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<i>ADDITIONAL NOTES</i>	

Teacher Epistemology and Collective Narratives: *Interrogating Teaching and Diversity*

By Susan Matoba Adler

Abstract

This action research study interrogates how one teacher educator analyzed her pedagogy and engaged her students in writing narratives about working with children, families, and co-workers who are racially and ethnically different from themselves. Data were collected from a special topic graduate course entitled, Epistemology, Diversity and Teaching, at a large Midwestern university. Issues such as “otherness”, the culture of power, and white privilege were some key concepts addressed in the course. Findings indicated that use of key readings and meaningful discussion on controversial issues enhanced students’ ability to take multiple perspectives, recognize the significance of student epistemology, and acknowledge the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

1. Introduction

Diversity within U.S. public schools has been considered enlightening, problematic, challenging, and even overwhelming to policy makers particularly in cases where many native languages need to be addressed. Most teacher education programs include some form of critical multicultural education (Gay, 1995, Sleeter and Grant, 2008, Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997, Nieto, 2000, Pang, 2001), as well as culturally relevant pedagogy (Au, 2007, Garcia, 1999, Gay, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1994) and reflective teaching (Liston & Zeichner, 1996). Some programs include courses in bilingual and special education as additional options. Pre-service teachers have expressed the desire to learn specific strategies for interacting with students who are culturally and linguistically different from themselves, often feeling that they have to “learn about all of the cultures represented in their classes”. But few teacher education departments offer opportunities for future teacher educators to investigate how personal epistemology influences their conceptions of student diversity and how perspective taking and communication with diverse families might be effectively

addressed. In this article, I share my experiences teaching a graduate course designed to interrogate the relationships among epistemology, diversity, and teaching.

In many teacher education programs on the U.S. mainland, a discussion of culture often focuses on a dominant “American” culture and the “multi” of multicultural connotes only non-western, non-European cultures. Thus a dichotomy of “us” (U.S., American) and “other” (foreign, not mainstream American) is inferred. A discussion of race usually interrogates Black-White issues within the U.S. civil rights context. A discussion of ethnicity often addresses problems of Latino and Asian immigrants (documented and undocumented) and the “tourist curriculum” of piñatas and Chinese dragons. And, a discussion of gender often results in a call for breaking down stereotypical roles and challenging patriarchy without consideration for how gender roles are constructed within differing ethnic cultures. Although none of these approaches would be considered inappropriate for teaching diverse populations in U.S. schools, they are indeed incomplete and limiting in today’s global society. Discussions of diverse regional cultures and dialects, diverse religious orientations, diverse sexual orientations, socio-economic differences and multi-heritage or bi-cultural populations are often avoided because of their “sensitivity.” The desire not to “offend” tied with the lack of pedagogical knowledge become rationale for not addressing these issues in teacher education programs. I firmly believe that teaching from colorblind and gender neutral positions need to be challenged and that a deeper analysis of epistemology, worldview and family racial/ethnic culture become part of this reflective process.

In this study, teachers (graduate students) reflected upon, uncovered, and articulated their personal worldviews regarding students, families, and co-workers who are racially and ethnically different from themselves. Through the course readings they began to understand the hegemony of the dominant paradigm and how it impacts children of color and ethnic minorities. Through self-reflection they recalled their lived experiences and told them as stories. In sharing and discussing them with peers, they re-constructed the stories, attached new meanings and re-told them in their written assignments, creating narratives.

1.1. Theoretical underpinnings

1.1.1. *Epistemology and education*

Aren't we all biased and judgmental because we see the world ego-centrally and ethnocentrically based upon our own cultural and value perspectives? Were we not reared to live in a world set by the parameters of our parents and families? Our families and communities help instill a sense of belonging and an emic value orientation, but once we reach school age (and even before, depending upon individual experiences) knowledge about "others" influences our "ways of knowing", or epistemology. I use this term in the broadest sense throughout this paper drawing from Ladson-Billings' (2000) description of "systems of knowing". She writes: "An epistemology is a 'system of knowing' that has both internal logic and external validity...Epistemology is linked to worldview." Citing Ladson-Billings continues:

Worldview and systems of knowledge are symbiotic – that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one's worldview. Thus the conditions under which people live and learn shape both their knowledge and their worldviews (p. 258).

I was my intent to awaken my students to their own epistemologies, but also to understand that all of the children they teach have their own epistemologies from their communities and family cultures. More importantly, they need to become cognizant of the dominant European American paradigm in mainstream U.S. schools that may be different from the worldviews of some children and their families. The readings were chosen to uncover the hegemony existing in American schools.

Ladson-Billings (2000) contends that the hegemony of the dominant paradigm, which "claims to be the only legitimate way to view the world", is problematic for students who do not share a western European worldview.

Once students examined and evaluated their own epistemologies, within the contexts of their family and community cultures and their experiences, then the next step was to create personal narratives describing the students' worldview. When I engaged in this process myself, I realized that my race (Asian) and how I was ascribed racially and ethnically by others played an important role in my identity. When I was ascribed as

foreign and not “American” by others, even as an elementary teacher, it highlighted the importance for teachers to interrogate stereotypes and the impact of diversity on children.

1.1.2. Three dimensional narrative inquiry space

In this study, I examined my own, and asked my students to examine their personal and social lives and “ways of knowing” including their beliefs, experiences, and biases as racial cultural beings in the hierarchical situated position of teacher. What were their interactions with families of color and how did that impact their diverse knowledge base and teaching? We used narrative inquiry methodology.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) derive their conception of narrative inquiry from Dewey’s theory of experience and his constructs of situation, continuity, and interaction. They write (2000):

With this sense of Dewey’s foundational place in our thinking about narrative inquiry, our terms are personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical three dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third (p.50).

We reflected on past experiences inside and outside the classroom and projected how our developing understanding of issues such as critical multiculturalism, subjugated knowledge, and culturally relevant teaching will inform our pedagogies, or our “ways of teaching” in the future. And finally, the “place” of this study was the graduate class throughout one semester where controversial topics were interrogated and meaningful dialogue emerged in a psychologically safe space. As student shared their individual narratives, we created a collective of narratives and documented the weekly discussion of readings, critiques, ideas, and interactive experience.

1.2. Study methods

1.2.1. Action research

There are two lenses I use in this study: the student lens of storytelling (documented through narrative inquiry) and the teacher education lens of action research to develop student multicultural awareness and empowerment. Self-reflection and study

of one's epistemology and the development of narratives are the individual processes students engage in, which provide the foundation for student awareness and empowerment. But the group process of engaging in course readings and discourse on critical issues of diversity is the pedagogical inquiry that I engage in as the teacher educator. In designing this course, my goal was to examine how my pedagogy provided catalyst for student multicultural awareness, and how student critical thinking about diversity might impact their ability to take multiple perspectives, uncover children's epistemology and engage in culturally relevant teaching.

MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) write that "an action researcher *hopes* that they can create a change for the better, *dreams* of a better world and *desires* to make a difference" (p. 5). This describes my conception of the process. I want my students to become agents of change, or in Giroux's (1988) vision as *transformative intellectuals*. Giroux (1988) explains that "the category of transformative intellectual suggests that teachers begin with a recognition of those manifestations of suffering that constitute historical memory as well as the immediate conditions of oppression" (p. 99). As a teacher educator, I designed this action research to help me uncover ways to inspire my graduate students become open to interrogating conditions of oppression that some of their children face in their daily lives. I strove to teach my students to analyze the relationship between their epistemology and their conceptions, beliefs and practices with students of diverse backgrounds and living conditions.

1.2.2. *Study participants*

Students who were enrolled in a graduate course on epistemology, diversity, and teaching during two separate semesters at a Midwestern "Big Ten" university participated in this study. These doctoral students, master certification students and practicing teachers came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences with diversity. Each class had nine students but the class compositions were markedly different. The first class was predominantly doctoral students and included six international students from Korea, China, Taiwan, Ghana and Turkey, all of whom had taught in their own countries. There was one white male (not yet in education), one African American male certification student, and one Jewish American lesbian. The second class had less racial diversity and more practicing teachers taking masters level courses. There were seven white women, one Black woman and one Mexican American woman. Two of the students were in the master certification program and

two were doctoral students supervising student teachers. The practicing teachers taught in a variety of settings: early childhood bilingual program, rural middle school math and language arts, an elementary school in an up-scale neighborhood, and a small town parochial middle school. The racial/ethnic terms I use in this article were the self-selected descriptors used by the students. I offer this demographic data without any assumptions about how any group or subgroup impacts the study findings. The only exception is that the international students held global worldviews rather than US perspectives on diversity (see section 2.2 Uncovering Epistemology and Identity).

This difference in worldviews actually contributes to one of the study limitations. Within the two classes, the student composition can be classified into three categories: international students (primarily from homogeneous societies), white middle and upper class students, and minority students of color and one lesbian (all of whom expressed experiences of discrimination and oppression based on race/ethnicity). Many course readings were situated in or referred to the U.S. educational context. International students, taking a global, multicultural worldview used the cultural lens of their native countries in discussing critical and controversial issues. For example, the concept of a “hidden curriculum”, non-explicit institutional expectations or rules of conduct, was not familiar in a country where didactic teaching is the norm. Analysis at this micro-level of diversity related to their perceptions of diversity in their classrooms was not conducted, although it was apparent to me, the course instructor, that the international students had little knowledge of the history of U.S. civil rights and racial/ethnic oppression.

1.2.3. The teacher educator (course facilitator)

I had the opportunity to design this graduate course with the specific purpose of investigating how one’s epistemology impacts conceptions of diversity, ability to accept multiple perspectives in student worldviews, and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The course focused on questions such as: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (inquirer) and the known (or knowable)?” and “What happens when teachers and students have differing knowledge bases and *ways of knowing*?” Taking a constructivist theoretical orientation, students in the class examined how teachers come to understand the knowledge base and *ways of knowing* of their students with cultural backgrounds different from their own. Assignments were

designed to elicit student responses to readings, investigate their own epistemologies, and write a narrative about their own lived experiences, beliefs, and teaching. Uncovering one's epistemology through self-reflection on critical readings became the catalyst for change in awareness and ultimately in teaching practice.

It was important to me that critical and controversial issues discussed in a classroom context be done so in a "safe" environment, where students (and myself as professor) exhibit mutual respect and non-judgment. Early in the semester we took great care to get to know about each other's backgrounds and cultural beliefs. In order to learn about each other and to uncover shared knowledge base and experiences, we began the first classes discussing Peshkin's "I's" (his subjectivity audit) as it informed our own epistemologies. Although Alan Peshkin (1988) was referring to situating the researcher within the research process, I believe that his analytic process could be applied to teachers as they view and communicate with their students. As an anthropologist, Alan Peshkin was concerned about the cultural lens and assumptions used by researchers as they investigate cultures different from their own. It was important, according to Peshkin, for researchers to identify themselves up front therefore making the interpretive process more transparent. This is critical when, for example, the researcher is raised in a dominant western culture and he is observing an eastern tribal culture. Likewise for my mainstream European American students, teaching children from minority racial/ethnic groups, I feel it is equally important for them to situate themselves in their own cultures. Students from similar cultures as the children they teach still need to interrogate biases and assumptions based on their own cultural lenses. Sharing likenesses and differences in a group setting helped set a foundation for understanding the perspectives of other class members as well as analyzing how we construct "others" based upon partial knowledge or stereotypes from our own cultural contexts.

How could I further create a *safe* place for students to openly and honestly share their experiences, beliefs, biases, questions and concerns about student diversity? I attempted to make the classroom a *safe* place to share with mutual respect by taking a socio-historical approach, which according to Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) "...assumes that individual development and disposition must be understood in (and not separate from) cultural and historical context" (p. 22). They continue: "In other words, we talk about patterns of people's approaches to given situations without reducing the explanation to claims that they do what they do because they are migrant

farm workers or English-language learners” (p. 22). I challenged stereotypes when they arose. For example, when one student spoke about Hispanic families choosing to speak Spanish rather than learning English, I asked whether this belief applies to all people of Spanish heritage and possible reasons and contexts for use of native language. The speaker was using her personal experience while I refocused the discussion on analysis of larger issues and hypothetical situations.

Another concern I addressed was the power differential between myself as the professor and that of my graduate students. One way was to make the grading system transparent and based objectively on tasks completed rather than on a more subjective instructor evaluation of the concepts understood, perspectives taken, amount of active participation, and sophistication of writing. I threw away all of the rubrics I had previously used in my teaching and provided grade expectations based on work completed and choice of a grade category. Students actually contracted for a grade (A or B) by the assignments they completed. There was no judgment of student interpretation of course content (clarification was allowed) but if the quality of their work did not meet graduate level expectations, students were given feedback and the opportunity to rewrite an assignment. This was necessary to create a “safe” place to interrogate controversial topics.

1.2.4. Data gathering

I gathered data from student weekly writing, self-reflection and final course papers, and field notes on class discussions of the course readings. My selection of course readings (see Appendix) was designed to have a cross-section of theoretical pieces and practical pedagogical readings including some older but seminal articles from education and the social sciences. Readings were chosen that addressed issues such as “otherness”, the culture of power, white privilege, and fear about dealing with controversial topics.

Data was gathered from 18 students taken from the following types of documents: 270 weekly responses to the readings, 18 self-reflection papers (student stories of their personal and family epistemology), 18 final course papers (student stories of encountering diversity and teaching), and 30 field notes of class discussions. I also collected 13 anecdotal notes on my impressions of particular students (or subsets of students, i.e. International students), or musings about emerging themes. The weekly responses to readings were designed to be analytical and inquiry oriented (responses

to and catalysts for class discussions). And the field notes documented some of the lively discussions where students respectfully challenged each other and attempted to understand the perspectives of “other”. In contrast, and to align with the Three Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Method, the self-reflection and final course papers were designed to be student stories reflecting both beliefs and past experiences.

1.2.5. Data analysis

When I began to construct my own narrative, I did not want to just tell my story (which is a common interaction/communication here in Hawaii called “talk story”, where experiences and beliefs are openly shared). Instead, as a researcher, I wrote many field notes of my impressions, interpretations, and analysis after class sessions. Then I reread, sorted, reflected and made decisions of what to use in creating my narrative.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the major misconception about analysis of narrative inquiry as follows:

Although in some people’s minds, narrative inquiry is merely a process of telling and writing down a story with perhaps some reflective comments by researchers and participants, the process of moving from field texts to research texts is far more complex. A narrative inquirer spends many hours reading and rereading field texts in order to construct a chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field texts (p. 131).

They suggest coding field texts into categories such as characters, actions or events, storylines, tensions, and continuities/discontinuities. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) maintain that field texts are “close to experience, tend to be descriptive, and are shaped around particular events” (p. 132). In the weekly responses and field notes of class discussions I looked for patterns, narrative threads, and themes. I often opened class sessions with common themes I noticed in the weekly writing. These included: fear of offending minorities, frustration with stereotyping, building trust with “others”, challenging bias and discrimination in the workplace, concern for authenticity, cross-cultural relations with families, the need to teach about the cultures of all the children in their classes, and teacher advocacy and empowerment.

My analysis of student narratives required much reading and rereading and attempts to understand the context, epistemology, and worldview of the student writer. In analyzing the action research, I looked for connections students made to specific readings. Were they catalysts for change, inspiration for new awareness, or thoughtful interpretive stances? I noted in my field notes how the class discussions progressed or fell short. Were my students becoming transformative intellectuals? In what ways could I as instructor scaffold meaningful learning by encouraging critique of readings while being receptive to student interpretations? Finally, I pondered how my students could become agents of change in the future. And would change last beyond the course?

2. Findings

2.1. Creating a collective of narratives

I start this section with a personal account of my experiences teaching multicultural education and diversity in the relatively homogeneous, White, middle class, European American mainstream culture of several Midwestern campuses. My narrative shares a few life experiences where I have been constructed as “other”. The student narratives moved back and forth between what the student recalled from past experiences, to what they were experiencing in the course.

2.1.1. Narrative one: my teacher educator narrative

I have been in teacher education since 1988 and I recall my first tenure-track university position at a small rural state campus in Wisconsin, which was the site of one of the original Normal Schools for teacher training. I was hired to develop an early childhood education program but upon arriving on campus I was told that I would also be teaching a course on multicultural education. It was a new challenge and when I asked why I was assigned this course I was told it was because I was “multicultural”. An African professor from Cameroon and I became the first “token” minorities in our department. I was later told that the reason I got the position (without a doctorate at the time) was that I was Asian and a woman. I had never been constructed as a person of color before or “given” a job because of my race and gender. I had never been considered a pawn of affirmative action by fellow faculty members until this happened. Teaching the course was also my first experience with

student resistance to learning about diversity. But on a professional high note (though it was personally difficult), my parents spoke about their experiences as Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II. To my surprise, there were faculty members who did not know about Internment. My journey as a professor of color had just begun.

In my professional career I have experienced student protest when I share personal stories, as a scholar, researcher, and classroom teacher of color. My stories involve examples of taking a racial/ethnic minority perspective, or are situated in cultural contexts different from mainstream students' lifestyles; therefore these comments sometimes elicit resentment or perhaps even guilt. On occasion I have been accused of "shoving race or ethnicity down their throats." This is distressing for any instructor and I take the charge seriously. I will never forget one negative experience with a student while teaching a section of Introduction to Education at a large Midwestern university. I always adopt a multicultural and inclusive stance when teaching any education course. The student came up to me holding out one of the course texts (Sleeter and Grant's *Five Approaches to Multicultural Education*) in her hand and demanded, "Are you going to give us an antidote for this?" She perceived multicultural education as a life-threatening disease! Needless to say, after recovering from shock and discussing the interaction with my mentor, Professor Carl Grant, I met the student for coffee before each class and eventually she began to participate in class with less resentment, though she was still uncomfortable with course content on diversity.

I have discussed these strong student responses with white male professors who teach the same course, with the same text, and use similar examples, and they indicated that responses in their classes were not as emotionally charged because students were speaking about "other." When everyone in the class is mainstream European American, then "other" (any racial and ethnic minority) does not have a face, is hypothetical rather than real. I have also experienced a similar response when teaching a course on ethnic minority families in which controversial and sensitive issues were discussed in regular small group discussion sections. I recall the day that one European American woman commented that she felt relieved that there weren't any minorities (she meant Blacks) in this section because she couldn't speak freely if there were. The fear "not to offend" people of color was strong for most of the students in the class. Ironically, she considered me White, or like her ("one of us"). I am Japanese

American. The same fear of offending along with a doubt whether they could provide authenticity in discussing cultures not their own was expressed by students (pre-service and practicing teachers) in my graduate classes.

2.1.2. Narrative two: White privilege and optimism

One European American student felt that her white privilege as an opportunity to act on behalf of minority students and a responsibility to break down power differentials in the classroom. This idealized interpretation addressed personal empowerment rather than the institutional power of policies which create inequity. She wrote:

As a white Euro-American teacher, I am put in an incredible position. With this knowledge (white privilege and inequity in educational opportunity) at hand, I can use it to break down the power barrier, and provide an equal education in terms of culture for all of the groups that are represented in my classroom...I can work with this awareness to provide an open, safe, and culturally diverse atmosphere in which my students can learn...I believe that as an educator it is essential to bring my lenses, my views, and my "systems of knowing" to my classroom, and ask the children to see through it. On that same token, I must also ask them to bring their lenses, their views, and their "systems of knowing" to my classroom, and ask them if I can see through it. If the other students and I can look through each other's lenses, we can open up a wonderful opportunity of learning where no power differentials exists, but instead a respectful collaborative approach to learning openly.

This student's incredible sense of responsibility for enlightening her students reflected her open-mindedness, optimism, respect for student knowledge, and her willingness to be a real listener. But it also raised the question of how power differentials are identified and negotiated by classroom teachers. "Where is the line where we ask children to see through our lens or we impose our adult standards and expectations?" asked one student. "In the past, teachers (and parents for that matter) have taught their students/children their own 'ways of knowing': that is what cultures do" suggested another student. This led to a lively discussion of school culture, hidden curriculum, inculcating children into mainstream "ways of knowing", and student empowerment. We discussed whether having NO power differential is idealistic and unattainable based on expectations, structure, and responsibility of school administration? Everyone agreed that having no power differential is virtually

impossible to attain but trying to minimize it should be the goal of teachers. Indeed, I was struggling with power differentials as course instructor and participant researcher.

I raised the possibility that children, whose school and home cultures are different from the mainstream, might be more informed and insightful because they had to be bicultural to survive. W.E.B. Du Bois describes this bicultural sensitivity as “double consciousness”. Ladson-Billings (2000) writes:

Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness applies not only to African Americans but to any people who are constructed outside the dominant paradigm. It is important to read this entire discussion of multiple consciousnesses as a description of complex phenomena. It is not an attempt to impose essentialized concepts of “Blackness,” “Latina/ness,” “Asian Americanness,” or “Native Americanness” onto specific individual groups. Rather, this discussion is about the multiple ways in which epistemological perspectives are developed (p. 260).

I used myself as an example for my students situating me as a Japanese American growing up in the predominantly White Midwest in the post World War II days, when assimilation was a necessity and totally sanctioned by my family. I learned to become “All American” 100% or even 200 percent as one participant in my study on Japanese American Mothering (Adler, 1998) described. Our double consciousness caused us to learn to be bicultural, Midwestern Protestant Ethic in public, and Japanese heritage at home with parents and grandparents.

That has been the goal of this course, for teachers to understand the multiple ways in which epistemological perspectives are developed.

2.1.3. Narrative three: honoring cultural difference

Another European American student who had lived and taught pre-school in China shared a story about her collegiate volunteer experience mentoring an “underprivileged” Southeast Asian girl and how it helped her interrogate white privilege. She wrote:

On my resume I described myself as a mentor to underprivileged Southeast Asian youth; however, the term “underprivileged” meant underprivileged by whose definition? The girl I tutored on a weekly basis was named Savoeun. Over the years I

got to know Savoeun and her family well. I often walked home with Savoeun and her younger siblings. She lived with her parents and nine siblings in a two-room apartment in North Chicago. Her parents fled Cambodia with their eldest child years before Savoeun was born and got by without being able to speak or read English. Looking back, the more I learned about Savoeun the more I discovered that by age nine, in many ways, she was more mature and worldly than I was at age 19. She could take care of her five younger siblings. She could translate between English and Cambodian for her parents. She could use a stove to cook for herself and her family. She was not afraid to walk down the streets of North Chicago. I had perceived my relationship with Savoeun as mentor-to-student, but reflecting on what I learned this semester I realize she was also teaching me many things. Privilege was something I was born into, and Savoeun was “underprivileged” by my White, middle class definition of privilege. Yet by age nine she was a stronger, more knowledgeable person than I was when I knew her. For Savoeun’s parents, who came to America for a better life for their family, Savoeun was also born into privilege – her family’s definition of privilege.

After this story was shared with the class, students were amazed at both their peer’s openness and this competent child. We discussed white privilege, as conceptualized by this student, power differentials between teacher (mentor) and child, and how this life experience informed her future work and life in China. Moving to new and different cultural places (situations) requires the ability to take multiple perspectives and to put yourself into the “shoes of others” (moccasins, according to the American Indian version), or to see through the “lens” of those different from yourself. I point out that this process is relevant to all kinds of diversity (disabilities, gender, language, etc.).

2.1.4. Narrative four: not wanting to “Offend”

As we began to discuss classroom pedagogy and how the readings addressed inequities in school policies and practices, the teachers expressed concern about how they could bring these issues to their classrooms. The norm was to wait for controversial issues to be mentioned by the children rather than incorporating issues such as race and ethnicity into their curriculums. The New York City public school “Rainbow Curriculum” had been effectively “shot down” politically so students were wary of offending people of color. Could these students advocate for change and

what were the risks of doing so, especially as young, new, untenured teachers? The myth about having to “know all of the cultures represented in their classes” surfaced with new concerns about mis-representation and lack of authenticity. The Jennings and Smith (2002) article on critical inquiry prompted one student to worry about her ability to “put what I am learning into practice.”

Echoing the sentiments of others in the class, this student queried:

Will I be able to be a risk-taker? I have fear of ‘stepping on toes’ by teaching about other cultures or minority groups. I have a fear of being unauthentic. I have a fear that I will not be supported by my future school district. I have a fear that I will not be supported by my colleagues or my students’ parents on my quest for social change through education. Through class discussions this semester, I feel more confident and acknowledge that I am not an expert. Through inquiry and collaboration I can take steps to learn and teach about other cultures. It is a journey I will take with my students and their families. In the process I will garner the benefits of cross-cultural trust and compassion. It is important to focus on how the children in my specific class live in their own culture. I should not be scared of authenticity as long as I am open and have desire to be authentic.

There were three major concerns (authenticity, offending others, and support for taking risks) expressed by this student. This paper was unique in that it addressed narrative directionality focused on the future, rather than recalling the past. She engaged in projection, yet she knew what she wanted to change (teach about cultures). As a class, we discussed how our lived experiences with these issues had the potential for causing tension and self-doubt. Concern about receptivity of co-workers, future employers and parents for teaching from a multicultural perspective, or addressing controversial issues, such as race and “foreign” cultures, were common feelings expressed by other students in the class. Concern about authenticity was another salient issue because most students had been warned in their teacher education courses not to adopt a “tourist curriculum” of focusing on dress, food, and holidays of “other”, non-American cultures. Culturally relevant teaching incorporates home cultures and communication styles to enhance learning of children not reared in the dominant culture (Au, 2007, Gay, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1994). We discussed how quality educational programs address both similarities and differences unique to the children in the class, thus minimizing stereotypes.

2.1.5. Narrative five: toxic parent relations

The Black teacher (self-identified label) in our class shared an observation of a parent–teacher interaction in her school which she considered problematic and very disturbing. She prefaced her story with this comment: “I’ve always kept my mother in mind in terms of keeping myself grounded in how I interact with parents. She never interacted with school faculty at all. I heard her describe teachers as mainly white, rude, abrupt, nosy, and condescending (in mother’s words: ‘talk down to you’). I guess I just never, ever wanted to be perceived that way by the parents.” Her observation:

I observed my fellow colleague across the hall from me talking “at” a parent. I happened to be in the hall hanging up some of the kids work while they were at music. The teacher (white, married, middle-class) was reprimanding a single, black, poor parent for two reasons. One reason was because her child had not brought back a book. I realize that returning books is important. I’m not minimizing the significance of retaining school property. However, the parent was explaining that she knew where the book was and she would get it back. The parent explained that the book was at her mother’s house, where the child had spent the weekend. The parent later “volunteered” (which is rare for many parents to divulge personal information) that she was in between a shelter and her mother’s house. The mother had arrived late in a cab to bring the child to school and she was being chastised for her child’s lateness too. Without truly listening to the parent, the teacher went into her second complaint (the lateness). It was near the end of the year and the teacher wanted to know if the child would be returning to the school next year for enrollment. The parent explained again her housing situation and that she was working with a caseworker to help her find stable housing. She was unsure of where she would live or even what school district she would live in...I was appalled! I’m sure this parent has a load on her mind. The most frustrating part of this story is that the teacher later bragged to another teacher about how “she let the parent have it” about being responsible. The teacher didn’t get it! I felt so bad for this parent for being policed and “talked at” that way. And, this all took place in front of the child.

This story was written first but when it was shared in class, the student was quite emotional. She was the only Black person in class (there was a Mexican American woman, self labeled, and me, a Japanese American, the only other people of color). I could not discern whether she was self-conscious about sharing, but the response she

received from her classmates was overwhelmingly supportive of her interpretation and condemnation of the other teacher's actions. It led to one of the best discussions we had about racism, and how it can be covert. The lack of compassion and empathy of the White teacher was perceived as an embarrassment to the field of teaching. I then asked the class to take the White teacher's perspective in order to understand and hypothesize why she acted as she did. It was a challenge for the students to do this exercise without passing judgment on the teacher. The comments (maybe she was tired, or she had similar problems with other parents) felt like "excuses" to the students in the class, even though they voiced them as reasonable possibilities. This exercise in identifying inward directionality in narrative inquiry, even vicariously from a classmate's story, was very helpful to students.

2.1.6. Narrative six: colorblindness and the golden rule

A European American pre-service teacher commented on how her own parents had a strong belief in being non-judgmental which translated into a colorblind attitude. This was problematic for her as she didn't agree with her upbringing. In her final paper she wrote:

I cannot remember any of my parent's friends being another ethnic group or race, except for one Black woman who was married to a white male friend of my father's. It may have been better if they modeled interactions with diverse people more. It may have been their way of enforcing a colorblind attitude in my siblings and me. But I feel like this was wrong because it was never addressed and in a real world context these things do matter. All of these issues were not explicitly talked about in my family. They were just implied in "the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated." In retrospect, it didn't really benefit me *not*acknowledging issues of race, social status, etc. with my parents through dialogue. I had to learn about these specific issues on my own more or less.

She added that her parent's non-judgmental value was reinforced in her mainly lower-middle income, working class, and predominantly Mexican American neighborhood. Opportunity to experience socio-economic and ethnic diversity was evident in this student's community, yet her parents chose to not address these differences. For the first time this student was assigning negative meaning to her parent's choice. She was retelling her story with new insights.

The class addressed the colorblind perspective several times throughout the semester. It was pointed out that in many Christian religions everyone is seen as equal (All God's Children) therefore race, ethnicity, class, socio-economic status, gender etc., are secondary to one's identity and affiliations. In fact, some said that too much focus on differences leads to divisiveness. One Catholic woman pointed out that it is their mission to proselytize people of all races, all over the world. In this paradigm, people are Catholic first, then, have other diversities. This can be said of the paradigm for disabled persons. The disability is pervasive and the other diversities are secondary. Same can be said about nationality ("American" first, then heritage, class etc). But this differentiation is challenged by those people of color and minority ethnic groups who label themselves as hyphenated (Japanese-American, African-American etc). What do these labels really mean to those who appropriate and use them for themselves? How might this be different from those who ascribe them to others, and use them as stereotypes? These issues were interrogated in class.

2.2. Uncovering epistemology and identity

I believe that the relationship between the student and teacher is the prime foundation for effective teaching. It is contingent upon the teachers' ability to communicate with children and their families, often across cultures, and requires insight into the socio-cultural context of their students' lives. Equally important to the efficacy of the student-teacher relationship is teacher knowledge of self, as a cultural being. Our individual upbringing gives us a template for values and worldview, but it also includes personal biases and misconceptions about other racial/ethnic groups derived from our experiences and family socialization. Teachers bring their cultural knowledge, biases, dispositions, and inter-personal communication skills into their professional work. This is particularly important for early childhood teacher/caregivers since they work most closely with parents and communities on a regular basis.

One of the goals of this course was for students to reflect upon their own epistemology, therefore some readings served as catalysts for this self-study. One teacher noted the dynamic nature of epistemology by writing:

Through the class and the readings I have become aware of the differences of others and I have termed that epistemology. By being aware of how I view others, and by

learning about how others view things, I have become more open to a living, breathing system where compromises need to be made in order to provide an equal and quality education for everyone. As I continue to grow as an educator, I look for my epistemology to grow as I learn from others around me.

Although this student's definition of epistemology was not completely accurate (she was addressing diversity in worldviews), she articulated the goals of the course, for teachers to understand themselves as cultural beings and to teach with cultural relevancy for all students. Like other student writing, social justice was in the back of her mind.

Delpit's (1988) article, *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*, provoked active participation in class discussions because some students had not encountered the idea that "otherness" isn't just diversity but that there are distinct power differentials that give agency to certain mainstream groups. Many understood that Delpit's "culture of power" existed in most schools, but they were unaware of the need to teach it explicitly to those who had not grown up with it. "I like the analogy of trying to learn a new foreign culture and to negotiate just living there" said one student. This raised another question of whether students equated ethnic diversity of American born citizens to cultures in foreign countries of their heritage. Most European American students did not differentiate between American born and immigrant "others" and made generalizations based on their racial/ethnic group. The need to explicitly teach the "culture of power" became evident when they took the perspective of the "other".

An example of racial ethnic awareness came from the Mexican American teacher (who is American born and not an immigrant),

I think that awareness of power differentials has definitely changed the way I think about curriculum and teaching standards. I find that I am now more aware of teaching my students more about the culture of power as well as the parents. By this I mean teaching my students more explicitly skills that will help them be successful in kindergarten and explaining to parents how they can and need to advocate for their children. To me this means empowering them to know that they as well as their children have rights in the school. Parents have the right to ask questions and have them answered to their satisfaction.

As an educator of color who had framed her ethnicity within a personal context (family and ethnic pride) rather than seeing it in a larger socio-political and structural context, this Mexican American teacher was articulating her role in advocating for her families, many of whom were minority. In the process of learning about “otherness”, she became more aware of how her ethnic identity was being perceived by mainstream colleagues. Learning that the “culture of power” was mainstream White, middle class, she began to realize that she was actually “other” in how she was perceived. There was school culture and home culture, and she was bicultural, separating the two. Since she had children in her class who spoke Spanish, and she did speak with them in their native language at times, she realized that non-Hispanics defined her in terms of her “foreign” heritage.

I totally understood this for I had taught elementary school for 9.5 years with 99% European American students and saw my own ethnic identity as foreign heritage. My awareness came when I once had a Japanese American teacher’s aide and she and I did a month’s instructional unit on Japanese culture for our second graders. I both gathered family cultural artifacts and had to study about contemporary Japanese children and family life to make cross-cultural comparisons that would be relevant to elementary aged children. At the time (the 1970s) I was not aware of critical multiculturalism and was even “targeted” as a minority teacher to be mentored for an administrative position in the future. At the time I was colorblind, in a school district that was actively trying to hire teachers of color. Affirmative Action was a new concept, nowhere near implementation.

The one student (the Black teacher) indicated that she had first-hand knowledge of growing up without knowing the “name of the game” (another student suggested this cliché). Even knowing the saying is culture specific. This also raised a discussion about the “hidden curriculum” in most schools. The 5th aspect of Delpit’s culture of power, “Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence” (p. 282) led to a discussion about “white privilege” and how White people are uncomfortable naming this concept.

In her book, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*, McIntyre (1977) suggests that one way White student teachers can “become creators of their *racial* identities, is through commitment to (1) investigating whiteness, (2) educating themselves about the relationship between their racial identities and the existence of racism within U.S.

society, and (3) taking constructive action in the naming of racism and the renaming of what they can do about it within the context of multicultural antiracist education” (p. 18). The students in my class grappled with the connection between White privilege and racism. McIntyre (1977) points out that “both educators of color, and white educators, may work simultaneously to challenge existing educational policies and practices that discriminate against certain racial and ethnic groups under the umbrella of multicultural education, but this challenge is grounded in different life experiences” (p. 12).

As we began to interrogate issues of race and racism in this course, I wondered whether my students constructed me as an ethnic minority, a person of color, a political liberal, a model minority, part of the academic “culture of power” or as WHITE and privileged. I certainly was not a neutral by-stander in this analytical process. The Black teacher in my second class was very moved by Delpit’s article and wrote: “Many of the ‘silenced thoughts’ I’ve had as a non-member of the culture of power were nurtured and perhaps uncovered.” Like some of the teachers in Delpit’s study she felt the same “mental and physical frustration” of having to prove herself while feeling ignored and isolated. After reading Hollins she wrote: “On a negative note (maybe not as negative as realistic), I was forced to look back upon my own teaching and how I taught; how my colleagues teach. I recognized many of the assimilationist, racist, attitudes we read about in my colleagues, Black and White. I find myself wondering how much co-dependent racism I engaged in unknowingly.” Her comments struck home as I began to reflect upon my public school teaching career and the co-dependent racism I perhaps also perpetuated.

In analyzing the experiences of the few domestic students of color, I realize that this course gave them “voice”. I refer back to Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) article, *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*, where they reiterate the importance of “naming one’s own reality” or “voice” in critical race theory (p. 56–57). They explain that the stories of the social reality of people of color serve as interpretive structures and psychic preservation of marginalized groups. A good example of “voice” of a teacher of color came from a male African American (self-labeled) student who offered a critique of the educational system as it serves Black children. He wrote:

As a sociologist, I am compelled to look at the whole. This means examining the complex interactions between sub-groups and how it shapes the larger group. I am a conflict theorist, which means that I believe that our society is based on conflict and competition for power and resources. I see education as a tool for empowerment, not as some mythical 'great equalizer' that levels the playing field. That idea is hogwash and poppycock.

Citing his hero, historian and educator Carter G. Woodson, this student continued:

Woodson believed that the worse thing to ever happen to Blacks in this country was not slavery, but the lack of access to proper and meaningful education. He essentially predicted the current achievement gap in 1933!

I recall the passion in which he shared his writing with the class. His challenge of public school as a "great equalizer", calling that notion "hogwash" exemplified his interpretive structure based on his own epistemology and the oppression he faced in his own schooling. His concept of "tool of empowerment" can be further interrogated: whose empowerment and whose power?

Of the nine students in that class, 6 were international students and most were unfamiliar with the writing of Black educators (as well as other civil rights advocates). They could readily describe their home ethnic cultures, based on language and national origin, but were less confident identifying the diversity of American school children. Given their global backgrounds and home cultures that were racially homogeneous, most were more sensitive to diversity of ethnicities within Asian, African, or middle eastern groups. Although most had stories of prejudice and discrimination they faced as students in the Midwest, their knowledge base on American multicultural education and the civil rights movement was relatively limited. Furthermore, as one Korean student indicated, "We have one set of knowledge, the one that the government education system sanctions. It is official so what other groups think is really irrelevant." This reflects a socio-political context of education which is, indeed, ethnocentric.

Overall, I believe that all of my European American students were actively articulating their epistemologies as they questioned how effective their relationships were with students and families of color in their schools. The need to "teach all of the cultures

in the classroom” or to take a “tourist approach” to multicultural education was effectively debunked, but the cultural aspect was not always easy to explain because there was still a conception that mainstream “all American” culture excluded ethnic and racial “minorities”.

3. Conclusion

Each time a course like this is taught and meaningful dialogue ensues, it is a new journey into sensitive and sometimes very personal territory. One of the keys to successful dialogue is for mainstream teachers to become cognizant of the interactional styles and subjugated knowledge of students in their classes as they match or contrast with their own. For example, as a Japanese American it is difficult for me to be self-promoting (the nail that sticks up needs to be hammered down) and I was socialized to be indirect in communications (Adler, 2004a). This is in stark contrast to students reared in cultures where direct and even confrontational approaches are expected. It was interesting that my Asian International students agreed that my communication style was indeed Japanese/Asian, but they regarded me as American, western rather than Japanese or Asian. There was a sense of racial/ethnic affinity, but not of cultural likeness. I realize that my international students were reading the writing of U.S. scholars of color, with a global rather than domestic lense and frame of reference. Furthermore, most of my students did not recognize my perspectives as subjugated knowledge. After all, I was their professor in a mainstream “Big Ten” university.

3.1. Understanding subjugated knowledge

As a teacher educator, I believed that given solid research and writing of scholars of color and others who address controversial issues of critical multiculturalism, students would become cognizant of many other perspectives, challenging their own assumptions and beliefs. As we discussed the dominant paradigm, I introduced the concept of subjugated knowledge, of which many of the students were unfamiliar. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) point out:

Confronted with subjugated knowledge, individuals from white mainstream culture begin to appreciate the fact that there are multiple perspectives on all issues...Curricula that include subjugated perspectives teach a lesson on the

complexities of knowledge production and how this process shapes our view of ourselves and the world around us. (p. 46).

By connecting subjugated knowledge with the uncovering of personal epistemology, students began to understand that knowledge and beliefs are not constructed in a socio-political vacuum. Through class readings, students examined how subjugated knowledge put minority students at a disadvantage within mainstream schools. The students in this course began to interrogate their own beliefs and practices to uncover whether they as teachers were complicit with this oppression or were actively challenging cultural difference that leads to educational inequity. Through the process of writing narratives the students made their own perspectives and practices explicit.

We used the narrative inquiry method of directionality as students examined the readings and their own epistemology across time and from an internal *na au* (Hawaiian word for gut) perspective. Even though they understood subjugated knowledge intellectually, some students had trouble recognizing it in the real world. Though we read about Hawaiian epistemology and had a guest speaker, a Hawaiian woman who was working on her dissertation on Hawaiian epistemology, students did not seem to recognize her perspectives as subjugated knowledge. It was regarded as different but not necessarily that of oppressed people. Was this because they saw cultures of the tropics as exotic and foreign? Or did they see her as an “American” teacher, imposing their own colorblind perspective? The narratives in this article shed light on a variety of perspectives, but more importantly they elucidate how critical analysis and dialogue can lead to adopting multiple perspectives.

3.2. Epistemology and pedagogical change

As I reflect back on the course, I realize that I gave the students some complex readings, such as Said (1978, 2003), which required careful analysis and ability to apply it to ones’ own epistemology. It required students to look to their past experiences, participate in the present dialogue, and anticipate how new knowledge and perspectives will help them develop multiple perspectives in their future teaching. What beliefs, practices and expectations, which came from the students’ worldview, were then translated into teaching style and pedagogical choices? Will the qualitative changes students experienced though out the semester lead to long lasting pedagogical changes?

Perhaps we should begin with the last question about continuity and change. New cultural awareness and implementation into practice may have varied results depending upon how dispositions on diversity developed. Wiggins and Follo (1999) in Wiggins, Follo, and Eberly (2007) investigated whether positive dispositions on multiculturalism and comfort level of European American pre-service teachers placed in African American inner-city schools were maintained. Their findings indicate that this field experience can actually reinforce negative stereotypes about ethnic difference. In their words: “Although our students developed knowledge and skills related to teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, they continued to feel uncomfortable interacting with individuals who were ethnically or culturally different from themselves” (p. 654). In the 2007 study, the researchers provided coursework and class sessions in the same school as the field experience, where students became more involved with the life of the school, and therefore produced student transformation “in a setting they had previously viewed as foreign and impenetrable” (p. 662). In my current study, narratives indicated some qualitative changes in awareness of diversity, but indication of how their pedagogy changed over time is beyond the scope of this study. But, I do believe that my participants are becoming *transformed intellectuals*, and agents of change in their lives and the lives of their students.

3.3. Recommendations from this action research

In closing, I have four recommendations for teachers who are risk-takers in their professional lives and who want to connect with children and families who are racially and ethnically different from themselves:

- 1) become cognizant of how your experiences, interactional style, and personality connect to the subjugated knowledge of your minority students,
- 2) seek out and really listen to natives, elders, insiders, and other cultural brokers in order to uncover authentic knowledge,
- 3) connect what you have learned to your own epistemology in order to become a “whole” teacher, one who can reach out across borders with true empathy, and
- 4) become a lifelong learner of diverse cultures, languages, epistemology, and worldviews.

I have been in the business of teacher education, multicultural education, and early childhood education since 1988 and have lived in societal and academic environments as a minority scholar studying Asian American families and home–school relations. When I reflect back on whether this action research study has positively informed my pedagogy as a teacher educator, I would have to answer in the affirmative. I had the opportunity to really listen to my students as they shared their personal narratives. They became my teachers and collaborators. They engaged in the classroom learning process with honesty and openness and their narratives were evidence of new awareness and change.

In the context of my previous research on Midwestern Japanese American Mothers ([Adler, 1998](#)), the racial/ethnic socialization of Asian American children ([Adler, 2001](#)) and ethnic identity of Hmong students ([2004b](#)), this research addressed graduate student knowledge of the diversities among minority groups including the ones that I have been studying for my entire career. Who the teachers are in relation to who they teach has been worthy of serious inquiry. Epistemology and pedagogy have been linked in a meaningful way by each study participant.

Now, having moved to Hawaii, I have the opportunity to view and live in a diverse Asian oriented society and educational setting where I am in the racial/ethnic majority. I feel a sense of racial belonging, an identity that I have never experienced before in my life. My Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, Korean, Pacific Island, Haole (white), and multi-heritage students are my new teachers of cultural diversity. I have also engaged in the study of religious diversity by studying Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. In the future I may consider replicating this study of Epistemology, Teaching and Eastern Diversity of the Hawaiian Islands.

Appendix.

The selection of course readings

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