

Teaching Multiculturalism in a Constructivist Learning Environment

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Abstract

This study discusses the content and the implementation of an undergraduate level elementary education course to preservice teachers offered at a southern university. This type of course seems to be an “eye-opening” course, which enables students gain a new vision of people of different cultures as well as of themselves as future teachers. The main implication of the course was that student learning can be ensured and enhanced using assignments that would allow students to have first-hand experiences about multiculturalism through interviews and reading about children of other cultures that live in the USA.

Introduction

This study discusses the content and the implementation of an undergraduate level elementary education course to preservice teachers offered at a southern university. The course description in the class syllabus was stated as follows: “The purpose of this course is to examine the child in the elementary and middle school. As American demographics change, school populations increasingly reflect our culturally diverse and pluralistic society. To be prepared to teach all children in the schools of today and tomorrow, teachers must have an understanding of the diversity present in heterogeneous classrooms. During this course, special emphasis will be placed on the implications of teaching and learning for all children. Recognition and celebration of the individual child will be of paramount importance.” The description of the course as well as the course itself places a great focus on multiculturalism.

Multicultural Education: A Broad View

According to Banks (1997), multicultural education is at least three things: an idea or a concept, an educational reform movement, and a process. Multicultural education operates based on the premise that all children regardless of their race,

gender, SES, and culture must have an equal opportunity to learn in school. However, the current school system in the USA discriminates against students of certain ethnic and cultural backgrounds that are different from American macro-culture (Apple, 1999; Banks, 1997; Giroux, 1988). In this sense, multicultural education is an idea or a concept, which emphasizes the unequal treatment of children of different backgrounds. Multicultural education is also a reform movement that is put forward to present all children with equal opportunities to learn. In this case, such issues as modifying the existing curriculum, aligning instructional activities with the cultural characteristics of children, and revising testing procedures become critical. Multicultural education is also a process that will never end. Racism, sexism, and discrimination against people with disabilities or with different characteristics are problems that have existed and will continue to exist to some extent. Multicultural education is a process that attempts to reduce the negative effects of these mistreatments. Therefore, it must be understood that multicultural education is an ongoing process, which must be constantly incorporated into daily school and classroom activities.

In order to teach students multiculturalism as well as multicultural teaching, this course was designed around four main phases: 1) Understanding one's own culture and values, 2) Understanding what multicultural education is, 3) Understanding others' cultures and values, and 4) Learning effective ways of teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. Class assignments and general conduct of the class were designed based on constructivist principles to attain the goals of the course.

Constructivism and Constructivist Learning Environments

There is no agreed upon definition of constructivism. It can be seen as a philosophical view on how we come to understand or know (Lebow, 1994; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Shapiro, 1994). As a philosophical view, constructivism takes a subjectivist epistemological stance which regards learning as a process of active knowledge construction (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Driscoll, 1994; Shapiro, 1994). Thus, one can easily assume that constructivist learning environments are very student-centered and activity oriented. According to Driscoll (1994) and Brooks and Brooks (1993) constructivist learning environments:

- Provide for social negotiation as an integral part of learning,
- Nurture reflexivity,
- Encourage and accept student initiative,
- Emphasize student-centered instruction,

- Use raw data and primary sources along with interactive and manipulative materials, and
- Encourage students to engage in dialog both with the teacher and with one another.

The main argument of this study is that student learning can be maximized in a constructivist learning environment by immersing students into primary sources of multiculturalism. It is certainly a necessity to equip preservice teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function as effective teachers in diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Chisholm, 1994).

Methodology

Since the main purpose of the study was to grasp the preservice teacher's understandings of multiculturalism after their experience in a constructivist course, a qualitative approach was regarded as appropriate. Therefore, this micro-case study follows the basic principles of qualitative research.

Study Participants

The study participants were 18 female students who were in Elementary Education program seeking teaching certification. Ethnic distribution of students is as follows: three Asians, one Hispanic, and fourteen Caucasians. Of these 18 students, only one had limited English proficiency. Students were enrolled in this course as a part of the teaching certification program (it is a required course).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the study came from student assignments, student reflection papers, class syllabus, student evaluation of the course and the instructor, and a journal kept by the instructor during the semester on overall classroom interaction as well as on subjects that were discussed in the class.

Each document went under a qualitative analysis for identifying patterns and big ideas. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the study, we applied peer debriefing on my analysis and used data triangulation. Triangulation and peer debriefing are important factors in ensuring the quality of a qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 1995; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Findings

Course Content, Class Conduct, and Student Reactions

As stated above, this course was designed to teach multicultural education by carrying out a multicultural and constructivist teaching.

Classroom assignments included:

- **Chapter book activities:** A group work on six chapter books each of which depicted a child or a group of children that were from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Students did classroom presentations on educational and cultural values treated in the book, created two lesson plans; one on how to incorporate the book into the existing curriculum, and one on addressing the needs of the child depicted in the book. Also, each member of the group presented an article related to the educational issues, contributions, or the problems of the targeted ethnic group.
- **Web index assignment:** Students, using WWW, created an index source of four articles/websites per for each of the following ethnic groups (African American, Asian American, European American, Hispanic American, and Native American). The purpose of the assignment was to make students become aware of resources on the Internet.
- **Interviews:** Interview assignment was divided into two parts. Students interviewed four elementary students. At least two of them had to be from an ethnic group other than that of the interviewer. Then, the interview results were compared and contrasted with the interviewer's own experiences. The second part of the interview assignment was to interview an elementary school teacher who delivered instruction to a diverse group of students.
- **Multicultural lesson plan:** For this assignment, students were to design or modify a multicultural lesson plan that was adapted to the age levels of the students. Students implemented their lesson plans in classrooms where they were assigned for their field hours and wrote a report on the instructional outcomes of the lesson.
- **Weekly online discussions:** Online discussions were held on the class website. These discussions covered subjects related to multicultural education that were not covered in the course because of time constraints. Also, student-generated discussions on the content of chapter books were held.

- Optional assignments: Optional assignments included four different assignments. Two of the assignments were to be selected by students based on their interest. These optional assignments were designed to enable students to learn about other cultures as well as their own cultures. The first optional assignment was writing an autobiography identifying key events, values, traditions, discriminations that shaped the student's life and comparing this autobiography to the biography of a person who was from a different ethnic and cultural background. The second optional assignment was developing two points of view on a single historical event. The third assignment was to collect information about a culture and a country by both doing a formal research and interviewing a person from that culture using e-mail or the web. The last optional assignment was doing anything students preferred to do as long as it was appropriate for the course content.

Constructivist principles of learning were applied in this class in different ways. Student initiative was encouraged for several aspects of the class. First, students were given a chance to choose the due dates for their assignments. Second, they were allowed to determine the grading criteria based on which assignments they thought would require the most effort. Third, they could choose any two of the four optional assignments. They were also asked to list subjects that they wanted to learn in this course in addition to what was included in the course syllabus.

Social negotiation of ideas was an integral part of the class conduct throughout the semester. Students had a chance to discuss subjects related to multicultural education both in class and on the class website. These discussions enabled students to see multiple perspectives on important issues as one of the students stated in her final reflection:

There have been many times throughout the year when I have not really agreed with much of what has been said in the class by some of my peers, yet it has still broadened my mind and has forced me to at least consider the possibility that there might be a better way. It is not always easy to hear a different side to things, but it is valuable in most professions, especially education.

Most of the students noted in their reflection papers that they found classroom discussions very beneficial. According to another student:

The class discussions were excellent. I really enjoyed them because it allowed me to not only get to know my classmates better, but to learn about so many cultures. In our group of students, I am the minority religiously, so that is another reason why I enjoyed our discussions. Through the discussions, I am able to educate my classmates on our religion so that when they have a Jewish student in

their own class, they will have a better understanding of their culture. With the same token, this is why I enjoyed having other cultures in our class, such as Andy. I have learned so much about Asian cultures, specifically Korean, which I am already applying.

Discussions were also held using the class website. As stated above, this course was designed to be a multicultural course teaching multicultural education. Web board discussions were a way of accommodating the needs of some students who were not comfortable speaking in front of the class. One of the students pointed out in her final reflection:

What I learned from web board was that as a teacher you should provide your students with an environment where they feel comfortable to take risks. I don't always talk in class and the web board helped me make my voice heard. I felt free to express my opinions and it felt so good when someone agreed with you. Our class can be very overpowering, and the web board just gave everybody a chance to talk.

Chapter books activities were included in the class content to assure that students could see educational and cultural problems of people of different cultural and ethnic groups from those people's points of view. Chapter book activities served multiple purposes. They enabled students to use their creativity and knowledge to prepare their presentations. They also enable the instructor to carry out multicultural teaching as each book talked about educational and cultural values and issues of a different ethnic group. One of the students stated:

I feel this was a way of learning that I never have encountered before. I have never had to read a book to learn information about a different culture. Usually, I would have been instructed to read from a textbook with boring information that I could not relate to at all. From reading the chapter books, I felt like I could actually feel what the person from the diverse culture was thinking and feeling. I felt like I understood the "real" part of the culture. The part of the culture that everyone can see out in the streets of the real world and not just words printed in a textbook.

Another student stated that chapter book activities enabled them to learn cultures in a fun way besides to provide them with tools to use in their future classrooms.

Interviews with elementary school teachers and students allowed students to gain knowledge from primary knowledge sources. Most of the students stated in their final reflections that interview assignment was very effective in learning about diverse classrooms.

Different students preferred doing different things for their optional assignments. Approximately half of the students did "autobiography versus biography" assignment and realized that this assignment enabled them to learn about

themselves and their cultures as well as their interviewees' cultures. Learning about self is an important step toward understanding others (Pang, 1994).

Regarding the Multiple historical perspectives assignment, one of the students stated in her reflection paper that:

In doing the Multiple Historical Perspectives assignment, I learned that there are many situations where one only learns half of the story. This opened my eyes to see how events can go unheard and people can go unnoticed. I don't want to be a biased teacher and I want my students to hear the whole true and not just half.

It seems clear that kind of assignment helped students realize that there were always two sides to an issue.

Gaining a vision rather than gaining a bag of tricks

One of the concepts that kept coming up in student reflection papers was "stereotyping." Stereotyping student based on their physical looks, gender, SES, and cultural backgrounds results in holding high or low expectation for them without really knowing them which eventually leads to self-fulfilling prophecy. Traditionally African American and Hispanic students are known to be "at-risk" students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Through their readings and assignments, students in this class learned that "stereotypes" do not work; every student must be treated as an individual.

Students did not put much emphasis on their multicultural lesson plans and teaching in their reflections even though understanding what multicultural teaching was an important deal. All of the students pointed out that they learned a better definition of multicultural and culturally relevant teaching. They all had misconceptions about what multicultural teaching was. According to the students, teaching about a different country or a different culture was what multicultural teaching was. However, multicultural teaching in this class was defined as teaching about problems, challenges, cultures, and contributions of people who live in the USA as well as modifying and designing instructional activities based on students' cultural characteristics.

Conclusions

This course was seen as an "eye-opening" course, which enabled students to gain a new vision of people of different cultures as well as of themselves as future teachers. The main implication of the course was that student learning can be ensured and enhanced using assignments that would allow students to have first-hand experiences about multiculturalism through interviews and reading about

children of other cultures that live in the USA. Most of the students pointed out in their reflection papers that they enjoyed the freedom they were offered in this class. At the end of the semester, students regarded multicultural education as a matter of respect and open-mindedness toward other cultures. One of the student's reflection paper points out:

If we close ourselves to make our students fit into the mold that we have created for them to fit in, we will not only miss a chance to learn but also miss a chance to teach respect and acceptance of people different than us.

This statement summarizes the experience students had learning multicultural education in a constructivist learning environment:

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