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| Title | Learning to teach low-SES (socioeconomic status) pupils through assessment in China |
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| Source | 2012 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 14 April 2012, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada |

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Paper Title Learning to Teach Low-SES (Socioeconomic Status) Pupils Through Assessment in China

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Session Title International Field Experiences

Session Type Poster Presentation

Presentation Date 4/14/2012

Presentation Location Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Descriptors Asian Education, Evaluation, International Education/Studies

Methodology Qualitative

Unit Division K - Teaching and Teacher Education

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Learning to Teach Low SES Pupils Through Assessment in China

Abstract

This case study describes for one rural school in China how pre-service teachers perceived their rural students and how they learned to focus on the test-related activities through the collaborative work with their intern colleagues and mentors. As this study explains, pre-service teachers learned from their mentors and support each other in learning to teach. I find that such professional collaboration sometimes promote teachers learning how to work with lower achieving students more effectively and offer them more cognitively demanding knowledge. This is referred to as “teaching *through* assessment”. Yet, some pre-service teachers in this study support each other in becoming more skilled in “teaching *for* assessment”, as well as in explicitly distinguishing between higher achieving and lower achieving students.

I. Objective

How teachers learn to teach students from low socio-economic status (SES) has growing importance in China and in many nations given the growing social economic inequality. In this case study, I explore eight pre-service teachers’ lived experiences during their internship in a rural school in China, and examine how these pre-service teachers think of their students as well as what and how they learn to work with the students in the rural school. I collected data for this study in a key teacher training university (Holly University, a pseudo name, abbreviated as HU) in northeast China from May to December, 2009. HU is specialized in training middle-school teachers. From 2006, HU implemented a cross-regional and cross-cultural internship (*dinggang* internship) that sends pre-service teachers to conduct their teaching practicum in less developed areas for a semester (about three to four months). This cross-regional and cross-cultural internship in HU provides an informative case to examine the research questions below:

1. How do pre-service teachers from more advanced areas in the city perceive students

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from low-socioeconomic rural areas during their internship in a rural school?

2. How do pre-service teachers' perceptions about their students shape and to be shaped by their teaching practice?
3. What and how do pre-service teachers learn to work with students from low-socioeconomic rural areas?

II. Theoretical Framework

In this study, pre-service teachers are from affluent areas in the cities. As they were sent to fulfill their internship in a rural school in a low socio-economic area, they had to learn how to work with students from a very different background from their own. I recognize the complexity of how an individual accepts or rejects "other" people and makes sense of her or his own actions in a culturally diverse context. In order to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions about their rural students and how these perceptions influence their learn-to-teach experiences, I seek ideas from the literature on *boundary work*. Especially, I draw on the studies by Lamont (2000) because her work mainly focuses on moral boundary and morality is an important cultural and social control issue in classrooms and larger society in China (Yuan and Shen, 1998; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Lizardo, 2004; Zhu & Liu, 2004; Yu, 2008). Although morality has different connotations in different national contexts, it provides a general conceptual tool for me to explore how it facilitates drawing or transgressing boundaries in China.

The theory of boundary work is rooted in the well-established tradition of sociology and elaborated in the works by Durkheim (1965), Marx (1963), and Weber (1978) that illustrate the dynamics between boundaries marked by religion, class and ethnic groups (Schwartz, 1981; On the history of the concept, see Lamont, 2000). Recently, researchers developed the classic theory of boundaries and introduced the distinction between *symbolic boundaries* and *social boundaries* (Epstein, 1988; Lamont, 2000). With this distinction, cultural sociologists focus on how boundaries are shaped by context, and particularly by the cultural repertoires, resources, and narratives that individuals can appropriate (Somers, 1994; Lamont, 2000; Swidler, 2001).

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space (Lamont, 2000). They are tools for individuals and groups to make symbolic distinctions between themselves and "others" in their daily lives

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(Lamont & Molnar, 2000). According to Epstein (1992), symbolic boundaries involve both exclusion and inclusion. In his words, symbolic boundaries “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (Epstein, 1992). *Social boundaries* are objectified forms of social differences. They are revealed in social inequality in getting resources and social opportunities and translated into patterns of social exclusion and segregation (e.g., Massey & Denton, 1993; e.g., Bian, Shu et al. 2001). To be more specific, *symbolic boundaries* exist at the inter-subjective level whereas the *social boundaries* manifest themselves in the groupings of individuals (Lamont & Molnar, 2000). Researchers have shown that teachers draw boundaries among students in their teaching and thus distribute resources differently to different students in the classroom. For instance, in her study on the effect of merit promotion policies in Chicago, Anagnostopoulos (2006) used boundary theory to illuminate the moral boundary that the teachers drew between “deserving” student and deemed “undeserving” students. Based on this symbolic moral boundary, the teachers enacted different classroom practices that limited the learning opportunities for demoted students. These teaching practices eventually create the social boundaries that exclude the demoted students.

The concept of *boundary work* is particularly relevant to this study of pre-service teachers’ beliefs of social differences because it provides a lens to examine how individuals evaluate people from different social backgrounds and how they enact these evaluative criteria in action. Through the lenses of the theory of *boundary work*, I am interested in knowing how symbolic boundaries, or perceived social differences by the pre-service teachers in the context of *dinggang* internship, are influencing and are influenced by social relationships during the process of learning to teach low students from low socio-economic background.

III. Methods

This study is a case study to explore into subjective meaning appropriated by prospective teachers in their internship and how they learned to work with students in a rural school. I observed the pre-internship training activities between May and July, and then shadowed eight HU prospective teachers in one school of a poor area during their internship period between August and December, 2009. Among these pre-service teachers, five are from cities which are better-off

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areas in China and the rest are from the rural areas. Their majors vary. Two of them teach mathematics, two teach Chinese, two teach chemistry, one teaches English, and one teaches fine arts. Various methods, such as in-depth interviews, observations and analysis on the written reflections, were used to have pre-service teachers unravel the complexities of their beliefs. Codes, patterns, and themes emerge from the data, and the analysis is related to the context in which the pre-service teachers learn to teach.

IV. Data sources

The main data sources are in-depth individual interviews, focus group interviews and participant observations as well as pre-service teachers written teaching reflections and official documents about *dinggang* project. By thick description and in-depth analysis, the students' beliefs and conceptions about low SES students are closely examined in the contexts. I used the software NVivo 7 to store, code and analyze the data.

V. Results

This study intends to answer these questions by examining how a group of interns raised or educated in urban settings understand their student teaching and their students in a rural middle school in northern China. By identifying the symbolic boundaries that these interns marked among their students as well as between themselves and the students, I draw attention to the unexamined intellectual, cultural and moral boundaries that interns constructed and learned to understand their rural students.

That is, social class difference were not revealed as differences in socio-economic status only, but implicitly existent in student teachers' perceptions about their rural students in the form of symbolic (intellectual, cultural, and moral) boundaries. For the pre-service teachers in this study, the varied levels of students' academic achievement were attributed to these distinctions in intelligence, culture and morality, which in turn lead students to cultivate an "urban identity", get

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higher education in the city and eventually become mainstreamed in the urban areas.

I also found that the pre-service teachers learned to teach rural students by using assessment. One approach, “teaching *through* assessment” is effective to help lower achievers in the rural school to obtain higher conceptual understanding of the knowledge. This approach involves organizing “typical” test items which can identify the common misconceptions that students have, and relating these test items to the curriculum in explaining these items during “test exercise lessons (*xi ti ke*),” lessons designed to help students review items of a completed test in preparation for subsequent learning and assessment, could help interns develop knowledge of students’ learning readiness and learn how to present the curriculum with the application in the tests. Someone may take this approach as “teaching *for* assessment” for it seems to focus on those knowledge points most likely to be tested in the standardized exams. It can be used in a limited way and become “teaching *for* assessment” when the teacher only requires mechanical memorization of the knowledge points frequently tested in the standardized exams. The purpose of this limited way would be to have students recall the errors they already made in prior tests or the common misconceptions people most likely have, and carefully avoid them during the exams. Or they may be simply asked to memorize the correct answer in case the similar test items occurred again in the major examinations, as it was demonstrated in some pre-service teachers’ classes. However, “teaching *through* assessment” goes beyond that. Teachers using this approach tap into assessment as one of the powerful teaching materials, carefully review the test items and curriculum to identify skills that must be learned and how to learn them, fit assessment in their teaching routine, analyze students’ current levels of functioning by reading their test results, and use the test analysis and error explanation to help students learning. To make it short, “teaching

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through assessment” approach uses the test items to create problems and opportunities for students to apply their knowledge. As a result, the teacher gathered data from students’ performance and the “typical” test items to inform their follow-up teaching and directly address the students’ errors in knowledge and understanding the problem-solving procedures.

Further, I argue that these pre-service teachers learned to work on their own perceptions of low SES students and learned how to work with these students in a professional supportive setting. By professional supportive setting, I specifically refer to the positive guidance provided by the school mentors, the meaningful communication among intern peers about their teaching, and the teaching opportunities the placement rural school and the university teacher education program provided for interns to learn to teach. In this study, not all participants are in the same professional setting although they were placed in the same school. Only those who obtained positive and frequent support from their mentors and peers experienced reflection upon their perception about rural students as well as growth in teaching efficacy while working with their students.

VI. Significance

This study is important because:

- (1) Examination of Chinese pre-service teachers’ learn-to-teach experiences will further enhance our understanding of the complexity of the relationship between perceptions of students and teaching practices in a specific cultural context compared to the international data.
- (2) My study provides a possible pedagogical choice for the “learning question” Cochran-Smith et al. (2004) , which refers to “how in general teachers learn to teach for diversity and what, in particular, are the pedagogies of teacher preparation (e.g., coursework assignments, readings, discussion) that make this learning possible” (pp. 39–40). Organizing “typical” test items which can identify the common misconceptions that students have, and relating these test items to the curriculum in explaining these items during “test exercise lessons” could help interns develop

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