

Examining the Impact of Place on the Cultural Competence of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

This study examined the significance of place, a Title One elementary school, on the preservice teachers' (PSTs) abilities to make theory to practice connections using culturally responsive teaching. I investigated how PSTs used theoretical knowledge of culture taught in coursework and emerging knowledge of community context to plan and execute lessons. The participants, five PSTs, were in their first field experience in a Title One elementary school. These PSTs conducted inquiries into the surrounding community and the classroom. The PSTs were strongly encouraged to use the information they gained in these inquiries when teaching. Data collection included two formal lesson plans, a KLEW (Know, Learned, Evidence, Wondering) chart, and a reflection on the inquiry into the community. From this data, I found PSTs made changes to their teaching, rethought assumptions about the community, and recognized the importance of using multicultural literature.

Few researchers have taken an in-depth look at how PSTs' beliefs shape what they learn about teaching (Anderson, 2013). In this study, I investigated how these beliefs may shape theory to practice connections when teaching for diversity. Zeichner (2010) noted one problem with teacher education programs is the lack of connection between the coursework and the field experiences. Furthermore, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Blue Ribbon Report (2010) called for more clinically rich supervision in which the field experiences and the coursework are interwoven. According to Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, and Doone (2006), PSTs are "able to make meaningful linkages between their course content and field experiences" (p. 26). One goal for university supervisors is bridging the gap between theory and practice (Allsopp et al., 2006). In this study, I sought to bridge this gap through my work.

Conceptual Framework

According to Freire (1970), true critical reflection leads to action. Freire's (1970) idea of the critical consciousness, *conscientizacao*, involves the questioning of the whole social system, in which education is organized, for inequalities and an awareness of oppression that is present. Through the development of a critical consciousness, PSTs can work to transform the education system. Instrumental in this transformation is Freire's (1970) idea of praxis, which is a balance between theory and practice as well as action and reflection. His ideas of critical reflection and critical consciousness are needed to uphold a social justice stance. In this study, I worked to promote praxis by helping the PSTs critically reflect on the community in which they taught.

The fundamental tenants of critical pedagogy intersect with place-based education. Gruenewald (2003) highlighted the necessity of reflecting on one's beliefs. In this study, I helped my PSTs reflect on their own beliefs before they reflected on their students. I also emphasized the importance of adapting lessons to the lives and interests of their students. Gruenewald (2003) "...encourages teachers and students to reinhabit their place...to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places" (p. 7). Through engagement in dialogue about culture and place, my PSTs can be the change agents capable of this social action.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Giroux (2009) asserted "...teacher education programs need to reorient their focus to the critical transformation of public schools rather than to the simple reproduction of existing institutions and ideologies" (p. 445). Understanding culture is central to critical reflection and the possibility of becoming a change agent in education. Culture is a set of practices and beliefs shared by members of a particular group that distinguish groups from each other (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). In order to better facilitate a theory to practice connection, it is imperative for PSTs to understand their own culture and the culture of their students. Once PSTs better understand the culture of their students, they will be better able to incorporate strategies for culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching "...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" (p. 29). Culturally responsive teaching can be utilized to understand the unique experience of every student since learning depends on how students make sense of their experiences (Kumashiro, 2009). Villegas and Lucas (2002) identified six strands for developing culturally responsive teachers: sociocultural consciousness, affirming attitude towards students from diverse backgrounds, commitment and skills to act as agents of change, constructivist views of learning, learning about students, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Through culturally responsive teaching, PSTs can adapt their teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners. In this study, I examined how my PSTs' knowledge about the surrounding school community influenced their teaching decisions.

How Context can Affect Teaching

The field experience is "at once difficult and exciting and without a doubt one of the most defining moments in a teacher's career" (Pena & Almaguer, 2007, p. 105). Context is one aspect of the field experience crucial to the formation of the PSTs' knowledge. The context in which teachers live and work are important to consider because "...context shapes effective teaching, what teachers know, what knowledge is seen as essential for teaching, and who is warranted to produce knowledge about teaching" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 24). Therefore, the context of the field experience can directly impact my PSTs' learning and practice in the classroom. Gruenewald (2003) found "...educative experiences students and teachers pursue depends on the distinctive characteristics of the places they inhabit, as well as on what learning objectives and strategies they employ" (p. 8). Hagevik, Aydeniz, and Rowell (2012) found PSTs constructed actions based on their school context. Furthermore, McDiarmid and Clevenger-Bright (2008) posited the "...knowledge, skills, and dispositions that individual teachers bring to teaching are, to a large extent, the products of the social contexts in which these were developed" (p. 144).

PST learning is influenced by not only the context but also the situation in which they are learning. The context of the field experience can impact the nature of the lessons my PSTs teach.

Why is Inquiry Important for Equitable Teaching?

By engaging in inquiry, PSTs can become change agents. A study conducted by Lynn and Maddox (2007) focused on using inquiry to explore social justice with PSTs. They found “Inquiry became a space where novices could reflect openly and honestly about these issues while drawing important relationships between theory and practice” (Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007). Additionally, Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1990) asserted when teachers join together “...as highly professionalized teacher-researchers, they become increasingly articulate about issues of equity, hierarchy, and autonomy and increasingly critical of the technocratic model that dominates much of school practice” (p. 9). Furthermore, Athanases, Wahleithner, and Bennett (2012) noted inquiry promoted reflection and knowledge that supports instruction. These studies show inquiry is a highly reflective process. Inquiry can be utilized as an authentic activity that helps PSTs develop the knowledge needed to teach (Hagevik et al., 2012; Lynn & Smith-Maddox, 2007; Martin, 2005; Mule, 2006; Rock & Levin, 2002). In this study, I used an inquiry process and subsequent reflections to investigate what aspects of teaching my PSTs focused on in their reflections.

Methodology

This study was situated in a constructivist view in which knowledge is socially constructed based on the context of the situation (Crotty, 1998). It also drew upon constructionism in the sense that each PSTs’ own culture has shaped their view of the world (Crotty, 1998). This study investigated the context of the PSTs’ field experience in relation to their ability to make theory to practice connections regarding culturally responsive teaching. I used the following research question to guide this study: In what ways does the context of a field experience at a Title One elementary school influence the ability of PSTs to make theory to practice connections in relation to equity issues in the classroom?

Contextual Description

This study occurred in a teacher education program in a large Southeastern United States university. The field experience elementary school in this study was located in a suburban community set within a very large school district. Sands Elementary School’s demographics have changed over the years. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, this community was comprised of 76.5% White, 13.2% Black, and 15.9% Hispanic/Latino (of any race) residents. The Black and Hispanic/Latino population both increased from the 2000 U.S. Census. From the 1999-2000 school year to 2010, Sands saw an increase in its Hispanic/Latino population from 11.88% to 18.66%. During this time, the White and Black populations have both decreased. Currently, the school population has sixty-two percent of its students on free or reduced lunch.

Participants

The sample of participants was selected from my thirty-two PSTs in the first semester field experience. The selected participants of this study were five PSTs interning at Sands Elementary. This field experience consisted of one full day a week in the classroom and an accompanying one-hour weekly seminar class. The PSTs were part of a cohort teacher education program. Therefore over a two-year period, they took classes with the same group of peers. Anderson (2013) found the literature tended not to focus on how PSTs' backgrounds affected their experience in the field. I used purposeful sampling to choose participants from a variety of backgrounds in hopes to determine how these backgrounds may contribute to their experiences. The participants included four females and one male. Of these participants, one female was a nontraditional student from Jamaica. Another female was of Latina descent and raising her nephew. The two other females were both white and of typical college age. I specifically chose one of these women because she has freely mentioned her low socioeconomic background growing up in a rural area. I included the other female since her mother was a teacher. I chose the sole male PST since he was the only male in this cohort.

Researcher's Role

I was the field supervisor for these PSTs. I also taught their Children's Literature course and had the opportunity to see my PSTs conduct literacy lessons. Anderson (2013) clearly raised the possible controversy of having a researcher as a current instructor/supervisor. However during my time as their instructor, I consistently tried to make each PST feel welcome to share their beliefs and ideas even if they differed from others. I continually tried to create a safe, comfortable learning environment.

Making Theory Relevant

During the Children's Literature course, I specifically addressed the topic of multicultural literature. The PSTs read a chapter on multicultural literature from Kiefer's (2010) textbook, *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature*. In addition, we read and discussed McDaniel's (2004) article about critical literacy, as "Critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 474). After this discussion, we used Meller and Hatch's (2008) protocol for questioning literature through a critical literacy framework.

In the seminar component of the field experience, I specifically addressed the topic of culture. I incorporated activities and discussions that prompted the PSTs to reflect on their own culture and beliefs. In seminar, we discussed the definition of culture. I introduced the idea of hidden culture, the aspects of a person's culture that cannot be easily seen. I encouraged the PSTs to identify their own cultures using a cultural autobiography chart as a guide. From there, the PSTs reflected on where they felt dissonance between what aspects of their culture were important to their identity and what aspects others might use to identify them. In addition, the PSTs completed a social identities portrait in which they first encountered the topic of privilege. Afterwards, we engaged in an activity to further illuminate the effects of privilege on their own lives.

Along with these discussions and activities, I consistently encouraged PSTs to account for their students’ diverse cultures within their lessons. As part of the pre- and post-conferences I conducted with my PSTs, I prompted them to think about how their lessons accounted for *all* students.

The table below summarizes the assignments and data collected in each of these courses.

Table 1
Data Collection Sources by Course

<u>Course</u>	<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Purpose</u>	<u>Data Collection</u>
Field Experience and Seminar	Reflection on Inquiry into the Community (classroom context and surrounding community)	PSTs did community drive and researched the community. They inquired into their classroom context. From there, they reflected on what they learned about the surrounding community and classroom context.	Reflections on inquiry
	KLEW chart (Know, Learned, Evidence, Wonderings) See Figure 1.	I used this assignment to analyze the PSTs’ initial beliefs about the school context and how their thinking changed.	KLEW chart
	2 lesson plans (One of these lesson plans was specifically for a read aloud lesson)	I wanted to see where the PSTs were making culturally responsive teaching decisions in their own practice.	Lesson Plans
Children’s Literature	Reflection on Multicultural Literature class	I collected reflections after a Children’s Literature class centered on the use of multicultural literature.	Reflection (online discussion board) on multicultural literature

What do you Know about this community?	What have you Learned about this community?	Evidence of this Learning	What Wonderings are you left with?

Figure 1. KLEW Chart

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2002). I looked across the data for initial themes. During this time I noted PSTs mentioned changes in their teaching and thinking. Then I recoded the data again with more specific themes. I used several data sources in order to triangulate the data and strengthen my findings (Patton, 2002). From the data I developed three main findings: 1) Preservice teachers were able to rethink their initial assumptions about the community, 2) Preservice teachers made changes to their teaching, and 3) Preservice teachers realized the importance of using multicultural literature in the classroom.

Findings

Preservice teachers were able to rethink their initial assumptions about the community.

As I examined the reflections taken from the inquiry into the surrounding community and KLEW charts, I noticed my PSTs were able to rethink their initial assumptions about the community. Initially, many of the PSTs simply judged the Sands community based on what they knew about Title One elementary schools. In the KLEW chart, they commented on the older school building and appearance of students. One PST even stated “The students are clearly more unfortunate” and wear “older dresses on picture day, one student doesn’t own a toothbrush”. However, after the community drive and first few weeks in the field experience I noticed some changes in the PSTs’ thoughts. One PST reflected, “I learned that it is not wise to judge a place merely looking at one context”. Additionally, some PSTs were able to understand how knowing the community and culture of a social context can affect their teaching. Another PST stated, “I have realized that each child is different that each child has their own personal strengths that they bring to the table”. This statement clearly exhibits how this PST was able to see the assets of each individual child instead of the deficits of the learning context. Another PST realized when completing the KLEW chart that her students might not have even travelled outside of the Seffner community before. All of these new ideas about the community will shape and change how PSTs approach their field experience and future teaching experiences.

Preservice teachers made changes to their teaching.

As the semester progressed, their lessons became more culturally responsive. They went from relying on holiday traditions to account for culture to changing their teaching styles. These changes were small, however, they did exhibit two aspects of Villegas and Lucas’s (2002) strands of culturally responsive teaching: constructivist views of learning and learning about students. Also PSTs used information from the inquiries in order to make these adaptations to their lessons. From the inquiry into the classroom community, the PSTs learned more about the students in their class. They specifically mentioned the accommodations they would need to make for specific students in their classes.

Throughout this semester, I was able to witness my PSTs relate teaching to their students’ lives based on the information they learned about their students through the inquiries into the community (school and surrounding community). For example, one PST specifically allowed her

students choice in their writing topics so that they could include their individual interests and backgrounds. I also found my PSTs developed more hands-on learning activities for their students. For example, the PSTs utilized math manipulatives and hands on Science experiments. Additionally, another PST popped popcorn so that all students could use the five senses to experience the popcorn and write about it. Furthermore, one of my PSTs related her own background, life in Jamaica, to the US government and Constitution. These initial changes to my PSTs' lesson plans show they were able to make connections to learning about the diverse needs of their students to actually accounting for these students in their lessons.

Preservice teachers realized the importance of using multicultural literature in the classroom.

Another finding directly related to my work in the Children's Literature course. After studying and discussing critical literacy, I asked my PSTs to all reflect on the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. One PST wrote, "I intend to incorporate critical literacy because I believe it is proactive for students to look at literature through a different lens because eventually children grow to become adults." This PST noted the importance of exploring multiple perspectives and viewpoints with elementary aged children. Another PST reflected on the importance of examining children's literature: "I plan to incorporate critical literacy within my classroom as I want my students to explore and discover the underlying meaning that each story brings." Yet another PST spoke to the relevance of promoting diverse portrayals of people in the classroom through the use of children's literature: "I didn't know how important it was to show students these books until during this research, but now I realize just how little information students receive about some topics." These reflections indicated new understandings about why teachers need to provide multicultural literature in the classroom.

Discussion

From this study, I found support for multiple field experiences with diverse populations. PSTs need consistent theoretical background about culture in order to understand culturally responsive teaching and how to incorporate it. While these findings support my PSTs' abilities to make theory to practice connections in their school contexts, more can be done. These PSTs were able to make some changes to their teaching practice; however, these changes were still superficial. As Villegas and Lucas (2002) posit, culturally responsive teaching includes sociocultural consciousness, affirming attitude towards students, demonstrating a commitment to change, upholding constructivist views of learning, and learning about students. However, my PSTs in this study were only focused on constructivist teaching and learning about students. While they did become change agents in the sense that they were able to make changes to the limited lessons they were required to teach, this aspect of their growth was just one area to consider. They needed more practice making theory to practice connections particularly with regards to sociocultural consciousness, demonstrating a commitment to change, and developing affirming attitude towards students. It is imperative that PSTs see culturally responsive teaching in their field experience classrooms. According to Guskey (2002) and Ellsworth (2000) change is a process rather than an event. As teacher educators, we need to be aware of the ways teachers change and the process of change in order to effectively plan for building knowledge over time. More specifically Guskey (2002) found teachers tend to change when they have evidence in the

form of student outcomes. This catalyst for change can be useful when thinking about PST learning, because as teachers grow they become more focused on student outcomes and will be more receptive to change if they have evidence supporting the reason for that change. If preservice teachers are given the opportunities to engage in culturally responsive teaching in their field experiences they are more likely to see the evidence of their new practices with their students; this evidence could then lead to a more permanent change in their future practice. Future research will need to explore how seeing culturally responsive teaching enacted in the field experience may affect PSTs' ability to incorporate this teaching into their own practice. Additionally, in the future I plan to study the effects of my PSTs staying within the same school contexts with the same field supervisor for the first three levels of their field experiences.

Conclusion

In this study, I investigated how my PSTs were able to enact theory to practice connections with culturally responsive teaching. I used the theory I presented in the seminar component of the field experience and in the Children's Literature course to promote the importance of equitable teaching. I guided my PSTs to make equitable choices and incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies into their lessons. After our course discussions and activities, my PSTs expressed the importance of incorporating multicultural literature into the classroom. They realized the significance of approaching children's literature with a critical lens. Additionally, my PSTs rethought their initial assumptions about their surrounding school community. These reconsiderations of their assumptions proved critical to how they taught their lessons. They used their new knowledge of the community to plan lessons. I found my PSTs were able to make superficial culturally responsive changes to their teaching by approaching their teaching through a constructivist framework and getting to know their students. These changes showed the first step in my PSTs being more culturally responsive.

These findings indicate implications for field supervision, specifically in regards to culturally responsive coaching. Field supervision can be defined as "an organizational function concerned with promoting teacher growth, leading to improvement in teaching performance and greater student learning" (Nolan & Hoover, 2011, p. 6). As a field supervisor, I will need to study how my coaching can help my PSTs' teaching performance and enhance student learning through culturally responsive teaching. I will investigate how a focus on culturally responsive teaching with my PSTs may influence student learning. With guidance, PSTs are able to make connections between their coursework and the field experience. Through supervision we can enhance these connections and directly link them to culturally responsive teaching.

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