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What diversity means to me: Exploration of the impact of
a diversity course on preservice teachers at a small private college

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to share the impact of an introductory diversity course on preservice teachers implemented in the teacher education program of a small private college located in rural South Georgia. Qualitative data from preservice teachers' course products were collected analyzed to see emerging patterns. Data results indicated that the course was an eye-opener for the majority of preservice teachers; this course increased preservice teachers' awareness and sensitivity to diversity around them and in education. In addition, this course shaped their view on themselves, the world and education in the sense that they expressed better understanding and appreciation of differences among diverse cultures and determination to improve their teaching in the future career to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

What diversity means to me: Exploration of
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Diversity and multicultural education have been a pressing issue for preservice teachers (Agnello, 2007). Decades after the Civil Rights movement, changes in the teaching force are slow and not sufficient in preparing teachers with cultural competency for multicultural classrooms in the 21st century. Most of the teaching force still reflected the dominant culture of European-American, middle class, females with little sustained and substantive interaction with diverse populations (Turner & Myers, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Burriss & Burriss, 2004; Hansen & Williams, 2003). In responding to what Bank's (2008) called demographic imperative, teacher education programs nationwide underwent reform and changes to prepare teachers to better serve the needs of diverse students. Despite the efforts, preservice teachers expressed concerns about not being prepared to teach in multicultural classrooms. Diversity variables such as language proficiency, classroom management, and inclusion needed to be conveyed to preservice teachers (Banks, 2008; Agnello).

Diversity variables represent the cultural characteristics students bring into the classroom and the culture formed as a result of that is critical to students' learning (Li, 2007). For teacher education students, nothing is more important than to realize students coming to their classrooms are unique individuals with differences and needs. In traditional curriculum, schools still teach using the same textbooks from the past and minority accomplishments are not recognized (Levin, 2006). Minority students' rich cultural backgrounds are not used to enhance everyone's learning. Banks (2008) emphasized that effective teachers need to grasp the pedagogical knowledge inherent in

multicultural education and adapt their curriculum and instruction to the unique needs of students.

Another aspect of emphasis on diversity was reflected in the professional demands on accreditation of teacher preparation programs. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has six standards regarding teacher education preparation and diversity is among those standards. One of the goals of the diversity standard is to support the “development of educators who can help all students learn and who can teach from multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and representations of students from diverse cultural backgrounds” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006). In the state of Georgia, the Professional Standards Commission affirmed the same importance of diversity for teacher training institutions (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, n.d).

In responding to the professional accreditation demands and educational needs, diversity components have been implemented in teacher education programs. One way of meeting the standard has been to add diversity courses to the curriculum. Stand-alone diversity courses became a convenient way of ensuring preservice teachers received at least rudimentary understandings of diversity (Gay, 2000). The results of studies on the impact of diversity courses introduced were mixed. Some studies revealed that multicultural courses were nothing more than history courses and they caused students to have even more biased attitudes towards diversity (Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey, 2009; Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003). Some studies suggested that implementing diversity courses caused preservice teachers to acquire knowledge about learners of diverse backgrounds and resulted in the development of culturally responsive

pedagogical skills pertaining to teaching (Culp, Chepyator-Thomson, Hsu, 2009; Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2004; Nagda, Kim, & Truelove, 2004). Other research indicated that diversity courses provided theoretical knowledge for preservice teachers while the gap between theory and practice remained (Lee & Dallman, 2008; Zhou, 2006).

The design and methods of multicultural courses vary as much as the results and several means of structuring the courses and assignments were found to have positive impact on preservice teachers' learning. Biographical writing assignments were effective in terms of self-empowerment and self-affirmation for ethnically and culturally different individuals (Li, 2007). Field experiences (Todd & Agnello, 2006) were effective in shaping preservice teachers' critical analysis of their diversity assumptions. When online learning management systems became apparent in higher education, the use of discussion boards in diversity courses was found to add avenues for individuals who may not feel comfortable talking in a traditional classroom to voice their concerns and questions, and hence develop the depth and width in critical exploration and analysis of diversity related issues (Wassell & Crouch, 2008; McShay, 2005). As multimedia appeared in the classroom, technology supported visual aids proved to be helpful in assisting students' learning and knowledge transfer (Moreno & Ortegado-Layne, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to share the impact of an introductory diversity course on preservice teachers implemented in the teacher education program at a small private college located in rural South Georgia. Georgia is a state with rich history and heritage in diversity, with 30% of its population from diverse backgrounds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). On a small, rural religiously affiliated private college campus with a 40%

diverse student population, there was no diversity course available in the teacher education program. Teacher education programs possess a majority of dominant culture students in their programs. At the college studied there was not a diversity course across all teacher education programs until fall term 2008. When the teacher education division was preparing for national accreditation, a decision was made to implement a diversity course to increase preservice teachers' knowledge of diversity issues and awareness and appreciation of diversity in educational settings. The impact of diversity courses at large universities captured the attention of the college's assessment system coordinators, while studies on the effects of diversity courses on small private college campuses in rural areas were sought but few.

Course Design

The new diversity course adopted two textbooks: *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* by J. Banks (2008) and *Understanding Human Differences: Multicultural Education for a Diverse America* by K. Koppleman and Goodhart (2008). These books were selected because they represented the scope and depth of diversity topics in multicultural education. This course was implemented as a hybrid one, and three course delivery formats were used: synchronous (Elluminate real time online) sessions, asynchronous (Blackboard online course management system) sessions, and seminars (physical classroom setting). The course was designed for a 16-week semester. The assignments of the course included Blackboard replies, autobiography papers, reflections, reading responses, action research projects, diversity lesson plan presentations, culturalism presentations, field experiences, and final papers.

Methodology, Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

This study is qualitative and descriptive. Forty five preservice teachers enrolled in the course in Fall and Spring semesters in academic year 2008-2009 were the study participants. Course products of these preservice teachers were collected and used for data analysis for this study. Qualitative data were collected from preservice teacher's Blackboard reading response papers, replies, action research projects, field experience projects, cultural-ism presentation projects, final papers, and reflections in the aforementioned terms. Banks' (2008) transformative curriculum goals of know, care and act were used as the conceptual framework for data analysis and data interpretation.

Findings

Know

For 89% of the preservice teachers, this was their first diversity course experience. The majority of the students' writing revealed their distance to diversity issues in education. To many preservice teachers in the course, information provided was rich, eye-opening, and thought-provoking. In Johnny's words "I am learning and being exposed to ideas that I have never thought of concerning education." Other preservice teachers expressed similar eye-opening experiences:

This class has opened my eyes and mind to the prejudices that many races have endured and still struggle with.

I have been very surprised at the amount of information I did not know. I did not know there were so many different cultures of people who came to the

United States so early in our beginning. I was surprised to learn of the brutality of early American Immigrants other than the African Americans.

Let me begin by saying how much my eyes have opened since I began this course. I never would have thought that America held so much diversity and to be honest I really did not give it much thought.

Before enrolling in this class, I don't think I had ever heard the term "multicultural education". Needless to say, I have learned a great deal and realize that I still have much to learn. The activities have prompted me to look at my own personal background and realize how my opinions have been shaped, and to really think about how I will approach teaching in a multicultural world.

To more culturally aware participants, reading the textbooks offered the platform for them to voice their learning. Stephanie really enjoyed her learning and stated that:

I have never read any other textbooks that I have enjoyed more than the two books for this class. They have both opened my mind to the concept of diversity and multi-cultural education. I have enjoyed expressing my opinion in the assigned papers and reading everybody else's.

Reading the textbooks was eye-opening and completing the course assignments was another new level of experience in thinking and learning for preservice teachers:

As I read Chapter 13, I realized that there were things I have never thought of. I realized that maybe I've had tunnel vision. I think possibly I haven't been challenged to think about some of these issues. It was very helpful to start the chapter off with a clear definition of diversity and pluralism.

The assignments for our [diversity] class have been very challenging and very eye opening for me. It is one thing to discuss issues like discrimination, diversity and prejudice in class, but to actually research these topics and write about them, it takes on a whole new meaning.

It is sometimes pleasant to receive feedback on our papers that asks us questions or makes comments to enlighten others about a certain culture. I am always up for learning more about other people because I am definitely a people person. I believe that these papers have made me sit down and really think about other cultures and how to incorporate them in my classroom.

I must have lived in a box because I just had never heard about the Asian people who came to the United States and how hard it was on them. In doing my newspaper article research on a prejudice I realize there are many people today in 2008 who still believe they are being oppressed because of their culture.

Care

Banks (2008) said that knowledge is not enough for individuals to be empathetic and caring in a democratic society and specifically when it comes to cultural democracy and cultural empowerment. Preservice teachers in the course go beyond mere course work and they start to become more aware of the existence, and sensitivity, of diversity. Differences in media, online learning communities, workplace, and diversity around become more apparent:

I don't think that I would have noticed how subtly the authors [of the articles] chose to incorporate these issues in their stories, but since I was intentionally looking for things like discrimination and stereotypes, it really changed my mindset and I became more aware [of those issues in media].

It [multicultural education] is something that I really had not given much thought. This is opened my eyes to see how everyone needs to be understood and made to believe that they are important and that no one else is more important than they are. During the first week we met online and got to know about each other and I believe that this is what we have to do in our classrooms. We have to make each student aware of the others and their importance, as well as aware of their own importance.

I must say this has been a very challenging semester; however I must say I have learned more about my cultures and many other cultures than I would have ever imagined. You know sometimes I must admit I have taken classes that I did not

give or put in 100% effort. I cannot say this about this class. I am finding reading more about cultures. I am paying more attention and to the cultures around me.

This semester has really been an eye opener for me. I have learned so much through reading Banks and Koppelman as well as reading what all of my classmates' responses. When I started out in this class I did not realize that I do, to a point look down on those that are needy and are not like me. I have also become more aware of the different cultures that are around me. I really did not realize that there was such a big problem in the schools when it came to different cultures.

Tom was a European American male. He had the tendency to see mainstream and minority as two different camps and he thought multicultural education was simply African American education. He did not like the idea of accusing white men for all the past wrong doings. He was shocked at the reading from both textbooks at the beginning the semester. At the mid-semester point, he found himself empathetic regarding what happened in the past to minority cultures and the issues going on in classrooms today, in relation to multicultural education:

After reading chapter five of Koppelman's and Goodhart's text, I have become very sensitive to the plight of other cultures. European Americans have oppressed and taken advantage of these people for centuries and continue to do so today. It is sad that white people of generations, past and present, committed

those atrocities for greed and for the need to be dominant and in control. It is no wonder then that many students of these cultures do not perform as well as whites in school. These cultures have only had somewhat of an equal education since the late 1960's.

Preservice teachers see the need for more understanding of differences and acceptance of others:

We should be more understanding not only as Christians but as teachers. Even at my work the last couple of weeks, I have noticed the cultural differences there, things I didn't really pick up on before. I hope that through this class, I will be a better teacher, wiser and more understanding and accepting.

I have a family member who is gay and he has experienced derogatory remarks within our family. I can only imagine what remarks he has heard from strangers. I know at school he got picked on and pushed around. I may not agree with his sexual orientation but I still love and accept him. I hope that one day as a teacher I will be able to help my students understand what prejudice is and help them avoid it so that they do not pass it down to future generations.

I did not realize that some children do not get any kind of teaching before entering school. I knew that children are at a different level when entering school, but I also thought that parents as well as caregivers would teach them a little. I guess this is where the low income issue comes into hand when people

do not have the means to buy or give their child education materials to learn from. My heart just went out to this child. I am very glad that I was able to have this opportunity to go into this classroom and learn even more about how different incomes do play a big role on learn behavior.

Educators must present an effective foundation for a multicultural curriculum and education. Education is the fertilizer in order to make students grow they need to learn to accept the different lifestyles, cultures, and languages, of all ethnic groups.

Koppelman and Goodhart (2008) stressed that when we say what we want to say to another, we cannot assume that what the other party heard or understood is what we intended them to hear. Kathy realized that we must establish a habit of accurate communication to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding:

Miscommunication can lead to many dilemmas or conflicts that can be avoided if we ensure ourselves that we are communicating efficiently and listening to what we are being told. Knowing the cultures that your students in your classroom come from can help you communicate with them and their parents more effectively.

To preservice teachers, the process of learning to be more understanding and more accepting of differences in cultures also means personal awakening and struggle:

Koppleman really got my attention in the seventh chapter where he talked about attitudes about diversity. This is a personal struggle for me growing up in the south, just because my parents taught me to accept everyone and yet I go to school and hear my classmates being racists to other students because of the culture difference.

Because of these assignments from week five to eleven, diversity has taken on a whole new perspective for me. Our class has been able to discuss a plethora of issues that deal with diversity, and we have even gotten to practice incorporating it into our teaching lessons and PowerPoints. I would have to say, one of the biggest challenges for me in view of these aforementioned assignments is how I will personally choose to address diverse aspects in not only my teaching, but also in my day to day.

Koppelman and Goodhart (2008) stated the empowerment of multicultural education is “a journey that leads students to self-discovery and to a sense of efficacy” (p. 311). To preservice teachers, the content in the course helped them to better discover their own bias and the need for changes in their ways of thinking:

Until this research and others like it I have done in the past, I had a tendency to group people according to their race which is a bit odd because I come from a minority race which includes various ethnicities not only in Africa but here in the United States. The more I continue to study multicultural issues the more educated I become but more importantly it opens my mind, attitudes and beliefs

about others. This is very significant because I am an educator of very young children and the need for me to be cognizant of their differences is great. Also it is vital that I teach in a way that helps shape their awareness of others.

After completing her field experience project, Laura expressed her learning this way:

I am in education field at the right time. I am excited and I want to make a change in the lives of my students. Creating a multicultural classroom will be exciting and challenging. I am up for the challenge, BRING IT ON.

Banks (2008) emphasized the importance of multicultural competency; however there are challenges for preservice teachers to analyze themselves as multicultural beings. In the multicultural autobiography paper, Sarah, European American, wrote “The challenge confronting us today is how to become multicultural individuals.” However, their determination to learn to become competent multicultural educators in their future career was obvious:

I really enjoyed reading and learning about the other cultures during this course. I think that really gives insight on the way other cultures are raised and what they believe. As we have learned, behaviors stem from different cultures and ethnicities. I am truly excited to continue on this path of learning to become a true multicultural person. I can't wait to get my own classroom and implement multiculturalism into it.

At the beginning of each semester, preservice teachers were asked to bring their cultural artifacts to class and many of them struggled about “what’s my culture?” The fact the majority of preservice teachers enrolled in the course were white, female, and traditional students contributed to what research indicated. Individuals from mainstream culture had difficulty affirming their identity and thus their culture (Hill-Jackson, Sewell, & Waters, 2007).

After experiencing the course, preservice teachers adapt to diversity and start to see the beauty of it. In Amy’s words “Multicultural education harbors a place for a multitude of voices in a multicultural society and a place for many dreams.” Their appreciation goes beyond the boundaries of nation and race:

When all of these things unfold we find ourselves in a country that is great and a World that seems small. As a kid growing up I did not see all of this coming but when they said the world is a rainbow the teacher did not joke around. All the diversity is a mix of colors, cultures and heritage that makes a beautiful people. Maybe many may not agree, but many did not agree with making this world a world of diversity. That did not stop it from becoming a better place, and most importantly bringing the change to America to make it one of the World’s greatest countries to live in.

Kim found her understanding and appreciation of diversity and its impact in educating young children was embedded in her favorite poem “It is time for parents to

teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength” (Angelou, n.d.). This reinforced the idea Banks (2008) meant to get across in that multicultural curriculum encourages an appreciation and understanding of cultures as well as one’s own culture.

Act

Gay (2000) stressed that, “Awareness or appreciation without action will not change the educational enterprise. Mastery of knowledge and skills related to working with culturally diverse students in pedagogical situations is imperative for this task” (p. 6).

In this study, preservice teachers’ perceptual and attitudinal change occurred at different levels in different dimensions. Preservice teachers were able to change their thinking mode and walk in “others’ shoes.” More importantly, they were able to see what they had experienced in the past as only one perspective:

Sometimes when you take the time to see another person’s point of view you realize we are not as different as we once thought. We have the same basic needs and emotions but we may have diverse ways of accruing them.

I remember being taught in primary and elementary school that the Pilgrims and Indians at Thanksgiving dinner together, was one big happy family and lived happily ever after. I am from Native American decent so when my mother told me what really happened I was at first confused. After reading the chapter on Native Americans, I was hurt. I felt betrayed by my teachers, I know it sounds

extreme but I was young, for lying to me. I now try to look at what was taught as only one perspective and not the whole story.

Multicultural education has reinforced something in my mind and that is that each of need to keep an open heart and mind to the needs of others. We also need to accept others for who they are. It was also a time of me reflecting on how each of us need to remain teachable and how we must never believe that our way is the only way of doing things.

From exploring the curriculum we have learned to multicultural education I have been flooded with new perspectives and a desire to promote change. There are ideas and perceptions that I never knew existed. I never thought about how one sided the curriculum we grew up learning could be more diverse. I think I just took it as face value and accepted it as fact. I was never challenged to think of it differently.

The self analysis of how preservice teachers perceive themselves was obvious. Many found their former ways of thinking to be prejudiced and partial in understanding diversity issues. This view change pushed them forward to come up a solution regarding what's next:

The chapter that I really feel as though I learned from the most was Koppelman Chapters 2 and 5. In chapter 2, it really made me realize that I do carry

stereotypes on different cultures. I looked at the Asian culture as the most educated culture. I looked at the African Americans as the ones that are on welfare.... I am not proud that I was part of the stereotype problem. I know that all cultures face hardships. Hard times are not prejudice. They attack everyone. I now try to look at each culture on a positive note of what they have to offer this country.

I know when someone tells me I'm prejudiced, I say no I'm not. However, after reading the past few chapters, I have changed that thought as I have some work to do--I need to change a few of my feelings and thoughts.

Preservice teachers realized that multicultural education was not just a concept for the classroom. They came to know that they need to build relationships extending into their communities.

The affect this presidential election had on the schools systems can be fixed. The president can not fix everything, but building a relationship with someone like your teacher or classmates may help you mend and correct a great deal of things. If we start in our schools and community we can accomplish a goal, that may set a trend, and some day become a custom. Taking advantage of the point that with education you are powerful and with it you can achieve mountains of joy.

After taking this course I notice the discrimination that goes on much more. I do not agree with it at all. If there was a way for me to be able to change it for everyone I would in a heartbeat! All I can do is be an example for the people and students I come in contact with.

Field experiences were an exciting assignment for the preservice teachers. To them, to be able to walk into the classroom to complete their assignments was where their spark for teaching was lit. After the field experience assignment, Julie concluded that:

If I reach my goal and have the opportunity to teach in this school, I will encourage the administration to have more multicultural activities in the classroom. They touch on different cultures around the holidays, but do not incorporate it more in the daily routine. The teachers feel that they are too pressed for time to add anything to the curriculum. They need to be trained to understand it doesn't take more of their time away from them; it just becomes a part of their current curriculum.

April also enjoyed her field experience in the special education classroom:

Each time I learn new ways of dealing with students in the education setting. I really enjoyed reading the assignment for week four. I liked reading about different ways to allow children to accept multicultural education while working on social skills.

The readings from Banks' have also transformed how I think about diversity and student's culture, language, and ethnicity. This will help me incorporate information in my lessons so that the needs of students will be met. I will teach so that students will appreciate and understand their own culture and this will help students understand other cultures in the process I want my students to recognize, understand, and accept cultural diversity.

Discussion

In the diversity course, preservice teachers expressed their learning and growth at different levels, awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation and different dimensions, perspective, inside-outside, larger community, and teaching career at large. Implementing a diversity course in a rural, religiously affiliated higher learning institution brought new opportunities for preservice teachers in their learning, understanding, and appreciation of diversity. A newfound desire and attitudinal readiness to transfer their learning into their future classrooms became evident.

However, challenges remain as evidenced by the findings that some preservice teachers had difficulty in digesting the diversity issues as outlined in the textbooks used for this course. Susan explained fully how hard she had to review the concepts and terms in order to have a better understanding of what the authors really meant between the lines. She said, "A lot of the words are similar and they run together and after a while they start to confuse me. I have to read some of the pages twice just to distinguish between the terms."

Preservice teachers did show perspective and attitudinal changes in their outlook about history and current teaching classroom practice in relation to diversity; however, it is still hard to eradicate prejudice and discrimination (Banks, 2008). Some evidence of this was displayed through preservice teachers struggling with prejudice and discrimination. The struggles observed reflected the statement by Edward Murrow that “everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences” (Murrow, n.d.). This view offered another way to look at lived experiences, in that how past experience can help or hinder preservice teachers’ openness to diversity. More training and instruction are needed in those areas.

Unlike some diversity course study results, in which resistance was found to be a significant factor in implementing diversity into the curriculum (Ford, 2004; Zhou, 2006; Hill-Jackson, Sewell, & Waters, 2007; Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003), most participants in the course became open to new ways of seeing. There was no obvious strong resistance expressed among preservice teachers enrolled in the classes.

In reviewing one of the textbooks used for the course, Kopplemans and Goodhard (2008) stated the intent of their book is “to challenge readers to think and talk about issues that each of us must consider as citizens in a multicultural society...to challenge attitudes based on incomplete or erroneous information” (p. xxiv). In this regard, preservice teacher’s wrestling with terms and chapter content reading, and reflecting on the implication of their learning, was an expression of that changing process; which was a journey of growth and discovery embedded in R.W. Emerson’s verse “Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there in no path and leave a trail” (Emerson, n.d.).

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