

4-2011

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Devising and Investigating Benefits of Interconnected Interventions to Promote
Education Majors' Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April,
2011, New Orleans, LA

Abstract

For five years I have supervised a summer literacy camp that connects graduate education majors with students from diverse ethnicities. Each summer I noted I inadequately challenged the education majors to extend their knowledge, examine their attitudes, and expand their abilities to offer culturally responsive literacy instruction to students in the camp. Therefore, I employed a formative-experimental framework to explore the benefits of adding two interventions to our curriculum to stimulate the education majors' culturally responsive dispositions. My discoveries indicate teacher educators can help education majors develop culturally responsive understandings, and pedagogical repertoires that meet the needs of students from nonmainstream families.

Key Words: culturally responsive; interventions; dispositions; education majors; formative-experimental framework

Author's Note: I wish to thank Doctoral Student, Patriann Smith, for her editorial assistance.

Exploring Two Interventions to Promote Graduate Education Majors' Dispositions toward
Culturally Responsive Teaching: Taking Action to Address
My Shortcomings as a Literacy Teacher Educator

I know now the concept of culturally responsive teaching is complex. I have just begun to understand what culturally responsive teaching means. (Graduate Education Major's End of Semester E-mail Reflection)

If it was not for camp this summer, I do not think I would have developed a deep understanding and appreciation of culturally responsive teaching. (Graduate Education Major's End of Semester E-mail Reflection)

National statistics show the population of the United States has become more ethnically diverse and this trend will continue. (Brown, 2004). In addition, by 2010, 95% of classroom teachers will be mostly white, middle class, monolingual females with limited or no previous multicultural experiences or interactions (Brown, 2004; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). As a result, future and in-service teachers will teach many students whose cultural, linguistic, racial, and economic backgrounds differ from their own (Banks, 2001; Sleeter, 2008).

Even after taking some coursework in multicultural education many teachers feel ill prepared to teach children from nonmainstream families. (Hadaway & Florez, 1987; Irvine, 2003; Jones & Fuller, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sleeter, 2008) They continue to hold misconceptions about minority children's literacy abilities, fail to recognize the pervasiveness of racial inequality, hold lower expectations for students of color, deny the significance of race in their practices, and lack a sense of themselves as cultural beings (Castro, 2010; Edwards & Kulman, 2010; McIntyre, Hulan, & Maher, 2010). As this demographic divide between students and teachers deepens, "teachers in diverse schools may hold lower expectations for students that result in a pedagogy

of poverty that undermines the potential inherent to a public school education” (Castro, 2010, p. 198) (also see Cazden 2001; Haberman, 1991; McIntyre, Hulan, & Maher, 2010; Szabo & Anderson, 2009).

Scholars who study diversity issues suggest teachers who accept and adopt the tenets of culturally responsive teaching must first take their “teaching behaviors into account, identify their view of the world, and recognize that one’s view is shaped by one’s life experiences that include race/ethnicity, social class, and gender” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 7). In addition, teachers must “possess the skills to provide a classroom environment that adequately addresses students’ needs, validates different cultures, and advocates equitable access to educational opportunity for all” (Brown, 2004, p. 325). Thus, Castro notes, “preparing culturally responsive teachers with the willingness and abilities to teach in nonmainstream school contexts represents perhaps, the most daunting task facing teacher education today” (2010, p. 198).

I concur with Castro’s statement. As a professor of a graduate Practicum Reading course situated for the past five years in a summer literacy camp for multicultural students, my observations of, and informal conversations with the White, Hispanic, and African-American middle class graduate education majors who tutored in the camp continued to reveal they wanted to provide exemplary literacy instruction for their students. But, they displayed minimal growth understanding themselves as cultural human beings and ignored race and culture as significant factors in students’ learning (e.g., see Ross & Smith, 1992). Even though I contextualized our coursework with a strong community center service-learning component, and had considerable previous successful experiences teaching elementary students in large culturally diverse school districts, I had not sufficiently challenged the graduate education majors to extend their

knowledge, examine their attitudes, and expand their expertise to offer instruction to children from a diverse society (see Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Taking Action

Recently, I took action to address my shortcomings as a teacher educator who apparently offered fragmented and superficial ideas about teaching students from various cultures, and therefore, shortchanged my graduate education majors, their future students, and the students in the camp. A review of the extant literature indicates most of the research about culturally responsive teaching examines gaps and deficits in teachers' experiences, attitudes, judgments, and perceptions regarding diversity, (Castro, 2010). But, I was not interested in rediscovering once again what my education majors did not know about culturally responsive teaching. Rather, I wanted to engage in an inquiry that would add some positive, proactive, and practical ideas to the literature, and also enhance the education majors' and my own culturally responsive teaching practices. In addition, since the literature shows researchers have neglected to identify detailed components of field –based courses that promote changes in teachers' perceptions, I wanted to focus “on the specific teaching practices and curricular components that foster changes in the beliefs and attitudes of ... teachers” (Castro, 2010, p. 207). Therefore my goal for the inquiry was to supply explicit, clear-cut information that surpassed vague assertions, such as, *teachers need to develop relationships and have high standards for diverse learners*. As a result I decided to conduct an exploratory inquiry to determine what interventions I might add to our already packed curriculum that might best help my education majors develop knowledge, dispositions, and techniques appropriate for teaching students from multicultural backgrounds. Recognizing that detailed culturally responsive pedagogical approaches are crucial, the major objective of my study was to discover what experiences might provide the best opportunities for

the graduate education majors to “build on and extend their limited knowledge or experiences with issues related to race, culture, ethnicity, and social class” (Irvine, 2003, p. 17). My first steps were to secure a University Innovative Teaching/Learning Grant to provide funds for the study to fund four research assistants and teaching supplies for the summer camp. Then, I obtained University Institutional Review Board approval for the inquiry.

Determining the Design of the Study

Next, I carefully scrutinized the literature to determine what type of research design might best help me explore the consequences of changes I might make in our curriculum. I discovered although not widely used in educational research, a flexible formative-experiment framework had the potential to allow me to link research and practice as well as adjust the curriculum as needed (Reinking & Bradley, 2004; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). This model is efficient because it uses no control group, and permits researchers to make modification to the curriculum in an attempt to better achieve instructional goals (Szabo & Anderson, 2009).

Although formative-design experiment studies are occasionally criticized for their heavy reliance on narrative accounts and some researchers acknowledge the challenges of objectivity, reliability, and validity that relate to a formative-experiment design (Shavelson et al., 2003), this type of research plan can help investigators develop insights about changes that are often obscured in complex, socially dynamic educational contexts. Specifically, a formative-experimental design allows researchers to:

- *Examine the pertinent literature
- *Conduct research within a single setting
- *Address simultaneously the multitude of factors evident in authentic teaching/ learning contexts

- *Identify a pedagogical goal, or goals
- *Offer a theoretical justification for its value and determine an instructional intervention that has the potential to meet the pedagogical goal
- *Collaborate with practitioners
- *Modify the intervention and implementation in an attempt to more efficiently address the pedagogical goal
- *Notice changes in the instructional environment resulting from the intervention
- *Determine what is and is not working
- *Develop knowledge that is of practical importance

(Brown & Campione, 1996; Collins, 1999; Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 1999)

Conceptual Frameworks Undergirding the Inquiry

I relied on dimensions of critical multiculturalism to support the inquiry. Critical multiculturalism draws inspiration from critical theory, and shares “the same ethics, spirit, values, principles, and actions” (Gay, 1995, p. 180). Critical multiculturalism endeavors to accomplish the objectives of social justice that perpetuates inequality across gender, ethnicity, race, and social class (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2001). I also adhered to ideas emanating from conscious reflection of self that Villegas and Lucas (2002) define as “awareness that one’s worldview is not universal but is profoundly shaped by one’s life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors . . . such as race/ethnicity, social class, and gender” (p. 27). In addition I was guided by social learning theory that explains how individual attitudes and motivations as well as interactions with others, the context in which learning occurs, and social persuasion and support

significantly influence what we think and how we act (Bandura, 1986; Szabo & Anderson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1986).

Context for the Inquiry

The literacy camp met one morning per week for six weeks in a Community Center adjacent to a low-income urban housing area close to my university. Approximately 150 students whose ages ranged from 5 -12 participated in the camp. Most had difficulties reading and writing. Ninety percent who attended the camp received free or subsidized breakfast and lunch in their elementary or middle schools during the school year. Eighty percent were African-American, 15 percent were Hispanic, and five percent were Caucasian. The majority scored at or below the 20th percentile on annual reading and language arts standardized assessments administered at their schools. (M. Dorvil, University Area Community Development Corporation Supervisor, personal communication, April 6, 2010).

Thirty graduate education majors (3 men, 27 women) tutored in the camp as part of their Practicum in Reading course requirements. Three fourths of the education majors had teaching experience that ranged from 2-6 years. One fourth had no teaching experiences and were Master of Arts in Teaching majors who planned to leave, or had left other professions to prepare to enter the teaching force.

Adhering to my Department's course guidelines, I designed the practicum to help the graduate education majors develop expertise in assessment and remediation of students' reading difficulties. Since I hold a psycholinguistic theoretical orientation toward literacy teaching and learning, I emphasized reading comprehension – what I believe to be the heart of reading (see Goodman, 1967).

Following four initial evening class meetings on campus, the education majors traveled to the community center where I led weekly lectures, class discussions, and demonstration lessons. Then, the education majors worked in small collaborative groups with their students (the same students throughout the 6 weeks) whom I had previously assembled by grade level. The graduate education majors chose the grade level they wished to teach.

Determining the Potential of Specific Interventions

I recognized in order to add possible worthwhile culturally responsive teaching interventions to our already full curriculum I first needed to learn what types of experiences and techniques might have the best potential to foster the graduate education majors' openness to, and understanding of diversity. Therefore, once again, I turned to the literature for guidance. I discovered teachers' previous multicultural experiences and their critical reflective abilities were important to widening teachers' cultural lenses.

Following the guidelines of a formative-experiment framework design I collaborated with the education majors regarding these two interventions (multicultural experiences and critical reflection). I modified the interventions as needed, and implemented them in an attempt to address my pedagogical goals. I also noticed any changes in the instructional environment resulting from the interventions. (Reinking & Bradley, 2004; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Data from the inquiry were a) the graduate education majors' e-mail reflections to me; b) the research assistants' observations and field notes of the education majors' tutoring efforts; c) my informal conversations with the education majors, and; d) the education majors' comments in two focus group meetings during the third and sixth week of tutoring sessions. The education majors' e-mail reflections provided the richest data source and triangulation of the other sources of data corroborated my findings. In the following section I describe these two interventions supported

by the graduate education majors' reflections.

Intervention 1: The Importance of Teachers' Prior Multicultural Experiences

Research shows there is a strong positive link between teachers' prior experiences interacting with culturally diverse others and their existing openness to and appreciation of cultural diversity (Castro, 2010; Dee & Henkin, 2002; McCall, 1995; Wiggins & Follo, 1999). These experiences include traveling in international contexts, residing in culturally diverse milieus, having cross-cultural friendships, and engaging in community service in diverse neighborhoods. For example "John" an education major wrote how valuable his international experiences were:

I have lived in two countries, South America and Jamaica, in which I was a minority. At first I felt out of the loop, disconnected from reality, but in time I realized we were all very similar. I gleaned a lot from discussion with strangers and perspectives on life from people I originally thought I should not talk to. Excellent ideas come from conversations with complete strangers. I have found in my travels appearances can be the result of circumstances rather than any great truth about a person. This has helped me accept differences in all of my minority students – in fact all students. I admire the strengths of my students of color and those from low socioeconomic homes. We vary by race, gender, socioeconomic levels and many other categories, but we still find a way to relate to one another. This is the face of the modern classroom.

("John's" message supports the literature about the importance of teachers having multicultural/international experiences. In particular, he connected his experiences in South America and Jamaica to his ability to provide culturally responsive teaching.)

Modifying this Intervention to Fit Our Curriculum

Since I could not change the graduate education majors' prior multicultural experiences, or provide opportunities for them to travel abroad, I decided to modify this intervention in the following way. Each week throughout the semester my students and I were responsible for talking to a person with whom we ordinarily would not converse (e.g., a person we did not know who was physically or mentally handicapped, a person of color, an English as second language learner). Then, we wrote a short reflective paper about what we learned when we communicated with this person, and shared our reflections in small groups. I hoped this intervention would help the education majors and me consider and value people from different cultures and socioeconomic milieus. This is one story I wrote:

During my out patient hospital visit I was placed in a chair next to a woman who I assumed was indigent, did not speak English, and did not share my middle class values. I closed the privacy curtain around my space so I did not have to speak to her. Then, I remembered my commitment to this project and to culturally responsive teaching. I pulled back the curtain and for the rest of the day, "Cynthia" and I had delightful conversations in Spanish and English. She kissed me when it was time for her to leave and passionately exclaimed, "Vaya con Dios mi amiga."

(I will never forget Cynthia and the understanding, friendship and kindness she offered me that day.)

Intervention 2: Stimulating the Graduate Education Majors' Critical Reflection Abilities

Scholars (e.g., Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Dewey, 1933; Liston & Zeichner, 1987), note there are three developmental levels of teachers' reflection: a) a technical beginning level in which teachers are concerned with improving their teaching; b) a contextual level where teachers

concentrate on relationships between problematic situations and their actions, and; c) a critical reflection level in which teachers are committed to social justice. Research indicates not all teachers will progress to Level Three: Critical Reflection. However, critical reflection is necessary for teachers who want to develop their culturally responsive teaching practices because critical reflection goes beyond consideration of the technical aspects of teaching to embrace the personal, ethical, and political dimensions of teaching (Caldwell, 2003). This type of Level Three Reflection contemplates and considers commitment to equity, and needed change in education.

During the first few weeks of camp I discovered the majority of the graduate education majors confined their message to Level One reflections. For example, consider “Rose’s” reflection during the second week of camp:

We had a great time yesterday. Our group is learning to collaborate and the kids are wonderful. We got a lot accomplished: dialogue journals, personal dictionaries, literature logs, and prediction logs. We had seven kids in our group last week. This week we had eight, but some were new kids and others from last week were absent. This isn’t real school I know where everyone must attend every day. But we had to make extra nametags, journals, dictionaries, and prediction and literature logs in a hurry.

(“Rose” never mentioned anything about culturally responsive teaching. Instead she supplied an overview about what happened during her tutoring session.)

Modifying this Intervention to Fit Our Curriculum

Although I responded back to the graduate education majors’ superficial reflections and urged them to reflect deeper about their work with their students, they continued to write shallow remarks. I assumed some did not possess the innate ability to reflect deeply about their work

(e.g., see Baratz & Snowden, 1995). I also surmised the education majors were preoccupied with planning and teaching concerns rather than their students. In addition, I recognized that the ideas surrounding culturally responsive teaching were new to the education majors, and therefore they may have overlooked the benefits and importance of reflecting about this topic. It is also understandable they may have lacked confidence in their abilities to reflect about their students who came from culturally diverse contexts. Therefore, although I wanted the education majors to reflect about their own concerns and successes, as the semester progressed, I decided to require them to respond to my specific questions and prompts about teaching students from diverse milieus. I hoped the prompts would stimulate the education majors' critical reflective thinking about culturally responsive teaching. My cuing statements were:

Week One: This far what have you learned about the students in your group? How do they think?

Speak? Learn? Read?

“Janice” responded:

These students are smart, quick, and eager to learn. We as teachers need to talk to students individually to see what they are like. Teachers cannot assume anything about students based on outward appearances. This week “Tyrinda” was quiet, unsure, shy, but definitely connected to our reading lesson. One might assume she was disinterested, but that isn't fair to her, is it? We teachers need to be detectives in order to understand what motivates our students from nonmainstream families, and, in fact, all students from all families.

I also learned although Alejandro has a Hispanic name he does not speak Spanish. I assumed he spoke Spanish based upon his name and his outward appearance. But, that is not the case.

(“Janice’s” reflection demonstrates her growing understanding of culturally responsive teaching. She compliments her students. She also discusses her concern for a specific student, “Tyrinda”, and states, “That isn’t fair to her.” In addition, she candidly shares her incorrect assumptions about “Alejandro”).

Week Two: Examine your own culture – your heritage and life history. What cultural factors do you share and not share with your students?

“James” replied:

This question is difficult for me to answer. I need to learn more about my heritage and family. This question has really started me thinking and I am going to pursue this. No one ever asked me this type of question before. I will respond more next week if I may? I need to do some research on my students and on my family.

(As the literature notes, part of being a culturally responsive teacher is to identify one’s view of the world, and recognize that one’s view is shaped by one’s life experiences that include race/ethnicity, social class, and gender” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). “James’s” frank response and his willingness to delve deeper into his and his students’ heritage indicates he is becoming a culturally responsive teacher,)

Week Three: What new ideas about culturally responsive teaching will you take with you to your professional context?

“Chrystal” responded to this prompt by reflecting about her use of culturally responsive literature:

I learned these students are capable of insightful discussions regarding their lives. Last week we read the book I love Saturdays and Domingo. The students were engaged and eager to read. So, that’s one thing I’ll take back to my classroom - use culturally

responsive' literature. The literature does not have to always reflect the ethnicity of students- it is the experiences of the story characters that are important.

(Like "Janice"(refer to reflection for Week One), Chrystal" compliments her students. She recognizes literature does not always have to a reflect students' ethnicities. Rather, the experiences of story characters and how these experiences connect to students' lives are important.)

Week Four: In what ways have you changed as a teacher in this camp?

"Charles" wrote:

What I learned about me, as a teacher is that I like working with students from different cultures and backgrounds. It is up to me to figure out the best way to help them learn. I have also changed as a person. Now I talk to strangers. The other day I was in the post office and spoke to this man and I had on my university shirt and the man asked pointed questions about the university. He was interested in going back to school. I also helped a woman in a department store how to operate a price machine. Now she knows how to look up prices on her own. This new openness to others I will take with me back to my school.

(Charles states he accepts responsibility as a teacher for determining the best way to help his students learn. He also notes he has become more outgoing and explains how he helped a woman in a department store. He shares that he will take his "new openness" back to school.)

Week Five: What does culturally responsive teaching mean to you?

"Sarah" reflected:

Keep an open mind- talk to your students – do not judge students or make assumptions about them- use culturally responsive literature for reading instruction – definitely model

and help kids use text-to-self connections. Learn from our students just as they learn from us.

(At the beginning of the semester, Sarah had difficulty answering this question.

However, near the end of the semester, she demonstrates she has come to understand dimensions of culturally responsive teaching).

Week Six: Tell a story about talking to someone you ordinarily would not talk to.

“Delores” told a story that affected her family:

I don't have to look far to answer this question. We are a white family and my daughter brought home an African-American young man (her boyfriend) with whom she had been “hanging out” (as she says) and she wanted us to meet him. He has dreadlocks and as a mother I quickly formed a negative opinion of him. It soon became clear that he was extremely intelligent and he was in the university program for epidemiology with personal aspirations to obtain a doctorate. He has two jobs, is witty, confident, and loves to travel. In fact he is in South Africa for three weeks at the World Cup with a friend and they are visiting the friend's grandmother in rural Africa. Now, I can't wait for him to come home and tell us stories about his travels. We learn from one another if we just “open the curtain” like you did Dr R. Thanks for your story about your hospital visit.

(Delores openly talks about her original resistance to her daughter's African-American boyfriend. Then, she explains she discovered his good qualities and actually looks forward to seeing him again. She closes her reflection with an insightful message - “We learn from one another if we just open the curtain.”)

Limitation of the Inquiry

As with all research, there are limitations to this exploratory inquiry. The study was confined to 30 graduate education majors who tutored in a literacy camp context. Since context is a key variable in teachers' work, a possibility exists that a different group of education majors in a different teaching environment may not have been as motivated to adopt the three interventions discussed in this paper. Furthermore, a strong possibility exists that other modified interventions might have proved just as successful as the three interventions employed in the literacy camp. In addition, although I feel comfortable attesting to the sincerity and forthrightness of the graduate education majors' messages to me, since I was the instructor on record who awarded final grades, there is a possibility they may have written reflections they thought I wanted to hear. Nonetheless despite these limitations, the inquiry is a first step in supplying specific, proactive, and practical ideas to the literature that focuses on culturally responsive teaching.

Discussion

Cochran-Smith (1991) notes many variables work against teachers developing dispositions toward culturally responsive teaching. These variables include the inflexibility of our educational system; the refusal and resistance of some educational leaders to recognize inequities in our school systems; and, the lack of empathy on the part of some teachers for multicultural students. Therefore our job as teacher educators is to learn to adapt and extend our course curricula to enable education majors to respect and meet the instructional requirements and experiences of culturally diverse students (Irvine, 2003)

The discoveries of the exploratory research reported here indicate teacher educators can help education majors develop dispositions toward culturally responsive teaching. In addition, teacher educators can structure their curricula to help education majors acquire pedagogical repertoires

congruent with the experiences of students from diverse cultures. However, scholars who study culturally relevant educational issues argue while knowledge, and understanding are key variables to pedagogy that is culturally relevant, education majors must also consciously assume dispositions as change agents. Toward the end, it is imperative that teacher educators help education majors examine their sociocultural identities (Banks, 1991). Although some education majors have a strong sense of identity, many, like “James”, the education major portrayed in this study, have never acknowledged, or investigated their familial and cultural roots and therefore do not recognize how membership and attachment to those groups influence who they are, what they believe, and how they view their students.

This inquiry opens up possibilities for literacy teacher educators and those in other disciplines to consider, modify, and explore interventions that promote education majors’ receptiveness to and understanding of culturally responsive teaching. While I cannot say that the three interventions highlighted in this study fostered awareness and positive change in all of the 30 graduate education majors’ culturally responsive views and instruction, based upon what I consider to be their honest reflections, I believe the majority became more open to diversity and developed more culturally responsive teaching practices. In addition, the interventions closed some gaps in the literature by highlighting the importance of providing education majors with prompts, if necessary, to support their abilities to develop Level Three: Critical Reflection abilities that portray their commitment to social justice. The education majors also became comfortable communicating with people they ordinarily would not approach. Thus, they learned about others and from others different from themselves. They also became more skillful reflecting about their work in a field-based experience with culturally diverse students.

Future studies need to build on the exploratory study presented here. For example, it is

essential that researchers examine additional interventions that provide opportunities for education majors to develop new and more complex ways of perceiving and experiencing multiculturalism and diversity. In addition, researchers need to explore other approaches and strategies that might help education majors expand their expertise for teaching in culturally diverse contexts. Equally important, as teacher educators we need to consider an experimental approach to our own teaching. By taking a critical look at our shortcomings, beliefs, curriculum, and pedagogy we can bring about changes surrounding our own and our education majors' dispositions toward culturally responsive teaching.

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