

NORTH CAROLINA MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION
JOURNAL

Kathleen Roney, Ed.D., Editor
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Fall 2011

Volume 26

Number 1

**Developing Global Awareness Through Self Awareness:
A Middle Grades Multicultural Research Experience**

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Introduction

Middle grades educators in North Carolina today are faced with an increasingly diverse group of young adolescents. According to US Census data, five of the state's six largest cities are now majority minority, with more Blacks and Latinos than Whites. The Latino population alone grew nearly 1500% from 1980 to 2010; they now make up 8.4% of the state's population, up from 4.7% in just 2000. In addition, the states rural and suburban counties have also become increasingly diverse; with 16 of the state's 100 counties reporting more than 10% of the population is Latino. In 1990, not a single county had more than 5% Latino population. Now, 63 counties do. These rapid demographic changes can have great impact on our classrooms, schools, and communities.

As the population of North Carolina has continued to grow increasingly diverse, the teacher demographics have not reflected that shift. As of 2008, nearly 75% of North Carolina's teachers were White, with the overwhelming majority (80%) female (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Education Statistics Access System [NCDPI ESAS]). As teacher educators, we may hope for the teacher demographics to shift in ways that reflect the larger population, yet we continue to see that the majority of our

teacher candidates entering our programs fit the national, historical demographic. At the institution where I work, the overwhelming majority of candidates for education are White, middle class, females in their 20s. In the past two years I have had only two African American students. I have had no students of any other ethnic or cultural background.

Thus, as a teacher educator, I am faced with the reality that the demographics of teacher candidates and in-service teachers are much slower to catch up with the student and community demographic changes. If I strive to prepare all teachers for diverse school contexts, I must find ways to help them understand the complexities of their classrooms and the individuals in them.

Theoretical Framework

This work is heavily grounded in the tenets of *This We Believe*, which emphasizes characteristics of culture and community, including an environment that is safe, inclusive, and supportive where students have adult advocates (NMSA, 2010). Mutual respect, equity, and acceptance are characteristics necessary for effective middle schools. In addition, all young adolescents should have an adult advocate who “assumes special responsibility for supporting that student’s academic and personal development” (NMSA, p. 35). It is essential that young adolescents have teachers who model good character, understand their students’ individual needs and backgrounds, and genuinely care about students and guide them in their development. As *This We Believe* attests, these teachers must receive ongoing professional development to achieve these goals. The course that I teach is designed to help middle level educators develop the necessary self-awareness and global awareness to achieve the goals of culture and community set forth by *This We Believe*.

This research also draws on the framework for 21st Century Learning, which suggests that students should be taught in ways that foster critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration (North Carolina Business Committee for Education, 2010). I believe that before teachers are able to achieve those outcomes with their middle grades students, they must possess those skills themselves. Therefore, as I developed a course specifically for middle grades educators, I focused on the 21st century learning theme of global awareness.

Global awareness, as defined by the 21st Century Learning Partnership, includes learning from and working collaboratively with individuals from diverse cultures, religions, and lifestyles in a mutually respectful, open way (P21 Common Core Toolkit, 2010, p. 38). Global awareness requires understanding other countries, cultures, languages, and ways of viewing the world. My position is that global awareness is developed through experience, exposure, and reflection. I believe that before global awareness is possible, educators must first look inward and examine their own beliefs, assumptions, biases, and influences. Then, as they grow in self-awareness, they can begin the journey to becoming more globally aware.

This inquiry is further guided by social constructivism and critical social theory literature. Social constructivists view knowledge as constructed through interactions with others. This construction takes place against a backdrop of context, including “historical and sociocultural dimensions” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). This view of knowledge is furthered by theorists from the critical social theory perspective. Critical social theory is concerned with uncovering the taken-for-granted assumptions and normalized ways of thinking that serve the dominant class in silencing and dehumanizing those identified as “other” (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Brown, 2004). Relatedly, educational theorists have argued that critical reflection is the hallmark of reflective practitioners and at the heart of effective educational practices (e.g. Larrivee, 2000; Walkington, Christensen, & Kock, 2001). Critically reflective teachers strive to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, values, biases, and experiences. The project I describe below strives to provide opportunities for middle level educators to do exactly that – examine and investigate their thoughts, words, and practices in order to gain self-awareness and be in a better position to empower students to do the same. Additionally, they are given opportunities to learn from other cultures and communities and take the first, perhaps hesitant, steps toward increased global awareness.

Overview of the Project

The course in which this Multicultural Research Experience project takes place is a Masters level course specifically offered to middle grades education majors. The course is typically the first, and only, course emphasizing issues of diversity in their program. Often, in diversity courses and in courses that emphasize self-reflection and challenge, students experience feelings of discomfort, guilt, resistance, denial, or even anger (Garmon, 2004; Milner, 2005; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). In order to lessen that possibility, I designed the course to be progressively more challenging, creating a staircase, if you will, toward global awareness with each piece of the project a single step on that upward journey. Still, students have expressed discomfort, anger, and frustration; yet all ultimately see the value in taking each step, as difficult as it seems in the moment.

The project begins with an online questionnaire developed by Teaching Tolerance (www.teachingtolerance.org/tdsi). The survey was designed as a professional development tool to help create positive, respectful school and classroom environments where teachers work effectively with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. My students complete this survey and submit their answers, both to me and to the website. They then enter their responses into a program called Wordle (www.wordle.net), which enlarges the words that appear most often. This allows them to see which words or ideas they used most in their responses and they can begin to examine and reflect on their philosophies of education (see Figure 1).

Next, students complete a personal and teaching history paper based on a series of prompts that emphasize diversity but allow freedom to customization to their unique circumstances and histories. The overarching prompt asks students to examine their own history of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, gender, or cognitive diversity and how they

view particular groups of students. Although some have struggled with what is “appropriate” to write, they often find the process very valuable, stating that they have not ever had to think in these ways before. The key here is for them to examine not just their own lives, but how their personal and teaching histories influence and impact their teaching and their beliefs, feelings, and assumptions about students.

Students next complete a 45-60 minute observation experience at a location where they expect to see interactions among diverse individuals. They are only there to watch, listen, learn, and to begin to take note of how different groups or individuals interact as well as to explore places in their communities that they have typically avoided or simply did not know existed. Afterward, they write up a reflection of their observations, their thoughts, feelings, surprises, etc. Many approach the observation anticipating negative interactions among different ethnic or cultural groups and are disappointed to observe “nothing” ultimately. We discuss what they anticipated and why, illuminating some of the misconceptions and prejudices they hold.

The project now becomes more challenging, asking students to put themselves in the position of a “minority,” finding a location in their community where they are somehow different from those around them. They are expected to now interact and write a reflection, addressing the rationale for their choice and what about that particular location made them a “minority.” They summarize the experience, discuss their feelings, thoughts, and findings, and address how their own beliefs, biases, assumptions, etc. may have influenced their experience in some way. They articulate what they learned about the people/culture/community, and, perhaps most importantly, what they learned about themselves as a result.

The next step on the journey toward global awareness is an interview with someone in their community or life who is “diverse” in some way. They conduct the interview and submit a transcript and written reflection of the experience. Many times, students choose a family, a couple, or a small group of students. They tend to most enjoy this part of the project because it gives them the “excuse” to ask questions they have always wanted to ask but have feared would offend others or be perceived as racist or otherwise biased. Having the freedom to have open, honest conversations with people who are so different from them is something they find very rewarding.

The next step is the most difficult for many students, as they are asked to draw on their increased awareness of themselves and their communities. They are asked to state their biases, beliefs, assumptions, etc. and then complete a plan of action for change. They can focus on self, friends/family/community/colleagues/students, or even the broader society. This is a time when students begin to express fear of isolation, rejection, or failure, especially when hoping to change those close to them. However, as they develop timelines and address hindrances or difficulties they may face and how they will respond to them, many express feelings of empowerment. They feel they better the world, even if it is something small just within themselves and they see the possibility for passing along what they have learned and experienced to help others become more self-aware and globally aware.

The final piece of the project is a presentation to their colleagues and a final reflection on how the series of steps they have taken have impacted them personally and professionally. These reflections often take them back to the beginning of the semester and allow them to track their own growth. Many reflect back on their naïveté and are surprised or embarrassed to think they once thought in the ways that they did. The growth they see in themselves demonstrates that we can all learn and grow and change; they seem to leave with a sense of hope that the problems of our society can be solved, one step at a time.

Methods

Data collected from each participant include the entirety of the work completed for the course. Students were all given the chance to opt out from the study, but in five semesters nobody has taken that chance. Thus, the data collected from each participant includes the entire Multicultural Learning Experience project as well as their reading responses and discussion responses throughout the semester. Data from these sources were coded to identify themes and develop assertions about particular individuals' learning and growth. Coding also allowed me to uncover broad patterns, relationships, or categories across individual cases (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Analysis of student reflections, experiences, and responses allowed me to compare and contrast emergent themes to better understand the whole and reassure myself that the events and themes were not "wholly idiosyncratic" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 172).

In the past academic year, I taught two sections of this course and had 28 students complete the Multicultural Research Experience Project. They each chose to focus on areas of diversity that were somehow personally relevant. The constraints of space allow me to only highlight one student voice here; thus, I have chosen a student who demonstrated, as well as reported, that he experienced significant growth and changed his thinking because of his experiences with the project.

One Student's Voice of Change

Anthony is one of two boys in a devoutly religious, close-knit family. When his brother came out to him, it caused a rather large rift in their small family. His brother has been completely ostracized by their parents, even though he is a successful, well-educated professional with a stable relationship and home life. Anthony, a young, married, middle school history teacher with one child, has become the "golden boy" in his family because of his lifestyle, his sexual orientation, and his choice to follow in his father's footsteps, teaching in the same rural community in which he grew up and in which his father was also a teacher. His soft-spoken, kind demeanor and his rural, religious upbringing made it difficult, at first, for him to express himself openly. Anthony wanted to use his project to understand his brother's life and begin the process of bringing his family back together.

Anthony's early work in the course emphasized relationships, making connections with students, and considering their individual personalities when designing instruction. While his survey responses and related Wordle clearly centered on students (see Figure 1), his personal and teaching history began to reveal a depth of thinking, a criticality of reflection, and a stance of challenging what he had been taught in his youth. The major influences on his view of diversity came from family and religion. "My parents taught me from a young age that all people are different and that is okay" (Personal History, September, 2010, p. 1). "Another influence on my life in terms of diversity has come from my faith; the Bible teaches to treat others as you would wish to be treated and that everyone was created in the image of God" (p. 1). He discloses, "A more recent event that challenged my views on diversity was when my brother first told me he was gay. This was a huge challenge to my belief systems and forced me to deal with yet another side of diversity" (p. 1). These themes intertwined throughout Anthony's entire project, culminating in an increased understanding of his brother, himself, his family, and his students.

For his initial observation, Anthony went to a gay nightclub. He found that the experience "forced" him to "be even more keenly aware of lifestyle differences, and my concepts of right/wrong and holy/sinful have been radically affected" (p. 1). He found that his apprehension was based on "stereotypes and biases I have developed over the years" and that the experience was ultimately "not as bad as I built it up to be in my mind" (p. 1). The experience raised questions he felt unable to adequately answer; therefore, he returned for his "minority" experience, this time free to interact, ask questions, and spend time with openly gay friends. This experience caused some discomfort. Anthony, as the "token straight man," felt barraged with questions about how straight men view gay men. Nervous about saying the wrong thing, he achieved an understanding of how people are often asked to be "a representative for everyone like me, picking my brain to gauge if other straight men might be as tolerant or accepting" (Reflection #2, p. 2). He realized after the experience that he only felt like a minority because of his false misconceptions and assumptions. "Let me be clear that when I felt like a minority, it wasn't because any other person was treating me differently.... I was treated with respect, kindness, and acceptance" (p. 3-4). In reflecting on the experience, Anthony began to see growth in his thinking; "I feel like I've broken through some of the boundaries I had previously set for myself in what I felt was acceptable in the way of lifestyles and how people choose to live and love" (p. 4).

Building on his positive experiences, Anthony interviewed his brother and his partner, an experience that "opened my eyes to the fact that these problems are not very far away from me. If I sit back and ignore one of the biggest problems in our country, the prejudice and discrimination of homosexual people, then I am directly affecting my own blood, and this realization does not sit well with me" (Reflection #3, p. 2). The interview experience drove Anthony to reflect on his own biases and his parents' intolerance. He began to question their reasoning, their words, their actions, their beliefs, and what he had held as "truth" throughout his life. He felt he could no longer look to his parents as an example "because they are a source of constant negative judgment and disapproval.

I have to be the example of acceptance and tolerance; I have to be the ‘ally’ that my brother has in his own family” (p. 3). He concludes his interview reflection,

I have learned through this interview and experience, as cliché as it sounds, I have to be the change I wish to see in others. If I want to facilitate acceptance in others, I can start with my parents and stand up for my brother. Hopefully a small bit of family acceptance can spread and eventually a whole community and country will accept the diverse lifestyles of others (p. 4).

In his final reflection and presentation, sharing these realizations was difficult and Anthony openly wept over the divisiveness of his family, the struggles his brother faced daily, and the uphill battle that he knew must start with him. Despite the strong emotions the project engendered, Anthony was committed to making changes within himself and those around him. His plan of action and his final reflection took the lessons learned from his experiences back to his classroom. He planned to “challenge students on their beliefs when they make discriminatory remarks” and to “intervene when students bully others about their differences” (Plan of Action, p. 1). As he articulates in his final reflection,

I can make sure that my classroom is an open and accepting environment where students feel they do not need to worry so much about their differences or how they fit in. I can give them opportunities to explore and embrace their differences. The only way you can be this accepting is to know who you are and understand that no one else can change who you are unless you let them. I think fear is the greatest opponent to acceptance. The best way to help is to change thinking; make differences acceptable. That is the greatest change that can take place (p. 2)

Conclusion

Middle grades is a time when students explore and develop their social, moral, sexual, ethnic, cultural, and academic identities. Middle grades teachers must understand the diversity their students bring to the classroom as well as the beliefs, assumptions, and biases they themselves bring that may impact their interactions with students of particular backgrounds. Courses that push teacher candidates to assess their beliefs and rethink the way they approach ALL students are more necessary than ever. This course, project, and study attempt to foster critical reflection, self-awareness, and global awareness in middle grades educators. Many of the students come to realizations that are often difficult and challenge their long-held beliefs and perspectives of the world. Anthony is just one example; yet, his journey toward understanding himself, his family, his brother, his students, and his professional and social responsibility were powerful and moving. His laughter, tears, and questions throughout the semester illustrated the potential for growth and change. He will no doubt be that “ally” for his brother that he hopes to be, as well as for young adolescents who are searching for their own identities. With educators like Anthony, the hope for a more accepting world is renewed. His

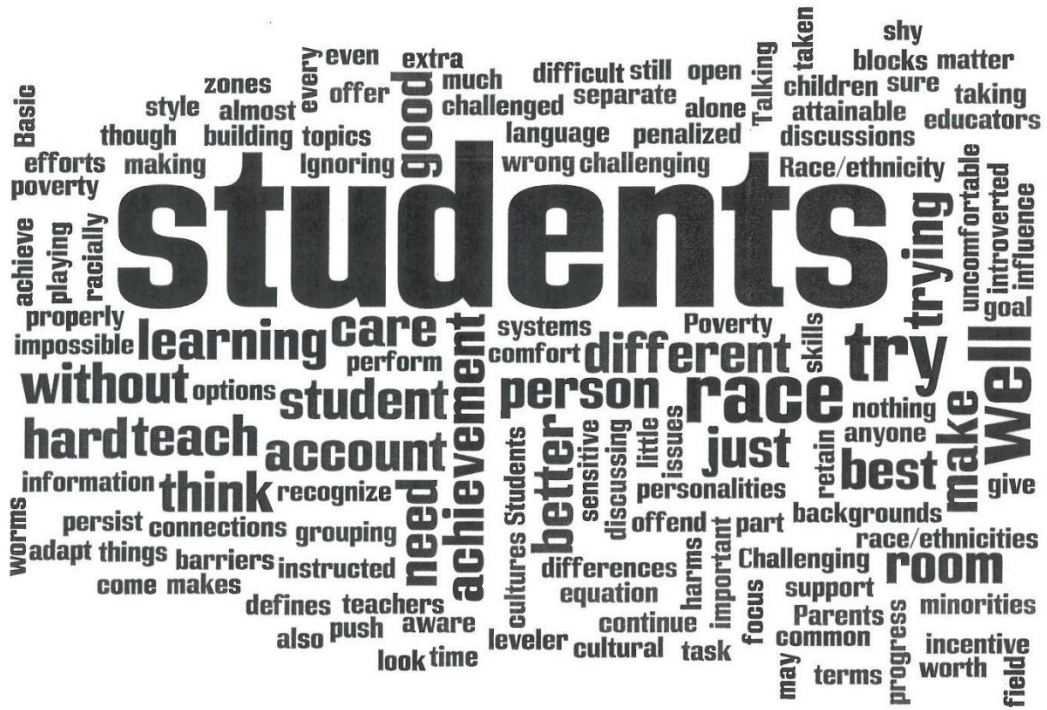
passion and commitment to creating a better world for his students, his family, and his community are things we can all strive to emulate as educators and as citizens of an increasingly diverse and globalized society.

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Figure 1.



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