting a shift in their expectations of roles for students and teachers, preservice teachers imply that they, too, accept the conflicting student-centered/teacher-centered philosophies (Cady & Rearden, 2007). Fung and Chow (2002) suggested that this discrepancy is also seen with instructors at the undergraduate level and that teacher educators address it with preservice teachers to assist them in critically analyzing the differences between stated philosophy and actual classroom conditions.

This incongruence seems to continue throughout an individual's career as both a student and a practicing teacher. Though practicing teachers indicate that they regard student-centered classrooms as highly desirable, the discrepancy between what they indicate and what they practice remains (Bolinger & Warren, 2007; Chen, 2002; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2005; Raymond, 1997; VanLeuvan, 1997). In a culturally and economically diverse educational landscape, it is important for teachers to reevaluate the roles and power structures within the classroom if they are to be responsive to their students' needs (Bartolome, 2007). Apple (2004) suggested that the roots of this discrepancy may lie in a broad educational climate that feigns student-centered methods and teacher choice while maintaining real authority at levels higher than students *and* teachers.

Preservice teachers in social studies methods classes acknowledge this incongruence by indicating that, while they prefer innovative methodology, actual classroom conditions inhibit them (Meuwissen, 2005). Additionally, preservice teachers disclose that they are hesitant to integrate student-centered methodologies into their own practice (Hansen & Stephens, 2000; Howell, 2006; Mezeske, 2004; Weimer, 2002). To cope with the internal dissonance preservice teachers may experience when seeing the conflicting philosophies at work, Meuwissen recommended experiences that allow for a more overt comparison and analysis between student-centered philosophies taught at the undergraduate level and teacher-centered practices seen in social studies classrooms.

Perhaps because of the exposure to the conflicting philosophies, preservice teachers do not feel they have the experience necessary to integrate student-centered practices into their own classrooms.

Preservice teachers who have limited exposure to student-centered practices may lack the requisite experiences in connecting content knowledge to innovative methodologies. With much of their own educational experience approaching content knowledge from a teacher-centered perspective, preservice teachers who are asked to create and execute student-centered activities may not have the background to integrate innovative methodologies into their classrooms. Fragnoli (2005) found that "preservice teachers' reflections, however, demonstrate that they did not feel empowered or confident to move those instructional strategies to their classroom" (p. 251), which may be indicative of the incongruence between student-centered methodologies taught at the undergraduate level and the teacher-centered methodologies in many social studies classrooms. This uncertainty often causes preserviece teachers to adopt practices modeled by their cooperating teachers in field experiences. As a result, preservice teachers experience challenges implementing the progressive strategies advocated by university settings because of their incongruence with practices employed in field experiences (Grant, 1996; Virta, 2002).

Integrating new experiences into existing schema may reinforce or alter an individual's concepts of the ideal roles of students and teachers in the classroom. Faced with contradictory messages, preservice and inservice teachers may use these experiences to justify an educational philosophy that has conflicting tenets. Preservice teachers may also accept these conflicting tenets out of self-preservation within a system that employs vastly different processes for students, as determined by their school settings (Kozol, 2005). Additionally, preservice teachers may apply different tenets of their overall philosophy to meet the needs of their environment. Faced with undergraduate courses that emphasize student-centered approaches and social studies classrooms that focus on teacher-centered approaches, preservice teachers may reproduce what is expected of them in these different environments. Postman and Weingartner (1969) argued,

> The college students we are now talking about are the ones who were most "successful" in conventional school terms. That is, they are the ones who learned best what they were required to do: to sit quietly, to accept without question whatever nonsense was inflicted on them, to ventriloquize on demand with a high degree of fidelity, to go down only on the down staircase, to speak only on signal from the teacher, and so on. (p. 143)

By applying the characteristics of the "successful" college student to preservice teachers, it may be that "successful" preservice teachers selectively apply the conflicting student-centered and teacher-centered philosophy when it is to their advantage—student-centered tenets in college courses and teacher-centered tenets in social studies classrooms.

Placed into the 21st century context, these conflicts may, in part, be increasingly reinforced by modern technological developments that increase passive information absorption and decrease social engagement (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000), which challenges preservice and novice teachers' abilities to reflect critically upon experiences. This occurs because they lack the experience to analyze critically the conflicts between the student-centered philosophy stressed in college courses and the teacher-centered philosophy evidenced in social studies classrooms. Uncritical reflection and integration of the mixed messages into existing schema may allow these messages to go under-analyzed, which reduces the chances that the conflict will be discovered.

Preservice Teachers' Ability to Reflect on Educational Experiences

Preservice teachers vary in their abilities to reflect upon their experiences (Alger, 2006; Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999; Bain, Mills, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2002). Hatten and Smith (1995) describe four levels of reflection; *descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection* and *critical reflection*. Descriptive writing, which may not be considered true reflection, is a simple recounting of events with no analysis. Descriptive reflection includes rationales for actions that work to explain why events take place. In dialogic reflection, the individual steps back from the events and questions the events and rationales. Critical reflection actively integrates larger contextual concerns into observed events and employs multiple perspectives to analyze the events (ibid). Given the current emphasis on standardization and acquisition of specific goals, many preservice teachers may not have been educated in a climate in which critical reflection was valued (Kelchtermans, 2007).

Dialogue between instructors and students that emphasizes the reflective process over the content of the reflection may assist preservice teachers in reaching higher levels of critical reflection (Bain, Ballantyne, et al., 1999; Bain, Mills, et al., 2002). Restating Meuwissen's (2005) call for a more overt analysis of disconnects between theory and practice,

engaging preservice and inservice teachers in discussions that ask them to consider the process of reflection may lead to higher reflective levels.

Uncritical reflective practices may inhibit preservice teachers' ability to negotiate and articulate the conflict between student-centered statements and teacher-centered practices. By remaining at low levels of reflection in which they recount events or uncritically rationalize them, preservice teachers may be accepting these tenets without seeing the conflict between them. Investigating how preservice teachers describe the integration of new experiences into a reconceptualization of experiences may illuminate the process by which students either become more critical in their reflections or remain uncritical of their experiences.

Researchers have interpreted how the introduction of diverse methodologies encourages preservice teachers to reconceptualize their educational philosophies (Angell, 1998; Pankratius & Young, 1995; Slekar, 2005). The current investigation seeks to add to the body of knowledge by focusing on how preservice teachers use current class activities as tools to reevaluate their past educational experiences. While previous studies integrate preservice teachers' previous educational experiences into philosophy formation, this investigation focuses on how current educational experiences are used to reevaluate past educational experiences.

Method

Sample

The qualitative study involved students enrolled in a middle school social science methodology class in a Midwestern teacher education institution during fall 2007. As part of the course, students (preservice teachers) were required to journal their reflections about the class activities. The unguided reflections were required to have a minimum of 300 words and were posted on the course website. To garner the students' immediate reactions to the activities, the reflections were due before midnight after each evening class. The instructors responded to each reflection over the following 48 hours. At the conclusion of the course, students were asked to volunteer their weekly reflections for analysis. Of the 21 students enrolled in the course, eight students (39%) agreed to volunteer their reflective journal entries for analysis. Seven participants were female and one was male.

The weekly journal entries provided students with opportunities to conceptualize their perceptions of the class activities in terms of both their past educational experiences and their perceptions of their future roles as teachers. The instructors (one faculty member and one doctoral intern) responded to the unguided entries with comments and questions that encouraged students to consider if they could connect the class activities to larger themes within student-centered social studies classrooms. Students were not required to respond to the instructors' comments and questions.

Procedure

The students participated in a course emphasizing a cooperative, student-centered teaching philosophy. In this course, instructors facilitated students' participation in activities that addressed topics that included, but were not limited to social justice, financial literacy, patriotism, and non-Eurocentric history. For example, in a dramatic activity, one of the instructors portrayed an individual who represented a department of education official. Students were addressed as practicing teachers in a seminar on the benefits of a shallow and didactic view of patriotism. This activity encouraged students' critical examination of the role that authority plays in teacher-student interactions. In another activity, student groups were asked to create and perform skits that addressed adolescent gender stereotypes. This activity encouraged students to examine what role stereotypes play in perceptions of adolescents. Debriefing sessions took place after many of the activities to encourage students' consideration of the underlying philosophical and methodological themes of the activities.

The course encouraged student interpretation of social studies themes through analysis and discussion of music, visual arts, and poetry. Group activities included designing and presenting unit lesson plans on various topics, competitive activities to recall geographic facts, analysis of potential textbook bias, roundtable discussions, silent written discussions, and debates. The course activities and assignments challenged students to examine their own understandings of the nature of social studies themes and methodologies. Additionally, students were encouraged to integrate experiences they had as both students and preservice teachers into their visions for their own future classrooms. Class activities, discussions, and assessments were informed by a theoretical lens that viewed effective social studies methodology as student-centered, interdisciplinary, and having multiple interpretations. They encouraged students to consider how differing roles of the teacher and the student in their past and present

educational experiences informed their views on the epistemological nature of social studies.

Coding and analysis

Participants' comments within the reflections that were pertinent to the research questions were coded into categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). From coding of the participants' reflections, the researchers developed three themes that addressed the research questions: (a) comments that compared and contrasted current and past activities; (b) comments that indicated future use of current activities; and (c) comments that connected themes between current and past experiences. The first theme, which compares and contrasts current and past activities, was divided to differentiate comments that describe the difference between current class activities and past experiences and comments that simply address the novelty of the current activities. The third research question, which addresses the students' descriptions of the process of changes in perception of past educational experiences, was not included as a theme in the coding process, because none of the students described this process.

Results

Through the semester, the participants increasingly integrated the course activities into a reconceptualization of their past experiences. The amount of time it took to move along a developmental trajectory, however, varied widely. This variation has been noted in previous studies (Alger, 2006; Bain, Ballantyne, et al., 1999). Marie was the first participant to suggest that the current activities could be used for more than just comparing and contrasting, describing larger themes in her second reflection (August 27). Elizabeth first discussed larger themes in her third reflection (September 10); Steve in his fourth reflection (September 18); Jody and Stacey in their eighth reflections (October 15); and Carrie and Marcy in their ninth reflections (October 22). Melissa was the last to indicate that she saw larger themes beyond comparison and contrasting or future use of current activities in her 12th reflection (November 12).

In the first stage of the reflective developmental trajectory, the participants limited their reflections to how the current course activities compared and contrasted with their past experiences. These descriptions did not reveal participants' integration of course activities into a new perception of past experiences. As the semester progressed, the participants' reflections moved from a focus on the novelty of the course activities toward a focus on how larger themes of student-engagement in class activities were modeled through class experiences. The participants became more skilled at integrating the activities into their reconceptualization of past experiences, but none of the participants articulated the process by which they reconceptualized their perceptions of past experiences.

How Do Preservice Teachers Describe Their Past Educational Experiences Before Discussions of Student-Centered Methodologies?

In the first stage of comparison/contrasting or future-use utility, the students described how the class activities were different from ones they had experienced previously. They limited their reflections to a comparison of the current course activities to their past experiences and descriptions of how they might use the activities in the future.

One activity asked students to rate musical selections based on personal preferences. This activity served as a metaphor for the difficulty of consensus building that takes place in the political arena. Marcy reflected on her own experiences and how the current activity was similar, but she did not describe whether or not the current experience changed her views of these past experiences:

> I remember when I was in grade school and I really enjoyed activities where we did activities that asked us to elicit some of the same feelings and emotions that the people we were reading about experienced. I like role playing and I think this is a form of it. (September 18)

Melissa also reflected on both teacher-centered and student-centered classrooms: "When I think back to my middle school days, I remember and appreciate more the teachers who made learning a group activity not just a teacher lecturing" (August 20). Like Marcy, Melissa did not describe whether or not the current activities affected how she views her own past experiences.

Carrie first described the activity, then explained that she might use it in the future:

> I really enjoyed the activities we did tonight in class. I liked the fact that they were interactive. They got us moving around the room and talking with our classmates. … I think that would be an activity that I could use in my future classroom. (August 27)

Stacey compared a geography activity in the second class meeting to her past experiences and then described how she might employ them in the future:

> The activity in class with countries and their capitals as well as their characteristics was a good one. I had never done anything like that before, but I think it could be a good activity to use in a social studies lesson in a middle school. It could be used for many different purposes. It could be used for the teacher to get to know where her students stand with geography. (August 27)

In her first reflection, Marie compared the current activities and discussion to previous classes, "Instead of beginning like every other class does, the syllabus was left aside for later. Having students list and discuss what is meant by respect within any classroom setting was a good way to begin" (August 20). Though Marie connected the current experience with past experiences and passed judgment, she did not indicate whether her conceptualization of her past experiences changed as a result of the current activity.

These examples illustrate how, during class meetings early in the semester, the participants framed the comparisons of their past educational experiences to current class activities and discussions from either a novelty perspective or future-use perspective. The discussions were limited to how the current activities and discussions differed from the students' past experiences or how the current activities could be integrated into their future classrooms.

The student-perceived novelty of the class activities and discussions garnered more attention of the participants' reflections than did an application of these new experiences to their past experiences. Though from the beginning of the course, students stated that many of the activities would be applicable in the future, they generally did not explain whether the current experiences were affecting their evaluation of past experiences. They reflected upon current course experiences and their own personal educational experiences separately from one another. Thus, students did not use current activities and discussions to reevaluate their own past experiences, they only used them for comparison or future-use.

In a similar comment to Marie's (August 20), Elizabeth responded to the first class in which an in-depth discussion of respect between teachers and students took the place of a discussion of the syllabus and class objectives: "The way we did introductions today was a different method than any other I have been exposed to before. I would really like to try some things similar to the activities we did and use them as 'icebreakers' when getting to know my students" (August 20). Like the other participants described above, Elizabeth stopped short of detailing whether or not her perception of her past educational experiences had been changed as a result of the current class activities.

Jody's first reflection compared the current activities and her past experiences, but this comparison stopped short of folding the current activities into a reevaluation of her past experiences. "Usually, the teacher has the students state an interesting fact about themselves, and it makes them uncomfortable, puts pressure on them, and some people find things interesting that others do not" (August 20).

Instructor responses to student reflections encouraged the students to further articulate the differences between their present experiences and their past experiences and then think about larger themes ingrained in the activities:

> Consider more of the differences between our first class and the typical first day classes you've encountered. How is the idea of respect represented/defined in these settings and what messages does this representation/definition send to students about expectations for their roles as classroom citizens? (Instructor response to Jody's first reflection, August 21)

Throughout the course, the instructors encouraged the students to articulate how the current experiences could be related to their perceptions of their past experiences and social studies methodology:

> In your own past, what do the enjoyable learnings have that the boring ones do not? Think about common traits that objectives, activities, and assessments have in common [that divide] them into enjoyable and boring. How do these traits relate to the teacher's concern for diverse student needs, views of the curriculum, and [the] unspoken message about what is important in schooling? (Instructor response to Carrie, September 18)

Because the students were not required to respond directly to the instructors' comments and questions, it is unclear whether or not the instructors' comments were effective in encouraging students to consider how the course activities could be used to reevaluate past educational experiences.

How Do Preservice Teachers Describe Their Past Educational Experiences in Light of Discussions of Student-Centered Methodologies?

As the course progressed and the students became more familiar with the student-centered environment and the activity debriefings, their reflections became more sophisticated. The reflections moved from a novelty perspective or future-use perspective to a more active application of current experiences to reevaluate their own past experiences. Comments like Carrie's became more common. "I think that if my middle school teachers would have done even half of the things that we have done in class, I would have enjoyed social studies a whole lot more" (October 22). In this comment, Carrie moved from explaining how the course activities were different to an evaluation of her past experiences in light of the current activities.

Likewise, Jody began by comparing current and past activities, then used the current activities to judge past experiences. "I think this class is different than others I have had before because it forces us to think. We are not just regurgitating information. We need to understand the material and apply it to the classroom" (November 12).

After Marie compared and contrasted current activities with past experiences, she then connected them together with the common themes of 'fun' and 'educational':

> When I was in middle school, many of the ideas that were discussed in class today seemed to share similarities as well as some differences from my middle school social studies classes. … These activities were both fun and educational experiences I had in middle school, and they are what I remember a great deal of information about. (August 27)

Marie connected themes and demonstrated a deeper reflective ability earlier than her colleagues. This difference in reflective ability is supported by earlier research that suggested preservice teachers vary in their ability to reflect at different levels (Alger 2006; Bain, Ballantyne, et al., 1999; Bain, Mills, et al., 2002).

This connection of current and past experiences to larger themes suggests that Marie was more actively using current activities and discussions to inform her in reevaluating her past experiences than she had the week before. Likewise, Steve changed his perspective of the current course activities from activities for their own sake to activities as tools for better understandings of student-centered practices:

> It has dawned on me that behind every activity in our class there are multiple connections that lead to a deeper understanding. … I'm certainly seeing the limitless possibilities associated with teaching when the teacher realizes the importance of HOW we teach! (September 18, emphasis in original)

Like the other students, Marcy began a reflection by comparing current activities with past experiences, but then took the next step to blend their common themes together:

> I really enjoyed the activity at the end of class. It really reminded me of something that we did in math class in sixth grade. … It is interesting the amount of learning that can happen when students don't even know that they are learning. (October 22)

As the semester progressed, the participants began looking for deeper meanings within the activities themselves. Of the eight participants, six (75.00%) described difficulties connecting the current activities and discussions with a reevaluation of their past experiences. Jody and Elizabeth's comments exemplified the struggle that many students had in seeing the current activities and discussions as tools to understand this deeper meaning.

> I guess the hardest thing for me to understand in this course is its vagueness. While I understand its purpose, I feel like I am missing something or doing something wrong with my work. … I feel like it is good to make us think outside the box, but sometimes I question my thought track or my work. (Jody, October 1)

> The music activity was very different but also interesting to me. At first I was wondering why we were even doing it and how it could apply to teaching social studies. It allowed me to see how students will be affected [by] collaborating and working in groups. It also allowed me to see diversity in a completely different way. (Elizabeth, September 10)

With deeper analysis of the activities themselves, the participants moved away from descriptions of the novelty of the activities toward using the activities to analyze both experiences as well as inform future practices. In her last reflection, Carrie took themes underlying the current activities and blended them together with her past experiences to inform her conceptualization of best practice:

> This class definitely proved to me that when it comes to social studies, the students rarely remember the detailed facts. … It is the activities that they remember. I feel this way about my middle school experience with social studies as well as my experience in this class. I remember what we did every week because of the way the class was set up and the activities that we did to learn the best ways to teach social studies. (December 3)

After repeated student-centered activities and overt discussions of these activities, participant descriptions of past educational experiences shifted from static to dynamic in nature. Initially, participants described past events as unchangeably positive or negative. They then compared them to the current activities. Throughout the semester, participants viewed their past experiences as being more malleable, actively applying current activities and discussions to more systematically reevaluate these experiences. This shift from static to dynamic conceptualization of past experience may indicate that participants had moved from descriptive writing and descriptive reflection stages into the dialogic reflection stage, in which questions about the nature of the experience become more critical.

How Do Preservice Teachers Describe the Effect of the Discussion of Student-Centered Experiences on Their Own Understanding of Their Past Educational Experiences?

As the participants used the current activities and discussions to inform their reevaluation of their past experiences, their perceptions became more dynamic in nature. Moving from low stages of reflection to higher stages of reflection, the participants became more adept at questioning the rationale behind many of the activities and their own past experiences. Though the participants were encouraged to describe the effects of discussions of student-centered experiences on their own understandings of their past educational experiences, none described the process in overt terms. No participant employed an external perspective to describe how their conceptualizations of the past had changed as a result of the current experiences. An external perspective of the process may have explained how and why participants' views of their past educational experiences either changed or remained the same. This description of the process would have indicated that participants were able to step back from both current and past experiences and actively employ both to explain how reevaluation occurs. Though we cannot state that the participants were unable to do so, their reflections did not document this skill.

Discussion

The findings suggest that participants initially limited their analysis to comparing and contrasting their past educational experiences with the student-centered methods used in the current class. As engagement in and discussion of student-centered activities continued throughout the course, student responses suggested an increasing ability to use the current class activities to evaluate both past educational experiences and inform expectations for future practices. The participants did not explicitly state how the current student-centered experiences influenced their own understandings of their past educational experiences. With more directed discussions of the process of reflection, the participants may have been better equipped to articulate how the current activities affected their reconceptualizations of past educational experiences.

While in the initial stage of reflection in which they compared, contrasted, and described the future use possibilities of the current activities, the participants did not question themes underlying the activities. That the participants viewed the current environment as novel is an indication it was a unique enough experience to warrant comparing and contrasting to previous environments. Researchers suggested that many social studies classrooms are teacher-centered in nature (Bolinger & Warren, 2007; Chen, 2002; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2005; Raymond, 1997; VanLeuvan, 1997). Had the current student-centered environment been closer to their past experiences, the participants may not have regarded it as different from their previous experiences. It was within the first stage of reflection that the participants worked to place the current environment within a historical context. Working to fit the current experiences within an existing schema, the participants did not focus on the effects these experiences may have had on their conceptualizations of their past experiences.

The lack of questioning of the larger meaning of current and past experiences may have been either because the participants were unwilling to take a more active approach to the experiences (Howell, 2006; Postman & Weingartner, 1969) or because they had difficulty in critically reflecting upon the experience (Alger, 2006; Bain, Mills, et al., 2002). Both the shift toward a more active role for students and a more critical examination of experiences require a shift away from a teacher-centered environment. The active

role of the student and the questioning of the activities themselves necessitate the handing over of the environmental focus from the teacher to the students.

As the participants acclimated to the student-centered environment, their focus moved from the novelty of the environment toward a consideration of how the current experiences could be used to inform their past experiences. Seeing that their roles as students were to be more active in nature for this course, the participants moved away from discussing the novelty of the experiences and how they compared to their past experiences toward a more active questioning of the themes underlying the activities. Additionally, discussions about ideologies that underlie methodological choices may assist preservice teachers in seeing how these choices affect the overall climate of the classroom (Bartolome, 2007). The repeated in-class discussions of the themes underlying the activities may have encouraged the students to view both the current activities and their experiences as interrelated and dynamic.

Throughout the course, the participants' employment of current activities to reevaluate their experiences became more sophisticated. However, the participants did not explain how this process took place nor did they describe the current activities as tools to reevaluate past experiences. Though the participants used the current activities as tools to reevaluate the past, the explicit description of how this process took place seems to indicate that it was an internally controlled process. Acknowledgement of the internalized nature of the learning process requires students to take an active role in the experience (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). This distinction is important, because describing the process of reevaluation of experiences as internally controlled acknowledges that perceptions can be evaluated and changed.

Further research may encourage participants to emphasize the process of reflection more than the connections between the content of the experiences. By overtly discussing the process itself, instructors may encourage participants to move to the highest level of critical reflection. By explicitly discussing how the current activities could be used as tools to reevaluate their past experiences, the participants may have been encouraged to more actively integrate current experiences with past experiences. This more active integration may have assisted the participants in seeing discrepancies between statements of student-centered philosophy and teacher-centered practice.

Though it cannot be stated for certain that the lack of emphasis placed on the process of reflection inhibited student movement to the highest level of critical reflection, it is possible that increased focus on the process would have made the transition to this level easier. Additionally, requiring students to directly respond to the instructors' comments and questions may have assisted students in reaching higher levels of reflection.

It is important to note that only eight of 21 students (39%) in the course volunteered for and participated in the study. Thus, the reflective processes of a majority of the students enrolled in the course remain unanalyzed. It cannot be inferred that the reflective processes of the participants represent the reflective processes of the students in the class as a whole. To gain a more complete understanding of how preservice teachers use current educational experiences to reflect upon past educational experiences, future research should include a higher percentage of students enrolled in middle level social studies methods courses.

Conclusion

This research study found that participants in a middle school social studies methods course increased in their sophistication in reflecting upon past educational experiences during the semester-long course. Initially, the participants described how current student-centered experiences compared and contrasted with their past educational experiences. As the semester progressed, the participants used the current experiences to reevaluate their past experiences. The participants did not describe how current experiences could be used as tools to reevaluate their past experiences. The study adds to the literature by describing how these preservice teachers integrate student-centered experiences into their conceptualizations of their own past educational experiences.

The study indicates that middle level teacher educators need to directly discuss with preservice teachers how their current experiences can be used as tools with which to reevaluate their past experiences. By framing experiences as tools for reevaluation, preservice teachers are encouraged to view all experiences as interrelated and dynamic.

Placed in a larger context, the view that current experiences can be described and used as tools to reevaluate past perceptions can assist in alleviating the discrepancy between statements that indicate a

desire for student-centered methodology and teacher-centered practice. Viewing and using experiences as active tools for reevaluation of past experiences, students are empowered to examine their experiences more critically and uncover inconsistencies between what is stated and what is practiced. If current experiences are not seen as tools to reevaluate past experiences, their integration into a larger reevaluation process may be limited. In this study, if the participants had described the current experiences as tools to reevaluate their own experiences, the underlying themes of the activities may have been made clearer, making them more potent experiences. To encourage critical examination of present and past experiences, social studies methods instructors need to discuss directly with preservice teachers ways to use current experiences as tools to evaluate past experiences. Experiences may be viewed from both a social studies and a larger social change perspective.

By assisting preservice teachers in analyzing both current and past educational experiences more critically, teacher educators can help preservice teachers in understanding the inconsistencies that exist. Critically analyzing both past and current experiences may give preservice teachers clearer understandings of their own experiences, which may lead to more articulate and accurate descriptions of these experiences. If current and past educational experiences can be analyzed deeply and more accurately, the congruence between what is stated and what is practiced can be improved. Put into practice in the middle level classroom, teachers who are more effective at analyzing their own educational experiences and the inconsistencies contained within them can more effectively design classroom experiences that promote a student-centered approach to the social studies.

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