

Contexts for teaching in diverse classrooms: Examining the reflective narratives of preservice teachers

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This paper explores the reflective narratives of preservice teachers as they come to see themselves and their future teaching situated within the framework of their own cultures and experiences. As such it investigates the following research questions:

1. What role does reflective narrative have within the framework of teacher education?
2. How do preservice teachers come to understand the importance of their past and present experiences on their role as teachers?
3. How can preservice teachers come to understand the lenses through which they construct their roles as teachers?
4. How can instructors help preservice teachers situate their teaching within relevant contexts in ethnolinguistically diverse classrooms?

To that end, this paper focuses on the role of ongoing reflection in a preservice teacher education program at one suburban, public university in southern California. All teachers in the programs will receive the Cross-cultural language and academic development (CLAD) or bilingual CLAD (BCLAD) credential upon completing the program. Given their future roles in teaching children from diverse backgrounds, instructors infuse issues of culture and language within both prerequisite and methodology courses.

Theoretical framework

Our research is guided by the current literature surrounding the topic of reflective practice and teacher research. We approach our teaching from the perspective that our role is to facilitate our students' roles as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983), recognizing the role they have to play in terms of examining and impacting practice. Students come to our programs with a myriad of background experiences that most likely will be different from the diverse groups of students that they will teach. It is important that they begin this reflective process by examining who they are, why they are and how their identities will affect their teaching and, thus, the learning experiences they teach.

Cochran-Smith (1995) argues that teachers must begin 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.

Tremmel (1993) likens this examination to the practice of Zen. He maintains that such self-examination is often forgotten as future teachers become overwhelmed with endless theories and techniques that are discussed, proposed and shared in their preservice courses. He feels that educators need to take “a step back from theoretical entanglement and ask fundamental questions about what and how teachers are thinking and why they are doing what they are doing” (p. 454). This would include examining how assumptions based on experiences color the way teachers practice their craft. He argues that we also must allow teachers time to become reflective practitioners rather than expecting them to fully understand their roles in the one or two years it generally takes to complete a teacher education program. “To become reflective and mindful practitioners, we need to learn to become aware of the workings of our own minds and, simultaneously, to let go of involvement in our own thoughts and feelings while plunging ourselves, mind and body, into the center of teaching and learning” (Tremmel, 1993, p. 456).

Zeichner and Liston (1996) further argue that teachers develop their own “practical theories” based on their own values and how these values influence the curriculum they choose and the methodologies they use (p. 43). They discuss the notion that teachers also are influenced by the social contexts in which they are practicing. This would include rules and regulations that come from without and that often constrict what a teacher may or may not do in her/his own classroom in terms of teaching and learning. This is obvious in California where recent legislation during recent years has mandated how second language learners are taught as well as how literacy instruction must be conducted. Given the diversity that exists in California, this makes it increasingly important that future teachers at least begin to examine their experiences in order to be clear about their own “practical theories” in relation to the students they will teach.

Method

Preservice students enrolled in two sections of a prerequisite course were chosen for data collection. Although most of the students will likely teach in ethnolinguistically diverse settings when they graduate, the vast majority of the students enrolled are white and monolingual English speaking. Approximately 300 examples of student writing/reflections were collected during the spring

semester of 2002. Students wrote weekly reflections on the course readings, discussions and classroom activities. Students shared their reflections with their peers, who responded in writing, and with the professors.

In addition we examined a variety of artifacts including original data in the form of surveys and questionnaires, teacher reflections and other assignments that engaged students in reflection such as community descriptions, family trees, etc., as well observational fieldnotes taken by instructors during discussions surrounding shared reflections, and anecdotal records. Data analysis was based on a review of each data source and coding of data. Patterns were identified as they surfaced and these were used to further identify salient themes, and (later) categories within and across each data set. Propositions were formulated from this process of data analysis and were further developed to address the specific research questions. Questioning and reflection on the data was a recursive process as a way of allowing the findings to be firmly grounded in the data. Throughout our examination of the data it was our intent to understand the cultural and experiential contexts that our students bring to the table in order that we might better facilitate their induction into the world of teaching.

Preliminary Results

The purpose of this paper is to examine the reflective narratives of preservice teachers in order to understand and to help them understand the lenses through which they will engage in teaching and learning. Preliminary examination of the data set and emerging results suggest:

1. Students are more open and critical of each other and the ideas/behavior expressed by peers in their writing.
2. Students more readily express controversial ideas and questions in writing as opposed to class discussions.
3. Students are reluctant to examine past experiences and influences on their own emerging practical theories. They often describe themselves as “cultureless” and explore the past superficially;
4. Students find it difficult to describe who they are, rather they often talk about who they know and what this means in terms of their own development;
5. Students question the need to make education accessible to all students, rather they want to know why students can’t “accommodate” to their instruction;
6. Students often demonstrate a desire to “fix” the educational system and/or specific students;
7. Students question their future roles as teachers, especially when examining tensions between what they remember as schooling and the “lessons” they are learning in class; and
8. Students often minimize the importance of their past experiences.

Educational implications

Given the changing demographics and the impact this has on the nature of schooling, it is critical that future teachers develop their own “practical theories” of education, based on who they are, what they bring to teaching and who their students will be. Reflecting on their own experiences as a means of contextualizing the lenses through which they will approach teaching is one means of examining who these future teachers will be in the classroom and how this will impact the students they teach. It is hoped that the reflections reviewed here will give us insight into the ways in which we, as teacher education instructors, can facilitate our preservice teachers’ growth as they come to understand their roles in education.

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