Understanding the Syntax of School Life for English Learners: A Study of Preservice Teacher Narratives Regarding Issues of Social Justice

Background/Purpose
Previous scholarship has uncovered much about what preservice teachers learn through their participation in school-based communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2003). Through their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), as well as experiences during their own K-12 studenting days, preservice teachers investigate many aspects of schools. Despite developments in research on teachers’ expanding knowledge, relatively little is known about how preservice teachers’ own K-12 studenting experiences and field-based observations impact their thinking about issues of social justice and equity in the classroom. Therefore, scholars have begun to appeal for more research centered on preservice teachers’ observations of and interactions with historically marginalized students and, concurrently, how these events are impacting their developing teacher knowledge (Yoon, 2008).

Our objective with this paper is to report findings from an ongoing narrative-based study aimed at understanding the developing storied knowledge of preservice teachers regarding issues of social justice and equity from their own K-12 studenting days and/or field-based observations. Specifically, the focused analysis of this paper centered around understanding the developing storied knowledge of preservice teachers in relation to their experiences with English Learners.

Theoretical Framework
This project follows 20 years of productive work in narrative methodology where much has been learned about the promise of story in our attempts to understand teaching and teacher knowledge (see, for example, Clandinen and Connelly, 2000). Also in this time, researchers have developed a framework which utilizes many forms of narrative in order to focus more explicitly on how observed classroom events are “storied” by novice teachers and what they learn from these stories (see for example, Carter, 1993, 2008, 2009, 2010; Stoehr & Carter, 2011; Carter & Stoehr, 2012). However, we have come to understand that much still needs to be learned about how teachers’ stories direct and shape their own actions in classrooms and concomitantly impact the learning and lives of their own students. One promising area of study that has been largely unaddressed using narrative methodology focuses on how preservice teachers’ (PST) experiences with English Learners (EL) impacts their developing teacher knowledge.

Previous large-scale studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have focused on issues of social injustice for ELs, particularly regarding language, race, and culture (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Garcia-Nevaraz, Stafford & Arias, 2010). A bleak picture has begun to emerge regarding the inequitable treatment of English Learners in the classroom. To actively combat acts of social injustice, a call has been issued to “place equity front and center” in classrooms and teacher education programs (Nieto, 2000; Nieto & McDonough, 2011).
One area of promising scholarship involves investigating how preservice teachers’ personal characteristics and experiences, along with teacher education programs, impact developing teacher knowledge and practice (Zeichner, 2011). Previous survey and statistical studies have found that preservice teachers question their ability to effectively teach and build relationships with English Learners (Karabenick & Noda, 2010). Additionally, the number of English Learners in schools continues to rise while their achievement remains relatively low (Fry, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). In spite of this, there is a noticeable dearth of research addressing preservice teachers’ experiences with and storied knowledge of English Learners in general education classrooms.

In an effort to actively contribute to the call for innovative scholarship to place equity at the forefront of educational concerns, we have designed a line of narrative inquiry to investigate preservice teacher experiences with English Learners to better understand novice teachers’ storying of classroom observations.

Data Sources
This investigation is part of a multi-year effort at a large Research 1 University; the larger project is aimed at understanding the developing storied knowledge of novice teachers (proposal author 2009, 2010; proposal author, 2011; proposal author, 2013). In this work, we previously uncovered themes of regret in narratives related to the inequitable treatment of marginalized student populations (see, for example, proposal author, 2012). For this paper, we focus on one of these particular populations: English Learners in classroom settings.

Methods and Context
Participants in this study were enrolled in the first course in the teacher preparation professional sequence. This course focuses on general methods of teaching and classroom processes and instruction. Attached to this 4-unit course is a 45-hour field component, where students are provided various assignments aimed at reflection on course content and its application to teaching events. Two major assignments were designed weekly with a narrative focus in mind: (1) well-remembered events (WRE’s) from the field (written and detailed descriptions of well remembered events of preservice teachers’ own choosing from their field-placement observations and/or teaching); and/or (2) personal well-remembered events, i.e., stories from preservice teachers’ own school days, which they found themselves thinking about often or retelling.

From a larger corpus of over 1500 narratives, we have analyzed a subset of 125 of these narratives imbued with themes of injustice for English Learners. For purposes of this study, these well-remembered narratives, personal WRE’s, and oral retellings were reviewed and carefully analyzed in order to identify standard analytical narrative elements (characters, sequence, plot, pattern of action) embedded in the texts. Using iterative and thematic qualitative analysis techniques, including constant comparison methods (see Bogdan and Biklen, 2006), attention then turned to a detailed documentation of thematic elements in these stories with possible implications for the development of a socially just curriculum for teacher education.
Results

Preservice teachers wrote over 125 well-remembered narratives about English Learners drawn from their own K-12 studenting days and/or field-based observations. These narratives were replete with EL feelings of isolation and frustration as well as PST feelings of confusion and powerlessness. From our narrative analysis, five distinct plot patterns were derived from preservice teachers’ stories. Due to proposal limitations, we will only be able to briefly outline these patterns here, however, a richly rendered analysis will be provided in our extended paper.

Plot Patterns:

1. “In their best interest”: Isolation of English Learners

These narratives focused on English Learners who were intentionally or inadvertently isolated from their peers by a teacher in an effort to provide individual instruction. In one representative narrative, the preservice teacher described the profound impact this isolation had on an English Learner’s confidence and motivation. In her words, “As if he didn’t stand out enough with sounding different and having a different background, I felt the way Mrs. Stevens separated him from his class was not helping him in any way.” In her narrative, the preservice teacher explains that the practicing teacher chose to pull the student from group work so that she could provide him with more focused instruction; however, her well-intentioned motives did not mitigate the sense of isolation and embarrassment experienced by the student.

These narratives, taken together, portrayed a puzzling predicament for preservice teachers. Some expressed support of these kinds of actions because it was “in their (ELs) best interest”, but others felt that the isolation was counterproductive. In other words, what might appear to “be in their best interest” had possible serious and unintended consequences.

2. “Living in a fishbowl”: Displays of Frustration

A second narrative theme involved the prominent and often public reaction patterns of students and teachers toward English Learners. In these narratives, teachers would initially make concerted attempts to translate or understand English Learner’s questions. However, feeling the pressure of working with one student and the risk of losing the rest of the class in the same moment, the outcome was often to abandon the assistance to English Learners. Preservice teachers’ stories cataloged the shared sense of teacher frustration coupled with the defeat of English Learners under the strain of language barriers.

Preservice teachers’ interpretations of these events, however, were quite varied. Some expressed feelings of anger or sadness over what they felt were inappropriate teacher responses while other empathized with the teacher and wondered what they would do in a similar situation.
3. “Hope he doesn’t show up for testing”: English Learners as Test Scores

These narratives focused on English Learner achievement on high-stakes tests. In one illustrative event a preservice teacher came to an uneasy understanding of the role that assessments can play in a teacher’s and student’s school life. During a playground conversation between the PST, her mentor teacher, and another teacher, it was revealed that an English Learner had recently returned to Mexico for a month. Both practicing teachers bemoaned this student’s frequent absences and went so far as to blame the family for his poor achievement. Yet, in the end, the practicing teachers stated that they hoped the student would not return before the state mandated testing was given so as to “not affect their average negatively.”

Initially the preservice teacher was appalled by this conversation, but ultimately she attempted to excuse their behavior because of testing pressures. This reversal illustrates a larger pattern in these narratives, where preservice teachers attempted to align their developing knowledge with state expectations. This appeared to be an uneasy alignment and was potentially quite costly both to the English Learner and to the developing understandings of the preservice teachers.

4. “Good as it’s going to get”: Classroom struggles

This plot pattern addressed instances where preservice teachers observed practicing teachers who, in effect, compromised the integrity of the curriculum for English Learners by reducing or abandoning academic task demands. These narratives described how practicing teachers often announced novel or interesting academic work that was routinely abandoned or never actually enacted when English Learners’ lack of understanding about the work prevented their immediate engagement.

In one particularly illustrative well-remembered event, the practicing teacher unsuccessfully attempted to engage a group of ELs. During seatwork, the PST observed the group of English Learners, only one of whom was able to partially complete the assignment in the time given. The preservice teacher who wrote this narrative felt strongly that her mentor teacher “did not provide adequate support” as she did not require them to complete the assignment or even focus on the directions because she knew they did not understand what to do.

These narratives were replete with instances of English Learners attempting to work in an environment where their learning was often abandoned. In one preservice teacher’s assessment of these common scenarios, she felt this abandonment was due to practicing teachers unvoiced feelings that this was as “good as it’s going to get”.

5. “I felt powerless and impotent”: First Experiences

A preponderance of preservice teachers’ narratives contained poignant thematic elements about their growing anxiety and feelings of being “unsure”, and “incapable” in
their ability to work with English Learners effectively. Furthermore, preservice teachers expressed feelings of “shock” and “impotence” during their first classroom interaction with English Learners. The frank emotions expressed in this subset of narratives suggest that as preservice teachers interact with English Learners, especially for the first time, they leave their field experiences feeling underprepared and unsure how to proceed.

Scholarly Significance

The narratives we analyzed provide a disconcerting picture of English Learners’ academic, social and linguistic experiences in classrooms today. Echoing previous scholarship, our narrative study suggests that English Learners are still struggling to find socially just and equitable experiences in the classrooms where they attempt to learn the tools to thrive.

Through our focused analysis, we have found that preservice teachers are attempting to integrate these experiences within their developing storied teacher knowledge. The “quality of their experiences” (Dewey, 1938) suggests that there is an ongoing need to develop more engaging and effective pedagogical practices for English Learners. Moreover, this need extends to developing promising practices in the preparation of teachers, practices that will ultimately move us forward to correct the inequities presently experienced by English Learners.

Can we bring community to the lives of students who have learned in solitude? Can we give voice where there has been silence? Ultimately our work causes us to ask and answer: Can we largely reshape the syntax of school experiences for English Learners?

References

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2006). Qualitative research in (validation) and qualitative (inquiry) studies.


