

Understanding the challenges of diversity: Analyzing a restructured curriculum

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Abstract

Teacher education is plagued by challenges pertaining to preservice teachers' attitudes toward diversity issues and the impact that these attitudes can have on instructional practices and teacher-student relationships. This study measured preservice teacher attitudes toward gender, race, and GLBTQ issues over the course of a semester, at a university located in Appalachia, a region historically noted for its politically and socially conservative ideas and resistance and distrust of outsiders. Participants completed two surveys at the outset and conclusion of the semester; one survey captured the degree to which students identified with characteristics unique to Appalachia, the other measured attitudes toward diversity-related topics including race, gender, and GLBTQ concerns. Based upon previous findings, the authors expected that participants would experience challenges as they encountered course materials and engaged in class discussions that, at least for some, opposed their previously held beliefs. In so doing, we sought to identify whether or not participants attitudes would shift. Our tentative findings confirmed our hypotheses. Specifically, we found few significant differences in attitudes between T1 and T2; shifts that did occur suggested that attitudes changed in degree of like/approve or dislike/disapprove, but did not move out of initial categories. We concluded that the course was necessary yet not sufficient in redressing attitudes toward diversity.

Introduction

Teacher education is plagued by the challenges related to what Korthagen and Kessels (1999) refer to as “the transfer problem”; traditional models offer prospective teachers a theory to application paradigm, wherein the “teacher educators make an *a priori choice* about the theory that should be transferred to student teachers” and student teachers are expected to apply this particular theory in their classrooms (p. 5). What oftentimes occurs is that student teachers, when faced with the realities of classroom life, revert to their comfort zones. These comfort zones might take the form of a refusal to problematize the tensions they experience in the classroom (e.g., they “do not tolerate contradiction in their position”; Levine-Rasky 1998, p. 106), or may be a reversion to the familiar when attempting to discern a “right” action (Agee 1998). Regardless of the particular form these comfort zones take, cognitive developments borne from dissonance and resistance may, in the immediacy of the moment, be relegated to the backburner, thereby establishing a subconscious tendency to address negatively those who do not act as the preservice or student teachers -- when students themselves -- would have (e.g., Murrell in Gomez, 1993).

Such a tendency is especially evident in issues pertaining to diversity studies and attendant application in the classroom. Indeed, to the extent that prospective teachers do seek – and/or are able -- to move beyond the stage of resistance, many express skepticism for those conceptions that challenge their previously held beliefs (e.g., Agee 1998). A particular concern that studies have revealed is a tendency for preservice teachers to differentiate between the concept of diversity at the macro level, and the reality of the “isms” at the micro level i.e., that while diversity is an issue conceptually, the presence of racism and sexism (e.g.) is the problem of the individual (e.g., Gomez 1993; Levine-Rasky 1998; Silverman 2010). Further, studies

have revealed that preservice teacher attitudes towards redressing such isms in their classrooms compound this problem. For example, Gomez (1993) cites a study in which 30 preservice secondary teachers “expressed curiosity about multicultural education at the beginning of the course” yet concurrently asserted that “sexism and racism don’t exist” and that the instructor “was ‘utopian and idealistic for advocating cultural diversity’” (p. 465). Other studies have reported that, to the extent that prospective teachers or student teachers recognize diversity is of concern, there is either a tendency to espouse the belief that specific address of any problems is the responsibility of administration and the district, not individual teachers (e.g., Paine, in Gomez 1993; Levine-Rasky 1993; Silverman 2010) or to lack a sense of agency and sufficient training to address it well (Menter 1989). Castro’s (2010) review of literature analyzing preservice teachers’ attitudes reveals that a considerable number ascribe to meritocracy ideologies, wherein issues pertaining to diversity – in this instance, the achievement gap – are considered the problem and responsibility of the individual (p. 204; also in Van den Bergh 2010). Of equal import are findings that suggest that preservice teachers’ exposure to diversity issues in their preservice curricula is met with resistance, with many continuing to espouse conservative views both in the immediate aftermath of a particular course that addresses diversity issues, and/or once faced with the challenges of life in the classroom (e.g., Levine-Rasky 1993; Robinson & Ferfolja 2001; Wolf et al 1999).

Regardless of the particular mode or form of resistance among prospective teachers, the impact of these attitudes is of particular concern: implicit teacher prejudice both is communicated to students, and has an impact on academic achievement (Van den Bergh et al 2010, p. 518; also Sleeter in Castro 2010). The overwhelming demographic of prospective teachers continues to suggest that White, middle to upper middle class females continue to be the

majority population that enters the teaching profession; as their student population continues to become more racially heterogeneous, the teaching population continues to become racially homogenous (Howard, 2003; Milner 2003; Zumwalt & Craig in Castro, 2010). Present within this population is the continued belief that their “cultural lens represents the norm for all other students” (Sleeter in Castro 2010, p. 198; also in Levine-Rasky 1998). When addressing concerns of diversity, substantive curricular changes, and student outcomes, this poses considerable challenges.

Yet, it is not only prospective teachers’ attitudes towards diversity that are problematic. In order to understand these attitudes and affect change, the curriculum must present authentic opportunities to learn about and from those cultures and groups who historically have been marginalized and constructed as “Other”, while concurrently problematizing the reality of structural determinants (Agee 1998; Ellis 1993; Gomez 1993; Howard 2003; Menter 1989; Milner 2003; Pearson and Rooke 1993; Robinson and Ferfolja 2001). This necessarily requires that University instructors, too, reflect upon their own identities and beliefs in order to communicate and facilitate discussions more effectively (Agee 1998; Donahue 2003; Ellis 1993; Levine-Rasky 1998; Pearson and Rooke 1993; also Menter 1989). Critical integration and balancing of diversity issues such as gender and race studies – or what Pearson and Rooke (1993, p. 418) refer to as “mainstreaming” -- are essential for moving beyond the postscript approach often found in current curricular and course offerings.

Toward that end, the researchers of sought to examine the effects of the addition of a diversity focused component to a structured curriculum change in undergraduate teacher education. Our underlying assertion rested on the notion that teaching is not a neutral act; it necessarily is a political act if we seek to afford our students a sense of agency to redress

inequities (e.g., Donahue 2003; Gomez 1993; Menter 1989; Milner 2003; Pearson and Rooke 1993).

Methods

This study measured preservice teacher attitudes toward gender and race issues over the course of one semester. Specifically, students enrolled in the researchers' classes (2 sections of the same course; 1 course section per researcher) were the subject population. This population consisted of 20 males and 14 females (N=34), all above the age of 18. The majority of these students was white, and came from Appalachia of Kentucky.

Prospective teachers' attitudes toward diversity were surveyed at the onset and conclusion of the classes. Two questionnaires were administered to both course sections. Initial and change in student attitudes were measured by the use of a semi-structured questionnaire that identified particular characteristics and attitudes of Appalachian culture toward diversity; these characteristics were culled from recent research (Spradlin, 2010). A second questionnaire measured initial and change in student attitudes about perceptions of diversity related issues (specifically, attitudes and beliefs about issues important to racial and ethnic diversity, gender difference and construction, SES, and the University experience); it was based upon one used at the University of Maryland at College Park. In addition to the questionnaires, student attitudes were assessed during the course of the semester by utilizing student reflection through journaling about racism, gender and SES; although some research to date (e.g., Hoffman-Kipp et al, 2003) indicates that such reflections do not take into account sufficiently the challenges that classroom life presents, these critical reflections can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to reflect upon conceptions to which they previously had not been introduced (e.g., Howard 2003; Levine-Rasky 1998; Milner 2003).

Participation in all facets of the study was voluntary, and subjects were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In order to ensure confidentiality of students' participation, each instructor administered the survey to the other's class, and safe guarded collection and storage of the documents until final grades were assigned.

To ensure that confidentiality and student anonymity was maintained for the survey instruments, students were directed to create a pseudonym, to keep that pseudonym confidential, and to use that pseudonym on both administrations of each survey. In addition, for those who consented to have their journal entries used for research purposes, the researchers assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain participants' anonymity. Researchers administered the survey instruments in the other's class, as well as collected and safe guarded the documents of each other's class, until final grades for the course were assigned and disseminated.

Research in teacher attitudes has revealed a propensity for prospective teachers to identify a distinction between openness and responsibility in redressing diversity and concomitant structural determinacy; social justice concerns, in other words, are a conceivable possibility, yet not necessarily one that prospective teachers consider their own responsibility in their individual classrooms (e.g., Levine-Rasky 1998; Silverman 2010). Based upon the findings of previous studies (Agee 1998; Gomez 1993; Levine-Rasky 1998; Wolf et al 1999), the authors did not anticipate an immediate, substantive change in attitudes towards diversity issues in classroom instruction per se; rather, we sought to measure the extent to which preservice teachers communicated a willingness to explore diversity issues in their own purview. In addition, we sought to gain insight into how the University experience has an impact upon students' attitudes and beliefs.

Furthermore, research findings to date suggest that the gender, race, and age of preservice teachers impact their attitudes toward diversity issues (Chizuk & Chizuk in Castro 2010; Pohan & Aguilar 2001; see also Gomez 1993). Subsequently, the authors expected that these factors influenced prospective teachers' attitudes toward diversity issues and discussions.

Results

Our tentative conclusions to date suggested that students' attitudes shifted very little over the course of the semester. Importantly, our analyses are based upon the surveys; although initially we had planned to analyze students' journaling, we were unable to do so, as our data was incomplete for our intents and purposes. Our analyses indicated that few statistically significant differences in attitude changes between test administrations. Those that did occur reflected degrees of attitude, rather than shifts in attitudes – i.e., when a change did occur, it was the degree to which students reported that they agreed or disagreed with a given statement, not that they previously agreed with a statement, and changed attitudes (or vice versa). Thus and for example, at Time 1 of administration of the surveys, the mean score for attitudes toward the statement “I discuss topics related to race awareness with friends” was .60 where 1=yes, and 2=no; at Time 2, the mean was .75 ($p=.08$), suggesting that, although students became more likely to discuss such topics over the course of the semester, in the aggregate the difference was not statistically significant enough for us to render the restructured curriculum of our course effective (and, indeed, to what degree could we attribute the shift to our course, as a standalone factor?).

[Table 1]

Although there were few statistically significant shifts in attitudes toward diversity in our study, our analyses revealed that, although most students were likely to recognize sex-based, racially-biased, and homophobic behaviors, they were less likely to discuss issues pertaining to these topics with their friends. Notably, our findings suggested that they were more likely to discuss such topics at the end of the semester than at the beginning.

In addition to the above considerations, our findings revealed that students found University faculty's and peers' respect for different races, sexes and sexual orientations remarkably similar. Specifically, they claimed to agree "quite a bit" with the statements found in Tables 2 and 3.

[Table 2]

[Table 3]

Discussion

As educators, we would like to think that course materials and structured discussions provided opportunities for student attitudes to shift toward recognizing tensions when such are present, and be willing to initiate the difficult conversations. While we found that the latter in fact did increase somewhat over the course of the semester, the former concern continued to be a conundrum. For example, our findings at both test administrations revealed that students did not find that gender, racial and sexual orientation tensions were evident in classrooms. Further, at both times 1 and 2 of the survey administrations, participants reported that they seldom, if at all, were "exposed to a homophobic atmosphere created by other students" outside the classroom

(mean at T 1 = 1.80; T 2 = 2.11). Certainly, we would like to believe that such attitudes are not present either in or outside of the classroom. Yet, comments such as “I disagree with homosexuality” and “I do not believe in homosexuality” are not uncommon in the region, a fact that suggests that sexual orientation tensions are likely to form an undercurrent, in at least one of the two settings, at some point. Indeed, when provided an opportunity to describe their experiences with such exposure, 15 participants noted that they *were* exposed to homophobic atmospheres outside the classroom. Equally troubling, 6 of these 15 participants wrote that homophobic comments overheard in these settings were “a joke”, i.e., an unintended slur.

Here, we cannot help but invoke Critical Race Theory, and note that recognizing intention is not sufficient. As Charles Lawrence (ND/1995) reminded us:

Traditional notions of intent do not reflect the fact that decisions about [racial] matters are influenced in large part by factors that can be characterized as neither intentional ... nor unintentional We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. ... a large part of the behavior that produces [racial] discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation. (237)

We recognize, of course, that Lawrence explicitly is addressing racial discrimination and the myriad and specific ways that what he refers to as “intent doctrines” have in fact reinforced cultural meanings rife with racism. Yet we think the argument about intent here can be invoked: as applied to our study, the fact remains that the statements overheard by participants were slurs, certainly not a joke to a GLBTQ person, or advocate.

Ultimately, our analyses indicated that substantive changes in participants’ attitudes toward diversity topics generally were not significantly evident. While our findings were not a surprise, they were a disappointment. As educators in the social justice mold, we would hope

that attitudes would shift to reflect more critical insights and reflections. We suspect that a systemic program that provides multiple opportunities to work with diverse populations could have a positive impact upon students' attitudes in our region, toward diversity-related issues and concerns.

Table 1: Student attitudes toward diversity

Variable	Mean Score T1 (0=no; 1=yes)	Mean Score T2 (0=no; 1=yes)	(Valid) Percent who responded yes T1	(Valid) Percent who responded yes T2
Recognize sex-based behavior	.93	1.0	93.3	100.0
Recognize racially-biased behavior	.93	.93	93.3	92.9
Recognize homophobic behavior	.93	.97	93.3	96.4
Discuss topics related to gender awareness with friends	.53	.64	53.3	64.3
Discuss topics related to race awareness with friends	.60	.75	60.0	75.0
Discuss topics related to GLBT awareness with friends	.40	.68	.40	67.9

Table 2: Students' responses to experiences with faculty

Variable	Mean at T1	Mean at T2	Std. Deviation
Faculty respect different races	3.47	4.32	4.23
Faculty respect different genders	3.37	3.68	1.09
Faculty respect different sexual orientations	3.37	3.54	1.15

Table 3: Students' responses to experiences with peers

Variable	Mean at T1	Mean at T2	Std. Deviation
Students respect different races	3.30	3.54	.75
Students respect different genders	3.33	3.50	.87
Students respect different sexual orientations	3.03	3.43	.95

For Tables 2 and 3, participants were asked to rate their responses based upon the following scale:

1 = little or none; 2 = some; 3 = quite a bit; 4 = a great deal; 5 = N/A

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