

Beginning To Think Critically About Culturally Responsive Pedagogy In Practice: An Elementary Education Book Study In Student Teaching

Charles J. Eick: Auburn University

Theresa M. McCormick: Auburn University

In this study student teachers in an elementary education program took part in a book study, *From Rage to Hope*, on culturally responsive teaching. Interns critically reflected on their practice and began making changes based on practical strategies from the book. Four themes of learning and change emerged in intern written reflections: Project positive teaching behaviors; respect, value, and embrace individual differences; teach to individual student differences and; get to know students' lives. Results suggest that critical reflection and practical application work together in practice to begin to change thinking and skill in teaching diverse students.

Introduction

Pre-service teachers have limited knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the needs of diverse learners through culturally responsive teaching (Howard, 2003; Knight & Wiseman, 2005). Culturally responsive teaching utilizes the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as a foundation for teaching more effectively (Gay, 2002). Vaughan (2004) states that "teachers' attitudes toward cultural diversity is an indication of how culturally responsive they will be in the classrooms" (p. 45). Past approaches in preservice teacher education have documented the difficulty of changing candidates' beliefs and attitudes about diversity through isolated learning opportunities that are not integrated throughout a teacher education program (Artiles & McClafferty, 1998; Garmon, 2005; Kyles & Olafson, 2008). These isolated learning opportunities are often in single

courses and often are only loosely connected to candidates' current field experiences and teaching practice. In such instances preservice teacher change has been linked to past diverse schooling and cultural experience, and dispositions toward critical reflection and social justice (Garmon; Kyles & Olafson).

Practice along with critical reflection on practice is essential to begin the process of belief and attitude change in preservice teachers in support of reaching diverse students (Korthagen, 2001; Kyles & Olafson, 2008). In studying their program designed to prepare candidates to teach diverse students, Kidd, Sanchez, and Thorp (2007) found that diverse student teaching experiences along with critical reading, reflection, and dialogue affected changes in dispositions and teaching practice among early childhood candidates. Candidates also had the opportunity to interact with their students' families and

cultures. New practice-based approaches like this one are needed to better meet the needs of a predominantly Caucasian, female population of new teachers (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006) in teaching diverse students. Early practice experiences that teach how to meet the needs of diverse students should become more commonplace:

...those involved in teacher education programs must be willing to provide opportunities for future teachers to develop and experience pedagogy that is culturally responsive and build the necessary skills that would allow them to be culturally responsive teachers in their daily practices. (Vaughan, 2004, p. 46-47)

In our elementary education program, we attempted to extend multicultural learning from earlier foundations courses to culturally responsive teaching during the student teaching (internship) semester. Our approach to reflection on practice in diverse schools was the implementation of a book study during a weekly seminar, *From Rage to Hope: Reclaiming Black and Hispanic Students*, and presentation by the author, Dr. Crystal Kuykendall. We sought beginning change in interns' thinking about culturally relevant practice through self-awareness, knowledge, and initial critical reflection on practice (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005).

Book Study Groups

Book study groups or clubs as an approach to professional development for inservice teachers has recently become more commonplace with new and preservice teachers (Chevalier & Houser, 1997; Clark, 2001; Kooy, 2006; Moore, 2008; White-Hood, 2007). Book study groups are often peer-led discussion groups that meet regularly to discuss a mutually chosen book that focuses on some aspect of teaching (Kooy).

Book study groups can support teacher learning and development on a critical area of teaching within a social context over a period of time (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty & Highfield, 2001). Participants in a book group have opportunities for critical discourse, self-reflection, and meaningful professional growth tied to practice (Smith & Strickland, 2001). Learning communities centered on book study can promote deeper understanding of ideas that transfer to classroom practice (Hirsch, 2009). These communities of practice through book study form a support group that also can foster change in attitudes and beliefs on the difficult to discuss topic of diversity (Garmon, 2005). For example, Moore conducted a semester-long book study, *Ways with Words*, with her elementary science methods candidates as a means to confront and understand their cultural biases that impact initial science teaching practice. Using a common text, candidates explored their insights about teaching science to culturally and linguistically diverse students through the lens of social justice. They met in discussion groups that fostered thought provoking discourse and reflection (Harlin, Murray, & Shea, 2007). Three themes were identified in Moore's study through data analysis: revealing cultural biases, connecting and applying knowledge of diversity, and getting to know students. (p. 105). Each of the themes underscored the need to challenge preservice teachers about the assumptions they hold about teaching students who are culturally, linguistically, and socially different from themselves while teaching in diverse schools.

Methods

Context

Forty-nine student teachers (interns) in the elementary education program were concurrently enrolled in a professional development seminar that met weekly in alternating face-to-face and asynchronous online discussion meetings. All forty-nine interns were Caucasian. One was male.

The intent of the seminar course taken during student teaching was to focus on professional development that preservice teachers needed as practicing interns. In this regard, discussion of case-based scenarios of challenges faced by interns including reaching diverse students was a big focus of the meetings and the threaded discussion board. The discussion board also facilitated the exchange of ideas and supportive feedback needed by interns.

During the first half of the seminar in the Spring of 2008, interns also completed a book study paralleling the same book study conducted by elementary teachers in the local Professional Development School (PDS) System. Eighteen interns were placed in this system. This system served approximately 6,000 students in grades K-12 with 28% minority students, predominantly African American, and 25% of students at the federal poverty level. This system had the smallest percentage of minority population and students at the federal poverty level than other nearby systems where interns were placed.

Data Sources

Before beginning the book study, 47 interns completed a forced-choice item survey on their background experience in education with diverse student populations. After completion of the survey, interns were assigned a few sequential chapters of the book, *From Rage to Hope*, to read each week along with guiding reflection questions for note-taking. They were also required to electronically post their reflective thoughts tying reading to practice in an online journal on a weekly basis for each chapter read. These journals focused on any aspect of their reflective notes from the guiding questions that were most poignant or meaningful to them. Journals were typically substantial paragraphs on each chapter. The course instructor monitored student thinking in their reflective journals, but did not reply to them in order to support a more open and safe sharing environment for the interns. Upon

completion of reading the book at the mid-point of the semester, all of the interns and the teachers in the PDS attended Dr. Kuykendall's talk on her personal story and the need for culturally relevant pedagogical strategies to reach all students. Afterwards, the student interns responded to a set of questions in their electronic journals as their final reflections on the impact that the book study had on their thinking and practice (See Appendix). These responses included specific examples of incidences in practice which strengthened the validity to their claims of change in thinking. Thirty-one of them consented to allow use of their final journal reflections for this study.

Data Analysis

Intern survey data were compiled as percent response for each item's choices. Co-researchers then independently read and descriptively coded consenting interns' final written reflections on thinking about culturally responsive teaching in practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coded descriptions were placed into initial categories based on similar or related descriptions through an iterative process. For example, one researcher placed the description, *children learn at different rates, focus on student learning styles, and make learning fun*, into the category of *teach to student differences*. Identical or very similar descriptions were only listed once in a category but demarcated by the number of participants who shared them. The researchers then came together and shared their initial categories and example descriptions within each. Similar categories were kept with agreement upon descriptive codes placed under them. Closely related categories were collapsed into newly named categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process led to the identification of four agreed upon thematic categories supported by the data.

Results

Survey results (N=47) showed that the vast majority of interns came from rural and suburban

elementary schools with only 10% considering their schools to be urban. Thirty-seven percent of interns came from high schools with African American populations making up half or more of the student body. However, 61% of interns also claimed that the Caucasian population of their high schools was greater than 75%. Half of these students still considered their high school populations to be somewhat diverse. See Table 1.

book study and how they interacted with African American students in their classrooms.

For example, interns began thinking about how their attitudes and body language with their students of color could make a big difference in how they were perceived. They wanted to portray positive attitudes such as praise and encouragement, which would motivate their

Table 1. The nature of diversity in interns’ past schooling experience.

Which best describes your elementary school?	
School Type	Percent of Interns
Urban (large city) school	2.1%
Urban (small city) school	8.5%
Suburban public school	51.1%
Rural public school	27.7%
Private school	4.3%
Private religious school	6.4%
How would you best describe the student population of your high school?	
Racial Diversity	Percent of Interns
Predominately white/Caucasian (greater than 75%)	60.9 %
Predominantly African American (greater than 75%)	4.3%
Equally diverse between white and African American	32.6%
Equally diverse between white, African American, and Hispanic	2.2%
Greatly diverse with many cultures and races represented	0.0%
How would you best describe the diversity in your high school?	
Diversity	Percent of Interns
Not diverse	31.9%
Somewhat diverse	63.8%
Very diverse	4.3%

Project Positive Teaching Behaviors

Although interns’ initial education and perceptions about diversity focused on general cultural diversity, its issues and perceived challenges, the book study focused their thinking on applied approaches and methods for teaching students of color. These students were typically African American because they made up the vast majority of diversity in the local schools. Interns now shared specific thinking and examples from practice based on their reflective learning from the

students to achieve at higher levels. In their relationships with their diverse students, they wanted to intentionally work harder with them for their success and give them a better chance than they may have had in the past. They especially wanted to inspire and hold high expectations that these students could achieve their best:

I recently implemented [Dr.] Kuykendall’s strategy on teacher attitude in the classroom with a difficult student. Immediately I showed him that I was

interested in him that day, and that I was willing and ready to help him succeed. I took time to assist him in preparing for a test, and then slowly went through the test with him. This process took a good deal of patience and determination. By taking time to show him I was interested, focused, and committed to his success paid off. No more yelling, giving up, or sending him out of the room. It is about my attitude in teaching him, and I choose to have a good one. (*Intern reflection*)

This book discusses how to handle those students' lack of motivation. I have worked hard to keep the children excited about learning, build confidence, and really work with the ten tips for teaching terrific children. Those strategies have been very helpful. Also, I have been maintaining a positive classroom environment for my students to help them better achieve success. The climate in a classroom is very important. For my first classroom I will be certain to maintain a positive classroom climate. I will achieve this by using positive terminology, present good physical conditions, and foster acceptance and understanding among each of my children. I will work to build their confidence and keep them motivated. (*Intern reflection*)

Respect, Value, and Embrace Individual Differences

Interns now frequently mentioned patience, respect, and caring for all of their students in an effort to build a classroom community made up of all students. They voiced how students of color must feel accepted and their individual differences should be embraced as an important part of the classroom culture. Embracing diversity and celebrating it was not new to interns' thinking from this book study, but viewing it for each individual and considering practices that foster

and help create a classroom community was new:

I also would love for my students to complement each other every day to show everyone in the class the wonderful things about them. As a class, we will not downsize students' differences; instead, we will discuss and make it known how wonderful it is that everyone is different in their own way. If everyone were the same, it would be very dull and school would not be as exciting. (*Intern reflection*)

Teach to Individual Student Differences

As internship proceeded, interns emphasized strategies for teaching that better motivated their students of color through lessons that were more interactive, fun, and even playful for their students. They were also cognizant of addressing individual students' different learning rates and capitalizing on each student's academic strengths and talents. One approach learned in the book study was to create individual goal-setting plans for each student with reachable goals for progress and success. Interns also wrote frequently about meeting the different learning styles of their students. They were very cognizant of how their approach to teaching in a diverse classroom needed to be congruent with the learning needs of their students:

One of my students in my internship placement is an early finisher with every assignment he is given. When he gets done, instead of reading, he usually distracts other students from doing their work. This student also loves to do research. One particular day he finished early, and instead of letting him distract others, I asked him to do some research on India (which corresponded with our unit for the week) that he would present to the class. He also loves to talk. It was great; he was excited about

his assignment, and the other kids were able to keep working in quiet. (*Intern reflection*)

After being at my internship placement only a few short weeks, I was able to point out those students who are/were at risk. As I observed these students during instructional time I was able to see which teaching styles that were used by my cooperating teacher seemed to hold their attention and which did not. After observing this I thought back to what [Dr.] Kuykendall said about incongruent teaching and learning styles and I made a decision to try to create lessons that were congruent to all my students' various learning styles. Although this may seem impossible to some educators, I found it to be more challenging and very possible with a little creativity.... During my last formal observation, my cooperating teacher kept an eye on those same students and told me that she saw a great improvement. This improvement has grown over the weeks and is now more and more apparent in their test scores and assignments. (*Intern reflection*)

Get to Know Students' Lives

Interns became aware of the various outside of school factors that impact each child's behavior and performance in their classroom, particularly their students of color. They better understood the difficult family situations that some of their students faced. This helped interns to begin developing empathy for students that affected how they addressed issues and difficulties that arose in the classroom. They often spoke of thinking first about their students' lives outside of school before making decisions as their teacher and disciplinarian. They wanted their students to have a chance to dialogue about problems instead of being punished for outward behavior:

One day a student came in and had not finished her homework, it was very unlike her. We asked her why she hadn't finished, and she said that her mom never came home that night, so she was taking care of her siblings. Under that circumstance, we made accommodations and had to remain flexible. (*Intern reflection*)

There are a few students in particular in my class right now that I felt were being described to a T in the book. Some come from broken families and low income situations. I have dealt with times where students talk about not having enough to eat, not seeing their parents for a while, and wearing the same clothes to school on a daily basis. Some of these things I cannot change but I do my best to be on the lookout for a chance to bring a snack and send some home.... (*Intern reflection*)

With one of my students in my placement I have had to learn to watch what I say around him. The student comes from a very troubled background. Until I understood some of what Dr. Kuykendall was saying I never stopped to think before I said, "take this home to your parents" or "make sure your mom or dad signs this tonight." I never thought about the fact that he did not live with either of his parents or any of his grandparents.... After taking this into consideration, I stop each time before I say it and think. (*Intern reflection*)

Discussion

As in past studies, the elementary education majors in this study came to student teaching with an awareness and understanding of diversity in their schools from their prior course work in multicultural education as well as prior field placements (Barry & Lechner, 1995;

Vaughn, 2004). Past experience in diverse high schools for many of them meant experience with African American students who were the focus of this book study. This past experience for the majority of them may be one reason why interns did not mention any discomfort in working with African American students, only students from other cultures as in the PDS System (Pope & Wilder, 2005).

This book study initiated critical reflection and dialogue on practice within a supportive community of peers through practical teaching strategies to better reach African American students (Garmon, 2005; Raphael et al., 2001; Smith & Strickland, 2001).

These strategies in practice were evident in interns' final reflective writing and their storied examples tied to the book's suggestions. For those eighteen interns placed in the PDS System, their examples of new thinking and changes in practice were likely supported by cooperating teachers conducting the same book study with each other at these schools.

Most commonly, interns stopped viewing and treating all students equally or the same. They began to accept differences in students and use the suggestions in their book to address academic weaknesses, particularly using students' academic strengths and talents. Many more interns saw the need to treat each student more as a unique individual, citing the need to tailor interventions to help each student achieve. Also, interns began examining their teaching practices for congruency with their students' learning styles. This led to shifting practice away from only traditional approaches to more active, collaborative, and fun ones. They also began creating a more positive and accepting learning environment for all of their students, avoiding tacit teacher behaviors that marginalized some children. Even in addressing inappropriate or unexpected behavior, many interns began critically reflecting on typical punishment practices that did not respect the

student or help the situation get better. They began getting to know each student that needed help and each student's unique circumstances (Moore, 2008). This knowledge elicited greater empathy and the need to find individual solutions to problems. These examples of teaching each individual child differently were a shift in their beliefs about how to reach their African American students for their success (Kidd et al., 2007; Korthagen, 2001; Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

Conclusions

The book study, in addressing culturally responsive teaching practices during internship, supported these elementary education majors' thinking about diversity in practice. In the process many of them began to change their thinking and beliefs about reaching students of color through applying newly learned approaches and strategies that worked. The connection between book, class discussion, critical written reflection, and practice was forged through the seminar course where interns had to address their thinking and practice together on this critical issue (Kidd et al., 2007; Raphael et al., 2001; Smith & Strickland, 2001). Critical reflection on practice along with the practical strategies to change practice while in practice seemed to be the vital combination for initial change in this study. This particular book was helpful in that regard. It was not theoretical but practical in the guidance given for practice through explicitly shared approaches and strategies. This practical guidance helped interns to begin to build the necessary skills needed to teach in more culturally responsive ways (Vaughan, 2004).

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Author's Note

Dr. Eick is an Associate Professor of Elementary Education at Auburn University who specializes in candidate formation and the teaching of elementary science for all children.

Dr. McCormick is an Associate Professor of Elementary Education at Auburn University who specializes in candidate formation and the teaching of social studies.

Appendix

Student Teachers' Final Reflective Questions

1. How would you describe the most powerful message you received from reading and hearing Dr. Kuykendall's book? (one paragraph).
2. What new insights about teaching and children do you now feel you have since reading and blogging on the book and hearing the author speak? (one paragraph)
3. Think about the students in your intern placement. Describe a specific example of how you implemented the strategies/ideas you have learned to facilitate learning in all students? (one paragraph)
4. Think about your first teaching job. Describe how you will establish the "climate" of your first classroom in an effort to help all students be successful. (one paragraph)