

Promising Practices

Expanding Appreciation for “Others” among European-American Pre-Teacher Populations

By Carolyn Siemens Ward

History

During the four and one-half years that I have taught social foundations and multicultural education for aspiring teachers and special education teachers at the Western Illinois University-Quad Cities campus, the class has evolved from being a hodge-podge of required content that maintained little student accountability and provided questionable attitude-changing experiences to a class where a significant majority of students express positive expansion in knowledge, understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of cultural diversity as evidenced by survey results. The improvement of the class followed much soul searching, sleepless nights, risk taking, failures, tenacity, continuous reading, and research.

The Western Illinois University-Quad Cities campus is located in an urban area with surrounding suburbs, and many of the students travel long distances from small town and rural communities. Although the urban area is ethnically diverse, the teacher education program is comprised of a predominantly European-American student population. My classes usually include one African-American at the most, perhaps two or three Mexican-Americans, with the remaining students of European-American background.

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I find that when first entering the multicultural education classroom, many Quad City students who are already overloaded, working part-time, parenting, and who may exhibit poor time-management skills, view the sixteen-week, three-hour course as just another hoop to jump through in order to obtain a teaching certificate. By the end of the course, anonymous survey results along with student comments indicate that a significant majority of students' understandings and attitudes regarding ethnic and cultural diversity issues have expanded and improved.

Objectives

Our nation's teachers play a key role in alleviating or exacerbating educational inequality across our nation. Oftentimes this educational inequality is based on ethnicity, class, and gender as well as additional cultural factors. It is essential that teacher education programs include courses that address multicultural issues with the goal of developing true respect for those who are different than one's self.

At the start of my social foundations and multicultural education class, students are informed that some may discover that teaching is not for them. A teacher fulfills too important a role in a child's life to not be an encourager, a respecter of all students, an empowering agent, a cultural mediator, and a holder of high expectations for every student in his/her classroom. Teachers may be masters of their subject areas while at the same time do irreparable harm to some of their students through ignorance of various cultural backgrounds or an out-

right disrespect for those who are different from themselves.

In order to gain respect for *all* others, pre-service teachers need to first understand what culture is; research their own cultural backgrounds and how individual cultural backgrounds influence the way one judges others; realize why we need multicultural education in our schools through an examination of the educational, economic, political, and social inequities in our society; and be exposed to the true history of the United States — warts and all. How has this country historically treated and presently treat people from various cultural and ethnic groups? What does this say about the present as well as past macro-culture of this nation? What are the elements that comprise our macro-culture?

With the aforementioned background, issues of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and misunderstanding of language minority students are more easily understood. Upon successful completion of the course, the student is able to:

- ◆ Demonstrate an understanding of multicultural education and the role of culture in the educational process.
- ◆ Develop a greater appreciation and understanding of individual differences represented in the social foundations and multicultural education classroom and how individual perspectives have been influenced by various cultural backgrounds.
- ◆ Describe (based on valid and reliable research) current demo-

graphic, economic, social, cultural, and political trends impacting U.S. society and schooling.

- ◆ Identify the impact of historical, contemporary, and future issues of diversity in the educational process based on valid and reliable research, i.e.: race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and language.
- ◆ Improve the ability to think logically, critically, and in an integrated manner in terms of analyzing the need for educational reform in order to meet the needs of a diverse learning community.
- ◆ Formulate plausible curriculum and delivery strategies to address the diverse needs of students.
- ◆ Demonstrate a realization regarding the efficacy of teachers in making a positive difference in individual lives as well as in an inequitable society — a social reconstructionist approach to multicultural education. (Sleeter & Grant, 1999)

Specific Activities

One focus of the course is a required eight-week journalizing field experience of tutoring/mentoring those who are at risk of failing academically, socially, and/or emotionally. Students are involved with several Title I schools in the area as well as agencies/organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, and additional after school programs for children and adults. Students are encouraged to widen their life experiences by working with others who are significantly different from themselves whether it be in terms of social class, ethnicity, ability, etc.

Another course requirement is to attend a school board meeting and write a brief summary. Students are provided information about school boards and are encouraged to notice if the board truly represents the diversity found in the school-community. Many times, attending these meetings proves to be revealing regarding community power struc-

tures and the role of the school-community concerning important school district decisions.

Finally, pedagogical methods are introduced and discussed through empowering and cooperative group projects that address multicultural issues under the following topics:

- ◆ Human relations approaches to teaching,
- ◆ Student empowering strategies,
- ◆ Critical thinking strategies,
- ◆ Cooperative learning strategies,
- ◆ Classroom management strategies concerning diverse student populations, and
- ◆ Multicultural education curricula for K-12 classrooms.

Students develop peer evaluation criteria for the group presentations and then evaluate each presentation accordingly, while the presentations are also evaluated by the instructor on pre-established criteria.

Instructional methods and materials for the course are varied with a high level of student-accountability through multiple and varied assessments along with ongoing dialogue in the classroom as well as through a WebCT3 site that includes a student dialogue box with optional anonymity. For example, one assignment is to report about a relevant current event while another is to create a personal cultural collage to share with other class members.

There are also a variety of experiential exercises such as small cooperative group illustrations of children growing up in various socio-economic classes and then surmising what the life-chances for these children are in our society (Ward, 2002). Finally, several guest speakers sharing their various cultural experiences in the U.S. add reality, interest, and excitement to the course.

An additional objective for the course is to develop a sense of community within the multicultural education classroom. I find myself more of a facilitator than an instructor at times — facilitating discussions and reactions to several powerful video presentations concerning racism, learning disabilities, and sexual orientation as well as other topics. A touch of humor as well as pa-

tience and not taking oneself too seriously always help here. The small group projects that research and demonstrate various teaching methods for multicultural education also aid in developing this sense of community, as I ensure that project groups are as culturally and ethnically diverse as possible.

Many students find that working in culturally diverse groups in presenting research projects is empowering and is the highlight of the course; others cite the eight-week journalizing field experience of tutoring/mentoring students who are at risk of failing academically, socially, and/or emotionally as the most enlightening course experience; while others mention the many discussions concerning various cultural issues as the most meaningful. The variety and multiplicity of learning activities, assignments, and assessments are essential for college/university classrooms comprising students who demonstrate a variety of learning styles and multiple intelligences, even though the classes may *appear* to be rather homogenous. Because of the variety, almost all students excel with several assignments, activities, and assessments.

Along with the variety of assignments and assessments, students are provided with clear assignment criteria in order to lessen confusion and promote equal treatment that is expected from students. This does not mean that I am not available to provide extra help for individual students — serving as coach at times. Additionally, because the four tests administered throughout the semester are in essay format, students are encouraged to retake tests in order to improve their scores. The objective is for students to learn and reflect upon the presented material — not to “catch” students failing.

Supporting Data

While attempting to determine whether or not student access to an anonymous dialogue box through a WebCT3 site was a positive factor in expanding knowledge, understanding, and boundaries of tolerance and appreciation of various cultural issues, I found that over a period of two semesters teaching two multicultural education classes per semester, the smaller classes which had no access to the anonymous dialogue box rated their knowledge, understanding, and expanding boundaries of tolerance

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and appreciation of cultural issues somewhat higher than the larger classes which *had* access to the anonymous dialogue box. The more intense sense of community within the smaller classes as well as increased time for instructor conversations with individual students may have given the edge to smaller class size over having anonymous dialogue access. The statements that were rated at the end of the semester from 0, low, to 5, high, for each category on the anonymous survey were:

(1) "I feel that I have increased my *understanding and knowledge* about the following: racism, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, bilingual education, U.S. culture." With n=86, the mean percent for the highest rating of 5 was as follows for each category: racism 63%, gender 48%, class 50%, sexual orientation 51%, ability 53%, bilingual education 75%, and U.S. culture 57%. (One to three students in each of the four classes selected a 0-2 rating for some categories.)

(2) "I feel that my boundaries of *tolerance and appreciation* have

been expanded regarding individuals coming from the following (different from mine) backgrounds." The mean percent for the highest rating of 5 was as follows for each category: race/ethnicity 78%, gender 61%, class 67%, sexual orientation 69%, ability 65%, language 72%. (One to two students in each of the four classes selected a 0-2 rating for some categories.)

The higher mean percent rating for the categories of bilingual education and language may have been influenced by the fact that this topic was the last addressed in the semester, or it may have been that class members actually had little knowledge and appreciation concerning limited English proficient (LEP) students and methods to address their needs.

Student comments were positive as written on student evaluation forms, especially for the most recent two years. Positive comments include:

"What I liked best about this course was the respect that was established between *all* people."

"I very much appreciated the community aspect of the class. I

enjoyed coming to each session and seeing other points of view."

"I really enjoyed this class, even though it forced me to realize I'm not as open minded as I thought."

"What I liked best about this class is that it opened my eyes to the prejudice within myself and engrained in our society."

Comments such as these encourage me to continue taking risks and to continuously learn and improve myself as a multicultural educator and role model in order to make a positive difference in the world of education and, thus, in our society.

References

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