

Teaching Diversity Issues to Pre-service Teachers in Rural Settings

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Abstract

Pre-service teachers need preparation for the increasing diversity that will accompany their entry into the teaching profession. As there are few individuals of diversity near many rural campuses, it is necessary to develop alternative methods to prepare pre-service teachers for diversity issues. A study of pre-service teachers' attitudes toward diversity as well as how their college classes prepare them to deal with diverse students was conducted. Results show that students who come from rural settings have little apprehension when it comes to dealing with diverse students, and approve of the techniques that are being taught to them with regard to dealing with diverse students.

It has become increasingly commonplace in our country to find rural schools challenged by diverse populations entering their classrooms (Reiter & Davis, 2011; Assaf, Battle, & Garza, 2010). These rural schools are now faced with some of the challenges that urban schools have been dealing with for many years (Beeson & Strange, 2003, Jones, 2004; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). According to Buchanan and Rudisill (2007), shifting demographics in schools toward greater ethnic and linguistic diversity require teacher education programs to teach future teachers even in rural areas how to be effective with all learners. In general education classrooms there are more races and ethnicities found, as well as individuals with disabilities and special needs. Educators must now teach large numbers of students who are unlike them culturally or linguistically (Harlin, Murray, & Shea, 2007; Thorp & Sanchez, 2008). Rural teacher education programs are now being asked to prepare their teachers for this influx of diversity.

The steady increase in the diversity of general educational classrooms in terms of race, ethnicity, and individuals with disabilities has not been accompanied by a concurrent increase in teachers from diverse backgrounds (Allen & Porter, 2002). This problem is exacerbated by the finding that prospective teachers generally do not consider themselves ready to teach children from culturally diverse backgrounds (Marbley, Bonner, Malik, Henfield, & Watts, 2007). “Preservice and in-service teachers are being asked to teach in ways they were not taught in their teacher education programs, to learners who are often unfamiliar to them, in classroom contexts that are outside their experiential realm” (Sobel & Taylor, 2005, p.83). Research shows that “If instruction reflects the cultural and linguistic practices and values of only one group of students, then the other students are denied an equal opportunity to learn” (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007, p.66). Furthermore, teachers exposed to diversity issues tend to develop a more humanistic attitude toward all children (Allen & Porter, 2002).

Role of Teacher Education Programs

The increase in diversity in rural schools is a major challenge to rural teacher education programs responsible for preparing individuals to teach diverse elements of society. A major requirement under Standard IV, Diversity and Equity, of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2001) is that teacher education programs provide preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills and related learning experiences required to succeed in facilitating learning that will take place in diverse classroom settings” (Valentin, 2006, p.196). Fortunately, there is a body of research that assists teacher education programs in meeting this challenge. However, the literature shows that reform with regard to educating for diversity cannot be limited to one course or field experience (Barnes, 2006).

Research shows that the shaping of attitudes and behaviors toward diversity is more important than stand alone multicultural courses (Valentin, 2006; Richards, et al., 2007). Preservice teachers have past schooling experiences which may inhibit their ability to be effective with diverse learners (Donovan, Rovegno, & Dolly, 2000). Many experts in multicultural education stress the need for diversity-sensitivity training for teachers (Marbley, et al., 2007).

Teacher education programs can affect how pre-service teachers perceive dialect diversity (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006; Duarte & Reed, 2004). “If

one can recognize that oneself and one's colleagues and friends are diverse, one becomes more open to acknowledge the oppression humans suffer because of their differences. When authentic acknowledgement occurs, empathy and behaviors change" (O'Hara, 2006, p.39). Teacher education programs need to prepare teachers to become aware of and confront resistance to diversity and emphasize practical and relevant pedagogical applications of research related to diversity (Godley, et al., 2006). Teacher education programs need to offer pre-service teachers the environment that allows them to fully express their views regarding diversity issues. They need to be made comfortable for these discussions and allowed time to reflect about how diversity impacts teaching and learning. According to research, this happens through preparation and practice, not by chance (Gutierrez-Gomez, 2002). Field experiences that expose students to diverse learners are also very important (Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009; Valentin, 2006). Students have asked for more in-depth diversity training, desire opportunities to observe skilled teachers demonstrating appropriate instructional techniques, and want more opportunities to reflect on these experiences (Sobel & Taylor, 2005). Teachers need to know more about the world of the children with whom they work in order to better offer opportunities for learning success (Barnes, 2006), and they must be prepared to work with the families of their diverse learners (Chavkin, 2005). Universities are developing partnerships with school districts to address this issue and create more diverse learning experiences (Sobel & Taylor, 2005). One thing is sure: "Specialty area expertise, alone, is not enough. Educators must be guided by policies, practices and experiences in multicultural education" (Jones, 2004, p.12).

Ideas For Exposing Pre-service Teachers To Diversity Issues

Collaboration.

Research has shown the value of collaboration among faculty members in higher education (Austin & Baldwin, 1991; Boyer, 1990; Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; Davis, 1997; Dickson, 1996; Richards, Hinley, Weaver, & Landers, 2003; Ripley, 1997; and Slevin, 1993). However, traditional models of teacher education programs rarely include collaborative teaching opportunities. It is important to note that the first author is a professor of special education and that the second author is a professor of general education and that both are on the same faculty at a rural, midwestern university. In order to demonstrate the collaboration necessary between general education and special education both authors often collaborate as instructors, presenting often in each other's classes. Additionally, it is quite common in the Teacher Education department at this university to have courses team-taught by general and special education faculty. A clear example of this is the collaborative teaching that involves faculty from general as well as foundations areas and special education in a human development course. Instructors plan, prepare, and teach both the typical (general education) and atypical (special education) content within the course. Curricular meetings are held each week and instructors have specific roles to coordinate the content, assessments, technology activities, and field-based experiences as they work together as a team.

Another unique feature of the renewed Teacher Education Program is the implementation of an interdisciplinary block of classes. In the first level of the teacher preparation program, education majors complete an introductory education foundations course along with a political

science class. The two courses are scheduled back to back for faculty collaboration and to create a block of time so that students can participate in field visits to P-12 schools. Social justice and educational diversity issues are explored and emphasized in both courses. The teacher education field-based program encourages faculty members to share their ideas and knowledge, and to build closer professional relationships.

Case-Study Pedagogy.

Due to the fact that the students in this rural, midwestern university come largely from rural, small towns where there are few ethnic, racial, and disability diverse residents, it is imperative that the department provide them with “meaningful” examples of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse cases in which they can problem solve educational solutions. Fortunately, there are commercially available books that have case-studies of students who come from these diverse backgrounds. The first author has added texts with case-studies by Weishaar and Scott (2005, 2006) and Weishaar (2007) to courses in Medical Aspects of Individuals with Disabilities, Assessment in Special Education, and Legal Issues in Special Education.

In the Medical Aspects of Individuals with Disabilities course, students are exposed to case-studies of students with a wide range of disabilities. They experience problem-solving activities for individuals with disabilities including mental impairments, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, communication disorders, hearing impairments, physical disabilities, health impairments, autism disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and attention disorders. This is done to prepare them for various disabilities that usually are only found in larger urban settings, but appear from time to time in less populated areas. These problem-solving activities take place in student-led discussions in a face-to-face classroom setting, and in Blackboard group discussions in an online class. Students in the face-to-face class take turns presenting these cases, and students in the online class take turns summarizing their groups’ discussion board threads.

In the Assessment of Special Education class, students are exposed to case-studies of assessment of students in areas including general achievement, aptitude, emotional and behavior, reading, mathematics, written language, oral language, bilingual proficiency, transitional skills, and early childhood skill development. Face-to-face students and online students participate in the same types of structures mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In the Legal Issues of Special Education class, students are exposed to issues that include school accountability, high-stakes assessment, the referral process, discipline, nondiscriminatory assessment, free and appropriate education, development of Individualized Education Programs, least restrictive environment, due process, and parent participation, with involvement in similar class activities. This case-study approach has brought to life much of the content covered in these courses and made the topics more relevant to the everyday situations encountered by teachers in diverse educational systems.

Service-Learning.

Several studies cite the benefits of using service-learning in the classroom. One of the most prevalent findings is that service-learning improves academic achievement and social awareness (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Eyler & Braxton, 1997). Another benefit is that students gain a deeper understanding of classroom content by participating in a thoughtfully organized service-learning experience (Mullany, 2005). Service-learning has the potential for developing pre-service teachers' abilities to question their perspectives regarding social inequities and worldview issues.

Service-learning is a major force in American higher education and is particularly powerful in undergraduate education (Ehrlich, 2006). When done effectively, service-learning has the potential to strengthen pre-service teachers' ability to work with others and to help them more fully understand social issues and diversity (Corporation for National Community Service Learning, 2000; Mullany, 2005). Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) suggest intense and robust approaches to help undergraduate students learn about diverse students. Some of the techniques suggested by these researchers include social immersion in a cultural community, and service-learning projects in diverse neighborhoods and schools. Personal interviews that provide pre-service teachers the opportunity to meet and dialogue with members of a diverse community were also suggested.

According to Ladsen-Billings (1994) pre-service teachers who actively engage in service-learning experiences that are different from their own tend to grasp the concept of culturally responsive teaching on a deeper, more significant level. In addition, when pre-service teachers are placed in culturally diverse and/or low-income settings, in addition to taking multicultural courses, they gain opportunities to better understand the social dynamics of culture, race and class (Sleeter, 2000). Service-learning often allows pre-service teachers to learn directly about children's social, emotional and cultural lives (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998).

Implementing a service-learning component within the teacher education program occurred several years ago at this rural, mid-western university. Teacher candidates are now required to complete a fifteen hour service-learning project in an introductory education foundations course before they can be officially accepted into the Teacher Education Program.

Course instructors frame service-learning discussions around the principles of the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) (Goodlad, 1994). NNER was created by John Goodlad, to encourage teacher education programs to prepare future teachers to embrace democratic aspects of teaching. A strong commitment to civic engagement is embedded within this interdisciplinary approach to service-learning. The incorporation of service-learning as a cornerstone for curriculum collaboration among teacher education faculty and service-learning personnel was designed to meet the College of Education's mission of preparing students to actively participate in a democratic society. Service-learning promotes the active participation of pre-service teachers in the community, addressing a broad range of issues (Furco, 2008).

Technology.

There is increasing research about the use of technology in helping pre-service teachers understand and appreciate diversity (Clark & Gorski, 2001; Phallion, 2003; McShay & Leigh, 2005). According to Phallion (2003), several teacher education programs from rural areas face obstacles in placing pre-service teacher in settings that have highly diverse students. The use of technology is one way to increase interaction and understanding between predominantly white, rural university students and school-aged students from diverse backgrounds. There is also emerging research about how technology aids in the development of mentoring opportunities between pre-service teachers and K-12 educators to benefit elementary and secondary students (Phallion, 2003).

Multicultural Literature.

Another more traditional technique for addressing diversity issues is through literature. Investigating research articles, case studies, films, and literature related to diversity has been shown to increase multicultural understanding and empathy levels in pre-service teachers (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). The use of original texts allows students to analyze diverse perspectives and experiences and compare them to their own. Learning becomes meaningful when students use real situations and authentic viewpoints.

Numerous suggestions have been made to help current and prospective teachers reflect upon their own beliefs and experiences, develop cultural awareness and sensitivity, and potentially modify deep-seated biased attitudes. Several researchers, e.g. Baker and McDermott (2000), Nathenson-Mejia and Escamilla (2003), and Singer and Smith (2001), have used multicultural literature with graduate or pre-service teachers to initiate discussion, reflection, growth, and attitude change, and have reported positive results.

This study attempts to find out the extent to which our students have been exposed to diversity, are open to teaching students from diverse backgrounds and feel that the methods being used to prepare them to teach students of diversity are effective.

Methods

Students from first year teacher preparation classes were surveyed on their exposure to diversity, attitudes toward diverse peoples and the preparation that they receive to be effective with diverse students.

Research Questions

1. Do you know people who are...(African American, Asian, Hispanic, Muslim, Native American, Gay, Disabled)?
2. Do you have close friends with who are...(African American, Asian, Hispanic, Muslim, Native American, Gay, Disabled)?
3. Do you have apprehension teaching people who are...(African American, Asian, Hispanic, Muslim, Native American, Gay, Disabled)?

4. (Service Learning, Case Studies, Technology, Literature, Case Studies, School Visits)...would help with diversity issues.

Results

There were many commonalities found among the students in the survey. Despite the fact that 91% of the students were Caucasian, and only 7% came from cities, an overwhelming majority of the students knew people who were African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Gay or Disabled. Far less of the students knew people who were Muslim or Native American. Fewer numbers in the study claimed to have close friends who were minorities (See Table 1).

Table 1.
Percent of Students who state that "I know people who are ..."

Demographic	% "Yes"	% "No"	Significant Predictors
African American	95.3%	4.7%	None
Asian	89.6%	10.4%	Age (B=.034, Sig. = .035) Year In School (B=-.127, Sig. = .017)
Muslim	30.2%	69.8%	District Locale (B=-.033, Sig. = .048)
Hispanic	99.1%	.9%	District Locale (B=.009, Sig. = .007)
Native American	55.7%	44.3%	None
Gay	90.6%	9.4%	Age (B=.040, Sig. = .010)
Disabled	93.4%	6.6%	None

Note. n = 106 p<.05

Still, more than a third of the students surveyed had close friends who were African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Gay or Disabled. It was true again that very few in the study had close friends who were Muslim or Native American (See Table 2).

Table 2.
Percent of Students who state that "I have close friends who are... "

Demographic	% "Yes"	% "No"	Significant Predictors
African American	38.7%	61.3%	State (B=-.347, Sig. = .026)
Asian	36.8%	61.2%	State (B=-.377, Sig. = .014) Ethnicity (B=-.204, Sig. = .004)
Muslim	8.5%	91.5%	State (B=-.241, Sig. = .006)
Hispanic	64.2%	35.8%	State (B=-.453, Sig. = .004) Ethnicity (B=-.151, Sig. = .034)
Native American	22.6%	77.4%	Percent Poverty (B=-.008, Sig. = .022)
Gay	39.65	60.35%	Gender (B=-.235, Sig. = .027) Ethnicity (B=-.141, Sig. = .050)
Disabled	35.8%	64.2%	None

Note. n = 106 p<.05

Despite the fact that the students in the study came from backgrounds of limited diversity, less than 9% of the students expressed apprehension toward working with people of diverse backgrounds. It was, unfortunately, Muslim people who encountered the most apprehension (See Table 3).

Table 3.
Percent of Students who state that “I have apprehensions about working with people who are “

Demographic	% “Yes”	% “No”	Significant Predictors
African American	3.8%	96.2%	None
Asian	5.7%	94.3%	None
Muslim	8.5%	91.5%	None
Hispanic	3.8%	96.2%	None
Native American	3.8%	96.2%	None
Gay	3.8%	96.2%	Gender (B=.094, Sig. = .028)
Disabled	3.8%	96.2%	District Locale (B=-.027, Sig. = .000)

Note. n = 106 p<.05

The data analysis provided some statistically significant differences between groups. Comparing students from the State of Nebraska with students from other states, it was found that only 35% of students from Nebraska had close friends who were African-American, as compared to 75% of students from other states. Only 33% of students from Nebraska had close friends who were Asian, compared to 67% from other states. Only 5% of students from Nebraska had close friends who were Muslim, compared to 33% from other states. Only 60% of students from Nebraska had close friends who were Hispanic, compared to 100% from other states. And, as far as the use of case studies to help teach diversity issues, 82 % of students from Nebraska saw this technique as helpful, compared to only 50% from other states (See Table 4).

Table 4.
Percent of Students who state that “..... would help with diversity issues. “

Activity	% “Yes”	% “No”	Significant Predictors
School visits	86.8%	13.2%	None
Case studies	78.3%	21.7%	Percent Poverty (B=.007, Sig. = .037) State (B=.442, Sig. = .001) Endorsement (B=.075, Sig. = .034)
Service learning	87.7%	12.3%	District Locale (B=-.018, Sig. = .011)
Good literature	70.8%	29.2%	None
Technology	82.1%	17.9%	None
Collaborative exercises	86.8%	13.2%	None

Note. n = 106

As far as gender is concerned, one significant difference emerged. Twenty-eight percent of all Males had close friends who were gay, compared to 46% of females.

Conclusions

Pre-service teachers in rural settings need exposure to diversity issues in order to prepare them for a future that will see inevitable increases in the diversity of their student populations. There are pedagogical techniques that will allow professors in teacher training institutions to expose their pre-service teachers to effective ways in which to teach diverse students. It is encouraging that the research shows that, although pre-service teachers from rural settings coming to college have had limited exposure to diversity, they are, in general, open minded and accepting of diverse students.

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