

Teaching Others

Preservice Teachers' Understandings Regarding Diverse Families

Anna F. Lyon

Sarah grew up in the same small, rural farming community where she now teaches first grade. As a child, her classmates were the children of predominately White owners of neighboring small family farms. In this close-knit community Sarah attended church and social events with her classmates from school. Finances prevented travel outside of an occasional shopping trip to the nearest town. Sarah is now married to a man she has known since childhood.

Like many preservice teachers, Sarah entered the university planning to return to her hometown to teach. She received high grades and felt well prepared by the teacher education program to teach in her community. She left the university feeling confident and eager to begin her teaching career.

Farming in Sarah's community has changed over time. Farms are larger and the children of Mexican workers now outnumber other ethnicities in Sarah's school. Although she strives to be a quality teacher and cares deeply about the children in her class, Sarah feels unprepared to meet the needs of these children. Worried about the drop in test scores in the local public schools, Sarah's two young children attend a small religious private school in a community in the next county.

Sarah's story is just one of many. Circumstances and settings vary, but the realities are that while early childhood preservice and classroom teachers are predominately White, middle class, and female, early childhood classrooms are becoming more and more diverse. Increasingly, teachers are being asked to teach in classrooms where they have neither knowledge nor understanding of the cultures of the children in their classes.

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Review of the Literature

It is well documented that many preservice teachers arrive on campuses with few past experiences or opportunities to interact with people from diverse backgrounds (Garmon, 2004; Siwatu, 2006; Sleeter, 2001; Ukpokodu, 2002; Zollers, et al, 2000). In addition, they often think of diversity only as an issue of race. Successful teaching requires a wider view of diversity that includes race, ethnicity/nationality, social class, sex/gender, health, age, geographic region, sexuality, religion, social status, language, and ability/disability (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2003). It is necessary for teacher education programs to help preservice teachers learn a broader definition of diversity. Valentiin (2006) reminds us, "Diversity is not a trend; rather, it is the reality that everyone lives with" (p. 197).

Many preservice teachers have not had opportunities to examine their own biases in a supportive setting. Therefore, it is important that teacher educators provide a variety of experiences for preservice teachers to give them time to reflect on their own beliefs and possible prejudices regarding diverse populations. Ukpokodu (2002) states that in order to be successful in helping preservice teachers examine cultural issues, we must know where the students are in their own multicultural development, realize that preservice teachers experience multicultural education differently based on their prior experience, and appreciate that students who feel implicated in what they are learning will become defensive and may reject both the message and the messenger (p.29).

Experts in the field of multicultural education believe that White preservice teachers are often unaware of the need to examine their beliefs regarding the privilege of race and skin color (Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Garmon (2004) defines self-examination as "an awareness of one's own beliefs and

attitudes, as well as being willing and/or able to think critically about them" (p. 205). Such self-examination is often uncomfortable, causing preservice teachers to be resistant to the process (Ukpokodu, 2002). While many universities require preservice teachers to take a course in multicultural education or diversity, few teacher education programs weave multiculturalism into all coursework, thus limiting opportunities for students to engage in self-examination (Zollers, et al, 2000).

There is also an exceptionally strong focus on families and student centered learning in early childhood education classrooms. One organization that provides standards for initial licensure programs is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Preservice teachers in early childhood programs guided by the NAEYC Standards are required to have an in-depth understanding of families and be able to use this knowledge to create strong working relationships with families and children (Hyson 2003, p. 31).

Furthermore, teacher educators need to assure that preservice teachers understand the importance of helping children maintain their cultural differences within the classroom setting while learning about others. Banks (2001) reminds us, "Citizens should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture" (p.3). Nieto (2000) clearly defines the challenge for both college professors and preservice teachers when she states:

The decisions we make, no matter how neutral they may seem, have an impact on the lives and experiences of our students. This is true of the curriculum, books, and other materials we provide for them.... What is excluded is often as telling as what is included. (p. 316)

Early childhood educators include activities and classroom materials that expose children to diversity and open forums for conversations around relevant topics.

With these challenges in mind, a case study assignment was designed to help preservice teachers learn about and from diverse families. The purpose of the case study was to have the preservice teachers interact with, learn from, and come to respect the diverse perspectives families have on raising young children.

The case study offered preservice teachers the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and understandings of young children who are different from their personal family background and experiences. As early childhood preservice teachers completed the assignment, and presented their findings in class, several themes emerged.

Class Assignments

On the first day of class, the preservice teachers were asked to draw a picture of a family with children that they believe would be in their future classrooms. The preservice teachers then viewed and verbally described the families they saw in the pictures. They noticed that most drawings depicted White, middle class families where everyone was well dressed and smiling. Most families in the drawings were "traditional" in that they contained a mother, father, and two or three children. Well-maintained single family houses with flowers in bloom and a bright sun overhead were common in the initial drawings.

After a discussion period regarding diversity and the realities of public school classrooms, the preservice teachers were asked to draw a picture of a family with children that reflected the true nature of public school classrooms. The second drawings no longer depicted "traditional" families. The most common family configuration depicted in the drawings was single mothers with one or more children. Many of these families were standing outside apartment buildings and smiles were less prevalent. Surroundings were less well maintained.

Many drawings also contained children and adults with disabilities, as well as families of differing races. The second picture indicated very stereotypic diverse families. For example, one preservice teacher drew a Mexican family wearing sombreros. Another drew a poor family with six children standing outside a run-down trailer. The grass was tall, the area was unkempt, and no one was smiling.

The preservice teachers also wrote a description of their own families. In general, the descriptions were very positive

and indicated happy, loving relationships among family members. Very few negative statements were included and those that were tended to be followed by how the family made the best of the difficult situation. For example, one preservice teacher wrote about her parent's divorce, then went on to describe her admiration for her mother for doing such a good job raising the children alone.

The next step in the case study assignment required the preservice teachers to select a family for their case study. The criteria for selection included choosing a family with at least one child in the age range of birth to age eight, and selecting a family different in some way from the preservice teacher's own family. Preservice teachers were asked to select a community setting in which they felt safe. The preservice teachers were required to spend from five to ten hours with the families. Their task was to discover, through conversations with family members, what a typical day for the family entailed. They were also asked to join the family in one activity that connected the family to the community and one activity that connected the family to school.

Once the case study families were chosen, the preservice teachers were asked to write a description of the family they had chosen. The descriptions of the case study families included both positive and negative reactions without positive qualifying statements. One preservice teacher described her case study family as having two parents "but the mother takes the brunt of the work."

The families the preservice teachers chose for their case studies were not very different from their own families. When the topic was raised during class discussion, students admitted they were aware they were not really leaving their comfort zone when selecting families. Several preservice teachers stated they wanted to know about the students they would someday teach, but they lacked the confidence to contact the families. They also reported feeling uncomfortable with unknown cultures and feared offending the families.

In their university class, the preservice teachers were assigned to groups and each group prepared a power point presentation to share their findings. The presentations were shared in class and the findings and insights were discussed. The in-class discussions and presentations indicated that the preservice teachers had gained an appreciation for the work and pressures parents face. The comments made most often involved how demand-

ing parenting is. The preservice teachers spoke often of the demands on the time and resources of parents, particularly parents of special needs children.

Implication for Educators

As Sarah's story at the beginning of this article indicates, many preservice teachers are at the very beginning of their understanding regarding diversity. Nieto (2005) reminds us that,

...we must remember that many teachers have not had sustained contact with people of diverse backgrounds, nor have they learned about people different from themselves in other ways. As a result, it is no surprise that some teachers have negative perceptions, biases, and racist attitudes about students they teach, and about students' families, cultures, and communities. (p. 217)

The family case study assignment could serve as an entry point into conversations around diversity. As one preservice teacher noted, the assignment was "a great way to open our eyes to the differences we'll experience in the classroom." It soon became apparent that for some students in the class this was their first opportunity to explore diversity, while for others it would be an opportunity to broaden and deepen understandings. One student remarked, "I thought I already had a pretty good handle on diversity, but this class has deepened my perspectives and understanding of what it means to be diverse."

These preservice teachers seemed to use their own families as a yardstick by which they judged their case study family. One student described growing up in a big family with "two parents (amazing) that brought us up to be proud but respectful." Yet another described her own family as "extremely close" and her sister as her "best friend." She went on to describe how her parents accepted her fiancé and brother-in-law "as their own" and declared her family did things as a family "whenever possible," while stating that her case study family, "...had problems with their view of what marriage and family life should be."

The widely held notion is that all people have the same opportunities to succeed if they work hard and take advantage of opportunity (Stevens, Wood, & Sheenan, 2002). Teacher educators need to offer many opportunities for preservice teachers to examine their beliefs regarding the components of a functional family. One student clearly demonstrated this idea by

stating, "In my mind, I want everyone to have a *Father Knows Best* kind of world, but working with diverse families brings me back to reality."

Preservice teachers need to understand parenting responsibilities and base their expectation of families on the realities of family life. While these findings are not new, what is surprising is that preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with limited understanding of the demands of jobs and families. A preservice teacher commented, "I have learned that raising small children takes a lot of work and patience from both parents." Another preservice teacher stated, "I have learned that the family is working to overcome a lot of obstacles. I can see through the child's behaviors that they are also trying to deal with the sudden changes that they have experienced in the last year."

During class discussions several preservice teachers commented that they came to realize how little time working parents have to spend with their children. They also commented on the heavy demands on the time of all parents, especially parents of children with special needs. Teachers educators need to be reminded that traditional preservice teachers are not yet parents themselves, and therefore have no direct personal experience with the demands of parenting. Even non-traditional students often have limited experience.

Examining the responses of the preservice teachers demonstrates the need to refine this case study project. Students openly admitted that they did not step outside their comfort zone when choosing a family for their case study. When asked if they had stepped outside their comfort zone, student replies included, "I have known them for a long time" and "not too much (outside my comfort zone), I've known the family for a while." One preservice teacher did come to the realization that, "even families similar to your own have uniqueness about them."

The hesitance to move outside their comfort zone is exemplified by one preservice teacher who stated, "Many people chose families close to them, but diversity can be broad so a close family could be different from yours." Their reluctance to select a truly diverse family they didn't already know well speaks to the need to raise preservice teachers' comfort level with diversity.

Diverse families need to be recruited from the community to join with the university faculty in helping preservice teachers understand the community and

families they will need to know well in order to teach effectively. Assigning preservice teachers to diverse families might allow them to not only learn about diverse families, but could increase their comfort level when seeking employment in diverse communities.

While teacher educators understand the need to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively with families and students, there should be increased efforts to do this in a variety of ways. A variety of experiences with diverse families need to take place throughout teacher preparation programs and should occur in school and community settings.

Diversity and Worldviews

During university curriculum planning across courses, faculty need to consider how diversity issues are addressed in teacher preparation courses. There needs to be an expectation for faculty and students to engage in discussions, assignments, and activities that lead to deep, broad understandings of diversity.

Banks (2001) tells us there are three purposes of multicultural education. The first purpose is to open opportunities to explore, to support, and to extend diversity concepts. The second purpose serves to support and strengthen respectful human relations, and third and finally, it is a process by which we can continue to work through conflicts and misunderstandings.

Practicum experiences must also include opportunities to interact in a positive way with high quality schools serving diverse populations. Siwatu (2006) believes that in addition to transforming preservice teachers' multicultural attitudes, increasing their cultural knowledge base, and equipping them with the needed skills to effectively teach diverse students, teacher educators need to require preservice teachers to *demonstrate* their competence for teaching in diverse settings.

Offering preservice teachers opportunities to examine their own personal beliefs and biases in a safe environment could lead to more open mindedness and greater acceptance of diverse families. After completing the case study, one preservice teacher commented, "I learned that it is not my place to judge. It's my job to support the families." Another believed that the assignment helped her understand that, "teachers shouldn't be so quick to judge." By opening these conversations, the preservice teachers could not only become more responsive teachers of children, but

also learn to share a worldview that would enhance their personal lives as well.

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We're seeking submissions of creative writing on topics including diversity, multiculturalism, equity, education, social justice, environmental justice, and more specific subtopics (race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, language, (dis)ability, etc.). Do you write poetry? Short stories or flash fiction? Creative nonfiction? We will consider any style or form, but we prefer prose that is no longer than 750 words and poetry that can fit comfortably onto a single page of text.

Submissions will be reviewed on a rolling basis.

And... If you're a teacher, Pre-K through lifelong learning, please encourage your students to submit to us! We would love submissions from the youngsters as well as the not-so-youngsters!

Where to Submit: Submissions may be sent electronically or by postal mail. Electronic submissions should be sent to Paul C. Gorski at pgorski1@gmu.edu with the subject line "ME Submission." Hard copy, mailed submissions should be addressed to: Paul C. Gorski, Integrative Studies, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Format: All submissions should be double-spaced, including references and any other materials. Please send one copy of your submission with the title noted at the top of the page. The title of the manuscript, name(s) of author(s), academic title(s), institutional affiliation(s), and address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the author(s) should all be included on a cover sheet separate from the manuscript. If you are a student or if you are submitting work on behalf of a student, please include age, grade level, and school name.

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