

Helping Teacher Candidates Examine Their Multicultural Attitudes

by Susan Szabo and Gina Anderson

Abstract

This article reports the results of a study evaluating the impact of entry-level teacher education course work on teacher candidates' multicultural attitudes. The authors were interested in finding out which curriculum was the most effective at helping teacher candidates examine their multicultural attitudes and at the same time enhancing their understanding of the ethnic and cultural attributes of students they will encounter as classroom teachers.

Introduction

Today's student populations demonstrate increased diversity in cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Ball and Farr 2003; Cooper 2007) and population of students who do not speak English as their first language (Brook 2001). However, 86 percent of those entering the teaching profession remain white, middle-class females (AACTE 1996; Cushner, McClelland, and Safford 2006; Hodgkinson 2002; Nieto 2000). This cultural mismatch between students and their teachers, who often have limited personal experience with people of diverse cultures (Ladson-Billings 1995), can produce misunderstandings that often impair minority students' classroom success (Cazden 2001; Ladson-Billings 2000; Sleeter 2001). Therefore, teacher-preparation programs need to challenge teacher candidates to step out of their cultural "comfort zone," not only to examine their multicultural attitudes but also to expand their knowledge of varied multicultural issues in education (Ball 2000; Cruz 1999; Garcia and Willis 2001; Gay 2002).

Purpose of Study

As teacher-researchers, we wanted to improve the cultural sensitivity of our undergraduate students (future classroom teachers) and at the same time implement a curriculum focused on multicultural issues. The purpose of this study was thus twofold. First, because this was a new approach to teaching the course, we wanted to examine our course curriculum and assignments to determine which would best benefit our undergraduate students. Second, we wanted to determine if the curriculum positively affected our students' multicultural attitudes.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist theories, in particular *social learning* and *cognitive dissonance*, guided our study. Social learning theory focuses on learning that occurs within a social context (here, the authors' classroom). The theory explains that one's behaviors and new understandings are learned through interaction with others (Vygotsky 1986). Vygotsky believes that individual attitudes and motivations as well as the environment in which learning occurs are important in personal development. Social persuasion and support play important parts in what we think and how we act (Bandura 1986).



Cognitive dissonance theory helps to change how we think, for there is a disconnect between what we already know and what we learn. Bandura (1986) believes that as we grow, students tend to replicate behaviors their parents have modeled for them. However, the students seldom understand the reasons behind what they have seen their parents do. Thus, for change to occur, it is important that individuals examine their “private theories” (Bullough and Gitlin 2001) as they grow older.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The Teachers (Professor and Graduate Teaching Assistants): Two types of teachers conducted this three-credit-hour course. First, a university professor taught a one-hour lecture. Second, five graduate teaching assistants taught two one-hour small-group discussion sessions. All five graduate assistants were working on doctorates in education and had prior classroom teaching experiences in various low-SES (social economic status) public school classrooms. The university professor was a middle-class, European American male, while four of the doctoral students were European American, middle-class females and one was a European American, middle-class male.

The Students (Undergraduate Teacher Candidates): The participants in the study were 144 undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in a required introductory educational foundations course at a large Southwestern university. It is the only required course that both elementary and secondary education teacher candidates take together. Most students were in the first semester of their junior year. They included 106 females (74 percent) and 38 males (26 percent); 69 were elementary education majors (48 percent) and 76 were secondary majors (53 percent). The ethnicity of these teacher candidates numbered 128 European Americans (89 percent); 9 Native Americans (6 percent); 2 Asian Americans (1 percent); 2 African Americans (1 percent); and 3 Hispanics (2 percent). Their ages ranged from 18 to 43, with a mean age of 21.13 (SD 2.9).

Course and Class Work (the Curriculum): The state required this three-credit-hour introductory course to obtain a degree and licensure in education (K-12). The authors designed a curriculum that addressed the research questions and collected data while implementing the curriculum with the teacher candidates in all five class-discussion sections. The teacher candidates examined multicultural issues through text readings and class discussions, “I Wonder” projects, and a field trip to a low-SES public school in an urban setting where middle-class European

Americans were a minority. The majority of the curriculum employed an inquiry-based approach, in which students engage in open-ended classroom discussion and reflection as well as student-centered activities (Murdoch 1998).

Design of Study

This was an action-research study that used the formative-experiment framework (Reinking and Bradley 2004). A formative experiment is intended for inquiries exploring the effects of instructional interventions in natural educational settings. The experiment's framework generally uses no control group, and it permits modifications to the interventions as the study unfolds to better achieve the instructional goal (Reinking and Watkins 2000).

Instrumentation and Data Analysis

Three sources of information were used to collect the data. First, a background questionnaire ascertained student background information, which was analyzed with descriptive statistics.

Second, at the end of the semester, a frequency count was collected on student perceptions of which curricula and assignments best facilitated examination of multicultural awareness.

Third, the twenty-statement Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey (TMAS; Ponterotto, Mendelsohn, and Belizaire 2003), which uses a five-point Likert scale, was given as a pre- and post-test to measure the teacher candidates' sensitivity to and familiarity with multicultural issues as well as to determine if the course curriculum affected students' multicultural awareness positively. The construct and criterion validity and reliability of the developed TMAS are supported (Ponterotto et al. 1998). A t-test analysis determined significant differences in the teacher candidates' multicultural attitudes at the end of the course.

Results

To determine which curriculum provided the most learning and offered students a better understanding of their multicultural viewpoints, we examined the frequency count of the various classroom activities and assignments within the curriculum. The two assignments these teacher candidates perceived as most helpful to understanding themselves and various multicultural issues were the "I Wonder" paper and the field trip to a low-SES urban school.

Several different analyses were undertaken using the TMAS data. First, an internal-consistency reliability analysis estimated the participants' degree of consistency in responding to the various survey

questionnaire items. The results showed a reasonably high internal-consistency coefficient for the pre-survey (Alpha = .80) and for the post-survey (Alpha = .81). Those results suggested that the survey data were reliable. Next, to determine our students' multicultural attitudes, we examined pre- and post-test scores on the TMAS instrument. The data showed that the teacher candidates achieved a higher post-survey mean score ($M = 77.32$; $SD 7.49$) than the pre-survey score ($M = 76.23$; $SD 8.83$). However, those differences were not statistically significant ($p = .732$).

Limitations

Studies conducted by teacher educators on their own practice can provide new insights (Boyer 1990), but they also have limitations: while interpreting the results, teacher educators introduce personal biases into the framework. Furthermore, the interpretation of the group ranking of curricula and activities the students perceived as facilitating change could have been biased. Moreover, the results of the TMAS were self-reported perceptions and thus subjective by default; however, as previously noted, the validity and reliability of the TMAS are supported (Ponterotto et al. 1998). Finally, this was a small sample of teacher candidates. Despite those limitations, we found that the examination of our own practice produced new understandings of our teacher education program, our curriculum, and ourselves.

Discussion

This study was undertaken for two reasons. First, because this approach to teaching the entry-level education course was new, we wanted to examine our class curriculum to determine which aspects benefited our undergraduate students the most. Second, we wanted to determine if the curriculum positively affected our students' multicultural attitudes. The qualitative data from class discussion and reflection on the impact of the course work were more encouraging than the quantitative data from the TMAS instrument. In truth, the results disappointed the authors, who had hoped for a more positive impact from the curriculum and the multicultural emphasis.

However, we did learn from our students how we could improve the course, which fits Boyer's (1990) scholarship of teaching.

1. We wanted to determine which course assignment(s) provided the most opportunities to influence students' multicultural awareness and attitudes positively. A frequency count revealed that the teacher candidates believed the field trip to a low-SES public school and their "I Wonder" research project provided the most

effective learning. However, the discussion questions intended to facilitate critical thinking on important multicultural issues failed to alter our teacher candidates' pre-existing private theories (Bullough and Gitlin 2001): they reported using the class discussions to sway their classmates toward their own thinking.

2. We wanted to determine whether a one-semester course exploring various multicultural aspects in depth could significantly impact the multicultural attitudes of undergraduate teacher candidates. That approach was important, for studies have shown that many teacher candidates entering the field lack knowledge of the experiences, needs, and resources of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. In addition, they truly do not understand how the backgrounds of minority and poor students differ significantly from their own (Seidl 2007; Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston 2006). The TMAS instrument showed no significant changes in the teacher candidates' multicultural attitudes.

Recommendations for the Classroom and Future Research

This course, which was the undergraduate teacher candidates' first in educational foundations multicultural education, required them to examine their awareness of, sensitivity to, and tolerance of multicultural issues. Quantitative data from the TMAS indicate that a one-semester course may be insufficient either to increase one's multicultural awareness or to change individual multicultural attitudes, a conclusion that supports previous studies (Colville-Hall, MacDonald, and Smolen 1995; Lenski et al. 2005; Weisman and Garza 2002). However, the qualitative data suggest that the order in which the course work is completed makes the greatest difference; we believe that assumption warrants further investigation. Bullough and Gitlin (2001) claim that teacher candidates tend to preserve their private theories, which are constructed through their own lived experiences. Perhaps presenting a disequilibrium-creating curriculum at the beginning of the semester, which would serve as a catalyst for challenging students' private theories at an early stage, would be beneficial. Several comments made by students during class discussion also support the idea that course assignment order is important.

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