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Bridging Funds of Knowledge in Learning to Teach

The Story of a Japanese Pre-service Teacher's Authentic Teaching Practicum Experience

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Abstract

The field of early childhood education and care has been in the forefront of setting the effort to increase diversity in its teaching force. Little is known about learning processes of teachers with diverse backgrounds in teacher education and what experiences and knowledge they bring to the field to educate and care for our youngest children. This qualitative case study tells stories of an Asian pre-service teacher during her process of becoming an early childhood educator through exploring her personal and cultural funds of knowledge based on her teaching practicum experiences. By listening carefully to her voice in her process of becoming a teacher, we hope that teacher educators and teacher preparation programs can gain new understandings to better support pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds in their processes of teacher development.

Introduction

Many research studies argue for a more diverse teaching force in the field of education in responding to a new demographic reality where students with racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds are dramatically increasing (Capps et al., 2005; Couse & Recchia, 2016; Park, McHugh, Zong, & Batalova, 2015). Within the field of education, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been in the forefront of setting the effort to increase diversity in its teaching force. Now nearly one fifth of the overall ECEC workforce are foreign-born,

often immigrants from various countries around the globe, and there is no doubt that their cultural and linguistic identities play a vital role in providing high quality early education and care (Park et al., 2015). Little is known about how they become teachers or caregivers in the field and what experiences and knowledge they bring to the field to educate and care for our youngest children (Adair, 2011; Cruickshank, 2004; Gupta, 2006; Hedges, 2012; Hwang, Baek, & Vrongistinos, 2005; Griess & Keat, 2014; Monzo & Rueda, 2003). Moreover, there is a dearth of research conducted on their teacher preparation processes to learn about who they are and what their experiences are like in learning to provide education and care (Adair, 2011; Pailliotet, 1997; Su, 1996).

In looking closely at teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds, scholars argue that their stories must be part of the curriculum of teacher education in order for it to become more “student-centered” (Goodwin, 1997; Rodrigues, 2013). Just as a teacher in the classroom can pick and choose what children can bring to the classroom from their lives, teacher educators can allow pre-service teachers to bring certain knowledge from their lived experiences into the university classroom. However, many teacher education programs pay little attention to the differences among pre-service teachers’ experiences, cultural backgrounds, and needs, and to how those differences can be utilized as valuable resources for learning in their teacher education courses (Gupta, 2006).

Recchia and Loizou’s (2002) study on early childhood pre-service teachers in their practicum course illuminates the need for space in teacher preparation programs to allow pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds to bring their personal histories and dispositions to their learning to become teachers. Garavuso (2016) also asserted that there needs to be a reimagination for teacher education in the field of early childhood education to meet the diverse needs of pre-service teachers because of the increasing diversity not only in children and families but also in the teacher population. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine more closely who pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds are and what their experiences are like in their preparation to teach and care for our youngest learners and to investigate their processes of reflecting on their current and past experiences to engage in more authentic teaching and learning.

Statement of Purpose

Studies on the experiences of pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds in teacher preparation programs are largely missing in

the field of teacher education (Pailliotet, 1997), and their success stories are even scarcer. Among the very few studies on pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds, Pailliotet (1997) discussed the experiences of an Asian pre-service teacher with a language minority background in her case study. She examined the cultural conflicts and hardships the pre-service teacher faced both in her teacher education program as well as her practicum site. In addition, Pailliotet highlighted that though the pre-service teacher's actual teaching practice was strong, the program failed to recognize her strengths in terms of her flexibility that came with her cultural and linguistic wealth and caring practice that enabled her to connect with her students with diverse needs.

In another case study, Gupta (2006) investigated a way to incorporate pre-service teachers' childhood and personal experiences and their beliefs in the child development theory course. Conducted in an urban setting, many of her pre-service teachers had diverse backgrounds in terms of their race, ethnicity, languages, and immigration status. In this study, the author stated that by providing a formal context in the course where the pre-service teachers were encouraged to interrogate child development theories in conjunction with their own experiences and beliefs enabled a reflective and inquiry based teacher education pedagogy.

The two aforementioned studies uncovered these missing pieces about the experiences of pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds in their teacher preparation processes. This is an area that can provide important insight to the field of teacher education; however, it is deeply under-researched. More studies are needed examining the "real" experiences of pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds within the field, especially in their practicum settings and to better support their processes of learning to become teachers.

In our qualitative case study, we focus on a Japanese pre-service teacher and her success stories during her process of becoming an early childhood educator through exploring her personal funds of knowledge and teaching experiences while engaging in a teacher education program practicum course. Though we are aware that her story cannot possibly represent the whole, we aim to contribute to the existing literature by adding an unheard voice. We hope that listening carefully to her voice in her process of becoming a teacher will shed light on teacher educators and teacher preparation programs to gain new understandings to better support pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds in their processes of teacher development.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Building on Vygotsky's sociocultural view, this study is based on the belief that unique and rich lived experiences of an individual enrich one's processes of learning. The theoretical framework of funds of knowledge, bodies of knowledge and skills that are historically and culturally accumulated and developed for functioning of households and individuals (Moll et al., 1992), is employed in order to explore knowledges that come from the lived experiences of a pre-service teacher with a racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse background. Traditionally, the concept of funds of knowledge has focused on studying children with diverse backgrounds and their experiences in and out of school (Dermans-Sparks, 1993-1994; Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). However, it has also been acknowledged that funds of knowledge of teachers with diverse backgrounds are closely intertwined with and shape their teaching and learning, considering that teaching is not simply about a particular set of teaching methods or procedures but a complex endeavor involving the whole person across his/her sociocultural contexts (Adair, 2011; Gupta, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Olsen, 2008; Sexton, 2008).

Some studies applied the framework of funds of knowledge to uncover 'in-service' teachers' funds of knowledge as resources for their instruction for children's learning (Adair, 2011; Jackson, 2006). Building on the existing studies, our study focuses on the funds of knowledge of a 'pre-service' teacher. Goodwin (2010) stated, "Prospective [pre-service] teachers' experiences and autobiographies become the foundation upon which teaching practice is built" (p. 23). It is important to create an environment in teacher education programs where their diverse experiences are acknowledged and they are encouraged to draw on their lived experiences and funds of knowledge so that their learning becomes more meaningful and authentic. However, little has been studied on how this framework can be productive for understanding the preparations of pre-service teachers with diverse backgrounds in early childhood teacher education. Therefore, our study attempts to tell a story of a pre-service teacher with a diverse background in her teacher preparation program and how she was able to excavate her funds of knowledge in learning to become an early childhood teacher and caregiver.

In addition to sociocultural perspectives and funds of knowledge, it also makes sense to frame our study using Dewey's (1998/1933) reflective thinking when examining stories of a pre-service teacher. Dewey stated that *reflective thinking* is "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds

that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). When considering the pre-service teacher’s sociocultural context and funds of knowledge, what enables authentic teaching and learning is reflective thinking in the examination of one’s own funds of knowledge as well as other knowledges presented in teacher education courses (Lee & Shin, 2009). In our study, the pre-service teacher will narrate her experiences from the practicum site and her reflections through her essay writing as well as reflective journals from the teacher education course. Taken together, we hope to illuminate possibilities of learning about pre-service teachers with a diverse background and their experiences to better understand their processes of becoming authentic early childhood teachers and caregivers within this framework.

Research Context

We chose to do a qualitative single case study (Merriam, 1998) of the experience of a Japanese pre-service teacher, Miyuki (second author), and about her stories based on her student teaching practicum experience at a preschool in a large urban area. At the time of her practicum, she was enrolled as a second year student in the teacher education graduate program. The practicum course was a semester-long weekly seminar and field practicum combined course. Her course instructor/university supervisor (first author) communicated with Miyuki about her experiences within the seminar discussions and in the field by visiting to conduct observations as well as through weekly reflective journal entries.

The data were collected during and after the semester. The data sources are the course instructor/university supervisor’s (first author) field/seminar notes, Miyuki’s reflective weekly journal entries during the semester, and her essays that were written once the semester ended. The study was conducted with permission from Miyuki, and she was assured that it did not affect her course grade. The data were analyzed by the first author inductively and also by using the aforementioned theoretical and conceptual framework. In addition, the first author member-checked (Phillion & Wang, 2011) with the second author while writing together throughout the process.

In narrating Miyuki’s stories, we highlight the importance of bringing her own funds of knowledge to her practicum classroom as she connected the knowledge with the children who also brought their various cultural and familial backgrounds. This classroom experience helped Miyuki to understand that she has valuable assets to bring to the classroom for both children’s learning as well as her own learning to become a teacher. By telling the stories of herself--perspectives from a pre-service teacher who

is from a different country, and different ways in which she was able to cooperate with her cooperating teacher under the guidance of her university supervisor in the course work to bridge her funds of knowledge—we hope to shed light on what is possible in the field of early childhood teacher education.

Miyuki's Stories

Miyuki often asked the children in her practicum site during free playtime and small group activity, “Do you know where I am from?” and “Do you know anything about Japan?” Some of them answered, “Kind of China?” and some others answered, “My mom loves Japanese foods, it’s very healthy.” On another occasion, when Miyuki was looking at the world map and reading a book with her students, she shared with them that she was from a country called Japan (Field notes). Through these short but frequent exchanges about her background with her students, her cooperating teacher also became aware of students’ interest in Miyuki’s background. The cooperating teacher mentioned that the children were saying things like, “Miyuki is from a different country” and “she speaks a different language” (Field notes) and suggested that Miyuki do a lesson on her Japanese culture to broaden students’ perspectives on diversity. And this is it how all began. Miyuki’s stories that we present in this study are anchored in her planned and successfully implemented series of lessons on her experiences of the Japanese culture and how she shared her funds of knowledge with her preschool students throughout her student teaching practicum.

Beginning with Personal and Cultural Funds of Knowledge

Miyuki shared in her journal, reflecting on her previous student teaching practicum experiences, that it was difficult for her to build relationships with the cooperating teachers and also with the children because of differences in terms of her culture and language. She wrote, “Being a pre-service teacher in the classroom where the first [dominant] language was different from my own with the classroom teachers who have different cultural background, was a huge challenge and I had many ups and downs” (Journal). However, this practicum was different that, though at first it was never easy, teaching a lesson on her own culture during the first few weeks into her practicum helped to “break the ice” between herself and the children as well as her cooperating teacher. Miyuki wrote the following in her essay:

I began my first lesson on Japanese culture with the book, *Yoko* by Rosemary Wells that talks about diversity through food. This book tells

children to be accepting and respecting of others who are different, to be proud of one's own background, and to be interested in others' backgrounds. Before reading the story, I showed the world map and let the children find the United States as well as Japan. Then, I discussed that I speak a different language; I eat different kinds of foods, and celebrate different holidays while showing pictures of what I usually eat for breakfast in Japan, and asked what was different from what they eat for breakfast. I also talked about different holidays Japanese people celebrate by showing pictures of my family and myself [sic] during the holidays. During our discussion after the read-aloud, the children began to comment and ask questions, "Your country looks very different," "Do you have any family in here?" "Do you have friends in here?" "All of them are in Japan? Do you miss them?" "Do you like New York city?" It was amazing to see how they were able to recognize the distance and differences between the two countries and ask personal questions concerning my emotional well-being. I responded that I liked the city but still missed my friends and family in Japan. Then one student said, "But, now you have friends in here, like us!" I never imagined that sharing my personal background and experiences would ignite such intimate connections with the students. It was such a wonderful moment to see and feel the impact of my lesson on them. Telling my story with the Yoko book helped the children better internalize the message in the book, but also was a powerful experience for me when learning to become a teacher. This introductory lesson also helped me break the ice between my cooperating teacher and myself. As a pre-service teacher from a different country, it was difficult for me to figure out how to close the distance, and how and when I could introduce myself in the midst of the busy classroom schedule.

After this lesson, my cooperating teacher told me that my lesson was a great experience not only for the children but also for her. She also shared her experience traveling to Japan and through such conversation we were able to establish a positive common ground. Though it is not an easy task, I learned that it was important for pre-service teachers to introduce ourselves and to build a rapport with our cooperating teachers by bringing our cultural background and sharing our experiences to learn about each other so that our time in learning to teach under their supervision could become more productive and meaningful.

Miyuki shared in her journal and also during our seminar discussion how excited she was to finally be able to start connecting with the children and the cooperating teacher and mentioned that opening herself to them helped her build close relationships with them. I responded to her by reaffirming her brilliance in creating the literacy lesson that was developmentally, culturally, and emotionally relevant to the children in her classroom as well as being meaningful to her personally (Seminar notes). Teaching young children involves honoring young children's funds of knowledge, their interests, and needs (Dermans-Sparks, 1993-1994;

Moll et al., 1992; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Learning to teach also works in a similar way. In her process of learning to teach, Miyuki successfully found a way to teach and reach the children with diverse interests and needs by bringing and sharing her own personal and cultural funds of knowledge that are interwoven with the interests, curiosity, and emotions of the young children in her classroom.

Searching for and Connecting with Children's Funds of Knowledge

After her very first and successful read-aloud lesson, Miyuki was asked by her cooperating teacher to be in charge of the daily read-aloud, and Miyuki was eager to make the most out of the opportunity. She reflected in her journal,

[Student teaching is] still challenging but this daily read aloud makes my weekend routine of picture book hunting more enjoyable. I'm now spending two hours to find a book for my read aloud every weekend, and when the children clapped their hands after my read aloud, I feel the luxury of being a teacher. (Journal)

This was Miyuki's final practicum course in her teacher education program and she was determined to make the most of it, enjoying the process of developing her teaching skills. She went above and beyond her responsibilities of a pre-service teacher to find the perfect picture books to read to the children and this arduous search rewarded her with deeper connections with them and true satisfaction of becoming a teacher. And this time, Miyuki engaged the children through discussing and bringing real folk arts from her homeland in addition to the picture book. In her essay, she shared how she searched for and connected with the children's funds of knowledge through folk arts:

Since my first read-aloud lesson, story time became one of my routine works in the classroom. I also developed a habit to go to the public library every weekend and spend several hours to find appropriate books I could use for my lessons for story time. The theme for the month was farmers' market so I searched for books that were aligned to the theme but also a bit more creative. I did not want to simply read about farm produce but wanted to broaden their understanding of a farmers market. After searching through the library aisles I picked out the book called *Market Day* by Lois Ehlert. In the book, the author uses folk arts she collected from all over the world to represent a farmers' market. I thought this book would be an interesting book to read and discuss not only for the children to expand their learning of a farmers market to folk arts but also as an opportunity for me to introduce them to some Japanese folk art. I wanted to share more about my cultural background using Japanese folk arts.

I explained to the children that folk arts are hand-made arts by local people and each folk art has a meaning in that country or culture, such as a Japanese daruma tumbling doll, which has a meaning of challenge and resilience. It is made of paper and weighted on the bottom so it always stands up even when being pushed. I showed a daruma doll and demonstrated how it stands up. The children gathered around me and asked, "Can I touch? Can I touch?" I also asked them to talk to their parents or grandparents if they had any folk arts in their homes, and if they did, I would like them to share their stories along with the folk arts. One boy said, "I have something from China and it's very old and it's from my grand grand grand...ma and grand grand grand...pa." They were excited to ask their families and find folk arts at their home.

After this lesson, one of the students brought a Matryoshka doll and shared the doll during "show and tell" in the classroom. She said the Matryoshka doll was from a different culture, Russia, because her grandmother was Russian, and the doll was folk art as "Miyuki said." Some student said he had folk arts at his house, but it was very expensive so he could not bring them to the classroom. He stated, "But I'm sure it's folk arts. My mom told me it's folk arts from France" and he added that his ancestor is French. Reflecting on this lesson I learned the discussion around the book not only exposed the students to my own cultural background but also provided them with an opportunity to explore their own family culture and share it with each other to build a learning community.

This remarkable learning opportunity that Miyuki created also fostered a learning community among the children. After Miyuki shared her daruma doll from Japan and told a story about the doll, she asked the children that she would like to hear their stories and their families' stories. Honoring and showing her genuine interests in the children's funds of knowledge motivated them to search for the folk arts that originated from their own familial cultures and traditions. She reflected in her journal that week,

I've been able to incorporate my cultural background in my [practicum] placement. I really feel this experience is meaningful for me. I feel more bonding with the students than before and I believe this is because that they have started to know me and trust me. (Journal)

Sharing her own funds of knowledge enabled her lesson to become authentic both for her and the children but also created meaningful relationships and trust between them. Miyuki also shared in her journal that later during the week she was told her cooperating teacher extended the lesson to a "show and tell" activity in which the children learned to honor other cultures and traditions and also to value their own as they shared the folk arts from the origin of the country of their own families.

Funds of Knowledge as a Resource for Authentic Inquiry

As Miyuki was concluding her practicum experience, she had a chance to share some pictures of her nephew who lives in Japan and the experiences of other Japanese preschoolers with the children in her practicum classroom. She was surprised by the brilliant minds of the young children and how they built on the discussion on comparing the differences between Japanese preschool culture and American preschool culture to an inquiry into gender issues in preschools. Miyuki explained in her essay:

In my last whole class lesson in my time there in the classroom, I had a chance to show several pictures of my nephew and Japanese preschoolers going to school by a school bus and by walking, and asked the children what were the same and/or different in connection to the unit of study for the month, transportation in New York City. One of the students raised his hand and said, "Same. Because [Raymond] come to school by bus and I walk to school." To expand their understanding of making comparisons, I also showed a picture of Japanese preschoolers having lunch and making murals in the classroom. A student responded that they looked the same and then another boy pointed out, "Why they are all wearing the same clothes? They are all wearing the same clothes, and boys are wearing blue and girls are wearing pink." The students started to share their own ideas about the relationships between colors and gender. I was amazed to see their authentic inquiry occurring from the pictures of Japanese preschoolers and my stories, and it developed a new way to enter into a new conversation.

By sharing my own stories and pictures of my nephew and other Japanese preschoolers, the students were able to make comparisons, ask questions, and learn about different cultures and people who are different from them in a meaningful context. It was a valuable lesson not only for the students but also for me as a pre-service teacher who was trying to learn to become a teacher. It was a powerful moment for me to realize that my own cultural background could become a unique resource for children's learning.

This last lesson Miyuki taught in her practicum site provided an invaluable lesson for herself about the capability of young children's pursuit of inquiry, ignited by her sharing of her own funds of resources. Miyuki reflected in her journal that she used to view herself from a deficit perspective because of her English language abilities. However, in this practicum placement, she was accepted and was respected by the children and her cooperating teacher despite her differences. Miyuki was reinforced and reaffirmed the use of her rich funds of knowledge in her practicum site through the course seminar discussions and the on-going communication with her course instructor/field supervisor via the field visits and reflective journal feedback. Miyuki stated,

During my [previous] student teaching [practical], I always felt my language barrier [was in the way]. Now in my [current] placement, I feel the importance and meaning of what I can bring into the classroom, and this is really meaningful for me. (Journal)

Such positive and authentic practicum experience fortified her to look at herself as a developing teacher from a strength-based perspective and to build her teaching skills on her funds of knowledge as well as the funds of knowledge of the children and the community.

Epilogue

Like the rings that ripple around a rock thrown in a pond, rings of successful dialog that begin in the classroom can ripple outward in ever-larger circles into homes and out into the community.

—Cowhey, 2006, p. 98

With the above quote selected by her, Miyuki reflected in her essay about her last day at her practicum site:

On my last day of practicum in this classroom, some parents talked to me about how I played a role as a catalyst and made a strong influence on their children. One mother told me that her son talked about how he was surprised to hear that Japanese preschoolers did not have snack time in preschool, and she was also curious to know the reason. Another mother told me that her daughter wanted to do a “play date” with me so that she could know more about Japan and see some pictures. She also thanked me for being in the classroom. Another mother told me she wanted to know about the Japanese dessert I made in the classroom because her daughter told her how it was different from their dessert, and even though she did not want to taste it, she told the procedure of making the dessert in detail to her mother. This made me feel that one small step, as a pre-service teacher, made by my funds of knowledge led to a significant step not only to open and broaden the students’ perspectives of different countries but also of their own families. As a pre-service teacher from a different country, I sometimes felt incompetent and thought I was not contributing very much to the children’s learning. However, this classroom experience made me feel that I have valuable assets such as my funds of knowledge and my lived experiences that I could bring to the classroom to enhance not only children’s learning but also my own learning to become a teacher.

For Miyuki, one of the biggest gains from this successful practicum experience is the confidence in her own developing identity as a teacher who has a lot to offer to the children and the classroom community. She seemed to realize that when her teaching practice becomes authentic to her by finding creative and meaningful ways to connect with

the children, they also benefit from this kind of teaching and it could enhance their learning in ways that broadens their perspectives and extends their horizon.

Discussion

While emphasizing how to teach children with diverse backgrounds, there is less attention in teacher education on how to support pre-service teachers who have ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds in their *learning to teach*. Miyuki's story sheds light on what is possible to create such an environment where funds of knowledge of both the pre-service teacher and the children are utilized as resources for meaningful learning. The experience for learning to teach became authentic for Miyuki because she was able to connect with the children by sharing her unique experiences and building close relationships. Furthermore, with support and encouragement from her cooperating teacher and university supervisor, Miyuki was able to engage in the reflective process through seminar discussions and her weekly journals. Throughout this active, continuous, and thoughtful process of learning to teach, Miyuki was able to gain confidence in bringing her funds of knowledge to create a shared space where the children were also excavating and exploring their own funds of knowledge within and beyond the classroom curriculum.

Educating diverse children must begin within teacher education where pre-service teachers are navigating and exploring varied ways of teaching and learning. As told in Miyuki's stories, one way to approach teacher education for diverse learners is for teacher educators to be mindful of creating a "learning to teach" environment that is open for their pre-service teachers to bring their own funds of knowledge, utilize them as valuable and official resources for their teaching and learning, and engage in critical reflections on their unique processes of learning to teach. We must understand and acknowledge that our lived experiences greatly shape and often enrich the ways in which we teach and learn.

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