

La Clase Magica and Conventional Classrooms:
Developing Conceptions of Language, Learning and Literacy

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Introduction

Based on many years of teacher-watching throughout their schooling, pre-service teachers develop various ideas about what teachers do. Such an "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975) leads to the common sense conclusion that teachers teach the way they were taught. However, relying on one's own experiences as a student can lead to myths and biases about learning and teaching. Unexamined attitudes, or "habitudes" (Flores, Cousin & Diaz, 1991), incorporated into a teacher's thinking become habits of the mind and practice. When the assumptions and misconceptions are not exposed, teachers ultimately come to perceive and anticipate them as natural outcomes of education (Gallego, 1995).

Teacher educators must help the novice see and understand the limitations and pitfalls of personal experience in learning to teach. It is difficult enough for the novice to shift attention from self or concern for subject matter to children's needs when teachers and students share common background experiences, i.e. culture; it is even more so when they do not. Teacher educators need to help students examine their own beliefs about the capacities and needs of different students (Buchmann & Schulle, 1983; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983).

In this paper we present two case studies based on an analysis of interviews conducted during their participation in two distinct field placement experiences. The case studies illustrate how personal beliefs about instruction, contrasting field placements, and opportunities for reflection on those experiences influenced the thinking of the two elementary education students.

The case studies highlight the difficulties pre-service teachers face in recognizing biases and misconceptions they have about children with whom they do not share a culture. In addition, the studies provide direction for thinking more clearly about the opportunities that can be fostered by community field placements. These community field placements could help pre-service teachers and other educators to confront and adjust assumptions regarding (a) learning and knowledge in non-school contexts, and (b) the abilities of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Finally, the studies challenge and modify assumptions regarding appropriate classroom roles for teachers and students.

Conventional Classroom Instruction and Field Placements

Teacher education programs have widely acknowledged the potential benefits of early field experiences. Such experiences provide prospective teachers with opportunities to explore teaching as a career option and to practice teaching skills (Henry, 1983), to become socialized into the teacher role (Dueck, Altmann, Haslett, & Latimer, 1984), and to connect theory with practice (Krustchinsky & Moore, 1981). Research indicates that such experiences also increase prospective teachers' interpersonal skills, helping them to develop an ability to communicate with students and school personnel (Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986).

However, inherent constraints of these placements, specifically issues of management, conceptions of learning, and institutional structures may impede the realization of these potential benefits. For example, research shows that prospective teachers in early field placements spend large amounts of time on mechanical and management oriented tasks (Goodman, 1985). This can encourage the perception of teaching "as a problem of acting with precision and exhaustive thoroughness in carrying out routine tasks" (Tabachnick, Popkewitz, & Zeichner, 1979-1980, p. 25). Through these tasks, prospective teachers could also come to view learning as the transfer of specific information (National Council for Research on Teacher Education, 1990). In addition, institutional structures such as the fragmented school day and high teacher/student ratios often provide little time for teacher discussion and reflection.

Community Based Instruction and Field Placements

The recent use of community based resources for educational reform is largely represented by two approaches. The first approach is to incorporate community members as intellectual resources for curriculum development. Unfortunately such outreach is typically restricted to special events and career days. A noteworthy exception is the work conducted by Luis Moll and Jamie Greenberg and their colleagues (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) which has capitalized on community "funds of knowledge" as the basis for substantive curricular development. The second approach, and perhaps more widely exercised, is the consultation of "expert outsiders," such as university faculty, to address particular curricular concerns. Although, these efforts often accomplish short-term changes in classroom behavior they result in limited changes in beliefs rather than long-term classroom practices (Cuban, 1990).

Interestingly, true "outside" experiences have been conspicuously overlooked (Generator, 1993) as excellent means for experimenting with curricular reform. Pre-service teachers' involvement in local communities (Porter & Paulson, 1989) can differ in the manner of participation. For instance, the one to one ratio typical of tutorial programs enables pre-service teachers to support school experiences in a more manageable form. Programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters focus on interpersonal relationships encouraging pre-service teachers to become personally acquainted with the children and their communities.

Conventional and Community Based Field Placements: Striking a Balance

The contrasting benefits and constraints of conventional and community based field placements suggest that experiences in both settings are desirable (Malenka, 1994). Conventional classroom placements introduce pre-service teachers to the organization of education in areas such as: district policies, building norms, and collegiality among teachers. They also provide pre-service teachers opportunities to tangibly apply and test theories discussed abstractly in university coursework. Community settings liberate both pre-service teachers and children from the time, space, and interaction constraints usually found in schools, helping teachers to better understand diverse cultures and communities and therefore reconsider current classroom practices.

Coupling conventional and community based field placements can encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on differences found in each setting. J.L. Green (1992) suggests that the contrast between the unfamiliar community setting and the familiar classroom environment would be likely to prompt an awareness of implicit instructional conceptions. In addition, interactions with children's personal and community literacies in non-school settings can encourage pre-service teachers to consider knowledge and experiences found in local and global communities as being as valid as those found in traditional school settings (Gallego, 1994). A broader understanding of learning, teaching, and knowledge encountered through both types of settings may prompt the revision, reconstruction, and redefinition of schools and schooling (Cairn & Wegener, 1993).

In this paper we explore two distinct learning/teaching environments and their influences on two pre-service teachers' understanding of the teacher's role, management, diversity, and instruction. First, we describe our research methods, including a brief description of the conventional and community field placements in which the pre-service teachers participated. Second, we examine learning episodes experienced at each setting. Lastly, we discuss the benefits each setting offers toward the reconstruction of classroom practice.

Methods

Participants

The two pre-service teachers highlighted in this paper were selected from a cohort of twenty-six juniors enrolled in an alternative teacher education program whose curricular emphases were diversity and equity issues. As partial fulfillment for the program, students participated in conventional field placements in elementary classrooms for two half days a week. As partial requirement for a literacy course, students also participated in a community based field experience four hours per week.

The majority of the university students were Caucasian, middle class females, born and raised in the Midwest. Children enrolled in local elementary classrooms and those attending the community learning setting represented a range of ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Field Placement Settings

Community based placement. All teacher education students participated in La Clase Magica (LCM) a voluntary after school program located in a community center, attended primarily by 3rd to 5th grade children (Cole; 1991,1994; Gallego, 1995). Participating children proportionately represented the residents of the multicultural neighborhood (approximately 1/4 Caucasian, 1/4 African-American, 1/4 Asian and 1/4 Latino).

Education and play activities were blended through the use of computers and board games designed to promote literacy skills and interaction with peers and adults. Genuine interaction was supported by participants' expertise. Children understood the norms of LCM and were more familiar with the use of computer activities. Pre-service teachers' content knowledge supplemented that of their school age partners. Teacher education students were directed not to play the role of teachers (e.g. giving directions) but to be collaborators, jointly trying strategies with children.

Conventional field placements The pre-service teachers also participated in and observed local elementary classrooms for two half days a week. These classrooms were located within middle class and lower middle class neighborhoods with diverse student populations. Although pre-service teachers' participation varied based on the discretion of their mentor teacher, general responsibilities included: observation of classroom teachers; assisting classroom teachers in management and teaching lessons related to methods courses.

Data Sources

Several sources of data were collected to illustrate the pre-service teachers' evolving understanding of teaching and learning while participating in conventional and community based field placement experiences.

Questionnaire and Interviews. Prospective teachers' theoretical conceptions of literacy instruction were documented by their responses to the "Conceptions of Literacy Instruction Questionnaire" (Malenka, 1994). Each pre-service teacher responded to the questionnaire before and after their field experiences and each was individually interviewed, providing an opportunity for them to expand or clarify their responses. This instrument required students to rate instructional scenarios representing a wide range of pedagogical approaches to literacy. Pre and post interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Field observations and reflection sessions. The pre-service teachers were alternately observed in each field placement four times during an eight week period, for approximately 45 minutes each time. Field notes collected by the researcher (the second author) recorded verbatim accounts of statements and interactions during each site visit. Pre-service teachers individually reflected on each interaction within a

week of each observation. Each reflection session included open-ended questions regarding the content, method, and value of each of the literacy events experienced.

Debriefings immediately followed students participation in La Clase Magica and provided them opportunities to discuss their experiences for 15 to 20 minutes with 7 to 8 of their peers and a moderator. The moderator urged students to address what they had learned about the children; what they had learned about themselves; and to compare their experiences at LCM to their experiences in elementary classrooms. The debriefings were audiotaped and transcribed.

Community-Based field notes Students electronically submitted weekly field notes describing their participation at LCM to the course instructor (the first author). Specifically, the field notes documented an objective overview of the general social scene and verbatim commentary regarding specific interactions with children. Lastly, students reflected on their experiences, offering opinions, suggestions, and comparisons between the community based and the conventional field placements.

Case Studies

This paper highlights the conceptions of teaching and learning expressed by two teacher education students who participated in conventional classroom and community based field placements. The case studies illustrate the benefits and constraints of participation in each setting and demonstrate how each experience complements and expands the other.

The Case of Sarah

When we approached Sarah about participating in this study, she responded in a cheerful and positive manner, and seemed happy to be of assistance. She continued to be relaxed and enthusiastic throughout the term, appearing to genuinely enjoy the time she spent with children. Her elementary placement was in a first grade classroom located within a lower middle class neighborhood. This classroom included culturally and ethnically diverse students, however the majority were white.

Sarah was completing a minor in Spanish at the time of this study, and often smiled when she heard children at LCM speaking the language. She was quick to join in these conversations and often initiated dialogue in Spanish. Another indication of Sarah's interest in Spanish and children was her volunteer work for the same community center in which the LCM sessions were held.

Questionnaire and Pre/post Interviews: Sarah's conceptions of literacy instruction. Two major themes emerged from Sarah's pre-term and post-term interviews regarding her conceptions of literacy and literacy instruction. One was the importance of stimulating children's interest in reading. She stated, "If they're interested they're going to want to learn about it and so, that's what I want to promote is the interest and then that will lead into their development." She planned to use children's literature, learning centers, and group work to accomplish this. However, she viewed children working together as more than just stimulating their interest. She also stated that "[Students] can get different ideas about things and look at things from a different perspective."

Conventional Field Placement: Sarah's classroom experiences. In the classroom, Sarah focused on learning. She wanted to promote an interest in literacy, and was surprised at the lack of games in her classroom placement:

I've never seen the first graders play games. They played the "trading game" with me, but ... I don't even think they have any games in the classroom. I never noticed any. That's weird.

She also wanted to integrate literacy across subject matter areas, such as when she taught a math lesson on place value. During this lesson she paired the students for partner work, but felt restricted from assigning journal writing:

They didn't write any words or read anything really. . . . If I were the teacher, I would have them do math journals every day ... explaining how they did a problem, or how they felt about doing it, if they felt they understood it or they didn't, or if they still had any questions that they didn't want to ask in front of the class, they could do it in the

math journal. So in my ideal classroom, that's what I would do, and that would incorporate literacy into math.

Sarah also used small groups during writing lessons, where she encouraged students to work together as they explored and shared ideas. During these lessons she focused on students' ideas, including their prior knowledge. Again, however, she felt constrained by her classroom teacher:

For one reason, I always feel strapped for time in that class. . . . With [the teacher] over me, I feel like I should do what she wants me to do. And that's how I feel with the writing group, too, as if, let's hurry up and get this over with, there's other things to be done.

Sarah viewed the classroom as a formal setting where the teacher was the authority and standard English was the method of communication. She accepted this as the way things were, but regretted that this impeded her relationship with the students:

In the classroom, it's the teacher's classroom, and that's the way it should be. . . . At school it's so much more formal, you don't get a chance to get to know your kids like you can at LCM.

Community-Based Field Placement: Sarah's LCM experiences. At LCM Sarah also focused on students' learning. Children worked with peers and with university partners to explore ideas. She noted that literacy was fun and interesting here partly because it was organized around games:

[LCM is supposed to be a learning environment, but I don't think the kids think of it as a learning environment, they think of it as fun stuff to do. It doesn't mean they're not learning.

In this setting Sarah also focused on students' ideas. She especially valued allowing them to make their own decisions, such as when she wanted to play a game in Spanish with a Spanish speaking child but he preferred English:

I would have rather continued in Spanish, but while I'm at LCM I think of it as a place to let the kids be in charge. So we tried it in English. This didn't seem to work much better. I was trying to explain it to Alex, but I found myself telling him what to do and that's not what I wanted to do.

Sarah especially valued the opportunity to speak and play games in Spanish at the LCM setting. She also learned about students' communities and other ways of communicating:

I like the chance to interact in Spanish, too. . . . Sometimes I think I learn more than they do, not so much about literacy but social stuff. Social skills and society, I learn about there.

Sarah viewed the LCM setting as a relaxed place which belonged to the children. She viewed herself as a guide and partner, not an authority:

The nice thing about LCM is that it isn't anybody's classroom really, it's everybody's classroom. The students and amigos (university students) are all learning together and we make up our own rules as we go along. This is how I want my classroom when I become a teacher--I want the class to be all of my students and mine together.

Comparison of Sarah's field experiences

In both settings Sarah focused on student learning. In the classroom she was surprised by the lack of games; at LCM she felt the games made learning fun. She attempted to bring games and collaboration to the classroom, but felt constrained by the teacher's expectations. In both settings she valued what students' brought to the setting. She viewed the classroom as formal, with the teacher as authority and standard English as the norm. She viewed LCM as relaxed, with teachers and students working together, and community literacies as welcome.

The Case of Janelle

When we approached Janelle about participating in this study she responded positively in a calm and matter-of-fact manner, seeming to regard her participation in the study as simply another aspect of her educational experience at the university. Janelle was friendly with the children and appeared to make sincere attempts to get to know and understand each child as an individual. Her elementary placement was in a second grade classroom located within a middle class neighborhood. Her classroom included culturally and ethnically diverse students. Unlike Sarah, Janelle spoke only English and had few prior experiences with children.

Questionnaire and Pre/post Interviews: Janelle's conceptions of literacy instruction During the pre-term interview Janelle focused on the affective responses of the children. She expressed concern for creating a classroom where children were comfortable and felt good. She planned to do this by granting students some control over their learning so as to alleviate fear; to avoid ability grouping so lower ability students would not feel bad; and to utilize culturally relevant materials so "different kids can think, 'Oh yeah, that's like my family.' Making them feel like they belong is important."

Janelle's post-interview responses still reflected concern with students' affective responses, but now she also discussed actual instruction. She focused more on learning and on individual progress rather than promoting self-esteem. For example, when discussing the focus of reading instruction Janelle stated that it "...should be on comprehension ... what they get out of it and the big picture, and then the small details."

Conventional Field Placement: Janelle's classroom experiences. Janelle's focus on the importance of students' affective responses is reflected in her discussion of a lesson on writing poems. She assessed the students' writing as good because they appeared interested and focused. She had not read their papers:

It looked to me like they were going to town on their things, and I didn't read them yet. . . . So they wrote really well, I thought. . . . They knew exactly what they were writing, because they were understanding what to put in there.

As the term progressed, Janelle emphasized the role of audience in writing and the importance of integrating literacy activities throughout the curriculum. When she discussed the overall atmosphere in the classroom, she was pleased to note that students often helped each other:

I see kids at the school helping each other. . . . They'll tell answers, or where are they, and they'll show "Well, we're on this problem, we're on this page." Things like that.

Janelle had discussed incorporating student choice into instruction as a way to make students feel more comfortable, stating that she did not want to be an authoritative teacher. However, in practice she was often very much the authority. When she compared the classroom with LCM, she stated:

[The students] don't have much choice in the classroom. . . . I decide when we start something new and when we finish, and when we have to hand something in and when we just work on it throughout the week or something.

This instructional view was evident in a lesson Janelle taught about writing poems. She had supplied an organizational structure using the five senses, and modeled its use. She judged the students who followed her example as being creative and involved, but was dissatisfied with a boy's poem which instead of following her model was based on his own experiences:

And that's another thing, Juan's poem. I don't want to criticize his poem or anything, but it was just kind of another sign of laziness. It was about clocks. . . . I'm not saying that's bad, I'm just saying the other kids came up with their own thing, like Jessica did the five senses using elephants.

Janelle also noted that students in the classroom often wanted her attention, and described a boy who pretended to need help doing math problems in order to get it:

Rob knew how to do it, but he'd call me over. We'd do them, he'd do them, I'd walk away, he'd [say], "I don't know how to do it." He just did four problems for me and there's other people that need my attention, too.

Janelle was unsure of how to handle this type of situation, and guessed that the high teacher/student ratio prompted students to seek out extra attention.

Community-Based Field Placement: Janelle's LCM experiences. At LCM Janelle also focused on students' affective responses, assessing their learning by her perceptions of their reactions. For example, when a cooperative, eager boy had difficulty answering questions about "Lemonade," a game he had played, Janelle asked questions such as "What was hard about making signs? Deciding on prices?" The boy responded with, "Deciding on prices." Janelle later stated that he had no problem answering the questions.

This somewhat superficial assessment of students' abilities was also evident in other site descriptions. For example, she stated that Carlos, who spoke Spanish as his first language, was "shy" and didn't like to tell her he spoke Spanish because he was "embarrassed." She did not consider that perhaps his "shyness" was attributable to lack of English fluency, and that instead of embarrassment perhaps he believed Spanish was appropriate only at home or in his neighborhood.

Janelle's focus on instruction was also evident at LCM. Even though she had been directed not to play the role of teacher, she was most pleased when her interactions with children lent themselves to a teacher role. For example, when she played "Marketplace" with a girl who asked for directions, Janelle used phrases such as "I explained experimenting and price range," "Again I emphasized," "I showed her how to read," "So, I explained advertising," and "Then I also had to explain how income, expense, profit were all related." About this interaction Janelle stated:

I thought that was a really good time at LCM. That will probably be one of my favorite times. . . . It was a lot more help than I've ever given at LCM. My role was a lot more similar to that of school that time. I liked that more.

Through Janelle's interactions with Spanish speaking students, she also came to consider the impact of speaking English as a second language. At the beginning of the term she did not consider language as a factor in a child's difficulty in comprehending game instructions; at the end of the term she realized that this might influence understanding of text written in English.

As in her classroom setting, Janelle noted that students also helped each other and worked together at LCM. Unlike her perception of school, however, she viewed LCM as a place where the students were in control and made decisions. When discussing a boy who wanted to stop playing a game at which he was not successful, she stated:

It's not supposed to be like a classroom setting, and if he seems like he wants to figure it out, then I'll help him. But I don't want to say, "No, no, no, you're not going to stop this. I'm going to teach you how to do this. Sit down." I was no way going to do that. It's his choice to be there, and if he wants to choose a new game, then that's what he should do.

Also unlike her perceptions of school, Janelle noted that students did not seek out teacher attention. This puzzled her, and like the situation at school where some students demanded her attention, she was unsure how to respond.

Comparison of Janelle's field experiences In both settings Janelle focused on students' affective responses. In both settings she maintained a focus on instruction, and was most pleased when LCM experiences were similar to school. She also noted that students helped each other in both settings. The main difference in Janelle's perceptions of each setting was who was in control: in the classroom it was the teacher, at LCM it was the students. This difference may be the source of the varying degrees of teacher dependence she observed at each setting.

It is interesting to note that despite Janelle's expressed preference for the classroom setting, she modeled her classroom writing on what she observed at LCM:

The writing group for them was a lot more different than anything they did in class because it was a lot more independent. They kept looking to me, "Is this right?" and I'm like, "Whatever you want is right." . . . That's similar, I think, the writing group and LCM.

A Study in Contrasts: Sarah and Janelle

The two case studies presented here illustrate that the participants perceived and interpreted teaching and learning differently in the non-school learning environment than they did in the conventional classroom context. In the classroom, both experienced the "teacher role." They had opportunities to develop teaching skills and to realize the connection between theory and practice, such as during writing instruction. At LCM they both experienced students' cultures and community ways of knowing, and observed students in the roles of authorities and decision makers. These differences prompted reflection on educational issues such as management, the teacher's instructional role, diverse students, and literacy. As a result, Sarah and Janelle adapted their classroom instruction to include student collaboration and decision making; their LCM interactions incorporated assistance with skills and problem solving.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study illustrate that coupling community based field placements with conventional field placements provide an innovative approach to educational reform prompting an assessment and healthy critique of traditional school norms and relationships.

In unique ways not available in conventional placements, the community-based setting validated community knowledge, membership, and informational resources. Several features of LCM supplemented the students' conventional field placements. First, LCM was located within a community center, a neutral environment--avoiding the constraints typically found in school and home settings (i.e. territorialism, established membership norms, and interaction patterns). Second, the placement offered extended interactions with children from distinct ethnic and economic backgrounds. This encouraged pre-service teachers to question their existing beliefs and assumptions, and to test out preconceived attitudes regarding children's abilities. Lastly, the environment, specifically organized reflective discussions, and fieldnote taking provided support for pre-service teachers to challenge and dispel myths about "minority" communities and children (Gallego, 1995).

The lack of clear authority and established interaction norms at the community based field placement may be considered a constraint to pre-service teachers' learning. Ambiguity is not a comfortable state, often filled with doubt and frustration. Evident in the case studies presented here, teacher education students as well as the community children are often tied to traditionally accepted roles. It is often difficult to imagine different ways of interacting and even more difficult to validate these ways as acceptable or even more appropriate than former models (e.g. teacher as all knowing authority). However, we contend that this very ambiguity regarding roles and responsibilities is a refreshing opportunity for breaking new ground without fear of failing to meet expectations. It provides unique and rare opportunities for students and pre-service teachers to genuinely construct and reconstruct these roles for themselves.

Conclusion

In learning to teach, neither firsthand experience (in classrooms as students) nor university instruction is sufficient. Without help in examining current beliefs and assumptions, teacher candidates are likely to maintain conventional beliefs and incorporate new information or puzzling experiences into old frameworks (Feiman-Nemser & Buchamnn, 1985).

Research also suggests that to change the ways teachers view diversity, literacy, communities, their role, instruction, etc., they must engage in an experiences which cause them to realize a discrepancy in their beliefs and then to reflect on the incongruity (Gallego, 1994; Hollingsworth, 1989; Posner, Stricke & Hewson, 1982). The most compelling experiences consist of personal involvement in real-life situations which reveal contradictions between beliefs and actuality (Guskey, 1986). Community based field placements supplement conventional field placements by providing pre-service teachers with unique experiences which contrast, contradict, and challenge those experiences gained in the classroom setting (Gallego, 1994). Specifically, the coupling of conventional and community-based field placement experiences provide students with exposure to current and to potential future practices, respectively.

However, to fully capitalize on such experiences, teacher education students must also reflect on them. Future teachers need help in examining their own beliefs about the needs and capacities of children. Reflection opportunities such as the collective and individual "conversations" described here provide the means for student reflection (Gallego, Malenka, DeVoogd & Lapp, 1993) informative to initiating school reform from the outside-in (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 1993).

This study has illustrated that an experience as brief as a ten week term can impact students' views of themselves, of children (especially those different from themselves) and of the learning/teaching process. We are encouraged by this and are optimistic about the potential impact participation in alternative learning settings can have on the lives of children and their future teachers.

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