



AN INVESTIGATION

Introduction

Changing demographics and the need for professionals to understand perspectives and beliefs of others has led many to reflect on the extent to which diversity issues are integrated into undergraduate and graduate programs (Heuberger, Gerber, & Anderson, 1999). This is particularly true as teachers and helping professionals are considered catalysts of change. However, educators need specific knowledge, skills and attitudes to influence the world in which they live. Banks (2001) stated that it is only when teachers are empowered that they have the ability to influence their personal, social, political and economic worlds.

The past twenty years of educational research include studies that describes the importance of multicultural education. However, Smith (1998) discussed not only an absence of multicultural education as a content knowledge base in teacher education programs, but also indicated the lack

of a knowledge base among instructors and professors who teach such courses. Although Smith (1998) advocated *culturally responsive pedagogy* as a moral and ethical responsibility in the preparation of teachers, the integration of multicultural perspectives has been difficult to achieve.

Both the standards for the National Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programming (CACREP) require multicultural training as integral in the training of teachers and school counselors. Yet, there is a lack in the literature regarding the overall effectiveness of this training across schools of education and human services.

Nieto (2000) asserted that one must become a multicultural person before one can become a multicultural teacher — this involves a transformational re-education. First, she said, individuals must learn more about people and events about which they know little. This knowledge could come from literature, cultural activities, appropriate and accurate media outlets, or other sources. Second, individuals need to successfully traverse the process of confronting individual racism and bias that are often so deeply rooted as to be unconscious. The dissonance that often occurs in cultural training experiences requires a high level of expertise by professors in teacher and counselor training institutions.

Assessment of Efforts

Assessment of teacher education programs and efforts in infusing multicultural education reveal that we have a long way to go. Vacarr (2001) argued that while college campuses have focused on training teachers for working in diverse environments and transforming the curriculum to embody multiculturalism, a gap exists between conceptual understandings and the ability to respond to classroom challenges involving differences. Globetti, Globetti, Brown, and Smith's (1993) instrument measuring university students' multicultural awareness and sensitivity found that although students were aware of various subcultures on campus, they lacked sensitivity in terms of responding to differences.

Moreover, White students exhibited a lack of sensitivity toward African-Americans and were reluctant to interact with different racial minority groups. Rumill, Harshorn, and Gordon (1994) sought to determine the effect that stereotypes had on how university students rated students who were from different racial, ethnic, or religious groups than their own. They found that White college students judged their black peers' credentials on the basis of skin color. These results were attributed, in part, to the lack of knowledge and experiences many white college students have with people of different colors and cultures.

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OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCES IN A SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Rudney, Marxen, and Risku (1996) found that students overwhelmingly agreed on the importance of multicultural education in their role as teacher. However, their survey of preservice teachers' field placement experiences in an urban setting revealed that, "graduates were most likely to speak in generalities regarding the importance of meeting the needs of diverse student populations and least likely to provide examples of appropriate theory-based professional action" (p. 35). Thus it appears that there is a gap between conceptual understanding and the ability to translate this understanding to practice.

In 1982, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) included multicultural education among its criteria for the accreditation of teacher preparation programs. Similarly, the Council for Accreditation for Counselor Education and Related Programming (2001) requires each counselor preparation program to infuse issues of diversity and advocacy throughout the training. With this impetus, many colleges and universities included multicultural education for preservice teachers as a mandate towards fulfilling the multicultural education requirement.

Teacher Preparation & Multicultural Education

Given that most prospective teachers and school counselors are White, middle-class females with limited or no experiences with minorities (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1989), it is critical that teacher/counselor preparation programs include mechanisms for prospective professionals in these fields to not only learn about diversity, but to experience their practice in diverse settings. Even with the integration of multicultural education coursework and field experiences designed specifically to help student become culturally responsive professionals, it is unrealistic to expect that all students will complete a program having the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that represent the desired goals (Jordan, 1995).

A lack of cultural awareness and a lack of specific instruction in culturally relevant pedagogy have created classroom environments that fail to facilitate the success of culturally diverse students. Research consistently indicates that teacher perceptions of students based on race, class, and gender influence their expectations for student behavior and academic performance (Gollnick & Chinn, 1998; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1992).

All things being equal, individual teachers make a significant difference in the learning experience of students. There-

fore, creating equitable education must begin with individual teachers. Knowledge of diversity, skills for effectively working with diverse populations, and transforming attitudes toward cultural diversity are all goals for the preservice teacher/counselor prepared in multicultural education (Banks 1997; Bennett, 1995; Gay, 1993; Nieto, 2000).

As a result of these and other research findings, many institutions of higher education have implemented a variety of programs to help remedy the situation and have made ongoing efforts to increase student awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural differences. This has led to an infusion of courses, programs, and curriculum related to multicultural education and issues of diversity. In education and counseling programs, an understanding of multiculturalism and diversity is often viewed as being critical to the preparation and development of teachers and counselors.

The purpose of this article is to discuss a pilot-study describing education, counseling, and human resource development students' knowledge, attitudes, and experiences regarding their experiences with multicultural education at a large, suburban institution of higher education.

Method

The primary source of data was a 21-

question survey that focused on students' knowledge, attitudes and experiences regarding multicultural education. Seventeen of these survey questions were rated on a Likert scale, and the last four were open-ended questions. The open-ended questions include (1) describe how you are a change agent, (2) provide suggestions for School of Education and Human Services, (3) provide three words describing your experiences, and (4) any feedback you would like to provide.

Multicultural training was described to the students as a focus on students' ability to work effectively with various cultural identities. The cultural identities were described as race, religion, ethnic origin, country of origin, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, disability as well as understand the complex issues of power, oppression and prejudice. Responses to the closed ended questions consisted of a Likert scale and included the following categories: Not Applicable, Limited Experience, Some Experience, Considerable Experience, Thorough Experience and Extensive Integration of Experience.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of graduate and undergraduate students completing their last semester of course work in the School of Education and Human Services. One hundred students completed the online survey. The survey also included demographic information and degree information. Students could complete the survey in the University's Educational Resources Laboratory or at home. The participants included 87% female; 62% between the ages of 20-29 years; 25% in counseling, 34% in curriculum and instruction, 17% in human development and child studies, 17% in human resource development, and 7% in reading.

Reliability and Validity

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, results lack generalizability to other schools of education and human services. The survey construction was developed to explore student perceptions and was not created with the purpose of internal consistency. The data was triangulated to increase the validity and reliability of the study using Likert scale questions, open-ended questions and the literature. The percentage of participants is also high for an exploratory study with 100 students completing the survey.

Data Analysis

Each close-ended question was divided into percentages based on the frequency of response. The four open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative methods from a grounded theoretical approach. Each open-ended response was imported into NUD*IST to assist in content analysis. The open-ended responses were read and re-read to develop understanding of the meaning of the data.

The data was then coded into tentative categories based on common ideas, recurring words/phrases, and similar themes creating a coding scheme. Three of the four questions include themes relevant to the overall qualitative responses. The fourth question, "any feedback you would like to provide," did not elicit enough response to complete a content analysis. Identified themes from each of the three open questions were identified. Some surprises were also identified in the data.

Results

Open-Ended Question Data

Several themes emerged from three of the four open questions. The first open question referred to examples of ways one acts as an agent of change in a diverse society. Four themes emerged from the participant's response including professional role, personal beliefs, professional development and advocates. Each theme is followed by an example from the questionnaire.

Role: To act as a change agent in one's professional role.

"I will help all students feel included when I become a teacher."

Personal beliefs: One's values and beliefs are a framework for a change agent.

"Treat everyone as equals and always be open-minded."

Professional development: Active involvement in continued learning on diversity.

"I read about and try to educate myself on counseling diverse populations."

Advocates: Response includes an action related to advocacy.

"Educate others, speak up against stereotypes and racism, continue to learn about other cultures and values."

Respondents also provided suggestions for the School of Education and Human Services to improve training regarding diversity. Themes emerged referring to

curriculum and training in the School of Education and Human Services including the use of guest speakers, specific curriculum issues, field experiences and the makeup of the academic community.

Diverse speakers: Increase the number of speakers on diverse topics and from a variety of differing cultural experiences.

"Have more guest speakers come in of different races."

Curriculum Issues: Suggestions and feedback directly related to curriculum experiences.

"More information regarding how to implement what we have been exposed too."

Field experiences: The importance of experiences in diverse settings.

"Provide more opportunities for OU students to experience settings in which integration is needed."

Role of Professors/Student Body: Suggestions related to the role of professors and the student body in diversity training.

"Address them head on. Avoid treating the topic as if it was taboo just because someone may be offended just by discussing the issue."

The third open question focused on students describing in three words their experience of diversity experiences in the School of Education and Human Services. Themes emerged based on similarity of responses.

Comprehensive: The presentation of diversity was in-depth and ubiquitous.

"Broad." "Comprehensive." "Extensive."

Affirming Statements: Students described their diversity instruction as positive.

"Beneficial." "Engaging." "Positive."

Increased awareness: Students described an increased understanding of diversity issues.

"Enlightening." "Informative." "Educational."

Lacks exposure: Students described little exposure to diversity issues.

"Limited." "Scarce." "Inadequate."

Dissatisfied: Students identify criticisms regarding their experience with diversity issues in the School of Education and Human Services.

"Not in-depth." "Not reality." "Uninformed."

The open questions provide a glimpse of student reactions to diversity training.

A couple of general themes, which are consistent with the data, involve the need for students to interact with other cultures on a regular basis through classroom and faculty composition, classroom curriculum, and field experiences. Secondly, students also describe a lack in the ability to move from knowledge acquisition to application. Throughout the data students described being firm in awareness of the importance of diversity and being competent in knowledge of diversity issues, yet, less confident in their ability to apply this knowledge in a work setting.

Closed-Ended Question Data

The Likert scale results revealed some positive and some negative trends. Responses to the closed ended questions of the Likert scale included the following categories: Not Applicable, Limited Experience, Some Experience, Considerable Experience, Thorough Experience, and Extensive Integration of Experience.

High scores on category 3, 4 and 5 were considered positive, implying that the students had positive multicultural learning experiences and exposure. Ratings of 1 and 2 were considered negative, implying that the students had negative multicultural learning experiences and exposure. In retrospect, the categories "considerable and thorough" may have been difficult to distinguish. Therefore, for purposes of analysis categories 3 and 4 were chunked together truncating the scores to eliminate the extreme.

The positive trends indicated that:

- Sixty-six percent (66%) of the students surveyed believed that there was considerable or thorough incorporation of literature and research related to diversity.
- Fifty eight to sixty four percent (58-64%) of the students believed that there was considerable or thorough discussion on culture, race, gender and socio-economic status.
- Fifty-one percent (51%) also believed that there was considerable or thorough discussion on special needs.
- Sixty-seven percent (67%) felt included in class discussions.
- Fifty nine percent (59%) indicated that there was considerable or thorough preparation to plan and implement a multicultural curriculum.
- Fifty-six percent (56%) believed they had considerable or thorough prepara-

tion to respond to the unique needs of families as cultural units.

■ A large majority (47% considerable or thorough and 43% extensive) indicated that they believe that all students can learn and are entitled to equitable learning opportunities.

The negative trends indicated:

- Only thirty-one percent (31%) believed that there was considerable or thorough discussion on sexual orientation.
- Only forty-two percent (42%) of the students surveyed believed that there was considerable or thorough discussion on white privilege.
- Fifty-one percent (51%) believed that they had considerable or thorough opportunities to participate in varied cultural experiences, but only forty-seven percent (47%) engaged in the cultural experience provided.

Discussion

Effective teachers and counselors are critical in creating schools that provide quality education for all our children. It is also important to ensure that a teacher education curriculum is neither 'race-blind' nor 'culture-blind' (Smith, 1998, p.17). Schools of Education and Human Services have a responsibility to prepare students to be culturally responsive and respond to the educational needs of a diverse student population. Thus the student's educational experiences must include both knowledge acquisition of issues of diversity and strategies for effectively working with minority students as well as with their families.

Smith (1998, p.17) identified the importance of teacher education programs not giving undue attention to the 'literature of failure' and paying greater attention to the 'literature of success' regarding minority children. Similarly, a large majority of participants in this particular study indicated that they believed that all students can learn and are entitled to equitable learning opportunities. Throughout the results, students identified important belief systems related to diversity and education.

Specifically, students discussed the value of equitable treatment in the classroom. The data is more ambiguous in demarking the contribution of their educational experiences to creating their belief systems. However, students did indicate they understood the strong value the School of Education and Human Services places on diversity.

One concern the data indicated is the

lack of effective educational experiences in specific applications related to students' work settings. This is a key concern for institutions of higher education who are attempting to prepare helping professionals to work effectively in the field.

The lack of specific tools for the work environment could be indicative of a lack of research in the practical knowledge, ineffective teaching at the higher education level and the lack of access to cultural informants. While there is an abundance of research discussing the importance of diversity, there is much less describing concrete tools such as curriculum applications, dealing with classroom cultural conflicts and creating culturally appropriated assessment tools.

The survey results indicated that although students felt they had opportunities to participate in varied cultural experiences, few engaged in the cultural experience provided. Research has indicated that a significant portion of students' acquisition of knowledge about others comes through experience and interactions with people who are different (Kang & Dutton, 1997). Therefore, the importance of integrating cultural informants and experts in both practical and theoretical activities would both expose students to cultural specific knowledge and engage the students in a more meaningful way.

Kang and Dutton (1997) found a significant portion of students' acquisition of knowledge about others comes through experience and interactions with people who are different. The students in this research study indicated the importance of, and also the lack of, diverse speakers and field experiences in their educational experiences. Therefore, the effort of academic communities to facilitate interaction with diverse populations is vital to increasing students' exposure and knowledge base.

Another concern the data indicated was the lack of training when working with issues related to sexual orientation. This is an interesting parallel process, considering many school districts struggle with how to "handle" sexual orientation and gender identity. Miller, Miller and Schroth (1997) studied practicing teachers and their perceptions of their multicultural training. The researchers found that teachers observed faculty demonstrating more bias toward sexual orientation than to any other culture.

Another study focusing on teacher educators' and student teachers' attitudes found preservice teachers' to be culturally sensitive for all subgroups except sexual orientation (Taylor, 2001). The lack of exposure to issues of sexual orientation is a

concern and necessitates further research of faculty knowledge base, preservice instructional material and K-12 instruction.

Less than fifty percent of the students felt that there was adequate discussion on white privilege. This data raises a concern about the need for more discussions and teaching platforms on the topic of white privilege, especially in predominately White academic communities. However, it is because this issue is not considered a problem that we need to critically examine it. Implied in discussions of race is the issue of 'white privilege.' It is imperative that we examine our cultural assumptions and examine how we treat others.

By examining the life experiences that have shaped the perspectives of individuals already committed to multicultural education, we may begin to understand the motivation that inspires them to commit to a multicultural perspective. This increased understanding may then inform teacher preparation for multicultural education and the equitable education of all students. It is crucial that all teachers and faculty today develop a new perception of their roles and systematically address inequalities in order to improve educational outcomes for all students (Darling-Hammond, 1995, Scott, 2000).

Based on their study of university students' multicultural awareness levels, Globetti et. al. (1993) suggested that the content of multicultural courses should involve students in experiential learning using methods such as role-playing, values clarification, and brainstorming. It has also been advocated that engaging preservice teachers in an exploration of their own cultures can help structure multicultural courses with a personal infusion of cultural history. Instructional strategies should be constructed to relate life experiences with cultural diversity (McCall, 1995; Morales, 2000). In addition, curriculum that engages preservice teachers and counselors in activities relevant to a variety of cultures provides an opportunity to gain insight regarding the communities in which they teach.

Further study is needed to actually observe teachers and school counselors interacting with diverse populations in classrooms and clinical settings to see examples of appropriate transfer of theoretical knowledge in action. Lawrence (1997) suggested that unlike studies using mainly a Likert scale, those based on narrative and experience offer the possibility of discovering more textured nuances. This does not ensure, however, that knowledge is carried into the school setting. The only way to discover the impact such learning has on class-

room practice is to follow the preservice teacher into the classroom.

This current study offers us a glimpse of student perceptions of their multicultural training experiences. Based on the research, it appears that students understand the value of working with others with a pluralistic point of view. As teacher and counselor trainers, we need to continue to develop methods to move students from general understandings to engaging in specific culturally appropriate skills and applications in the educational field. If anything, this is an indictment that we are moving from a conceptual stage of diversity and multicultural training to direct service applications.

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