

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Diversity: The Power of Multicultural Narratives

Rui Kang: Georgia College & State University

Charles W. Hyatt: Baldwin High School, Milledgeville, Georgia

This study explores the outcomes of a potentially powerful multicultural pedagogy---the use of multicultural narratives in teacher education. Participants were 22 preservice teachers enrolled in a required, semester-long, foundation course at a liberal arts public university in middle Georgia. Data sources include responses to ten classroom- or school-based multicultural narratives and reflection papers. The results indicate that narrative analysis helped preservice teachers facilitate transfer between theory and practice and develop a deeper understanding of and connection with multicultural and diversity issues. The authors argue that multicultural narratives should be a more widely used practice in teacher education.

Introduction

A widely accepted goal of teacher education is to prepare culturally competent practitioners who are ready to serve diverse student populations (Guyton & Wesche, 2005). One major challenge, though, is the mismatch between the increased diversity in student populations, including students of color, English language learners (ELLs), and children living in poverty and a teaching force consisting largely of white, middle-class females (Sleeter, 2001). Novice teachers' lack of familiarity with students' cultures, learning styles, and communication patterns may result in negative assumptions and expectations of students, use of culturally inappropriate or insensitive materials, and poor student-teacher interactions (Wallace, 2000). When facing cultural conflicts in real-life classrooms, novice teachers who are inadequately prepared for diversity often feel a sense of helplessness and frustration (Goodwin, 1997). Teacher educators, therefore, have an obligation to broaden preservice teachers' knowledge bases

and experiences and to help them develop skills and attitudes that can support the creation of empowering classroom interactions with diverse students (Guyton & Wesche, 2005; Phillion & He, 2004).

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that some form of teacher training in multicultural education be incorporated in preservice teacher education (Guyton & Wesche, 2005). A much debated question is how multicultural education should be taught in order to produce competent practitioners who are capable of meeting the needs of diverse student populations (Phillion & He, 2004). We believe that a sound multicultural pedagogy must demonstrate that multicultural concerns are personally relevant and have immediate impacts on teaching (Goodwin, 1997). In addition, powerful multicultural education cannot be passive and must engage preservice teachers in critical dialogues and reflections that lead to social change and action (de Ramirez, 2006).

In this self-study, we describe our own experiences of using what we believe is a potentially powerful pedagogy---multicultural narratives in a required, semester-long, foundation course. We also then advocate for greater use of narratives in preparing culturally conscious and competent practitioners. In particular, we address the question: did preservice teachers' beliefs and perspectives change as a result of their engagement in narrative reflections?

Multicultural Narratives as a Pedagogical Strategy for Preservice Teacher Education

Multicultural narratives in this study are defined as vignettes or short case studies featuring one or more multicultural themes or issues (Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002). Using vignettes or short case studies as a pedagogy is as old as ancient storytelling and has been employed successfully in schools of business, law, and medicine; however, their applications in teacher education, and especially, in multicultural education are still relatively new (Gartland & Field, 2004). Although systematic study of the effects of use of multicultural narratives in preservice teacher education is limited, a few recent studies brought our attention to this potentially powerful pedagogy. Clark and Medina (2000) reported that the reading and writing of literacy narratives increased preservice teachers' critical and multicultural understandings of literacy, demystified stereotyped, dominant, and generalized discourse on minority students, and bridged the gap between personal narratives and multicultural theories. Milner (2007) reported that race-related narratives transformed preservice teachers' thinking about racism and racial discrimination, from a position of resistance and rejection to one of compassion, understanding, and acceptance of its pervasiveness and prevalence.

Why multicultural narratives are valuable additions to teacher educators' repertoires of classroom strategies? In Dewey's (1938) emphasis

on the quality of experiences in facilitating meaning construction in the development of individuals, he put forth that educators should carefully select those experiences that are educative, meaningful, and significant. An educational narrative must not only tell a story but also contains affective, practical, and theoretical descriptions of a situation, which provides a meaningful path for the development and sharing of educational knowledge in context (Dolk & den Hertog, 2008). In addition, Dewey urged educators to pay more attention to the formation of "enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes," and asserted that "these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future" (p. 48). We believe that reflecting on multicultural narratives fit Dewey's description of "an educative experience" because narratives foster positive attitudes in times of frustration and help preservice teachers develop theory-based, professional competencies in solving repeating or emerging problems (Gartland & Field, 2004).

Phelan (2009) defines practical reasoning as "teachers' capacity to discern particulars and make judgments about how to act in different situations and contexts" (p. 93). She argues that practical reasoning is largely neglected in today's outcome-based, government-mandated curriculum, but practical reasoning is often more important than generalized propositional knowledge when teachers are faced with moral dilemmas in educational settings. The uncertainty reflected in authentic narratives forces preservice teachers to weigh alternative solutions and help them foresee the long-term consequences of their decisions. Therefore, multicultural narratives support teachers' development of much needed practical-reasoning skills for sound ethical decision-making.

Finally, narrative analysis provides powerful non-cognitive experiences in multicultural education because it allows teachers access to rich, multifaceted, complex, personal, and emotional data (Phillion, 2002). Phillion

described “narrative multiculturalism” as “a person-centered, experiential, and relational way of thinking about the everyday experience of multiculturalism” (p. 276). We agree with Phillion and He (2004) that teacher educators have to work at not only a cognitive level but also an emotional level in order to foster true commitment to multiculturalism that lead to change and action.

Research Design

We chose to rely on qualitative, narrative data to document evidence of beginning changes and growing trajectories that preservice teachers experience in this innovative educational experience (McVee, 2004). Our use of self-study or an ethnographic approach to investigate preservice teachers’ changes in beliefs and perspectives is justified because fostering such changes is a complex process that is best understood through rich, informative cases, triangulation of multicultural data sources, and thick descriptions of findings (Yin, 2003).

Participants

The sample consisted of 22 preservice teachers enrolled at a liberal arts public university located in middle Georgia in a required, four credit-hour, multicultural education course titled “Exploring Socio-cultural Perspectives in Educational Contexts.” The following describes the self-identified demographics of these preservice teachers: 21 female, 1 male; 16 Caucasian, 2 African American, 1 Hispanic, and 3 Biracial. All reported their religion as Christian except for one Jewish female. The age range was 18-21, all 22 participants reported themselves as being heterosexual, and 18 identified themselves as middle class, 4 as upper class.

Research contexts

Our primary goal for the course was to facilitate future teachers in developing deeper understandings of the influences of culture

on learning, development, and pedagogy. Ten multicultural narratives were chosen from de Ramirez’s (2006) book *Voices of Diversity* and provided the basis for most class discussions. We chose this book because the narratives cover a wide range of critical multicultural issues such as race, gender, linguistic diversity, sexual orientation, religion, physical disabilities, and learning styles. Another reason is that the narratives were based on real-life classroom and school incidents and were written by real people caught in multicultural conflicts.

Each student was required to read and reflect on all ten narratives and respond to five in writing. We asked preservice teachers to use the two-part scoring rubric developed by Seguin and Ambrosio (2002) as a model and told them that their written reflections would be graded using the rubric. The rubric requires each preservice teacher to (1) critique the classroom conflicts presented in the narratives and (2) provide alternative solutions to the conflicts. Other assignments of the course include field-based observations and journaling, reflection papers, and a multicultural lesson plan.

Data collection and analysis

The data that are the focus of this study consist of preservice teachers’ 115 written responses to ten multicultural narratives selected from the book, *Voices of Diversity*. We coded the narrative responses according to the same scoring rubric developed by Seguin and Ambrosio (2002), which was also used as a guide for the preservice teachers to complete their responses. For the purpose of this research, we kept only the essential features of the rubric; therefore, the frequency distributions reported in this study do not match the actual grades that the preservice teachers received for the course.

We coded two aspects of each narrative response. The first aspect addresses the *critique of the classroom conflict* embedded in the narratives and has three specific criteria: (1) critique of

(basic) pedagogical as well as multicultural/diversity issues, (2) critique of several deeper, intricate problems, and (3) critique of a variety of different problem areas. The second aspect addresses how *the solutions demonstrate a diversity/inclusiveness approach* and has five specific criteria: (1) solutions create classroom environment that respect individual differences, (2) solutions include multiple sources for content and learning, (3) solutions can result in deep level of understanding and long-term change in human interaction and/or understanding, (4) solutions include critical dialogue between all participants, and (5) solutions focus on student attitudes, knowledge, and skills. A narrative response was coded “1” for a particular criterion if the criterion is met and “0” if the criterion is absent. It should be noted that although we describe these criteria as falling into different categories, they are, in fact, interwoven and interdependent.

To assess reliability of the coding procedure, a second coder rescored approximately half of the 115 responses. Agreement between coders was 0.89 for coding *critique of the classroom conflict* and 0.85 for coding *the solutions demonstrate a diversity/inclusiveness approach*. Discrepancies between coders were resolved through peer debriefing.

Results

Critique of the classroom conflict

Of the 115 narrative responses, all except one (99.1%) contained critique of basic pedagogical as well as multicultural/diversity issues. This result is not surprising given that the preservice teachers knew that they were enrolled in a required diversity, multicultural education course. What’s worth noticing is that using Seguin and Ambrosio’s (2002) rubric as a guide, the vast majority of the preservice teachers (over 90%) were also able to see beyond general, surface problems to identify a range of deeper, intricate multicultural issues. Specifically, about 96.5%

of the narrative responses contained critique of several deeper, intricate problems; and about 90.4% contained critiques of a variety of different problem areas rather than a single problem area.

Here are a few examples. Some preservice teachers, through the writing of narrative responses, developed deeper understandings of what equality, fairness, and justice mean in the context of multiculturalism and diversity, as in the following self-reflection: “An idea that I realized was very important was that believing that everyone is equal so should be treated exactly the same is wrong.” Some preservice teachers were also able to relate cultural conflicts with their larger political, social, and policy implications. In their responses to a narrative that describes the social alienations a gifted young girl, Wendy, had to suffer and which eventually led to her withdrawal from high school, some preservice teachers argued that the reason for such lack of acceptance from the teacher toward Wendy was because it was easier to teach to the test and ask students to memorize uniform steps. If a student came up with a different idea or demanded for complete understanding of a problem, the teacher could be afraid she did not have enough time to cover all the required content. Other preservice teachers related this scenario to the lack of emphasis on social skills at school: “The public school system is in place in order to prepare students for the work force or for higher education, but if we are neglecting to educate our children on the most basic of all skills, social skills, are we really sending them into the work force fully prepared?”

In the end-of-course survey, many preservice teachers described this semester-long foundation course as an “eye-opening” experience for them. One reason is as this student wrote: “We have learned in class that diversity does not just mean the color of our skin, but also...students with same sex parents, language barriers, and religion.” In a similar vein, another student wrote: “While ethnic diversity is an important thing to

acknowledge, it is not the only type of difference that a teacher will come across in the classroom.” The broad coverage of diversity issues in the multicultural narratives also made it clear to a lot of preservice teachers how limited their personal experience were, as in this self-reflection: “At the beginning of the course, I thought requiring us to take a course on simply multiculturalism was a waste of time because it was something that could be summed up in one simple lecture. But through taking this course, I have come to understand and discover there are many different sides to multiculturalism.” Many preservice teachers also started to realize what kind of impact that they could make on students as a teacher, as in this example: “I have never thought that something as simple as how I choose to celebrate what most people would consider a standard holiday, like Mother’s Day, could affect some students and their family.”

How solutions demonstrate a diversity/inclusiveness approach.

Of the 115 narrative responses, 95.7% provided solutions that focus on student attitudes, knowledge, and skills. For example, the revelation that equality does not mean treating everyone exactly the same often leads preservice teachers to consider thoughtfully how to incorporate theories of learning styles and multiple intelligences into their solutions to the conflicts presented in the narratives. We also found that 87% of the narrative responses provided solutions that create classroom environment that respect individual differences. For instance, we found that the development of empathy was essential for students to generate culturally sensitive and relevant solutions to the conflicts presented in the narratives. In her response to a narrative that portrays a dilemma that a young Jewish girl had to face---celebration of an important religious holiday, Yom Kippur, versus playing for her school’s soccer team on that day, a preservice teacher suggested the following opening speech for the coach: “Now girls, I would like to stress

the importance of honoring and celebrating each other’s differences. We must put ourselves in her shoes. What if there was a game on Easter or Christmas? How would you feel?” She further elaborated: “I think simple statements like these can open up people’s eyes to how others feel.” We found that many proficient responses reflected this kind of “putting ourselves in other people’s shoes” mentality.

Two of the weaker areas in the preservice teachers’ narrative responses are integration of multiple sources for content and learning in their solutions and providing solutions that have the potential for deep level of understanding and long-term change in human interaction and/or understanding. About 74.8% of the solutions met the first criterion and only 64.3% of the solutions met the second criterion. Here are some examples. In their responses to a narrative that portrays an incident that involves racial stereotypes and prejudice, some preservice teachers recommended inviting witnesses or historians of the Civil Rights movement as guest speakers to discuss interracial collaboration. Another example is that after reading Banks’ (2002) four types of multicultural integration, some preservice teachers were able to recognize that the efforts to integrate multicultural content into the curriculum are superficial in some of the narratives. They subsequently were able to provide solutions that often require deeper level of integration at the transformational or the social action level.

Finally, the weakest area in the preservice teachers’ responses is including critical dialogue between all participants. Only 40% of their narrative responses met this criterion. However, we also found that those preservice teachers who emphasized promoting critical dialogues were able to generate more creative and thought-provoking solutions. For example, one preservice teacher suggested that teachers, when solving a schedule conflict between a school event and a religious celebration, may allow students to go home to fulfill their religious duties but

meanwhile ask the students to make up for their schoolwork by submitting a paper on their religious experience. In this way, the teacher could open up a discussion of the importance of religion in people's life and religious freedom. We found one preservice teachers' solution especially unique. She created a classroom activity in which she introduced to her students the most influential people in her life without revealing their races and let her students guess whether they were white or black and why.

While most preservice teachers were comfortable with issues such as individual learning differences and linguistic diversity, when it came to more sensitive issues such as institutional racism, sexual orientation, and religious diversity, they often became less articulated, and their expressions seemed more awkward. On very few occasions, some preservice teachers showed unwillingness to engage in deeper reflections when confronted with tougher issues, but would rather explain what happened as "the way the world works" (Dome et al., 2005, p.64). For example, when confronted with a scenario that portrays a schedule conflict between a sporting event and a religious holiday, one preservice teacher wrote: "I believe that this shows students that in life, the world isn't always going to acknowledge the things that are important to them. Life goes on and the world keeps turning." When they could not come up with a reasonable solution to a particular cultural issue, less reflective preservice teachers tried to find excuses from the larger society rather than challenge its structural and institutionalized inequalities, as shown in the following example. A few preservice teachers argued that even if schools are willing to change Mother's Day or Father's Day to Family Day to accommodate children with same-sex parents, the students would still be exposed to commercial products celebrating traditional holidays in department stores and on televisions.

Conclusion

Our study of multicultural narratives in teacher education has provided us with many insights. First, as teacher educators, we must constantly examine and challenge our own practices and embrace new ways of teaching and knowing in the preparation of future teachers for diversity (Hale, Snow-Gerono, & Morales, 2008). Our engagement in multicultural narratives has enriched and improved preservice teachers' learning experiences as they strive to become culturally knowledgeable and transformative practitioners. This semester-long course propelled many preservice teachers to rethink the impact of race, gender, language, religion, and sexual orientation on the educational experiences of diverse students. Many preservice teachers in this class have experienced the transformation from rejecting the importance of multiculturalism to increased awareness and acceptance of its impact on teaching, learning, and curriculum.

Second, we believe that the teaching of diversity should include not only familiar territories such as racial/ethnic diversity or gender equity but also linguistic diversity, gay/lesbian parenting, religion, and people with disabilities (Wallace, 2000). We found that it is often through those narratives that address the various less familiar issues in which our preservice teachers were able to develop the most meaningful and deepest insights.

Finally, our analysis of preservice teachers' narrative reflections provides valuable insights for future course design and instruction. We feel that Seguin and Ambrosio's (2002) rubric served as a valuable scaffolding tool that guided preservice teachers' reflections on the narratives. However, we also realize the limitations of using a paper guide alone to foster critical thinking. Generally speaking, preservice teachers were better at critiquing classroom conflicts than at providing solutions using a diversity and inclusiveness approach, which indicates that teacher educators

must also explicitly model and illustrate with examples what it means to reflect on multicultural issues critically and reinforce their expectations repeatedly throughout the semester (Dome et al., 2005).

Through this self-study, we share our voices and perspectives with fellow teacher educators and hopefully bring about greater use of multicultural narratives as a structured and meaningful discourse framework in teacher education. Self-study is a form of systemic examination and reflection of teacher educators' own practice; without self-study, it is difficult for teacher educators to learn from their experiences and to make a difference in student lives (Milner, 2007). Through portraying our own growth as multicultural educators, we also advocate that teacher educators participate in a joint effort to develop sound, grounded theories and practices for effective use of multicultural narratives in teacher education using self-studies.

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Author's Note

Dr. Rui Kang is an Assistant Professor of Foundations and Secondary Education at Georgia College & State University. Her research interests include economics and social studies education and action research.

Dr. Charles W. Hyatt teaches gifted, AP, and special education English classes at Baldwin County High School. His research interests are in reading education and in learning and communication in humans and animals.