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“I Understand What These Students are Experiencing”: Linguistically Diverse Preservice Teachers’ Narratives Regarding English Learners

Background/Purpose

Preservice teachers enter their preparation programs with multiple years of experience in schools as k-12 students. Past schooling experiences, or their ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975), often shape preservice teachers’ understandings of schools, teaching, and learning. Teacher preparation programs must address these experiences and related preconceptions when preparing preservice teachers to work with students, specifically diverse student populations (Hammerness et al., 2005). While the majority of the teaching force remains White, female, and monolingual English speaking, the scholarly community has begun to focus on the preparation of diverse preservice teachers (e.g., Tsui, 2007). This study focuses on one such a group of preservice teachers, i.e. linguistically diverse preservice teachers who were identified as English Learners during their own k-12 schooling days.

This narrative-based study explored preservice teachers own experiences as English Learners in k-12 schools and the shaping force these experiences had on their current thinking about teaching linguistically diverse students. While these remembered events were often deleterious, they also had powerful implications for the preservice teachers’ understandings about the current schooling situations of English Learners. Moreover, these past experiences as k-12 English Learners and preservice teachers’ current field-based observations in classrooms shaped novice teachers’ views about the responsibilities that they, as future mainstream classroom teachers, have when working with English Learners.

Theoretical Framework

This project follows many years of productive work in narrative methodology where much has been learned about the power of story in our attempts to understand teacher knowledge (e.g., Clandinen and Connelly, 2000). During this time, researchers have developed a framework that utilizes many forms of narrative in order to focus explicitly on how observed classroom events are “storied” by novice teachers and what they learn from these stories (proposal authors, 1993, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). This study explored the storied understandings of a relatively underrepresented group of teachers in teacher education research, i.e. preservice teachers who were classified as English Learners during their k-12 schooling days and plan to enter mainstream classrooms.

In the field of language teaching, some scholars have begun to explore the impact of teachers’ personal language histories on their interactions with and understandings of students and language curricula (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy 1999; Morgan, 2010). Recently, there has been a focus on how teachers’ own personal language stories shaped their professional identities (e.g., Tsui, 2007; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). This study adds to this extant scholarship by exploring how preservice teachers own experiences as k-12 English Learners shaped their developing professional knowledge about English Learners in classrooms as well as their personal language stories.

Data Sources

This narratology-grounded investigation is part of a multi-year, ongoing effort at a large Research 1 University; the larger project is aimed at understanding the developing

storied knowledge of novice teachers (proposal authors 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014). In this work, we previously uncovered themes of regret, shame, and humiliation in narratives related to the inequitable treatment of marginalized student populations, including English Learners, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, and women in mathematics classrooms (proposal authors, 2012, 2014, 2015).

Methods and Context

Participants in this study were preservice teachers enrolled in one of the first courses of their preparation sequence. This course focused on general methods of teaching, classroom processes and instruction, as well as an embedded social justice strand. Attached to this 4-unit course is a 45-hour field component. Participants completed various assignments aimed at reflection on course content and its application to teaching events. Two major narrative-based assignments were designed: (1) well-remembered events (WRE's) from the field (written descriptions of well-remembered events of preservice teachers' own choosing from their field-placements); and/or (2) personal well-remembered events (stories from preservice teachers' own school days, which they found particularly salient).

From a larger corpus of over 1500 narratives, we have analyzed a subset of 50 narratives written by preservice teachers who identified as English Learners at one time during their k-12 schooling. All of the participants were female and a majority were native Spanish speakers; however, three preservice teachers were native Navajo speakers and two participants were native Mandarin speakers.

During analysis, the well-remembered narratives were reviewed and carefully analyzed in order to identify standard analytical narrative elements (characters, sequence, plot patterns) embedded within the texts. Using iterative and thematic qualitative analysis techniques, including constant comparison methods (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006; Lichtman, 2012), attention then turned to a detailed documentation of prevalent plot patterns across the well-remembered events and preservice teachers' sense making of these stories with possible implications for their own future practice with English Learners.

Findings

Plot patterns from these narratives and preservice teachers' sense making will be briefly reported here due to proposal limitations; however, a richly rendered analysis will be provided in our paper. The three plot patterns and two pedagogical implications identified through our iterative analysis have been entitled with preservice teachers' own words drawn from their written well-remembered events.

Plot Patterns

“As an ESL student there is this feeling of fear of people making fun of you”: Challenging peer relationships

The largest subset of narratives focused on injurious interactions between preservice teacher English Learners and their native English-speaking peers during the preservice teachers own k-12 schooling days. For these novice teachers, routine classroom interactions were often fraught with fear over being teased or bullied by their classmates. In one illustrative event, a preservice teacher remembered working with another Asian English Learner in her second grade classroom. As the two girls worked on vocabulary words, two of their male classmates, both native English speakers, approached them and “pulled the corner of their eyes so they looked Asian and...started

saying words like ‘ching chong’ to make fun of how we spoke.” The preservice teacher recalled being confused but also very embarrassed by the event even though she was not sure if she fully understood her peers’ intent at the time. The preservice teachers in this plot pattern often recalled not fully understanding all of their aggressors taunts, but being painfully aware that they were being singled out because they “were different” from their non-English Learner peers.

“Is this the same person that teaches me everyday?” Distressing teacher encounters

In this plot pattern, preservice teachers recalled being the recipients of or witnesses to teacher actions that were marginalizing, isolating, and even humiliating to themselves or other English Learners in the classroom. Many preservice teachers recalled hearing teachers utter variations of “You’re in America now, speak English,” while others were called out academically because of their English Learner status. In one prototypical narrative a preservice teacher, a second grader at the time, remembered her teacher becoming increasingly frustrated with the preservice teacher’s continual struggle to master grade level site words. In her frustration, the teacher made the narrator read her site words to each of the 25 students in the class. Even more troubling, the teacher “gave them (the students) the authority to have me start over as many times as they wanted to...many of them (the students) took advantage of the power.” This subset of narratives was haunting because of the preservice teachers’ frank expressions of humiliation and sadness. For these preservice teachers, the well-remembered events continued to shape their own learning experiences and their developing knowledge of what it means to work equitably with English Learners.

“The school system is flawed”: English Learner encounters with systemic injustices

This plot pattern is replete with preservice teachers’ personal and professional analysis of how schools underserve or misinterpret the needs and abilities of English Learners. One preservice teacher vividly recalled her excitement as a freshman high school student registering for classes. When she approached the registrar with her mother, also an English Learner, the preservice teacher was proud to find out that she had tested into honors algebra. The narrator recalled turning to her mother and explaining her accomplishment in Spanish. Upon hearing the mother and daughter converse in Spanish, and despite having already spoken to the preservice teacher in English about her course selection, the registrar said, “Oh, you can not take this class if you do not speak English.” In this case, the preservice teacher bravely explained that she was bilingual and was more than prepared for the course; however, other preservice teachers in this plot pattern felt too intimidated by their interactions with school representatives to defend themselves. Sadly, this often resulted in these preservice teachers, and sometimes their siblings, being placed in courses that were below their linguistic and academic abilities based on flawed assessments and/or the opinions of school staff.

Pedagogical Implications for Preservice Teachers

“I want to make a change in students’ lives”: Expressions of hope

All but one of the preservice teachers in this compendium focused on negative school-based interactions. A majority of these novice teachers pointed to these deleterious events as a primary reason for why they decided to become a teacher, and, for some, bilingual education teachers. As one preservice teacher stated, “I see myself as an

advocate for my future students and I want them to have the opportunities I did not have as an elementary student.” While these recalled events were emotionally, socially, and even linguistically painful, preservice teachers appeared to draw strength and determination from their stated goal to make sure that the English Learners they will work with do not have similar experiences. However, given that many of these well-remembered events focused on systemic injustices, it may be challenging for these preservice teachers to maintain their developing sense of advocacy and agency within the larger school system.

“Being in an ESL classroom is tough”: Conflicting professional ponderings

A small proportion of preservice teachers came away from these recalled events with noticeably disparate professional plans of action. Some preservice teachers expressed reluctance over working with English Learners in their future classrooms despite having been English Learners themselves. One narrator wrote, “As we know those students (English Learners) won’t take their learning seriously,” as her main reason for not wanting to work with English Learners. Other preservice teachers were uncertain about their ability to enact meaningful change in the current education system.

While preservice teachers in the previous pedagogical pattern felt empowered to use students’ native language in their future classrooms, preservice teachers in this pattern solely focused on the importance of acquiring English. These preservice teachers stated that their professional goal for English Learners would be to acquire English as quickly as possible; therefore, English would be the only language that they would use in the classroom. These two conflicting linguistic plans are notable in that they would arguably provide very different language and learning experiences for English Learners in these future classrooms.

Scholarly Significance

To be certain, the well-remembered events analyzed here from preservice teachers’ own experiences as English Learners and observations of other English learning students engender significant considerations for the teacher education community. The preservice teachers represented in this study were unique in that they were once classified as English Learners themselves, and their own k-12 schooling experiences have shaped their understandings of language, teaching, teachers, as well as the larger education system. Sadly, the majority of the shared experiences were negative and potentially harmful.

As teacher educators and teacher education scholars, careful consideration should be given to designing a teacher education curriculum that prepares novice teachers to work with English Learners and their native-English speaking peers. Part of this preparation could involve preservice teachers in reflective work where they can explore their own preconceptions about English Learners and learn about the experiences of English Learners in and out of school (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). We argue that this preparation and scholarship should start with the very preservice teachers who have experienced the k-12 schooling system as English Learners, because these stories unequivocally demonstrate the resilience needed by these preservice teachers and other linguistically diverse students to learn and hopefully flourish in today’s schools.

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