

University School of Education Promoting Diversity Awareness and Initiatives

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Abstract

An abundance of research confirms preservice teachers are unprepared to work with diverse populations. This article describes an education program's efforts to support diversity initiatives and provide information and hands-on training to prepare teacher candidates for future work with the diversity they will encounter. Explanations of programs, coursework, professional development, and current and supportive literature are included.

Introduction

Imagine a world where all teachers are comfortable working with all students. They are prepared to meet the needs of every child based on academic abilities, physical and emotional constraints, and cultural, religious and domestic backgrounds. Imagine a world where classrooms are equipped with the necessities that provide for the ultimate learning experience for all children. They are filled with books from all cultures, in many languages; pictures representative of all people; manipulative materials to fit all hands; and decorations and wall art that is inviting to every individual. Imagine a world where all children can go to school unafraid, excited, and knowing they will be treated equally. Imagine a world where parents feel comfortable entering their child's school, talking to their child's teachers, and being involved in the education of the whole.

We call ourselves simply *The Diversity Committee* for our University's School of Education. While we cannot expect to make the description above a reality, we can and have worked toward that vision in our own smaller community. Our mission is to 1) cultivate and continuously improve a curriculum that will engage all faculty members as diversity responsive professionals, 2) pre-prepare all teacher candidates to function effectively in diverse classrooms, and 3) develop and nurture a relationship with partner schools and other university education programs that strive to promote diversity awareness and education.

Sonia Nieto (2006) shares a list of qualities (beyond those research reveals) that she believes good teachers should possess. They are 1) "a sense of mission," 2) "solidarity with, and empathy for, their students," 3) "the courage to challenge main-stream knowledge," 4) "improvisation," and 5) "a passion for social justice" (p. 463).

Wong et al. (2007) state "teacher quality must be defined beyond the parameters of content knowledge to include a teacher's ability to create optimal learning environments for students marginalized by the system because of their primary language, race/ethnicity, social class, culture, gender, and ability" (p. 10).

This paper provides a general outline of our committee's work with teacher candidates, colleagues, and PK-12 schools to promote diversity awareness and responsive teaching. It specifically breaks down best practice program initiatives we have found successful. We strive to promote quality teaching from a research standpoint: knowledge of subject matter; good communication and organizational skills; and training in educational pedagogy. Yet, we embrace those additional qualities listed by Nieto to help our teacher practitioners and professionals grow their knowledge, attitudes, and skills for working with a diverse student population. We make every effort to produce quality teachers as defined by Wong et al., to be knowledgeable in content and all-encompassing of diversity.

School of Education Unit Diversity Plan

Nichols and Dong (2011) make a bold statement when they say, "The majority of today's American pre-service teachers just simply do not understand what multi-cultural education is" (p. 6). They go on to challenge education programs to "better prepare their students for teaching the multicultural student populations they will undoubtedly encounter" (p. 6). We believe, as a committee, our education unit is prepared to take this challenge.

Our committee begins each academic year by updating our "unit diversity plan," which one can access at <http://www.uscupstate.edu/academics/education/default.aspx?id=2489>. This plan focuses on diversity initiatives for teacher candidates, faculty, partner schools, and the unit as a whole.

Nichols and Dong follow some important researchers in the area of multicultural education with their prescriptions for education programs. Ladson-Billings (2001), Gay (2002), Banks and McGee Banks (2004) and Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) have all called for change and/or better preparation in multicultural teacher education. In keeping with this standard, the following list describes activities integrated into our curriculum and supported by our diversity committee and unit diversity plan.

Course Assignments

Each year, course instructors update a unit Excel chart detailing diversity-related content for all education program courses. We ensure inclusion of diversity related topics in the majority of our program coursework.

Teacher Work Sample Diverse Learner Project

As a part of the required teacher work sample portfolio implemented during the student teaching semester, preservice teachers are required to follow and work with a student from a diverse background. This can include racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, or other differences. They then report and reflect on the experience in the work sample portfolio.

SEDF 483 – *Organization and Management of a Diverse Classroom*

This course is specifically designed to detail practices supporting instruction in a diverse classroom. All teacher candidates are required to take this course the semester before student teaching.

www.teachdiversity.org

This website, a collaborative effort between USC Upstate and Furman University Education programs, "identifies resources for teaching and managing diversity in the classroom." It is valuable for teacher candidates, teachers in the field, and university faculty in that it provides valuable

diversity-related resources such as lesson plans and links to other websites. This website is shared with our public school partners and “seeks to help educators prepare for the next generation to deal positively with the opportunities and challenges that diversity affords.”

Field Experiences

Dunn et al. (2009) advocate “faculties of education aim to ensure that all teacher candidates take part in field experiences that involve working in communities with diverse populations” (p. 553). Early field experiences and student teaching are essential parts of our programs. We have developed relationships with schools allowing us to place our teacher candidates in classrooms for observation and practice teaching. We also offer some of our courses on the K–12 school campuses. Our teacher candidates are placed in schools each semester after being admitted to the professional program. The field experience director makes certain they are placed in rural, urban, and high poverty schools for one or more of their placements. The teacher candidate population in our education program is approximately 70% Caucasian. During the senior year, our elementary education teacher candidates are placed in two very different schools for approximately 100 hours of field work: One school is predominately African American; the other is predominately of Hispanic culture. The response from the prestudent teachers is overwhelmingly positive.

Diversity Conference

This one-day event for student teachers from USC Upstate and other South Carolina college and university education programs is a forum for sharing ideas and activities for supporting diversity. The conference, formally called the Diversity Collaborative, brings together future teachers from various cultural backgrounds to learn from professionals in the field and one another. The event is described in detail later in this paper.

Faculty Updates and Information

Higbee, Schultz, and Goff (2010) commented, “although many educators would agree that integrating multiculturalism in post-secondary teaching and learning is an important goal, there is a dearth of resources for professional development for faculty and student services staff related to specific strategies for achieving this goal” (p. 50). The diversity committee strives to help provide opportunities for our faculty and staff. The committee chair and the Dean send out emails and other forms of diversity-related information to the education faculty on a monthly basis. The information is a combination of theory and practice related to diverse teaching methods and activities. The emails include current issues and trends as well as ideas and activities they can discuss with their teacher candidates. One example is an article written by Dr. Colette Rabin of San Jose State University entitled *Constructing an Ethic of Care in Teacher Education: Narrative as Pedagogy Toward Care* (2008). Also provided are websites with useful information, such as <http://www.nea.org/tools/1360.htm> and <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/ui362.pdf>. We provide training videos during faculty meetings, and live speakers for our faculty and staff. We recently invited Michael Fosberg (incognitotheplay.com), an actor, writer, and presenter to speak at our annual diversity conference for student teachers and faculty.

Charles Lea Participation

In June 2006, our School of Education and the Charles Lea Center for Rehabilitation and Special Education initiated a partnership to enable students with physical and mental disabilities to attend classes on a college campus. After participating in a number of on-campus learning experiences, students attend a graduation ceremony with faculty dressed in full regalia, and a keynote speaker addressing and congratulating the graduates and they receive their diplomas. Faculty and teacher education students participate in the course delivery and help with graduation ceremonies.

OSEP Grant

As part of a grant provided by the United States Office of Special Education Programs to our School of Education, several elementary education courses were revised to integrate activities and assignments to help our preservice teachers better prepare for supporting children with disabilities. Extensive use of the IrisCenter.com supplements the syllabi in our courses.

College Day

Each spring, K–12 students are chaperoned by administrators and classroom teachers to visit our campus for the day. The students listen to a variety of campus speakers, including the Dean of the School of Education, an admissions officer, an international student, our “Street Team,” a group of college student athletes, a local hero, and other teacher candidates and faculty. They tour campus (library, bookstore, residence halls, classrooms and offices), and participate in an education course in process. They also have lunch in the campus cafeteria. The goal of the committee in this initiative is for young students to begin thinking about their academic futures at an early age. Schools with a high diverse population are targeted for this endeavor because of related statistics in low minority college enrollments and graduation.

Family Nights

Our programs host a variety of family nights in collaboration with our school partners. For example one of our field experience groups planned and implemented a reading night with a partner school, where students and parents had dinner and participated in reading activities. Our preservice teachers planned and carried out all of the activities and acquired donations for dinner. We also have math and science nights with a similar format. These family night initiatives are an attempt to bring in families from diverse backgrounds with the hope of increasing their familiarity and comfort level in the school environment.

Diversity Collaborative with Partnering Universities

Since the spring of 1994, groups of student teachers from universities and colleges across South Carolina have come together for a day of discussion and collaboration about diversity-related issues. Most colleges of education have not been “attentive to issues of diversity” (Irvine, 2003, p. 15) and have been producing preservice teachers “unprepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds” (Nieto, 2006, p. 471). We agree that “over the last decade teacher preparation programs have attempted to respond to the challenges of preparing teachers for the increasing diversity that is represented in public schools today” (Liggett & Finley, 2009, p. 33). With our programs and initiatives such as the diversity collaborative/ conference, we are striving to surpass what has been the norm in diversity education.

Our first diversity collaborative, focusing on cultural differences, consisted of 17 preservice teachers spending a day together in Charleston. It was an informal meeting led by an African American female professor and Caucasian male professor. The preservice teachers included one Asian female, six Caucasian females, three African American males, and seven African American females. It was simply a day to learn about one another—to ask questions and find answers.

“White, pre-service teachers have little cross-cultural knowledge, experience and understanding” (Irvine, 2003, p. xvi). “Teachers are unprepared for and misread cultural communication cues” (Davis, 2006, p. 15). “Teachers make negative assumptions about children with disabilities or impoverished backgrounds” (Davis, 2006, p. 25). Many teachers “perceive history as certain and assured knowledge and are reluctant to utilize an inquiry approach to history” (Banks, 2006, p. 29). It is the goal of the committee to provide student teachers with a day of diversity-related information to add to their coursework and field experiences and to be more prepared to teach in a diverse world.

Since the first diversity collaborative, the initiative has grown and evolved to include up to 350 student teachers from up to 10 different South Carolina colleges and universities. Over the years, we have adjusted and adapted our formats to meet the needs of our teacher candidates and the changes in the public schools where we live. We have attended the South Carolina Early Childhood Association conference where students met together, joined sessions, and presented papers. We have met at parks where teacher candidates had a cookout and participated in a team-building nature trail activity. Today, our School of Education diversity committee hosts a more formal diversity conference each spring for student teachers from across South Carolina. Benedict College, our partner institution, hosts a similar conference each fall.

Davis (2006) gives the following description of diverse learners:

They are the homeless children, the migrant children, the immigrant children learning English, children dealing with gender issues, children with learning disabilities, special needs children, and children from diverse cultures – students perhaps not previously included or successful in our classrooms. (p. x)

Our earlier initiatives focused mostly on cultural differences. Today, we strive to represent a wider variety of diverse groups.

Past diversity conference themes include: Diversity: Bridges to a Common Goal; Influencing the Future through Voices from Our Past and Present; Creating a Sense of Belonging in the Classroom; and Today’s Classrooms: Diverse Needs, Diverse Responses.

Each conference lasts approximately six hours with a keynote speaker, discussion sessions, a catered lunch with public school entertainment, and breakout sessions presenting strategies for working productively with diverse school populations. Past keynote speakers include authors and presenters such as Louise Derman-Sparks, Michael Fosberg, Donna Gollnick, Gloria Boutte Freeman Owle, and Paul Gorsky. Children’s groups from the surrounding schools provide entertainment, such as local school choirs, step and dance teams, and percussion bands.

Preservice teachers generally participate in two small-group, breakout sessions with guest speakers, where they have opportunities to share perspectives while discussing relevant issues on diversity. Examples of breakout presentations include *Teachers supporting the education of homeless children; Supporting the adopted child and their families; Helping students unlearn stereotypes of American Indians; Diversity and at-risk students; Multicultural children’s literature; Ten traits of highly effective teachers; and, So*

you have English learners in your class. These interactive sessions continue during an informal round table discussion at lunch.

Vygotsky (1978) maintained that the way students talk and interact with one another helps them to internalize new information and shapes the way they think and learn. This is true for very young students, as well as college age students. During the conference, preservice teachers take part in the many opportunities to interact with other preservice teachers from cultural and ethnic groups that differ from their own. This allows for an opportunity to listen to and share perspectives that offer insight on different ideas and thoughts that children may bring to the classroom. Having a chance to discuss these experiences not only helps preservice teachers become sensitive to cultural differences, but also helps them develop effective skills for working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. "Colleges of education should assume a leadership role in reversing the cycle of failure among students of color by producing teachers who are culturally responsive and advocates of social justice" (Irvine, 2003, p. xxiii). To increase cultural awareness, teacher education students may choose a small candy bar upon registration and later divide into groups who have the same candy wrapper, or they may sign up early to go on a lunch date with someone they have never met. The goal is to mix the participants for positive and productive interaction.

Past preservice teachers have been extremely positive in their evaluations of the conference. Sample comments include: "I loved the entertainment"; "The information and resources obtained at this conference will be useful to me as a future teacher"; "The keynote speaker was very inspiring"; "I enjoyed meeting new people"; "I learned a lot about how to incorporate culture into my future classroom"; "Getting to catch up with other student teachers was great"; and "The sessions were very informative and the speakers were very well prepared."

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that "Most teachers reject the notion that gender, class and ethnicity should be considered in designing instructional programs" (Irvine, 2003, p. 21). This spans all levels beginning in preschool and continuing through college or university.

We feel, as a partnering university, it is partially our responsibility to ensure that young people in our community schools receive equal opportunities and treatment; that new teachers, upon entering the classroom, are prepared to work with a diverse population; and faculty and staff are educated to carry out necessary diversity-related initiatives.

It is for this reason our committee strives to help all teachers (in our small sector of the world) be comfortable working with all students and prepared to meet the needs of every child. Through the School of Education diversity initiatives, we help ensure classrooms are equipped with the necessities that provide for the ultimate learning experience for all children: books from all cultures, in many languages; pictures representative of all people; manipulative materials to fit all hands; and decorations and wall art that is inviting to each and every individual. Through simple outreach, teaching, and work with local schools, we are encouraging and supportive of a community where all children can go to school unafraid, excited, and knowing they will be treated equally, and where parents feel comfortable entering the school, talking to their child's teachers, and being involved in the education of the whole. Finally, through our "college bound" programs, we are providing opportunities where many children have the opportunity to visit a college campus, learning about higher education and choices for their future—perhaps to attend that same campus as a young adult without disparity and superfluous

challenges because of their race, economic standing, and/or cultural background. We hope and believe we are making a difference.

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