

# Using Cultural Narratives to Positively Transform Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes towards Diversity Appreciation

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**Abstract** In the United States, most current and future teachers are White females from suburban areas. These teachers are or will be called to successfully educate children from a wide array of cultural and racial backgrounds. Teacher education programs do a disservice if teachers are not prepared to handle such diversity in the classroom. Pre-service teachers need the opportunity to engage in meaningful work that allows them to become more knowledgeable about other cultures, while also allowing them to reflect on prejudices and biases that may potentially influence their actions in the classroom. This article describes a project designed to meet that dual objective. In sum, the objective was met by the completion of the Cultural Narrative Project, where students reported that the project helped them authentically learn about other cultures and increase their overall appreciation of diversity.

**Keywords** Cultural Narratives, Diversity Appreciation, Teacher Education, Multicultural Education

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers in integrated classroom settings are overwhelmingly White and female (Ahlquist, 1991; Casteel, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, Young, Tran, & Pang, 1994). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008), in 2007-08, 82.9% of all teachers were White; 7.2% were Hispanic; 6.9% were African American; and 1.3% were Asian. Regarding gender, 75.1% were female; 24.9% were male. When examining 2008-09 school demographics (NCES, 2009), in the largest 100 public school districts in the United States, 28.9% of students were White; 25.9% were African American; 36.8% were Hispanic; and 7.7% were Asian. Clearly, in major school districts across the country, the majority of students are non-White. Up until the point of entering the classroom, many of the White female teachers who dominate the education workforce have had few interactions with African American or Hispanic American students. This can be problematic because teachers may have difficulty relating to students who are from racial and cultural groups other than their own. Furthermore, teachers may consciously or unconsciously demonstrate lower expectations and other negative behaviors towards students who they perceive as different. For example, research revealed that within classroom

settings, White students were praised more than African American students who offered the same responses to questions (Aaron & Powell, 1982; Troyna, 1990). Not only are African American students often praised less, but they are also given less attention (Ford, 1985; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). In a southeastern school district in an integrated middle school setting, Casteel (1998) found that African American students received more negative interactions from their White teachers compared to their White counterparts. The converse was also true. White students received more positive feedback, and they were given more clues when asked academic questions. Furthermore, findings showed that teacher and student interactions were racially biased, indicating that race played in a role in the amount of attention a student received. The inverse racial composition between students and teachers in the United States is not likely to change anytime soon. Culturally, racially, and linguistically student populations are becoming increasingly diverse. However, teacher education programs largely produce White female teachers from suburban communities. Studies that examined racial bias and teacher expectations have shown that teachers need to be aware of the effects of bias in the classroom. Negative teacher attitudes toward students can have a detrimental effect on student achievement, self-esteem, and motivation (Brophy, 1983; Cooper, Hinkel, & Good, 1980). While research concluded that teachers who share the cultural and racial background of students can draw upon commonalities and are often more successful with students of color (Dance

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2002; Ladson-Billings 1994; Quijano & Rios 2000), no body of empirical research has shown a connection between a teacher's race and student achievement (King, 1993). Essentially, students and teachers do not have to be from the same racial background in order for student achievement to occur.

## 2. Preparing Teachers

Teacher preparation makes the difference between a teacher who is aware of the effects of potential bias and is confident and ready to face a multicultural classroom, and a teacher who feels uncomfortable, unprepared, and believes that a color-blind approach to teaching is acceptable. Teachers who state that they are color-blind—that they only see children and not their differences may fail to make classroom learning relevant to students' lives, which comes by connecting who students are to what they are learning. A color-blind approach does not acknowledge that culture matters, and that when we celebrate our differences we also discover our common humanity. Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to better prepare teachers in the area of diversity appreciation and multicultural education. Teachers not only need strategies to teach lessons that are culturally relevant; they must also have an appreciation and respect for diversity. How do we better prepare teachers to face the culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse student populations they will surely encounter in their classrooms—particularly when there is a major possibility that the teachers will not share in those differences? The answer is two-fold in that pre-service teachers must acquire cultural knowledge, and they must develop the ability to reflect on their personal biases and beliefs. Pre-service teachers should be afforded opportunities to authentically learn about cultures that are different from their own. To that end, teacher educators must create unique learning experiences for pre-service teachers that expand their worldview. In addition to gaining knowledge about other cultures, future teachers have to be taught to examine who they are and what they bring into the classroom. If we teach who we are, then teachers have to know their prejudices, expectations, values, and cultural standards that will manifest in the classroom setting. They have to be aware of their attitudes towards diversity. Teachers have to be willing to honestly examine their perceptions and recognize areas that may require further attention. Any person who seeks to grow in their appreciation of diversity, first has to become comfortable admitting that they even have prejudices and biases, which is a fact that most people have been conditioned to deny. Pre-service teachers have to feel safe and secure in openly exploring sides of themselves they may not want to admit exist. Teacher educators can facilitate that type of reflection and honesty in the classroom by modeling the behaviors. If teacher educators cannot admit or recognize their prejudices and biases, they cannot teach others to do so. Tatum (1999, p. 31) stated that educators must ask

themselves, "Do I acknowledge and examine my own prejudices, my rigid categorizations of others, to minimize the adverse impact they might have on my interactions with those I have categorized?" In sum, conscious acts of reflection are required. This type of reflection does not occur haphazardly. It is very deliberate and intentional. Pre-service teachers must simultaneously learn about people who are different from themselves, while also reflecting on their own beliefs and biases. As an instructor in a teacher education program, I developed an assignment to meet that dual objective. Through creating cultural narratives, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to self-reflect and learn about cultural difference through dialogue. I believe that through meaningful dialogue one can begin to understand themselves and others. Webb (2001, p. 251) stated, "Dialogue reveals the assumptions that inevitably direct inquiry in reflective thinking. Teachers who understand their own assumptions can make better-informed judgments about their teaching for their students."

## 3. Cultural Narrative Project

As a social studies methods instructor for early childhood teacher education students, I strive to show students that social studies is the study of interactions between people, and how we can learn from those interactions in order to become better citizens. Textbooks can be useful, but often do not offer the richness of using primary resources to learn about a particular person or event in history. Narratives, which are written or oral first person accounts of an experience or event, are an excellent primary resource and can provide the context that textbook accounts of history may not. Hoping to construct a meaningful assignment that could potentially transform the attitudes of students, I created the Cultural Narrative Project for pre-service teachers. My objective was for students to learn about themselves and a person from a different racial or cultural group. Students were directed to locate a person from a cultural group different from their own, and to compose a narrative about a particular event in the person's life (i.e. family celebrations, births, childhood, school, life transitions, etc). A narrative is not an interview, and there is no question/answer format. The participant simply describes their life experience and the researcher records the experience and reports it in narrative format. Guiding questions may be necessary to keep the narrative focused and detailed, but generally the participant tells their story and the researcher listens. Students were instructed to use an audio recording device to record their participant, and to word-process the results into a written narrative. Meeting with the participant, hearing their story, and creating the narrative allowed pre-service teachers to learn about a particular culture from an authentic source.

In addition to completing the narrative, the other component of the assignment was for students to complete a pre and post reflection in order to measure whether their attitudes toward diversity shifted. The pre and post reflection

included approximately ten prompts each, and students had to provide a written response for every question. The pre and post reflection questions were adapted from Understanding Prejudice, a web resource that promotes racial understanding and teaching tolerance.

(<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/basetips.htm>)

#### 4. Student Responses

As with any assignment, student effort corresponded to the quality of work produced. Regarding the product presentation, some of the work was exceptionally done, some was above average, and some was average. In the area of content, out of approximately 30 students, almost all reported that they learned a tremendous amount about the culture of their participant. Not surprisingly, students reported in their pre and post reflection responses that what they knew about the culture after completing the narrative had largely increased. Students also reported that they gained practical and meaningful information, and that they believed speaking with a person from the cultural group was more valuable than reading about the group. The narratives were richly detailed, and most participants seemed comfortable sharing various aspects of their lives and beliefs. Student remarks exemplify how much knowledge they feel they acquired. Students stated:

1) I originally thought Venezuela was a poor country with dirt roads and small houses and while that is true in much of the country now, it was not the case at all for my interviewee when he was growing up. Venezuela was actually a very wealthy country back in the 70s.

2) I learned so many things about this culture that I had never known before. Before this narrative, I assumed that the Mexican culture valued family. I was right, but had no idea to what extent the family was valued.

3) I feel like what I knew prior to completing this narrative was weak. After talking to my participant, I feel that the information I now have about India is concrete and factual. Although there is a lot more for me to learn about the Indian culture, now I feel like I can begin to have an educated conversation with someone about the culture.

Students also provided reflection responses regarding whether or not they held stereotypes that were later proven wrong. Prior to completing the narrative, not many students expressed ever having this happen. However, after completing the project more students reported having this type of transformational experience. Students stated:

1) I am ashamed to say that after completing this narrative, I realized that I had indeed held a stereotype against Mexicans; before completing this narrative, I always wondered why Mexicans travelled in large groups...I assumed they were poor so they had to travel together in order to do everyone's errands. I couldn't have been more wrong, and prejudiced in this assumption. Mexican families do this because they take care, and support their families 100%. I am glad that I was able to take part in this assignment. I

now stand corrected and rightfully so.

2) Now I realize that I definitely held stereotypes. I believe that everyone makes judgments about people based on what they know. The problem is that we typically don't know a lot about cultures other than our own, so they are taboo to us. I think that if people open themselves up to other cultures, like we had to do for this assignment, then they too will have stereotypes that are proven false. Everyone deserves a chance to make a name for themselves, and it is up to us as individuals, and as future educators, to make that possible.

3) I am able to look at people from the Hawaiian culture differently. The views I had before were mostly formed from television shows and just a lack of knowledge. The views I had before were that Hawaiian people wore hula skirts and Hawaiian shirts, hung out on beaches all day, and did not have a care in the world. I was able to speak to someone who was born and raised there and she really enlightened me. At first glance, you would not even know she was Hawaiian. So I asked myself, what does a Hawaiian person look like? Now I realize that you can never look at someone and assume their cultural background. I was very guilty of doing this.

4) I thought that children from 'third-world' countries were not as smart as children from America. I found out that children from those countries can be as smart as Americans, and many times they are smarter.

The pre and post reflections also showed a difference in whether or not students considered themselves as prejudiced. Prior to completing the project, most students saw themselves as unprejudiced or they stated that they were probably prejudiced because everyone is in some way. After completing the project, students were more likely to say that they saw themselves as prejudiced and were able to provide specific details and more clarity on the issue. Students responded:

1) I find that people are prejudiced against me when they come to know I am a Muslim. I didn't think I was prejudiced against any cultural group, but after my talk with my participant who was an elderly Caucasian man I realized that my mind was in a big bubble of assumptions. I never thought that the privileged children or people of the dominant cultural group might have to face hardships. This project helped me to realize how important it is to get to know someone before you assume anything, and you can't really get to know them without talking to them.

2) I would still like to believe that on the whole I am an unprejudiced person. That being said, no one is perfect and I now know that I occasionally may allow my prejudices to affect the way I talk to someone or if I even talk to them at all. I will continue to work on this and try to be an example to others.

3) This project has totally and completely transformed my assumptions and perceptions of other cultures. Before completing this narrative I didn't see myself as having any prejudices against other people, but I did. I have a completely new look on other cultures and am eager to learn

about all of them! This project has been a very positive experience for me in that I feel like a different person. I will no longer look at other people and judge them so quickly.

4) I would like to consider myself an unprejudiced person. However, I find that through day-to-day activities, I am more prejudiced than I would like to be. I think taking the initiative to become more educated about other cultures will help reduce prejudice.

5) This project has made me look at myself from a different vantage point. In the past, as an African American I saw everyone else's prejudices and never realized I had some of my own. Now that I realize I do, I will have a different take on getting to know someone.

The post reflection responses concluded by addressing the original objective—changing pre-service teachers' attitudes toward diversity for the better. When asked if this project transformed them, either positively, negatively, or not at all, the majority of students stated that they believed their attitudes changed in a positive way. Students responded:

1) I think by doing this narrative, I helped myself toward the goal of reducing my prejudices. I proved to myself that I really don't know and can't know or understand another person or their cultural background unless I talk to them about it or research it for myself. Hopefully, when I become a teacher I can lead my students to reduce their own prejudices by doing different types of social studies and cultural projects.

2) I would just like to say that this project is a very, very important one; and I am glad that you have this as part of your instruction. I do not think the results of this narrative would have been the same had the assignment been to simply read a multicultural narrative. Thank you for giving me this experience; I will never forget it.

3) This project has made me more aware of other cultures. I feel more open-minded after having a deep conversation with my participant about the Indian culture. I think after seeing how naïve I have been when stereotyping groups from other cultures I will take the opportunity to educate myself prior to developing an opinion.

4) I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to complete this project. I think that assignments like this one should be given more often. One way to reduce prejudice is by requiring students to engage in activities like this. After all, you don't know someone you haven't talked to.

5) Before completing the narrative I think that I held a very narrow view about diverse groups of people. I didn't necessarily appreciate diversity because I didn't really think about it. But now I realize that I held prejudices and stereotypes, and that appreciating diversity means being willing to get to know people from other cultural groups. After completing this project I see the importance in doing that.

6) This project has transformed me positively. Now I am aware that I have biases and prejudices, and since I now know that I have these imperfections, I can work harder to overcome them.

7) This project is an amazing opportunity for students to learn about things they have always been curious about, but didn't have a reason to learn about. I believe that it opens people's minds and hearts, and it helps the participants to see each other for who they are.

8) I was telling a small group of my friends about this project and before I knew it everyone was talking and discussing their culture, religion, and traditions with one another. It was really interesting to hear and see how everyone was excited to know something new about someone they thought they already knew. I found out so much about my friends that I never would have thought to ask before. I assumed that my Mexican American friend spoke Spanish and she does not! This was a great project that really opened my eyes and made me very aware that you never really know someone until you talk to them.

The voices of these pre-service teachers demonstrate that using narratives combined with reflection helped to increase their knowledge of those who are different, and increase their knowledge of self. That simultaneous process of learning about others and one's self is a step towards helping pre-service teachers become better prepared for the diverse student populations they will face in the classroom.

## 5. Project Caveats

While the pre-service teachers I taught were very excited to speak with the participants and learn about their lives and culture, classroom discussions are also necessary to enhance understanding and growth. For example, we discussed the fact that students only spoke with one person from the cultural group, and by no means does one person speak for an entire race or culture. Therefore, the participants shared their individual life experiences and interpretations of their culture and traditions. Without classroom discussion, the project could potentially reinforce stereotypes if students are left to think that what they learned from their participant is true for the entire group of people. We discussed that this project is only a beginning, and that through meaningful dialogue one can truly get to know another person. We concluded that as future educators of diverse student populations, they should continue to seek out those types of opportunities.

An additional caveat is that resistance to professional development related to issues such as diversity appreciation, social justice, and race and culture is common. Not all students will truly reflect, and some students may simply write what they think will please the instructor. One group of students may fully embrace the project and another group may not. However, teacher educators should not avoid giving these types of assignments. Instead we should continue to model the reflective behaviors we want our students to display.

I would also like to add that this is not a scientific research study with all of the reliability and validity checks that come along with such endeavors. However, sharing

ideas and teaching strategies is valuable in education. In an effort to increase cultural awareness and diversity appreciation, teacher educators need to collaborate and dialogue on ways to help pre-service teachers reflect on their prejudices and expand their knowledge of various cultural groups. As a teacher educator, this is my contribution to that cause.

## 6. Conclusions

Student populations in America's classrooms are diverse culturally, racially, and linguistically, and that trend in education is not likely to change. Teachers are overwhelmingly White females who may not be comfortable or familiar with the various cultural backgrounds they will encounter in the classroom. In order to best serve students, teacher educators have to help pre-service teachers understand the importance, the impact, and the role of culture. Teachers have to recognize that everyone has culture, including themselves, and when they walk into their classrooms they bring a specific set of beliefs, values, and expectations. Because we are all different, the potential for bias always exists. Pre-service teachers have to understand the possible negative effects of unexplored prejudices and biases on students. In support of that objective, teacher educators must provide pre-service teachers with the opportunities to learn about other cultures and to explore their prejudices and biases. The ability to self-reflect and respond with wise action is important for all teachers, not just teachers who are White women. As shown in the student responses, students of color also discovered that they held prejudices and biases of which they were unaware. Transformational education has to be the goal for all students. The Cultural Narrative Project is only one example, and should be viewed as only a component of a comprehensive teacher education program that adequately prepares future teachers for the multicultural classroom. However, using cultural narratives may be an effective method to help pre-service teachers begin to learn about others, and also learn how to self-reflect in order to grow in diversity appreciation.

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