



Teacher epistemology and collective narratives: Interrogating teaching and diversity

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ABSTRACT

This action research study interrogates how one teacher educator analyzed her pedagogy and engaged her students in writing narratives about working with children, families, and co-workers who are racially and ethnically different from themselves. Data were collected from a special topic graduate course entitled, Epistemology, Diversity and Teaching, at a large Midwestern university. Issues such as “otherness”, the culture of power, and white privilege were some key concepts addressed in the course. Findings indicated that use of key readings and meaningful discussion on controversial issues enhanced students’ ability to take multiple perspectives, recognize the significance of student epistemology, and acknowledge the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

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1. Introduction

Diversity within U.S. public schools has been considered enlightening, problematic, challenging, and even overwhelming to policy makers particularly in cases where many native languages need to be addressed. Most teacher education programs include some form of critical multicultural education (Gay, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 2008; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Pang, 2001), as well as culturally relevant pedagogy (Au, 2007; Garcia, 1999; Gay, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and reflective teaching (Liston & Zeichner, 1996). Some programs include courses in bilingual and special education as additional options. Pre-service teachers have expressed the desire to learn specific strategies for interacting with students who are culturally and linguistically different from themselves, often feeling that they have to “learn about all of the cultures represented in their classes”. But few teacher education departments offer opportunities for future teacher educators to investigate how personal epistemology influences their conceptions of student diversity and how perspective taking and communication with diverse families might be effectively addressed. In this article, I share my experiences teaching a graduate course designed to interrogate the relationships among epistemology, diversity, and teaching.

In many teacher education programs on the U.S. mainland, a discussion of culture often focuses on a dominant “American”

culture and the “multi” of multicultural connotes only non-western, non-European cultures. Thus a dichotomy of “us” (U.S., American) and “other” (foreign, not mainstream American) is inferred. A discussion of race usually interrogates Black-White issues within the U.S. civil rights context. A discussion of ethnicity often addresses problems of Latino and Asian immigrants (documented and undocumented) and the “tourist curriculum” of piñatas and Chinese dragons. And, a discussion of gender often results in a call for breaking down stereotypical roles and challenging patriarchy without consideration for how gender roles are constructed within differing ethnic cultures. Although none of these approaches would be considered inappropriate for teaching diverse populations in U.S. schools, they are indeed incomplete and limiting in today’s global society. Discussions of diverse regional cultures and dialects, diverse religious orientations, diverse sexual orientations, socio-economic differences and multi-heritage or bi-cultural populations are often avoided because of their “sensitivity.” The desire not to “offend” tied with the lack of pedagogical knowledge become rationale for not addressing these issues in teacher education programs. I firmly believe that teaching from colorblind and gender neutral positions need to be challenged and that a deeper analysis of epistemology, worldview and family racial/ethnic culture become part of this reflective process.

In this study, teachers (graduate students) reflected upon, uncovered, and articulated their personal worldviews regarding students, families, and co-workers who are racially and ethnically different from themselves. Through the course readings they began to understand the hegemony of the dominant paradigm and how it impacts children of color and ethnic minorities. Through

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self-reflection they recalled their lived experiences and told them as stories. In sharing and discussing them with peers, they re-constructed the stories, attached new meanings and re-told them in their written assignments, creating narratives.

1.1. Theoretical underpinnings

1.1.1. Epistemology and education

Aren't we all biased and judgmental because we see the world ego-centrally and ethnocentrally based upon our own cultural and value perspectives? Were we not reared to live in a world set by the parameters of our parents and families? Our families and communities help instill a sense of belonging and an emic value orientation, but once we reach school age (and even before, depending upon individual experiences) knowledge about "others" influences our "ways of knowing", or epistemology. I use this term in the broadest sense throughout this paper drawing from Ladson-Billings' (2000) description of "systems of knowing". She writes: "An epistemology is a 'system of knowing' that has both internal logic and external validity...Epistemology is linked to worldview." Citing Ladson-Billings continues:

Worldview and systems of knowledge are symbiotic – that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one's worldview. Thus the conditions under which people live and learn shape both their knowledge and their worldviews (p. 258).

I was my intent to awaken my students to their own epistemologies, but also to understand that all of the children they teach have their own epistemologies from their communities and family cultures. More importantly, they need to become cognizant of the dominant European American paradigm in mainstream U.S. schools that may be different from the worldviews of some children and their families. The readings were chosen to uncover the hegemony existing in American schools.

Ladson-Billings (2000) contends that the hegemony of the dominant paradigm, which "claims to be the only legitimate way to view the world", is problematic for students who do not share a western European worldview.

Once students examined and evaluated their own epistemologies, within the contexts of their family and community cultures and their experiences, then the next step was to create personal narratives describing the students' worldview. When I engaged in this process myself, I realized that my race (Asian) and how I was ascribed racially and ethnically by others played an important role in my identity. When I was ascribed as foreign and not "American" by others, even as an elementary teacher, it highlighted the importance for teachers to interrogate stereotypes and the impact of diversity on children.

1.1.2. Three dimensional narrative inquiry space

In this study, I examined my own, and asked my students to examine their personal and social lives and "ways of knowing" including their beliefs, experiences, and biases as racial cultural beings in the hierarchical situated position of teacher. What were their interactions with families of color and how did that impact their diverse knowledge base and teaching? We used narrative inquiry methodology.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) derive their conception of narrative inquiry from Dewey's theory of experience and his constructs of situation, continuity, and interaction. They write (2000):

With this sense of Dewey's foundational place in our thinking about narrative inquiry, our terms are personal and social

(interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical three dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third (p.50).

We reflected on past experiences inside and outside the classroom and projected how our developing understanding of issues such as critical multiculturalism, subjugated knowledge, and culturally relevant teaching will inform our pedagogies, or our "ways of teaching" in the future. And finally, the "place" of this study was the graduate class throughout one semester where controversial topics were interrogated and meaningful dialogue emerged in a psychologically safe space. As student shared their individual narratives, we created a collective of narratives and documented the weekly discussion of readings, critiques, ideas, and interactive experience.

1.2. Study methods

1.2.1. Action research

There are two lenses I use in this study: the student lens of storytelling (documented through narrative inquiry) and the teacher education lens of action research to develop student multicultural awareness and empowerment. Self-reflection and study of one's epistemology and the development of narratives are the individual processes students engage in, which provide the foundation for student awareness and empowerment. But the group process of engaging in course readings and discourse on critical issues of diversity is the pedagogical inquiry that I engage in as the teacher educator. In designing this course, my goal was to examine how my pedagogy provided catalyst for student multicultural awareness, and how student critical thinking about diversity might impact their ability to take multiple perspectives, uncover children's epistemology and engage in culturally relevant teaching.

MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) write that "an action researcher *hopes* that they can create a change for the better, *dreams* of a better world and *desires* to make a difference" (p. 5). This describes my conception of the process. I want my students to become agents of change, or in Giroux's (1988) vision as *transformative intellectuals*. Giroux (1988) explains that "the category of transformative intellectual suggests that teachers begin with a recognition of those manifestations of suffering that constitute historical memory as well as the immediate conditions of oppression" (p. 99). As a teacher educator, I designed this action research to help me uncover ways to inspire my graduate students become open to interrogating conditions of oppression that some of their children face in their daily lives. I strove to teach my students to analyze the relationship between their epistemology and their conceptions, beliefs and practices with students of diverse backgrounds and living conditions.

1.2.2. Study participants

Students who were enrolled in a graduate course on epistemology, diversity, and teaching during two separate semesters at a Midwestern "Big Ten" university participated in this study. These doctoral students, master certification students and practicing teachers came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences with diversity. Each class had nine students but the class compositions were markedly different. The first class was predominantly doctoral students and included six international students from Korea, China, Taiwan, Ghana and Turkey, all of whom had taught in their own countries. There was one white male (not yet in education), one African American male certification student, and one Jewish American lesbian. The second class had less racial diversity and more

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