

# **Making Connections to Cultural Identity: Using Multicultural Children’s Literature and Storytelling to Explore Personal Narrative**

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## **Introduction**

More than at any other time, changing demographics, especially in urban settings, have impacted teaching and learning in schools and classrooms. Students come from diverse backgrounds in terms of social class, ethnicity, race, languages, and other socio-cultural constructs. However, institutional heads and their practices in most urban settings do not mirror this diversity nor do they affirm this diversity (Nieto, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; Banks & Banks, 1995; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, Gay, 2000). The result is that “minority”<sup>1</sup> students are put into a deficit model of failure and underachievement (see for example Nieto, 1992; Villegas, 1991). How can we as teachers, begin to create a space in our classrooms that is supportive, inclusive and affirming? How can we begin to envision strategies that realize the student as the center of teaching and learning? In other words, how can we build bridges across identities (ours, the diverse students’ and the pedagogy) so that we may teach and learn from multiple perspectives?

Educators have noted that one way to address these socio-cultural differences, especially in urban settings, is to follow a culturally relevant and responsive approach in teaching and

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term minority within quotation marks to acknowledge the debates around the word minority. Here I use it as an umbrella term to include any student who has been in any way marginalized within a school system.

learning practices. This view of education is based upon formulations and practices of an ethical and equitable approach (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Banks & Banks, 1995; 1995a). Another approach is using personal narratives as a means to explore each individual's personal situatedness and subjectivities in connections to and with the social world. Within such an approach, a strategy that offers rich possibilities to actively involve students and teachers in classroom situations is Storytelling or Storying selves (Booth, 2000; Booth and Barton, 2000) Storytelling and storying allow us to have encounters with and from a variety of perspectives in order to negotiate and build understandings of one's cultures and identities, thereby comprehending living in a complex, culturally diverse world (Greene, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1998, Dyson & Genishi, 1994)

### **Background and Purpose**

Current research in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy documents, analyzes and posits certain epistemological assumptions that teachers need in order to effectively teach students from backgrounds different from their own (Banks & Banks, 1995; 1995a; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992; 1994; 1995; 1995a; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). For example, one of the basic epistemological assumptions is that learning is culturally situated in contrast to a 'banking' view of education in which students are considered a 'bank' to deposit knowledge (Freire, 1970, 1973). Another basic assumption is that teachers need to learn about students' home cultures and communities and that teaching in schools and classrooms should meet the home cultures of students for them to be able to learn effectively (Banks, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Some educators attribute this principle as the defining factor of culturally relevant and responsive approaches to teaching (Erickson, 1987; Nel, 1995). Many recent case studies (Hollins & Oliver, 1999) also describe particular classrooms where the

teacher because of her cultural competence in knowing her students' home cultures was able to teach in a culturally relevant and responsive manner. Some of these studies also give specific lesson plans and strategies that teachers could follow in order to develop cultural responsiveness towards their students (Shade, Kelly and Oberg, 1997; Irvine & Armento, 2001).

These studies provide teachers with conceptualizations of cultural relevance and responsiveness and provide many effective methods of teaching with ethnically and culturally diverse students. However, while these studies provide ways for teachers to affirm *students'* difference and diversity, few of them address how *teachers'* own conceptions and understandings of cultural differences and cultural diversity affect the way they teach in the classroom. One study (Paley, 1979), does address the teacher's cultural identities and how that affected students' teaching and learning in her classroom. However, Paley's (1979) study, although based on cultural and social factors, did not specifically use culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy as a guide to analysis.

An important question that needs to be asked in relation to viewing teacher's cultural identities and how they affect students' learning in the classroom is – how do teachers characterize difference and diversity in a classroom? Does the teacher locate difference and diversity as embodied by ethnically diverse students and not herself? Are 'minority' students termed to 'have' cultural identities and not the teacher? Ladson-Billings (2001) writes that often, White teachers choose whiteness over their own cultural backgrounds and do not think of themselves as embodying cultural identities. Notions of whiteness, she believes, are taken for granted. Such teachers, she asserts are not culturally competent to teach with ethnically and culturally diverse students because they consider the students as 'others' and themselves as the 'norm'. In order to develop cultural competence and through that, to teach in a culturally relevant

manner, Ladson-Billings (2001) feels it is important to first address how the teacher's own cultural identities affect teaching in the classroom.

Cochran-Smith (1995) makes a case for the use of personal narratives by stating that teachers must begin their journey by examining both their own experiences and the tacit assumptions they have about teaching and learning in order to begin to instantiate their roles as teachers. She states:

In order to learn to teach in a society that is increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, prospective teachers . . . need opportunities to examine much of what is usually unexamined in the tightly braided relationships of language, culture, and power in schools and schooling. This kind of examination inevitably begins with our own histories as human beings and as educators--our own cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds and our own experiences as raced, classed, and gendered children, parents, and teachers in the world. It also includes a close look at the tacit assumptions we make about the motivations and behaviors of other children, other parents, and other teachers and about the pedagogies we deem most appropriate for learners who are like us and who are not like us.

The present study contributes to the body of research in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy from teachers' points of view. It also contributes to research in Storytelling and narrative practices by documenting how teachers' own cultural identities affected conceptions of diversity in classrooms. By using children's literature as a lens to explore their own personal narratives, teachers could begin to story their own lives and begin to understand their own cultural identities.

## **Methodology**

This paper examines the impact of one course in multicultural children's literature on the reflective personal narratives and autobiographies of preservice and inservice teachers. Students (preservice and inservice teachers) who take this course are required to write reflective narratives or autobiographies in order help them understand the lenses through which they will engage *their*

students in teaching and learning. Multicultural children's literature serves as the context for the narratives these teachers write. Storytelling further serves as a vehicle to share and reflect on these narratives. These narratives and storying practices serve as an impetus for teachers to examine their own cultural identities and begin to facilitate their understanding of their own students' personal stories. We believe that these stories will help to define who these teachers are as learners and how they will approach the teaching and learning tasks presented in school. It is especially critical that teachers who work with students from diverse background engage in such self-reflection as a first step toward understanding their own as well as the identities of their students. As Greene (1994) says

“Numerous people in education are recognizing the importance of coming in touch with the patterns of their own self-formation if they are to find connection points with other human beings whose memories may link with theirs at certain junctures, and perhaps, seem alien at others and [through these narratives] we gradually impart meanings to our own lives.” (p.14)

For this paper data is being collected from approximately 32 preservice and inservice teachers at one urban university in southern California. Some of the questions that drive this study include:

1. How can teachers use multicultural children's literature and storytelling to facilitate the development of their own and their students' cultural identities?
2. In what ways do reflective and narrative autobiographies help in facilitating preservice and inservice teachers' building an understanding of their identities?
3. What role does this have within the framework of teaching?
4. How can storying help teachers come to understand the lenses through which they construct their roles as teachers?

## **Data Collection**

Data collection is currently underway in one multicultural children's literature class in a large urban university in southern California. Thirty-two students are enrolled in this course. Eighteen of the students are currently teaching in an urban school and are enrolled in the course as a requirement for their M.A. in Education (with varying options). The remaining students are preservice teachers enrolled in the university's undergraduate blended B.A. and credential program that has a focus on urban learning. Ages of the students range from 21 to 55. The students themselves come from diverse backgrounds: twenty-one are Latino, one is African-American, one is Korean, one is English, two are Armenian, and the rest Multiracial.

Data collection focuses on classroom activities and discussions related to multicultural children's literature, storytelling and the use of narrative, including weekly reflections and a student written personal narrative/autobiography. This is written in the beginning of the quarter as an exploration of the stories of relevance in their childhood and later, during the quarter, modified to include their individual autobiographies and cultural identities. Data include field notes of all class sessions, weekly reflections, online discussions, personal narratives and autobiographies. Whenever possible, class discussions will be audio taped and those tapes transcribed and added to the data set.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is ongoing and will be based on a review of each data source and coding of all data. Field notes will be compiled during classroom activities and discussions. Documentary analysis of student narratives/autobiographies and weekly reflections will examine themes that respond to the research questions. Patterns will be identified as they emerge and these will be used to further identify salient themes, and categories within and across each data set.

Propositions will be formulated from this process of data analysis and further developed to address the specific research questions.

## **Findings and Conclusions**

At present data collection is underway and preliminary analyses will be completed by the time of the presentation.

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