

Teachers' Self-Images in Multicultural Classrooms: Who am I?

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study, conducted in southern Virginia, United States, was to understand six teachers' own images through the experiences teaching preschoolers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers from two day care and development centers. Observations of classroom teaching added vital information to the data collected through interviews. Other tools for data collection included field notes and a researcher's reflective journal. Strategies for examining the data in this study were thematic and constant comparative analysis. Five major themes of teachers' self-images emerged from their reflection on the roles in multicultural classrooms were: (1) Teachers are advocates for promoting social justice, (2) Teachers are learners of cultural diversity, (3) Teachers are transformers through caring, (4) Teachers are supporters for children's emotional and social needs, and (5) Teachers are facilitators of social reciprocity. The findings also suggested recommendations for future research and practice in the field of early childhood education.

Keywords: *Phenomenological study, Preschool teacher inquiry, Multicultural education, Teachers roles, Reflective inquiry*

Introduction

The story described below is one shared from my colleague teacher's experience

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with a child from a cultural and linguistic background that was different from her own.

One student teacher told me that an Asian boy kept nodding his head when she gave him direction, but he did not follow all of them. She pondered these questions: Did he really understand me? Or did he forget what I said? How do I know if he understands me or not?

Many stories like this one motivated me to investigate teachers' work and reflection on working with these children and their families, particularly teachers' reflection on who I am in a multicultural classroom. In addition to being motivated by these stories, my personal reflections and experiences of teaching preschoolers in the United States have inspired me to explore teachers' meaning making of their roles in classrooms.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of selected teachers in one university town in the United States, in regard to their reflection of the roles as teachers of preschoolers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The main research question is: what teachers think their roles are in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Young children from diverse backgrounds in this study were ones whose first language was not English (Reyes, 1992) and whose parents were from countries outside the United States. Image is character that someone deliberately tries to produce by addressing in a particular way (Ramsey, 2004). In this study, a teacher's self-image is defined as her description of her experiences with these children and self-reflection of a physical position in a multicultural classroom. In other words, a teacher's self-image was inquired through understanding her identification and reflection on her roles.

The Census Bureau of the United States (2000) estimated that half of the preschool population will be children of color by the year of 2020. Tabors (1997) predicted that by the year 2000, there would be 5.2 million preschoolers from other than English-Speaking homes in the United States. In light of the changing demographics of the United States, teaching young children from diverse backgrounds has become a research priority in early childhood education.

Previous researchers have investigated challenges of cultural and linguistic di-

versity in this field (Deman-Sparks & Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force, 1989; Fenandez, 2000; Garcia, 1995; Hill, Stremmel & Fu, 2002; Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching & Lee, 2000; Johnson, Lee & Templeton, 2003; Klien & Chen, 2001; Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Okagaki & Dimond 2000; Powell & Yamamoto, 1997; Ramsey, 2004; Tabors, 1997), and teacher preparation to meet the challenges (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Fu, Stremmel & Hill, 2002; Gutierrez-Gomes, 2002; McMahon, 1997; Morales, 2000; Rust, 1999; Weisman & Garza, 2002). The present study adds to the early childhood education research literature in the critical area that involves teaching young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

I investigated and described teachers' identifications of their roles with teaching individual children from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, the research was, not only a continuation of previous research, but it also expanded other researchers' understandings and discussions on the topic. The study is expected to stimulate discussion among other researchers about understanding teachers' own reflection upon their roles, and about preparation of reflective and competent teachers who meet the challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood education. Furthermore, readers or teachers in Asia-Pacific areas would be inspired to share their experiences working with immigrant children or parents who are from different countries to their own. For instance, there has been increasing numbers of immigration from Southeast Asia into Taiwan. In the same time, the students were born to immigrant parents has been increasing (Lai & Chen, 2007).

I recorded and reported teachers' experiences in hopes that these stories would provide inspiration for teachers in similar settings to share their experiences with coworkers. Weisman and Garza (2002) suggested that research methods should offer teachers the opportunity to reflect and articulate their beliefs and experiences related to teaching children of diverse cultures and languages. My study, using a phenomenological method, embraced the suggested notions of Rust (1999) and Weisman and Garza (2002) by providing teachers opportunities to reflect on the meaning of their roles in teaching children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The long range goal of this study was to help teachers, educators and parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to generate more love, care, and understanding of

each other through the mechanism of sharing experiences and stories.

Philosophical Perspectives

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive science which studies people's experiences in a phenomenon (Kao, 2001, Van Manen, 1990). Interpretation unmask what is concealed behind an objective phenomenon. Phenomenologists would look into a question of meanings in lived experiences to inquire, but not into a problem to be solved. Phenomenology was originated from Husserl's philosophy. Husserl (1970) believed meanings of living in a life world could be illuminated with conscious act and detailed descriptions of experiences. His phenomenology has been noticed as descriptive phenomenology as pure description of lived experiences. Heidegger (1962), his student, extended Husserl's idea, but stated that interpretation is an essential tool to understand the meaning of being in a world. Gadamar (1976) reinforced Heidegger's emphasis on hermeneutics showing that interpretation is the basis structure of experiences. Hermeneutic study "involves the art of reading text so that the intention and meaning behind appearance are fully understand" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9). Therefore, Heidegger and Gadamar emphasized that phenomenological research aims to include description and interpretation of experience via some text or symbolic forms. This phenomenology has been noted as interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology.

In this study, I embraced Heidegger and Gadamar's notions of hermeneutic phenomenology. I attempted to understand six teachers' self-images through their reflection on the experiences working with young children from diverse backgrounds, therefore using hermeneutic phenomenology assisted me to look behind their experiences. After I read interviewing transcriptions of their experiences and reflection in classrooms, I described and interpreted their self-images carefully through intersubjective agreement with the teachers. It could be challenging for me to solely describe teachers' experiences and roles without interpreting, particularly after talking to them, hearing what they said and reading the transcriptions. As Van Manen (1990) pointed out that hermeneutic phenomenological research may seen as a dynamic

interplay among research activities: "turning to a phenomenon, investigating experience, reflecting on the essential themes, describing the phenomenon" (p.30). As I read and interpreted interview transcripts, and conducted member checks with teachers, I developed better understanding of how the teachers made sense of their roles in the experiences.

Dewey's images of teachers provided a foundation for my study as well. I have been motivated by Dewey's philosophy to focus on this research topic. In the following, I would explain his influence on my motivation of the study. In terms of images of teachers, Dewey described teachers as scholars and students of the learning process (Wirth, 1966). The implication of his philosophy for teaching is that children need support to explore their world and discover knowledge as well as opportunities to learn alongside teachers and peers. Teachers are learners, researchers and children's partners. In multicultural classrooms, there might or might not be more changing images than what Dewey stated. Moreover, the descriptions and meanings of the images need to be presented in order to understand teachers' self-images in multicultural classroom of the current age. Based on Dewey's notion of teachers images and my interests of inquiring contemporary teachers' self-images, I conducted this study.

Methodology

In order to understand teachers' reflection upon the roles while working with young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the main tool I used for exploring my research questions was the hermeneutic phenomenological method. This method can serve as a tool for reflection and an in-depth narrative. Van Manen (2002) stated that a phenomenological method is a deeply reflective inquiry into the meaning of human life. The purpose of phenomenological research is to look at the essence of participants' experiences (Creswell, 1998).

It was hoped that the I could find the essence of preschool teachers' experiences and identifications with the children, so I applied the method. Most importantly, experience is a key term in this diverse inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Muchmore, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Patton (2002) also suggested that in

order to acquire such data, a researcher needs to “undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest” (p. 104). Therefore, I applied in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore their experiences and roles working with these children.

Research Participants

I interviewed six teachers at two child care and development centers. The choices of these teachers were based on the criterion sampling strategy (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). It is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied. Creswell (1998) said that “Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p.118). The participating teachers in this study have had at least one year experience of working with young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In each of the classes at least one fifth of the students were from diverse backgrounds.

The classrooms and teachers in research site D1 were chosen for the study because of the director’s suggestion and because of my relationships with the teachers as I had been a frequent visitor in the center. The director suggested that the classes present a diversity of children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The process of conducting my pilot study with the teachers in D1 helped me to build closer relationships and trust with the teachers. These positive relationships assisted me to have deeper discussions with them during my study, because they will feel comfortable enough to share their reflections with me. This sampling strategy of building strong relations with the participants is suggested by Rossman and Raillis (2003) as well.

The research site D1 was located in a southwest Virginia college town, which had five classes. The research site D2 was located in the same town as well but it was affiliated to a university. There were five classes in the site D2 as well. Similarly, the research director of research site D2 recommended the teachers who are in one of the classes that present a diversity of children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Data Collection

The tools for data collection included interviews with teachers, observations, field notes, a researcher's reflective journal, and occasionally photographs which assisted in the collection of information. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher twice a week for three weeks. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes. I interviewed six teachers for a total of eighteen hours over a three week period. The interviews were audiotaped by a digital voice recorder with the participants' permission and then transcribed to be reviewed and analyzed.

The goal of the interviews was to understand teachers' experiences in a classroom with cultural and linguistic diversity. Followings were efforts I made to assist the interviewed teachers to fully represent their experiences and myself to understand their experiences as well during those time. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher using interview guides. The interview guides not only provided topics to discuss with interviewees and offered areas of interests to explore in the later parts of interviews, but also made sure that "interviewers carefully use the limited time available in an interview situation" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). I first used interview guide I to learn more about teachers' background information and their values. Then, interview guide II was used to follow up after completing the interviews with guide I. Interviewees were also encouraged to address anything that I did not bring up at the end of each interview. The interview guides helped me in using questions to guide our conversation and to explore teachers' experiences. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggested that the interview guide assists researchers to discover participants' meaning and point of views. The questions in my interview guides for the study were related to teachers' reflections on teaching young children from diverse backgrounds. In particular, the processes of working with these young children were addressed, reflecting the influential factors on these experiences and the impact of the these experiences on them. I also created a chart that showed how the interview questions reflected my research questions. Some questions in the interview guides were adapted from Stremmel (1996).

In order to elicit more information from the six interviewed teachers and obtain an in-depth understanding of their experiences, I constructed and used appropriate

probing questions. I also sought to increase my skills for the semi-structured interview as suggested by references. I encouraged teachers to elaborate on their experiences and to tell their stories as fully as possible. By using probing questions, I might have gotten more detailed and rich data and thus gain in-depth understanding teachers' experiences. Some possible probing questions suggested by Kvale (1996) are: (a) Could you tell me a story about this? (b) Could you give me more detailed description of what happened?, and (c) Do you have further examples of this? Some interview skills that are recommended by Powney and Watts (1987) for probing are (a) eye contact, especially an inquiry glance, (b) an expectant silence, and (c) repeating back the interviewee's own words. In addition, I remained flexible in terms of the questions listed on my semi-structured interview guides in order to change or form new questions for further inquiry.

I applied interview techniques as recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2003). These techniques emphasized the interviewees' usage of language and nonverbal cues. In terms of the usage of language, interviewers and interviewees both need to have the same understanding of certain specific terms. As an interviewer, I needed to be aware of language interviewees use in "delineating the type of questions: board, narrow, leading, intrusive, and so on" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 86). I periodically assessed my communication with interviewees by asking them to restate the question in their own words. As for awareness of nonverbal cues, I carefully paid attention to the teachers' body movements, gestures, interpersonal spaces, lengths of silence in conversations, and pitch of voices.

I also conducted at least two hours of observation on teachers' interactions with young children in their classrooms twice a week. Regarding photographing, I only took photos of a particular classroom setting or curriculum materials (such as posters or settings that help children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds or help you and children learn about different cultures).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data from my transcriptions of interviews, I applied general thematic analysis. The purpose of phenomenological studies is mainly to looking for

“themes of meaning in participants’ lives” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 276). Shaped by the genre of this study, I used thematic analysis to find themes of teachers’ identifications. Another reason was because of the anticipated format for presenting findings.

The format of the data I expected was short stories of teachers’ roles with teaching young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds for each theme. Themes were emerged from reading, reflecting upon and interpreting the texts of observations and interviews. Meanwhile, themes were re-interpreted or reformulated through collaborative conversations with two major academic professors and participating teachers, in order to conceal the essence teachers’ experiences. Van Manen (1990) stated this process as having a discussion of questioning answering.

Trustworthiness was built through simultaneous data collection via teacher interviews, observation, field notes, a researcher’s journal and other strategies such as triangulation, member checks, data analysis, reflexivity, audit trail, coding schemes, purposeful sampling and thick descriptions (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002). The diverse methods of collecting data helped me to provide thick and accurate descriptions of the teachers’ roles. I also conducted member checks. I took the data and theme analysis back to teachers for discussion of the results in order to elicit their opinion and further inquiry.

Findings

Based upon reading and interpreting interview transcripts, I identified five themes from across all the data and finalized the themes through intersubjective agreement with the teachers. Five major themes of teachers’ roles and descriptive examples from observation and transcripts to illuminate the teachers’ meanings are presented in the following sections. The six teachers’ names are pseudonyms as Mary, Renee, Tina, Melissa, Olivia, and Ben.

Before introducing the thematic findings of the interviews, it is essential to introduce the six participating teachers in this study. Married with a child, **Mary** was a young, Irish-American woman who had been employed as a full-time teacher in the

Day Care and Development Center 1 for five years. When I interviewed her, she had five children in her class from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds out of a total of seventeen students. Mary's passion was teaching young children, she believed that teaching young children helps her grow as a person, and she told me that she hopes to stay in the profession in the future.

Renee was in her early 20's and was single Euro-American woman. She had been working with Mary as a full time teacher in the Day Care and Development Center 1 for almost two years. She was also a part-time student in a nursing school, and she was preparing for a career as to be a nurse. She described herself as compassionate, loving, caring and friendly person.

Tina was a middle-aged, African American woman who was married and had children. This was her third year working full time as a teacher in the Day Care and Development Center 1. She used to work as a teacher in a Head Start program for nineteen years. At the time of my interview with her, three of the fifteen children in her class were from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. She described herself as friendly, considerate and loving.

Melissa was a young 20's, and married Euro-American woman. She had been working full-time as a toddler and preschool teachers for about three years in the Day Care and Development Center 1. When I interviewed her, she was a co-teacher with Tina in a preschool classroom. Melissa described herself as a family-oriented person who loves children.

Olivia was a young 20's, single Euro-American woman with an undergraduate degree in art. She had been working in the field of early childhood education for almost one and a half years. During the study, she was a full time preschool teacher in the Day Care and Development Center 2. At the time I interviewed her, her class had five children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds out of a total of fifteen. She described herself as a fun, artistic, and free-spirited person. She claimed to be passionate about working with children in the Day Care and Development Center 2, because she believed that children are honest and share their real feelings, and because the school supports using art to help children develop their multiple intelligences.

Married with children, **Ben** was a middle-aged teacher who immigrated from Europe. Having worked in the field of education as a teacher and a researcher for several years, he worked as a co-teacher with Olivia in the Day Care and Development Center 2. Ben described himself as honest, open-minded and loving person who also values liberty. The values, the goals and identities of the parent, the spouse, the researcher, and the liberal person attached the elements of love and care to the roles and images of the parent and the spouse; he respects people who are liberal because they stand for individual freedom, and as a researchers, he aspired to study children and make them free or self-reliant.

I have also avoided using the names of children, who have been represented through symbols. I have also chosen to omit the children's cultures and countries from my descriptions as well as quotations, simply because I did not want my readers to come to that data with any cultural preconceptions and stereotypes.

Teachers are advocates for promoting social justice

One role that the teachers identified in the relationships with these children is advocator. Other similar roles to advocators that the teachers identified were "protector" and "interpreter". The role "advocator" revealed the teachers' commitment to social justice and to tender care for these children. Garmon (2004) defined a sense of social justice as "a commitment to equity and equality for all people in society" (p. 206). The teachers claimed that they felt they need to help these children who do not speak English to defend themselves and express their needs. Following experiences the teachers mentioned in the interviews illustrated their commitment to social justice.

Renee recalled the experience in communicating to these children by reinforcing some English words, repeating words and giving these children words to talk.

One child, Xing, who is learning English took another child Yvonne's toy. Yvonne screamed and said, "It is my toy. That is my toy." Xing did not know and I explained to him it is not ok. Another day, the child Yvonne kept kicking child Xing's chair and Xing looked at me. I told Xing to tell Yvonne "stop". (Renee)

Specifically, I strongly expect these children to be able to defend themselves and

to express their needs. I think it is important for these children to use words to defend themselves, such as, the first two words I teach children who do not speak English are “help” and “stop.” Those two words help children find assistance from others and to stop something they do not like in the class. I also found it practically useful to discuss with parents their assumptions about parenting and their expectations related to their children’s education. For instance, my experience has taught me to ask parents if they want their children to learn English. If certain parents are not really concerned about this, teachers will respect parents’ wishes and do not ask parents to follow up at home some English words. (Melissa)

The episodes listed above revealed that the teachers were playing crucial roles in the process of promoting social justice. They tried to use different ways to understand these children’s needs. Further, they helped them to express, communicate and negotiate with English speaking peers and adults. Renee observed children carefully and helped them negotiate and work with other native English speaking children. Garmon (2004) reported that commitment to social justice is one of dispositional factors which play critical roles in positive multicultural development. The teachers’ understandings toward the experiences working with these children may reveal that they obtained the disposition.

Teachers are learners of cultural diversity

By building the relationships with these children, the teachers became learners through this learning experience. Working with these children provides the opportunity and stimulation for teachers to reflect on and learn from the experiences, such as what different values or cultures they hold, how these affect teaching strategies and personal lives, and what does or does not work in interacting with these children. The following descriptions illustrate teachers’ roles as learners.

Working here in the Day Care and Development Center 1 really opens my eyes to see cultural differences. I saw a child from XXX wearing a belt around his belly and was told by his mother that it is a sign of being a young boy in their religion. The mother also told me that there are belts of different colors for girls and boys and children wear the belts until they are ten years of age. (Renee)

Olivia's personal experience on September 11th attacks, coupled with current experiences teaching young children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds has reinforced her learning of anti-racism and anti-stereotyping.

My father died in the September 11th attacks on the world trade center; and I remember when it happened, Americans were terrified or feared any person from Middle East or resembling someone from Middle East. When I worked at the center and talked to some children from Middle East, my friends ask me, "Don't you worry while this kid is in your class, his dad is at home plotting to attack the USA?" I responded, "What a prejudicial comment. I have met these families and they are so nice and so wonderful. It just shows you how awful stereotypes can be. I do feel that I am sensitive to the diverse cultural needs and am gaining a better cultural understanding everyday. (Olivia)

Olivia's past experiences with cultural diversity allowed or encouraged her to learn about the diverse cultures of the children and their families. Understandably, the September 11th attacks reinforced her belief that one should not stereotype people from alien cultures. For all that, she continues to be interested in asking from parents and learning from other resources about foreign cultures. She thinks that her self-education would make her a better teacher of these children.

Teachers are transformers through caring

The meaning making of teachers' role in the relationships also demonstrated that they had "cultural caring" and "built a learning community" (Gay, 2002, p. 109). The teachers identified their roles as transformers, who learn not only these children's home cultures, but also implement their understanding of newer information into practices. Gay (2002) stated that teachers of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds need to know the use of "cultural scaffolding" in teaching these children (p. 109). Cultural scaffolding occurs when teachers care about these students' ethnic backgrounds, and emotional and academic needs. Then teachers are able to transcendence this understanding and care into interaction with and curriculum for the children. As suggested in the following statements, teachers reflected their role of transformers. Mary, for instance, pointed out after caring parents' backgrounds, she

learned their expatriation and implemented it in communication with parents.

Teaching these children over the years has helped me to learn specific things people do differently in different cultures, particularly [in relation to the] parenting of toddlers. For example, from my experiences, I learned that parents from different countries start potty train at different times for toddlers. In XXX (a country), parents start potty training in the 18th months, which is at least 6 months earlier than people do in the United States. Parents in some other XXX countries start even earlier when children are one year old. Learning this helps me to know some parents' expectations [regarding] when to start potty training and prepares me to explain [how we do things differently here in the US]. (Mary)

Tina reported following experiences of using gesture and body movement, and saying a word and showing an object. Tina showed her transformation from caring to action.

I can't expect these children to understand exactly what I say. I need to take a little bit more time and effort to do what ever that helps them to understand... like we need to physically show a child who dose not understand English how to do things in class. I told [one boy] to pick up a toy and he just looked at me, so I need to take him [where the toys was and repeat myself as I showed him how to pick it up]. Show and put words and action together. (Tina)

As a teacher of these children, Tina also mentioned several things she learned and her learning became practices in a multicultural classroom. The following quote illustrates her role.

Working with these young children and parents gave me a chance to explore their countries, cultures and languages which I did not know anything about. One parent from XXX came to my class to show us how to make dumplings with children. One parent from XXX came to my class and taught children and me a few words in their home language. In my class, all children are interested in learning numbers in their friends' home languages other than English, such as Spanish, Korean, and Chinese. Parents from these countries helped me create posters of numbers in their languages and we counted them in these languages during circle time. (Tina)

Another example mentioned by Ben illustrates teachers using music or art acti-

vities as approaches for understanding children.

I knew that one child who only speaks a little bit of English likes to dance in the classroom, so I said to her "beautiful" when she danced. Then I put music in the class and she laughed and kept dancing with the music. (Ben)

Teachers are supporters for children's emotional and social needs

The teachers reflected that they feel closer to these children because they have been trying hard to understand children's needs and interests, and to build relationships with them. The teachers found that these children have strong and close relationships with them as well. These children stay around with them and ask or indicate the needs for help often. Even though these children do not understand exactly what they say or do not know at all what they say, they still keep talking to them and using various ways to build relationships.

With these children, a lot of time, you know that you feel more for those kids, because they do have a harder time; I feel I am closer to them because they have bonded with teachers more than other children, at least at the beginning, because you constantly help them. You are like more than a caregiver than regular. You are teaching them to protect themselves... uh... and interpreting for them. You can figure out what they said eventually and express them to other people, children even more. And advocate, I think; I stand up for them. Like I am giving them words or I am using words for them. If somebody hurts them, I encourage and tell them to tell others that you do not like that. Sometimes, they will not say that and I will look at the other child and say, he does not like that. I am speaking for him because he is not having that speaking form yet. (Mary)

Some other approaches to build relationships include helping these children reach out to play with others, giving them words to practice in expressing their needs, supplying concrete objects in play and talking about what they have, comforting when they screamed and cried. One example described by Ben is that these preschool children need more concrete objects to play with in fantasy play than children who speak English.

With American kids, you can talk to them about fire fighters without having a hat

or hose to start and continue fantasy play. But with children whose English is limited, you need to provide more physical objects to start and to talk in play. Otherwise, they get lost completely. For example, I showed these children fire fighter coats, hats, a hose and drew fire on a piece of paper to show them what we were going to play about. I couldn't use many words to explain, so these physical materials kind of substituted for explanations. (Ben)

According to their experiences, roles that teachers described themselves in the relationship with these children are emotional supporter. These following stories illustrate the roles teachers play in the relationships.

One child A (who is learning English) came right away to Ben when he entered the room. He said to Ben, "X (another native English speaking child) pushed me." Ben held his hand and walked together to the child X in block area. Ben said to X that A told him that you pushed him.

The child X: He breaks my house.

The child A whispered to Ben. Ben said to X: X, A wants to play with you.

X: (silence)

Ben: Maybe A can help you.

X: ok.

The child started playing with X, but he tried to put his truck in the child X's house.

Ben said to A: If you put the truck into the house, the house will be broken down. X will be upset.

A stopped putting the truck into the house.

(Field note, 31705)

I feel like I am facilitating between these children's conversations, helping them to reach out to other people. I help children find the words they need to communicate with their teachers and peers. Sometimes a child gets confused with a teacher or a classmate and may misinterpret what is being said; in turns, we help the child to realize the context of the conversation or interaction. An example is that one child gets upset a lot, like we told him not to jump off stairs from the loft. He got upset and cried. At first I did not know why he was so upset and tried to find what was wrong.

So I talked to his mother about this and knew that he thought he was wrong, he did something bad. I also thought maybe he is from a more refined culture and that is why he felt more upset about a little thing. Later, if similar things happened, I knew better what to do. I rubbed his back and explained to him that I just did not want you to be hurt. He was still upset a little bit, but getting better fast and smiled at me again. (Olivia)

Teachers are facilitators for social reciprocity

According to their experiences, teachers had an active role in their relationship with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers considered themselves as facilitators, friends, and guides to the parents. Some descriptions below illustrate their roles in their relationships with the parents.

We have been collaborating well. I think we are like friends and they [these parents] taught me many things about their cultures. (Tina)

Most families ask me to help the children with their English language and I gladly do. I help the children find the words they need to communicate with their teachers and peers. Sometimes I feel like I am facilitating conversation between parents as well. Most of the fathers in my class speak more and better English than the mothers, so sometimes I need to wait and ask a dad to explain what I said to a mom. For example, I went to the child, X's home for home visit. The dad spoke fluent English, but the mom just sat there and smiled. I felt so bad that the mom just sat there and watched us and smiled, just because she did not speak English. So I asked the dad to translate for me of what I said to the mom. I was sure she had ideas and questions of what we talked about. (Olivia)

I think my role for some parents is [that of a] teacher. We were doing potty training and parents learned how to do it too by working together with me. So in that sense, I am a teacher for them as well as their children. (Mary)

Regarding the meanings of their relationships with parents, teachers opined that a good relationship with the parents make easier for them work together in helping these children learn. At the same time, it helps them learn different cultures and languages. The following examples illustrate teachers' opinion to the good relationships

with the parents.

My relationships with these parents are good and open. They helped me to create posters of numbers in their languages and came to the class to teach children. I did not know how to say numbers in their languages before and I knew some of them. (Tina)

The relationships I have with one of these parents is too open, I have know the parents since their child was in the day care. I can even joke with them. One example is that I could directly ask the mother if her child is wearing underwear to school today when the child was potty trained. If the child wore a diaper instead of underwear, I could ask the mother what happened. We could laugh about it together. (Mary)

Meanwhile, the teachers focused on the idea of “give and take” or social reciprocity in teachers’ relationships with parents from backgrounds that were different from their own. The following stories illustrate the good and collaborative relationships.

Mary cited the commonality of interests between the parents and the teachers in relation to the children as the foundation for good collaboration.

Mum, I think right from the start we (the child A and his mother) communicate well. I always tend to focus on communication with parents, but some people are just not sure, taking more time to warm up, like B’s parents (the child B is another child from these backgrounds). We (A’s mother and her) never had that. We warmed up and talked right a way. Yeah, and I think we both have the same goal too, and that helps. We want him to get comfortable as quick as possible in the environment, because it is strange for him. She wanted him to learn English and I want him to be able to communicate. So those are in the same line, and she wants her to potty trained and we want that too. You know all kinds of those things. (Mary)

Olivia’s statement as below also helped me to understand teachers’ focus on “give and take” idea.

I told a parent that I respect your culture, but when your son comes to our school, he needs to respect our culture too. [Just because he might not listen to women in his culture, but when he comes to school, he has to listen to women teachers] (Olivia)

After reviewing descriptions that illustrate the theme of teachers’ roles, I present discussion and reflection upon the themes below.

Conclusion, Discussions and Reflection

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the roles of teachers who work with preschoolers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. After carefully listening to six teachers' experiences in working with children from these backgrounds, five themes focusing on their roles emerged. In the following, I discuss the findings, and suggest implications for future research and practice. The discussion is framed by related content and comparisons with previous research, philosophical foundations, and my own field notes and journals. I also acknowledge the effects from my multiple roles as a researcher, a preschool teacher, and an international student, and mother. Throughout the study, I recalled my own experiences and reflected on the stories that I heard from teachers. I would be leaving a gap in this study if I did not bring up the powerful effect that those participants' lives and my own experiences in this multicultural society had on the meanings that I derived from the data.

Images of teachers

According to the findings, teachers identified their roles as learners and transformers. I concluded this observation of teachers' experiences with these children corresponded Dewey's image of teachers, which is that teachers have to obtain the "attitude and skills" (Writh, 1966, p. 54) for teaching students. Teaching these children would allow teachers to continue learning about teaching. Working with these children provides the opportunity and stimulation for teachers to reflect on and learn from the experiences, such as what different values or cultures they hold, how these affect teaching strategies and personal lives, and what does or does not work in interacting with these children. Their experiences reinforce the concept that teachers are scholars and students of the learning process. Their experiences also strengthen Dewey's (1961) idea of education, which is life itself. Life in schools and the United States currently is rich with diversity.

Teachers' continuous experiences with these children from diverse backgrounds not only brings them various types of experiences, but also produces continuous

learning opportunities to explore cultural and linguistic diversity beyond one's own culture of origin. Morales (2000) indicated a conclusion about teachers' experiences with diversity by saying that, "learning and appreciating cultural diversity needs to begin with the teacher's knowledge about his or her own culture, personal biases, and understanding of the children in the classroom" (p. 9).

Meanwhile, playing these roles brought constructive meanings to the teachers. The teachers reflected that they feel closer to these children than to native English speaker children because they had invested personal energy in trying to understand children's needs and interests. These children also maintained close proximity to them and frequently indicated the need for help. This observation corroborates a finding by Irvine (2003) who stated that students from culturally diverse backgrounds are more often dependent on teachers than are their classmates who represent a cultural majority. Through interaction and building relationships with these children, the teachers in this study learned more about the children and their home cultures and learned what helped in their interactions. The process not only led them into new learning experiences, but also into interesting and rewarding ones. The roles that teachers identified in the relationships with these children also revealed the teachers' commitment to social justice and to tender care for these children. The meaning making of their roles in the relationships also demonstrated that the teachers had "cultural caring" and "built a learning community" (Gay, 2002, p. 109).

I found that the teachers had been trying hard to understand the parents' and children's cultures and how to work with them, so parents' respect for teachers as well as their collaboration and learning about American cultures was an essential element of building good relationships with teachers. The complexity of social and cultural reciprocity was highlighted by Yang and McMullen (2003) who stated that the relationships between American teachers and parents from these backgrounds are "highly complex and must be interactive, involving openness and understanding by each party" (p. 13).

In terms of communication between the teachers and the parents in this study, the teachers found that their communication with these parents seemed good, perhaps because most of these parents in the two research sites were international students or

scholars from the university and who spoke English comfortably or fluently. It is my inference that the parents' English skills may be one of the influential keys to their openness and communication with teachers. Studies by Lahman and Park (2004) and Yang and McMullen (2003) suggested that communication between teachers and these parents was hard and the cooperative relationship was slow to be built if the parents do not speak English fluently or comfortably.

Implications for future research

According to the findings in the present study, there are many directions that researchers could pursue in the future. For instance, researchers may want to continue exploring teachers' own learning experiences, particularly in terms of teachers' understanding of children's second language learning. Researchers could also continue investigating how these positive, learning, interesting and rewarding, experiences help teachers to build confidence and competences.

Teachers would likely benefit from time and opportunities to reflect with a mentor on their experiences in teaching diverse children. Researchers evaluate models of training for multicultural educators. Moreover, attention is needed on how day care administrators might provide teachers with time and opportunities for reflection on and documentation of changes in self perceptions of themselves as teachers. Researchers could use a case study approach to examine details of day care environments or training sessions that support teachers' self-reflection and documentation of changes. An action research study could be used to find out what could be improved in a day care center in order to support teachers' reflective activities. This seems appropriate since action research is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it (Stringer, 1999).

Researchers in the future may want to study international parents' experiences in working with teachers in the United States. Research on about parents' experiences might bring a more detailed understanding of parents and teachers' experiences working together and could suggest strategies for collaboration or communications in a class of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Implications for practice

According to teachers' reflection upon their roles are in a multicultural classroom, instructors in higher education could provide social service learning courses on this topic in workshops for preservice teachers or college students in order to educate them to "function well in a diverse society" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, p. 50) and develop their senses of moral and civic understanding.

Another recommendation for practice is that teacher educators who are preparing workshops on teaching children of diverse backgrounds could apply my interview questions for teachers to reflect upon or discuss. A trainer in a day care center, such as an administrator or a supervisor, could play a mentoring role to help teachers of English language learners to reflect upon their experiences.

In addition, although the study was conducted in the United States, I sincerely hope this study could bring implications for readers in Asia-Pacific areas. Increasing globalization has led countries in Asia-Pacific areas to face of preparing competent teachers in multicultural classrooms as well. Educators of young children, who are in Asia-Pacific area, might be inspired by my research to share their teacher images or experiences in a classroom with children or families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers may be able to share their experiences through conversing with other teachers on multicultural teaching or conducting research with researchers.

Final remarks

The multilingual, multicultural classroom is an American reality in the 21st century.

(Costa, McPhail, Smith & Brisk, 2005, p. 116)

All in all, this study contributed to the existing research in multicultural education of young children by examining and highlighting teachers' roles in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The study provided participants an opportunity to reflect upon their roles playing in a multicultural classroom and to share them with others. It also demonstrated the teachers' continuous learning through experiences working with these children. The teachers learned different ways

and searched for various resources constantly in order to communicate and work with these children. The findings of the teachers' meaning making of their relationships with these children and parents also filled the lack of previous studies. More importantly, in the future, teachers can benefit from reading the study and be inspired to share their stories with colleagues. One aim of the present study was to bring more love, mutual understanding, and collaboration among teachers, educators and parents from these backgrounds in a multicultural classroom by sharing stories, experiences, and reflections.

I, as a researcher with multiple roles in this multicultural society, have learned from teachers' reflection upon their roles in this study. Moreover, these studies and stories will further help promote "participation in a pluralist and multicultural society and a world that extends beyond the boundaries of the United States" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003, p. 51).

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