

TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTIONS ON PERSPECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: PROVIDING A LEAP FORWARD IN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND BELONGING IN PRACTICE (Paper)

ABSTRACT

Qualitative methods were used to analyze reflection statements from candidates in a children's literature course, which was refocused to include intentionality and reflective practice around diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and perspective consciousness. This research demonstrates leveraging perspective consciousness in preparation programs improves acceptance and compassion, potentially impacting their future students.

1. Introduction

This research paper describes the results of the integration of perspective consciousness as a pedagogical lens integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging through an inquiry-based design in a children's literature course for preservice school librarian candidates, transcending the scope of traditional approaches to teaching children's literature courses. By leveraging perspective consciousness as a pedagogical framework, candidates are provided experiential learning opportunities and tools for becoming more aware of their lived experience and that of others. The intentionality in using this lens assists candidates in becoming aware of their perspectives and unrecognized limitations which, upon discovery, they consistently described as an "eye-opening experience." Blintt states, "Students [including school librarians] seeing themselves in the stories they read to foster a sense of belonging, recognition, and most of all, validation, is crucial - representation matters" (2020, p. 1). Candidate reflection statements provide evidence of their realizations and expectations of how perspective consciousness impacts their future practice.

2. Objectives

This research aimed to capture the change in school librarian candidates' worldviews of self and others through the lens of perspective consciousness and to understand how candidates expect this new awareness will expand their future practice. The data illuminate the transformational change in candidates' cultural awareness and their belief that they can actively change the learning environment by transcending their egocentric worldviews to expand the influence of their libraries, ensuring students can accept and engage with others unlike themselves.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research relies on Vygotsky's foundational Theory of Socio-Cultural Development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Vygotsky maintained that consciousness-raising through reflection supports meaning-making and contributes to the intentional consideration of alternative approaches in understanding one's world. The authors suggest that perspective consciousness has a foundation in individuals' meaning making during reflection. Critical reflection inherently contemplates alternatives and provides opportunities for additional or alternative practices or

beliefs, such as expressions of values and self we observe in others, particularly those of other cultures, ethnicities, religions, identities, and more.

Perspective consciousness is defined as:

...an awareness of and appreciation for other images of the world and that a person's worldview is neither universally shared, nor necessarily right, yet may be profoundly different. It is the realization that an individual's worldview is both a matter of conscious opinions and ideas and, more importantly, to subconscious evaluations, conceptions and unexamined assumptions. Perspectives are shaped by ethnic, religious, and differences in age, sex, and social status, among many other factors. (Burnoff, 2004, p. 3)

The theory of perspective consciousness provides the frame for expanding the impact of this children's literature course. The goals for the inclusion of perspective consciousness were: (a) to enhance candidates' appreciation for the development of richly diverse collections; (b) to develop within candidates an awareness of their own perspectives regarding self and others; and (c) to cultivate candidates' understanding, acceptance, and compassion for others' cultures, values, and lived experiences.

4. Methods

Candidate reflection statements provided the data for this research. The data from five iterations of course reflection statements, with 54 participants, were analyzed. Qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the resulting themes (Creswell, 2018). The researchers followed the six-step process for thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), including peer calibration in developing coding. The reflection statements supplied tangible evidence of student transformation in their teaching and collection development approaches, including providing diverse literature in their school libraries; recognizing how the skills and knowledge gained will impact their future practice; and acknowledging changes in their perspective consciousness. Additionally, the research garnered evidence on the value of reflection in improving school librarians' future practice.

5. Key Findings and Observations

The analysis of the data resulted in two main themes: transformation in student perspectives, and the impact of perspective consciousness and future practice. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards asserts reflections are necessary for allowing teachers to focus on advancing equity, diversity, and fairness within their teaching practice (2021).

Transformation in Student Perspectives

Student reflections provide evidence of knowledge gained as having shifted candidates' thinking regarding diverse literature, and perspective consciousness. This assignment is a summative task, asking students to think critically about their personal perspectives as well as their role as professional school librarians within the learning landscape. Student comments serve as direct

evidence in documenting this transformation. Indeed, most students' reflections demonstrated their transformation in perspective in strong ways such as "mind shift" and "eye-opening."

Student quotes that exemplify the transformation they recognized in their own perspectives, practice, and communication were selected. One student shifted her collection development process, noting, "I have had an entire mind shift in how I will select books."

Another student recognized her ability to think critically about ways to communicate the need for diverse literature and her own thinking around informed collection development, stating:

I now have an even deeper understanding of WHY it is so important and what I can do when discussing books with colleagues and students. I have learned and grown so much through the course of this class and have had a mind shift in how I will look for and select books moving forward. I'm no longer just grabbing a book off the shelf and sharing it without previewing it with a magnifying-glass-like attitude. (Student 2)

Reflecting on her personal perspective transformation, one student shared her understanding of the subliminal influence of illustrations. She also commented on the ability of literature to nurture children's acceptance of others and their feelings of belonging:

No one should be made to feel invisible. I now look at and study the illustrations with a keener eye. I want to make sure there aren't any biases or stereotypes within the pictures. I am also very cognizant of story lines and relationships between characters and lifestyles of the people represented in the stories. I am considering how books affect self-awareness and social standing for students (how they see themselves in others). I have found that I am even looking at books with animals as characters with a different light. I'm looking for the lesson and theme within books and considering how they will impact students. I'm looking for mirror, window, and sliding glass door opportunities and making sure that the books I share are nurturing the minds of young people. (Student 27)

The following student's remark indicates her understanding of the power of literature to provide children with the ability to see themselves reflected in what they read and how they see others:

My starting point at the beginning of this course was a book is a book, and any book is good for a child to read. I thought getting a child to read was the only important issue. After this course, I now see the importance of who is being represented in the books we are showing our children. (Student 34)

Reflecting on her own lived experience, her ability to recognize the transformation in her mindset, and the growth in her skills to critically analyze new materials, one student commented:

What has changed in my mindset about what a "good" book means. It's not just a good storyline. It's a good book when I can relate and put myself in the book, effortlessly. Now, I feel sad because as a student I did not know what I was missing out on and I probably didn't enjoy reading because of this very fact. This course will most definitely influence my choices for my collections in the future. I also did not realize how many

resources a teacher or parent could find online until this class. These resources will benefit me both in my personal life and my work life. Thank you! (Student 31)

The researchers recognize these statements provide powerful evidence of the students' ability to engage in metacognition on their own mental constructs and perspectives which will create a pivotal change in their lives and in their future professional practice.

Perspective Consciousness and Future Practice

As mentioned earlier, perspective consciousness is the recognition that our reality differs widely from that of others, and that their perspectives are equally as valuable as our own. Triggering this realization among candidates is pivotal in empowering them to see the nuances in life stories, which include the role, identity and positionality of characters, the portrayal of images, and the integrated diversity (or lack thereof) within the tale. Leveraging this newly widened lens guides school librarians in collection curation and in practice which is inclusive of a global society. The following statement indicates the effectiveness of the course in this awakening. A student reflected, "When I think about the books I want to bring into my classroom I now reflect on what books will help my students see themselves or help them build empathy" (Student 40). Another speaks hopefully, saying, "I want to make sure I am making all students feel included and that they are represented. I enjoyed this class. It made me dig deeper into my own preconceived notions about subjects and explore them" (Student 52). Others stated:

What has made a great impact on me is how important it is to have mirror and window books so that students can see themselves reflected in them but also learn about others through them. This course has, literally, awakened my perspective consciousness which also made a great impact on me. I have gained so much knowledge throughout this course, and it has made me want to be a librarian even more. (Student 6)

At the beginning, I thought I knew a lot about different literature, but I realized that was not true. My goal is to create a space where students feel like they can find what they need in the library and feel safe to ask questions and feel like they belong. Somewhere they learn more about themselves and grow and become culturally sensitive and conscious as they go through life. (Student 22)

I hadn't really thought much about what characters look like in books and the importance of making sure my students are exposed to books that have characters that look like them. I think this may be in part due to the fact that I am white, so I never experienced not finding books that had characters that looked like me because white is the default. (Student 19)

We must find books for underrepresented populations, so that all students feel that they are represented in books. This would include books that feature characters with disabilities, LGBTQ books, books that break gender stereotypes, and books that showcase different religions and cultural backgrounds. As a future librarian, I will make it a personal goal to make sure that I have a diverse collection of books. (Student 5)

I'm anxious to get back to my classroom library and go through my book titles. I know I have a somewhat diverse collection but there is much to be done and added. I leave this course feeling enlightened and thankful for all the new learning. I know I will be a better reading teacher this year and this will be a huge part of my future career as a librarian. (Student 41)

I feel that today's climate is very volatile and that if we as educators want to make a change it needs to start with the books we have for our students to read. We need to start conversations about race, injustices, and differences that allow our students to learn from them and hopefully when they grow up they can make better decisions and bring about the much needed change the country needs. (Student 46)

Adding perspective consciousness and an intentional focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in this course catalyzed student transformation in perspectives and led to a paradigm shift in our school librarian candidates' understanding of the need to pursue diverse collections and practices dynamically.

6. Discussion

Student comments provide evidence that they have broadened and deepened their understanding of diversity within literature. They also perceive the powerful opportunity that school librarians have to act as change agents in creating a climate of inclusiveness, and promoting belonging for all students, teachers, staff, and families. By playing a part in building an accepting community within their schools, librarians recognize their students will carry this attitude of acceptance and honoring of differences into their future, truly transforming the world in which we live.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The change in this children's literature course provided an active application of the skills school librarians will perform as professionals. Realistic practice creates a mental acuity regarding the inclusive lens needed to provide the literature encompassing our communities' worldviews and more. Introducing students to practice, reflection, and discussion with others acts as the cornerstone to the realization that others are inherently different and that their perspectives are equally important, contributing to the richness of a more complete world perspective. The course focuses not only on knowledge acquisition, but rather on building skills and conscious awareness, truly activating the potential of learning to create informed and enlightened school librarians. The library can be an epochal change in school cultures with such exemplary practitioners.

Based on our findings, the researchers recommend adding active skill development through hands-on practice focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging to school librarian preparation coursework and integrating perspective consciousness as a theoretical framework in children's and young adult literature courses. Thinking about our own perspectives and truly listening and amplifying the voices of others must be done with intentionality. The intentional embedding of perspective consciousness within course activities provides students a way to examine their own perspectives and practices, leading to the recognition of needed adaptations

and changes to their skill set to meet our diverse schools and communities. Continued research is warranted to ascertain if other university courses are similarly adapted to result in equivalent findings. In addition, the researchers plan to expand the research, following candidates into their professional roles and gathering data on the continued use of perspective consciousness to create inclusive collections and programming within their libraries and impact on school culture.

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