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Students drum life stories: The role of cultural universals in project work

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ABSTRACT

This study describes how a primary school teacher and her students explored multiple means of communication through the use of a project on storytelling and drumming to personalize and translate cultural differences into universal human experiences they could understand. It documents how the teacher and two researchers collaborated with planning and implementing the drumming project so that it integrated social studies with multiple modes of literacy. It discusses how the teacher and researchers examined cultural universals within this project to provide students with a frame of reference to engage in an authentic understanding of diverse cultures within their classrooms. Finally, the study examined the students' work within the actual drumming project.

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Introduction

This study describes how a primary school teacher, her students and two university researchers, Researcher 1 and Researcher 2, engaged in an action research project that explored multiple means of communication through storytelling and drumming. The study's context was a project within a school-wide, yearlong thematic unit that attempted to personalize and translate cultural differences into universal human experiences that the students understood. It explains what transpired when the students began to see themselves as historians (Barton, 2008) who used their collective memory to record their community's history through their drumming and/or writing its stories (McNeill, 1985). In addition, the study examines the impact of the teacher's perspective of culture being "shared systems of meaning" rather than "a list of traits, rituals, or customs" (Maschinot, 2008, p. 2). It also examines the teacher's decisions to invite Researcher 1 to collaborate in planning and implementing this study of communication within cultural universals through the drumming project and Researcher 2 to function as an outside observer who raised questions about the project. Those questions served as a guide to deeper reflections of the actual project and its meaning and implications for the teacher's classroom practice.

The drumming project emerged as a result of a primary school's faculty's decision to do a yearlong study of the African continent and its cultures. The individual teachers tailored their thematic curriculum to meet the needs, abilities, and interests of their students (Dewey, 1933/1998). The teacher in this study was concerned about teaching the stereotypical thematic curriculum on Africa that typically contained broad generalizations about "exotic" aspects of African rituals,

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thereby stereotyping African cultures (Merryfield, 2002; Merryfield & White, 1996; Mindes, 2005). She also feared that her students would focus on cultural differences. As Brophy and Alleman (2007) remind us:

Given children's implicit orientations toward chauvinism and towards noticing differences...more than similarities, it is important for teachers to represent cultures in ways that reflect the goals of anthropologists...to help students see each culture through the eyes of its own people rather than through outsiders' stereotypes... (p. 128)

Because of the teacher's concerns about the faculty's decision to have the African continent and its cultures as the school wide theme, she decided to discuss this with Researcher 1 whom she met in her graduate program and maintained contact through joint participation in an informal teachers' community of practice. The teacher trusted that Researcher 1 could help her reimagine her curriculum as she learned about thematic teaching from a constructivist perspective when she was a student in Researcher 1's undergraduate and graduate classes.

In their initial discussion about concerns, Researcher 1 suggested that the teacher narrow her approach to the school wide theme by selecting a project that was similar to one that the students used in their classroom and had some personal connections to members of the class. She also suggested that they focus on that project and use the African continent and cultures' theme as a backdrop. Researcher 1 felt that such a project would ease the teacher's concerns about the broad stereotypical theme but not stray too far from the school wide theme. They decided that the teacher would encourage the students to use their knowledge of a ritual within their own classroom's culture to investigate a custom within one of the African cultures (Dewey, 1938/1997; Henze & Hauser, 1999).

Originally the teacher had considered having the students do a project on drums but discounted it because she reasoned that once they made the drums they wouldn't do anything with them. As she and Researcher 1 brainstormed customs that might have connections to both the classroom rituals and African customs, the teacher mentioned her idea of having the students make drums. Researcher 1 really liked it for two reasons. First, parents of one of the students' were from Kenya which would personalize the study of African customs. Secondly, storytelling through drumming in African cultures and story writing and telling in the students' classroom rituals were both communicative systems of meaning. They decided to introduce the students to the idea of exploring the importance of drums and drumming as a form of communication within the oral tradition of African cultures (Kituku, 1997; Mbiti, 1975; Olupona, 1991).

The rationale for our choices

This article describes the decision to focus on a project within a theme. It draws from three overlapping areas of research in elementary social studies: (1) the project method as a pedagogical strategy (Branscombe et al., 2013; Clark, 2006; Katz & Chard, 2000; Lee & Goh, 2012; Mindes, 2005; Ward, 1989); (2) cultural universals as a focus of elementary content (Alleman, Knighton, & Brophy, 2007; Brophy & Alleman, 2008); and (3) notions of constructivist pedagogy (Chaille, 2007; DeVries & Zan, 2012; Duckworth, 2007).

The authors selected Berthoff's approach (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) of using writing as a methodological tool for searching and re-searching the teacher and students' work with the project. By selecting this methodology, we focused on a specific pedagogical method (and its related philosophical characteristics) as a way of exploring key concepts in social studies content and implementing our belief that students construct knowledge through active and highly social classroom environments. Although elementary education has several versions of the "project method" or project work, our concept is based on two central features: 1) a question or problem drives the activity, and (2) students work towards a final product or solution (Good & Brophy, 2008). Furthermore, this notion of project work includes the following elements:

Tasks are varied and include novel elements, problems are authentic and challenging, the work leads to closure in the form of a final product, students exercise choice in deciding what to do and how to do it, and students collaborate with peers in carrying out the work. (Good & Brophy, 2008, p. 167)

The research in primary education suggests that students learn best when they are engaged in authentic learning experiences that allow them to coordinate their cognitive, social, and physical understandings of the content areas (Branscombe et al., 2013; Daggett & Nussbaum, 2012; Lee & Goh, 2012). When the setting is culturally diverse, students learn best when they can identify and focus on the universal part of their experiences (Mindes, 2005; Sinnema & Aitken, 2012).

The seminal research from Brophy and Alleman (2002, 2006) points the way for elementary social studies teachers to inform their content and pedagogy with research about cultural universals. "Cultural universals are domains of human experience that have existed in all cultures, past and present...basic needs of food, clothing, shelter...family structures, government, communication, transportation...economic exchange" etc. (Brophy & Alleman, 2006, p. 5). By using cultural universals in the elementary social studies classroom teachers can attempt to bridge the gap in understanding cultural differences that exist between groups (Alleman et al., 2007). "Ideally, such instruction will connect with students' prior knowledge, both by building on their valid knowledge and by addressing their misconceptions" (Brophy & Alleman, 2006, p. 2). In addition to the research conducted with children's conceptions of cultural universals, research into children understands of geography (Mindes, 2005; Palmer, 1994; Palmer & Pettitt, 1993), in particular, Africa reveals that children have incomplete and/or biased opinions of this "distant land." "A great challenge in the teaching of distant lands...is to provide

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