
August 2022

Utilizing Counter Narratives to Develop Culturally Sustaining, Critically Conscious Preservice Teacher Practitioners

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Recommended Citation

Wolff, David (2022) "Utilizing Counter Narratives to Develop Culturally Sustaining, Critically Conscious Preservice Teacher Practitioners," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol28/iss2/1>

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Abstract

The content areas that get most attention in an elementary classroom include mathematics and English/Language Arts (ELA), and little time is devoted to other content areas like social studies. Preservice elementary teachers can learn to maximize instructional time by integrating social studies content in the ELA block. Using counternarratives, preservice teachers can learn to use children's literature to teach multiple perspectives to the dominant narrative in the textbooks. This article shares strategies to present counternarratives and examples of children's literature that can be used in an elementary classroom.

Keywords: instructional strategies, elementary, preservice teachers, social studies methods, content integration, counternarratives

Utilizing Counter Narratives to Develop Culturally Sustaining, Critically Conscious Preservice Teacher Practitioners

Since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, titled No Child Left Behind, the amount of time students engage in the core content areas of English/Language Arts (ELA), Math, Social Studies, and Science has become disproportionate. According to Mulvaney Hoyer and Sparks (2017), during the 2011-2012 school year, public-school, third-grade students spent an average of 33 hours a week in the classroom. Of those 33 hours, 9.9 hours were allocated to ELA, 5.8 hours to Math, 2.9 hours to Science, and 2.8 hours to Social Studies. As preservice elementary teachers approach the instructional day, it is vital to maximize the time they have with students to teach “the skills and knowledge that will ultimately enable [students] not only to live productive and empowered lives themselves, but also to work alongside like-minded others for the betterment of those who suffer from oppression and other inequities” (Wade, 2007, pp. 1-2). The proposed solution for preservice elementary teachers is to develop into culturally sustaining, and critically conscious practitioners by making intentional curricular and instructional choices (Pak & Ravitch, 2021).

In elementary teacher education preparation course work, preservice teacher candidates are required to take one methods course in each of the dominant content areas to prepare for a fully licensed position. With an average of 30.2% of the instructional week in a third-grade, public school classroom dedicated to ELA and only 8.6% dedicated to each Social Studies (Mulvaney Hoyer & Sparks, 2017), it is my proposal that preservice teachers learn to maximize the time and strategies in ELA to enhance and supplement the learning in Social Studies. Alarcon et al. (2015) stated,

As time and space for social studies content in elementary classrooms continues to be pushed to the side and reduced to arbitrary tidbits of information, elementary preparation programs face the urgent challenge of sharing strategies with preservice teacher that will strengthen social studies content knowledge, so they may gain the confidence needed to integrate social studies in meaningful ways each day in their classrooms. (p. 186)

By utilizing ELA skills like prediction, visualization, making connections, summarizing, questioning, and inferring, elementary teachers can capitalize on the time during ELA to teach historical events. Preservice teachers must learn “to utilize allotted ELA instructional time to teach ELA and social studies in tandem with one another. Literacy skills can be used as a vehicle for students to engage with social studies content” (Demoiny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018, p. 66). The ELA

skills provide the thinking skills, and the Social Studies content will provide an opportunity for the students to use and apply the thinking skills. Without the social studies content, students do not have meaningful ways to practice and apply their thinking skills in the real world.

Culturally Sustaining, Critically Conscious Practitioners

Culturally Sustaining, Critically Conscious (CSCC) Practitioners commit to reflect and change personal beliefs and practices while challenging systematic systems and policies that perpetuate the status quo. The development of CSCC practitioners center on five pillars. “The five pillars represent the iterative, cyclical nature of critical praxis: continued reflection and action for social justice” (Pak & Ravitch, 2021, p. 76). “Pillar 3 advocates for educational leaders to provide planning and instructional time and freedom for teacher to thoughtfully review and intentionally review their pedagogy and curriculum” (Pak & Ravitch, 2021, p. 78). Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) asserted that “it is critical that our students learn about history and current events through multiple perspectives and with a critical lens to seek more complete understanding of our past” (p. 64). Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) further explained how textbooks depict historical events as a retelling of facts and often omitting opposing facts to the master narrative “which focuses on victory, progress, and accomplishment while silencing the atrocities, discrimination, and failures” in our country’s history (p. 65). Pak and Ravitch (2021) introduced the idea of engaging students in critical thinking through problem-based or inquiry methods rather than a “banking educational approach in which information is deposited into students” (p. 78). A problem-based approach is authentic and relevant to students because it “should focus on students’ lives – their experiences, concerns, and needs – as well as on the particular subject matter” (Christensen & Karp, 2003 as cited in Wade, 2007).

Pak and Ravitch (2021) outlined steps a classroom teacher would use to address curricular and instructional decision making while maintaining alignment to district approved textbooks and state mandated standards. “First review the required text and identify the dominate narrative, any secondary narratives, and the narratives not included” (p. 79). Then CSCC practitioners seek out stories, resources, and artifacts that fill the void of the absent narrative. These “perspectives written about and by marginalized groups that are not included in the dominate narrative are called *counter stories* and *counternarratives*” (Morrell, 2005 as cited by Pak & Ravitch, 2021, p. 79). Wade (2007) points out that “many textbooks seem to assemble almost random bits of information, without much controversy and from limited cultural perspectives” (p. 35). Counternarratives are stories often omitted from the dominate perspective. The Minnesota Humanities Center (2018) described counternarratives as absent narratives; “the lived experiences – the stories, art, music, and histories – of people and place...not

absent from the communities they are part of, but are often left out, overwritten, absented, by a dominate story” (p. 1). Wade (2007) stated that adding perspectives of all people to the curriculum will influence the students’ view of past events and inspire students how they might have positive impact on current events. With creativity and foresight, counternarratives provide teachers the opportunity to teach the whole story, from multiple perspectives, including marginalized groups, regarding historical events while meeting requirements at the local and state level.

Applications in the Classroom

Three promising strategies that preservice teachers can use when incorporating counter narratives include the use of paired picture books, documentary films, and Journey Boxes. Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) paired two picture books, master- with a counter-narrative, to pose critical thinking about the messages within the stories. “These intentional book pairings allow students to grapple with what history truly means and to question how history is told” (p. 64). The authors used question prompts developed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004, p. 53) in their work, *Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding Reader Response*; “Whose viewpoint is expressed, what does the author want us to think, whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted, how might alternative perspectives be represented, how would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance, what action might you take on the basis of what you have learned” (p. 66)? These prompts challenge students to compare and contrast the pairing to better understand multiple perspectives of a historical event.

Brown Buchanan (2015) conducted research to measure historical thinking using documentary films. Films go beyond the traditional textbook to explore multiple perspectives of a historical event while developing empathy. “Films can present counter-narratives that disrupt dominant narratives and provide a text for critiquing historical perspectives or omissions in film” (p. 48). In the study, preservice teachers watched documentary films preceded with anticipation guides and proceeded with discussion and reflection prompts. Based on the post-questionnaire, the documentary films assisted historical thinking and 56 percent of the preservice teachers “recognized the role of different perspectives in understanding history” (p. 52). By experiencing historical-perspective-taking as a student themselves, preservice teachers are equipped with a strategy to implement in their own classroom with elementary-aged students.

Alarcon et al. (2015) shared a strategy used with preservice teachers called Journey Boxes. A Journey Box is a collection of images and artifacts that illustrate the counter narrative of a historical event or person. “Assembling a

collection of artifacts based on often marginalized events or individuals the preservice teachers were able to disrupt the type of stories generally told in social studies textbook” (p. 191). Preservice teachers gathered primary source documents accompanied by questions to prompt deep thinking. Journey Boxes “focused on the counter narrative and moved beyond abstract notions of historical thinking. They [preservice teachers] became more aware of the importance of conducting history lesson preparation as research” (Alarcon et al., 2015, p. 188). The researchers concluded that “we must also prepare them for the resources needed for extending state standards beyond the dominant, often exclusionary, historical narrative” (p. 191).

Reflections from the Trenches

To simulate an elementary learning environment for preservice teachers, several lessons have been created to demonstrate how to integrate counternarratives in the ELA block. Examples of counternarratives in children’s literature are included in the Appendix for reference.

During college level ELA methods course taught at a regional university in southern Minnesota, preservice teachers engaged in a lesson that focused on the topic of immigration. Two books were assigned for students to read, *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate and *New Hope* by Henri Sorenson. Both stories were about immigration to Minnesota. One story was set in 1885 describing the story of immigrants leaving Denmark for a new life in American and the other set in 2005 telling the story of a refugee child who left South Sudan for a new life. Although the stories took place 120 years apart, students engaged in deep conversations about both stories, synthesizing reasons why people move to new countries and how people adjust to the culture and language of the new country.

To make a personal connection to the issue of immigration, students created a virtual journey box in which they shared their reflections about, “What does immigration mean to you?” Students had the option to research immigration from a micro-level or a macro-level. Students learned and shared about their own family’s immigration story as well as local immigration or refugee stories in their community. Student stories included ones of families that immigrated to American from Norway, German, Philippines, and Ukraine; personal stories as refugees from Myanmar; local stories of community members immigrating from Bosnia, South Sudan, and Somalia; and personal stories of working with organizations that support refugees making a new home in America. The preservice teachers learned about immigration from a historical lens, but more importantly they read and heard stories about immigration from a humanistic lens as they examined counternarratives to the dominate narrative of immigration.

Conclusion

When preservice teachers understand how to maximize the instructional time and academic skills by integrating social studies concepts within the ELA time, elementary students will develop critical thinking skills and historical thinking skills through counter-narratives. Elementary students will begin to think about historical events as both the subject to be taught as well as the vehicle to teaching important ELA content and thinking skills.

Appendix

Counternarrative Children's Books

Environment:

1. *We are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom
2. *The Water Princess* by Susan Verde

Immigration:

1. *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate
2. *New Hope* by Henri Sorenson
3. *How many days until America: A Thanksgiving Story* by Eve Bunting
4. *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest
5. *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales
6. *My name is Jorge on Both Sides of the River: Poems in English and Spanish* by Jane Medina

Geography:

1. *How to Make an Apple Pie and See the World* by Marjorie Priceman
2. *Bring Me Some Apples and I'll Make You a Pie: A Story about Edna Lewis* by Robbin Gourley

Ancestry:

1. *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal
2. *Thunderboy Jr.* by Sherman Alexie
3. *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits
4. *Teach Us Your Name* by Huda Essa
5. *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi

Perspectives:

1. *Drawn Together* by Minh Le
2. *Same, Same but Different* by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw
3. *The Sandwich Swap* by Queen Rania Al Abdullah

World War II:

1. *The Tree in the Courtyard: Looking through Anne Frank's Window* by Jeff Gottesfeld
2. *The Butterfly* by Patricia Polacco

Poverty:

1. *Potato: A tale from the Great Depression* by Kate Lied
2. *Fly Away Home* by Even Bunting
3. *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena

American Indians:

1. *SkySisters* by Jan Bourdeau Waboose
 2. *Cheyenne Again* by Eve Bunting
 3. *Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Leitich Smith
 4. *Shota and the Star Quilt* by Margaret Bateson-Hill
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