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# A Listening Pedagogy: Insights of Pre-Service Elementary Teachers in Multi-cultural Classrooms

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [A Listening Pedagogy: Insights of Pre-Service Elementary Teachers in Multi-cultural Classrooms](#)

Although Texas schools are under the pedagogical constraints of both the Texas Assessment of Knowledge Skills (TAKS) and the national No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is morally incumbent upon Texas legislators and educators to listen to students' voices to engage them with the "teaching and learning" technical core of schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2000, p. 75). Ironically, while Texas teacher certification standards mandate student-centered pedagogical practices, the current state and national pressure of a high-stakes accountability climate often lead to a teacher-centered pedagogy in which student voices are routinely excluded from the classroom (Kordalewski, 1999). This atmosphere leads to inauthentic instructional practices that are removed from students' own experiences (McNeil & Valenzuela, 1998), which in turn lead to a perceived lack of student self-efficacy that is directly linked to disengagement from school (Bandura, 1993).

Writing about the test-based and test-prep curriculum of Texas schools, McNeil and Valenzuela (1998) write that such a curriculum contradicts established research about how children learn and is irrelevant to student experience and culture. This lack of fit can lead to a student-teacher relationship that Freire (1970/2001) has characterized as "a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)" (p. 71). This teacher-centered pedagogy excludes students from the opportunity to construct and to own their education, which is necessary to students' perceptions of self-efficacy (the belief that they can determine their own learning outcomes), which positively influence motivation and academic progress (Bandura, 1993).

According to Lincoln (1995), this type of teacher-driven pedagogy has ongoing ramifications, as inattention to student voices results in "retrofitting children (p. 89), which consists of the imposition of adult assumptions regarding the students' futures. Thus, children are provided with an education limiting them to the roles that adults assume will be theirs in the future, which are often based on socially unjust, erroneous perceptions based on race, gender, and economic class (Lincoln, 1995). The act of making these assumptions is called "assumicide" by many, as reflected by its inclusion in Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.merriam-webster.com>). Education based on uninformed assumptions such as these leads to faulty decisions about curriculum and pedagogy, providing an education that lacks relevance to children's lives and to their own aspirations, and resulting in further marginalization of these children from a future sphere of influence.

Lincoln's (1995) research converges with that of others that shows that respecting and listening to children's voices leads to their perception of a positive educational environment and the perception that they can shape their own learning. The absence of voice is linked to powerlessness, which not only inhibits the educational success of all children (Bandura, 1993), but especially is devastating to the educational experience of children from diverse, marginalized, and/or economically disadvantaged cultures in U. S. society that often expect parental and governmental authoritarianism (Freire,

1970/2001).

The concept of a listening pedagogy is derived from research on caring and effective teaching practices for mainstream and diverse learners (Paciotti, & Covington, 2007; Paciotti, K. D., 2006; Talbert-Johnson, 2006; Tompkins, 2006; Shor, 1996; Rossi & Stringfield, 1995; Bandura, 1993). First, a listening pedagogy is attentive, caring, and student centered, characterized by what Rogers (1969/1983) called “prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person . . . .” (p. 124) by respecting, eliciting, and considering students’ voices throughout all school learning experiences. Second, a listening pedagogy is culturally relevant to students’ diverse life experiences as well as their school experiences (Paciotti & Covington, 2007). Third, a listening pedagogy accommodates different learning styles through lessons delivered through auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic perceptual modalities facilitated by the application of multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1983/2003). Fourth, a listening pedagogy is characterized by teaching for understanding and mastery of content through intensive scaffolding based on student needs (Paciotti & Covington, 2007). Fifth, a listening pedagogy involves student choice of methods, materials, and/or topics, which enhances self-efficacy and allows students to have ownership of their learning (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999).

Even in today’s standards-driven curriculum, listening to diverse student voices can be enhanced through relevant pedagogical techniques in different disciplines. Negotiation of their own learning empowers students to occupy the “enabling center of their educations, not the disabling margins” (Shor, 1996, p. 200). This active participation is especially critical to students of populations that already feel marginalized and powerless in American society, and it may serve to mitigate the negative cycle that occurs when, as adults, they perpetuate “the rigid patterns in which they were miseducated” (Freire, 1970/2001, p. 155). Furthermore, as students are given the opportunity to express their views and to choose the learning experiences that are most relevant and effective for them, they practice making informed choices and actively participate in the democratic process, thus developing the skills for becoming educated citizens of a democracy that have long been exercised by the more affluent and politically dominant groups in American culture.

In this paper, the authors describe the perceptions of preservice teachers (PSTs) at a medium-sized, Hispanic-serving Texas regional university before and after participating in a Professional Development School (PDS) that incorporated the researchers’ construct of a “Listening Pedagogy.” Research has suggested that beginning teachers who participate in PDS display more sophisticated assessment skills that are critical to student learning, and they focus more on students than do beginning teachers who do not participate in PDS (Castle, Fox, & Souter, 2006).

## Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative design in which preservice teachers responded to an open-ended survey after their first semester of field-based experiences. The purpose of this study was twofold: to determine whether preservice teachers perceived that their teaching practices moved toward a more student-centered, listening pedagogy, and whether students’ perceptions of effective teacher practices based on researcher-identified characteristics of a listening pedagogy changed after participation in a Professional Development School (PDS). During the qualitative phase of the study, participants’ responses were read and re-read to report recurrent patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); then a narrative account was created. Patterns were compared over time in relation to the researchers’ observations in the schools. Thus, the researchers became participants in the study. Qualitative data were viewed from

a constructivist lens (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Tobins & Tippins, 1993), in which researchers and participants “frame interaction and confer meaning” (Charmaz, 2000) and data are interpreted using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial data construction began with the researchers reading and re-reading responses to the post-survey questions of the PSTs. The data was interpreted inductively by both researchers as they searched for patterns in the data, reflected and wrote memos, and developed categories and themes. Data construction was ongoing and data was continually compared with initial categories (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The categories were compared across data sources until no new categories emerged. The data interpretation was ongoing throughout the year with triangulation through multiple sources and member checks (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

### Qualitative Findings

Five open-ended questions about influences on student-centered teaching were asked on the post-survey. Of 124 PSTs completing the survey, 27 choose not to answer the open-ended questions, a non-response rate of 22%. We see this as evidence that, as they gave the survey, some site professors encouraged PSTs to respond or gave PSTs more time to respond. Influence of site professors on response rate is supported by the fact that at one upper grade site, there was an 82% non-response rate. Across all five questions, the following themes emerged: caring, ascertaining student needs, student centered instruction, differentiated instruction, respectful classroom management, the benefits of professional development schools, and the importance of mentoring from both clinical teachers and site professors emerged. These themes were integrated with corresponding characteristics of a listening pedagogy.

The first characteristic of the listening pedagogy is a caring, student-centered attentiveness shown through eliciting and considering student voices. Preservice teachers (PSTs) overwhelmingly responded that their practices became more student centered as they participated in their field-based experiences. In addition, they considered the total student response rather than just speech. Their interpretation of listening to student voices was congruent with the researchers’ in that the PSTs considered student needs, response to lessons, prior learning, and getting to know the students as part and parcel of considering their voices. Responses such as, “Lessons were based student needs,” and “I have designed plans to engage students, whereas before, I would just plan to cover material” were indicative of the feelings of the PSTs. In addition, One PST responded, “I do believe that all effective teachers focus their lessons upon their students’ needs.” Some PSTs considered the inclusion of student voices as caring: “Students should feel that teachers care about them,” and “Effective teachers should focus on building a caring learning environment.” One PST observed, “Sometimes I don’t see teachers getting to know their students on an individual basis and only look at academic performance.” Another PST wrote, “I was able to see the effective differences in the students’ attitudes when I paid attention to who each of them were as individuals.” Other PSTs wrote, “My teaching practices have become more student centered as a result of field basing experience because you are watching students learning in front of your very eyes,” and “With each lesson, I thought about [the students]: their interests, needs, and abilities. It became more natural for me as [PDS] progressed.” Another PST wrote, “As I was doing field basing I always had my students in my head and was always trying to figure what lesson can I do with the students with whatever I was doing.” Several PSTs described the influence of their clinical teachers, “who taught me always to listen to our students, always take notes, always be there when our students need them even if it’s a minor thing, because to the students there

are no minor things.” Furthermore, one PST indicated that considering student voice changed teaching practices, writing, “Feedback from students can help teachers improve their methods in order to be better in the future.” “Summing up the majority of responses in this category, a PST noted: “It’s all about the students!”

The next characteristic of a listening pedagogy, the incorporation of teaching practices that are relevant to students’ diverse life experiences as well as their school experiences (Paciotti & Covington, 2007), emerged as a separate category by many PSTs. PSTs ascertained the importance of this characteristic during the PDS experience for example: “I began to tailor my teaching to the students resulting in more effective teaching. I could see the results in my students’ interest and learning,” and “I really see the importance of relating everything to the student’s life. They seem to learn more when they feel connected to the topic.” Another response was: “Planning lesson plans that correspond to a child’s personal life is very important because it gives students a reason for wanting to learn.” Following are other typical responses:

“I learned that tapping into prior knowledge was a HUGE asset to learning. When I catered to their interests and experiences, they always performed better.”

“Students seem to learn better when they can relate to what is being taught.”

“A teacher that makes lesson plans relevant to life experiences is a great way to get students engaged in the lesson. If it relates to the student they are willing to participate in the lesson more.”

Researchers’ observation notes indicated that the most effective PSTs paid more attention to students’ cultures, private lives, school lives, and student needs than less effective PSTs, and that these practices continued to increase during the PDS experience.

The third characteristic of a listening pedagogy is the accommodation of different learning styles by incorporating auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic perceptual modalities with the use of multiple intelligences in lesson planning and presentation. Preservice teachers (PSTs), especially those who described themselves as more student-centered, responded that effective teachers include this characteristic in their teaching methods. They wrote: “It is important for teachers to teach to all types of learning styles, and understand that each child learns at a different pace and rate,” and “I do not want to rely on worksheets to teach students all the time.” PSTs also responded that students “enjoy and learn more when . . . they do things in ways they learn best,” and “I tried to incorporate many different learning strategies.” Other PSTs described how they utilized different learning styles and intelligences, through “kinesthetic energizers, students working independently and in cooperative groups,” “imaginative similes to describe musical ideas,” “hands-on activities,” such as using math manipulatives, “being creative” in adapting to different learning styles, and using “various materials/methods . . . for effective education.” One PST working with special needs children wrote, “Since he doesn’t write very well, I got him on the computer so he can type out his work.” This PST also stated, “I also brought in games and different paper for this student.” One PST equated using differentiated methods and materials to becoming more student-centered during the PDS experience, saying this resulting in incorporating “many more hands-on activities so the students [could] learn through their own experiences with the objects.”

In describing their growth in and their use of the fourth listening pedagogy characteristic, teaching for

understanding and mastery of content through intensive scaffolding based on student needs, a smaller number of PSTs described their use of scaffolding during their PDS experience. The researchers' observation notes show that there is a general lack of application of scaffolding in preservice teachers' practice, perhaps due to their inexperience. However, several of the most effective PSTs commented that their field experience had increased their use of scaffolding, leading researchers to think that prior to PDS, students think that, just because of their own skills, their students will understand what they teach without reteaching or prompts. As they progress through their semester, they realize that, for many reasons, many students will need scaffolding to learn the material. One PST stated, "It is very important to be able to scaffold each individual student. They are not all on the same level." This PST also commented, "My clinical teacher was constantly doing this to make sure students didn't fall further behind. Other comments were: "Unless the child understands a concept, you cannot move on," and "I would begin by building on prior knowledge; I would gradually build up from there and add on at the student ability level until the student can work it on their own." Another PST wrote that she learned that "The student comes first. After seeing my CTs efforts to do things like scaffolding students in the classroom and her willingness to modify and adapt her lessons," and one more commented that effective teachers "use an enormous amount of scaffolding techniques." The researchers' notes showed that the most effective PSTs grew in such scaffolding techniques as prompting, rephrasing, or reteaching. However, they came to PDS with a limited knowledge of scaffolding.

Some PSTs indicated that student choice of materials for learning and for demonstrating mastery, the fifth characteristic of a listening pedagogy, was important. Some pertinent comments were, "Being an effective teacher means . . . allowing students to choose from different materials to demonstrate learning," and "It doesn't matter how you demonstrate what you learned as long as the teacher knows what you understood." However, one PST added the caveat that, although students should have some choices, "The teacher should be the decision maker. Choice should benefit the class or what 'works.'" The researchers' observation notes indicated that choice was primarily used through the use of self-selection of learning centers in the early grades, rather than giving choices for learning the material or demonstrating mastery.

### Discussion and Implications

Based on the totality of the PST responses and the researchers' observation notes,

the researchers noted that PSTs seeking EC-4 certification and all-level Special Education certification seemed more aware of the characteristics of the listening pedagogy construct at the beginning of PDS than PSTs seeking secondary certification. Researchers surmised that two reasons for this might be that the PDS is the first overall teaching methods course for secondary PSTs, and that previous research has indicated that secondary teachers, in general, seem to focus more on delivering content than on students. Another reason might be that fewer secondary PSTs responded to these questions than EC-4 PSTs. In fact, one reason that researchers incorporated a listening pedagogy within the PDS throughout all levels of certification was to engage secondary students in the process of incorporating these characteristics when planning and giving lessons. Also, all PSTs (regardless of certification level) who considered themselves to be more student-centered responded that they incorporated all of the characteristics of a learning pedagogy. Another PST indicated that, as she became more student-centered through the PDS, she became more adept at accommodating diverse learning styles and multiple intelligences, prompting researchers to consider that being student-

centered, being caring, and listening to student voices should be single categories, rather than being a single characteristic of a listening pedagogy. In addition, based on additional responses from PSTs, researchers will add two other characteristics to a listening pedagogy: effective classroom management through positive strategies and an inextricable linkage of teacher content knowledge and instructional quality (Paciotti & Covington, 2007). Furthermore, based on responses regarding scaffolding, the researchers find that scaffolding techniques need to be addressed in a more in-depth manner in classes prior to PDS. The responses also caused the researchers to observe that the real-life experiences in PDS and explicit instruction on a listening pedagogy contribute greatly to the PSTs' knowledge and use of a listening pedagogy.

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## Appendix A

**Open Response Questions: Please be as thoughtful and specific as you can.**

1. In the questions above, describe the greatest influence on items you rated as 3 or 4. Please be specific.
2. Has participating in the field-based experiences of this class influenced your teaching practices? If yes, how: Please be specific.
3. Did your teaching practices become more or less student centered as a result of your field-based experience? Can you give any examples?
4. Did your mentor teacher influence your teaching practices: If yes, how? Please be specific.
5. Did you influence the teaching practices of your mentor teacher? If yes, how? Please be specific.

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