

Fostering Cross Cultural Competence in Preservice Teachers Through Multicultural Education Experiences

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Abstract Diversity is increasing in our classrooms implying the need for teachers to be prepared to work effectively with students from different backgrounds, such as cultural, linguistic or national origin. Additionally, the focus on diversity education is important because of the need for students to develop, from an early age, the ability to communicate with and relate to others from diverse backgrounds. This article focuses on cross cultural experiences gained from cross cultural partnerships between preservice teachers and English Language Learners over the course of a semester at a medium size public university. Evidence from this project suggests the need for teacher educators to model and support appropriate cultural competencies that are critical in classrooms that are fast becoming more culturally as well as linguistically diverse.

Keywords Multicultural education · Diversity education · Cultural competence · Preservice teachers · English language learners

Background of the Project

Many teacher education programs face challenges in better preparing preservice teachers to respond appropriately to the diversity of diversity they are likely to encounter in the classroom (Jones 2004). As a result, there is growing pressure and focus on teacher educators to provide diversity experiences for their students to help them develop cultural skills as well as cultural knowledge and

understanding of similarities and differences between/ among cultures. In other words, there is need for future teachers to understand how to work with diverse groups of races, cultures and languages that students represent in the classroom. Establishing sound pedagogy rooted on cultural understanding of the students is also critical given that racial, cultural and linguistic integration has the potential to increase academic success for all learners (Smith 2004).

Although multicultural scholars argue for the need to have teachers gain knowledge and develop skills for working with students from different backgrounds (Banks 2006; Cushner et al. 2009; Nieto & Bode 2008), many early childhood teachers have limited experiences working with diverse students and families (Hollins & Guzman 2005; Ray et al. 2006). The focus on cultural and linguistic diversity is important because there are many preservice teachers who, for instance, hold various misconceptions, false beliefs, stereotypes and erroneous attitudes about minorities (Vaughn 2005). Further, there is a pressing need for students to develop, from an early age, the ability to communicate with and relate to others from various racial, cultural, linguistic or national backgrounds.

Teachers' beliefs about how students, for instance, from different racial backgrounds learn and the expectations that they have for different racial groups may influence the way they conduct their lessons (Sadker et al. 2008). Teachers with lower expectations for their students could lead to lower achievement (Burt et al. 2009) especially when there is cultural discontinuity that influences attitudes and expectations. In a study conducted in 79 schools of students ranging from kindergarten through third grade, Dee (2004) reported that students who spent three or 4 years with a teacher who shared the same race resulted in a rise in test scores by two to three percent each additional year. Dee (2004) argues that pupils develop trust and respect

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someone with whom they share a salient characteristic enhancing their learning.

When teachers ignore or reject different cultural expressions of development that are normal and adequate and on which school skills and knowledge can be built, conflicts can occur which may lead to student failure (Nieto & Bode 2008). Therefore, cross cultural experiences could help teachers interact more effectively with diverse children and enhance children's academic achievement. Additionally, for students to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that foster cultural competence, it is critical for teachers to model the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of culturally competent professionals. Teachers who are successful in the classroom generally possess cultural competence that entails "mastering complex awarenesses and sensitivities, various bodies of knowledge, and a set of skills that taken together, underlie effective cross cultural teaching" (Diller & Moule 2005, p. 5).

Purpose of the Project

Schools across the U.S. serve increasingly diverse student populations while the teaching force is becoming less diverse (Nieto & Bode 2008). The number of immigrants, for instance, has increased tremendously contributing to the growth of the nation's student diversity. There is no doubt that the demographic landscape of America has changed tremendously and will continue to be so. However, while a record number of preschools and early primary classrooms in our nation comprise of students from a variety of racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the prospective teacher populations remain predominately White, non-Hispanic and female (Saluja et al. 2002).

Today's classrooms require teachers to teach students with different cultures, languages, abilities, and many other characteristics (Gollnick & Chinn 2002). However, there is evidence that many teachers struggle to teach students with backgrounds different from their own (Sadker et al. 2008). Every student is a unique individual with unique characteristics that include strengths and challenges. A student's unique needs could be attributed to learning styles, developmental levels, and social economic status, learning experiences, religion, social class, race, and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical and mental abilities. As a result, it is critical that teachers understand these attributes and respond with skill and sensitivity to help support each student to attain their full social and academic potential.

Teacher education programs continue to teach as if diversity were either non-existent or annoying problems to be overcome (Beykont 2002). Additionally, due to lack of

cross cultural knowledge, skills, and experiences (Nieto & Bode 2008), many teachers fail to appreciate real similarities and differences between their understanding of their own "world" and that of their diverse students. Regrettably, a great majority of preservice teachers who wish to teach in diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic settings are unprepared for the cultural diversity they will face in those schools because they have learned little or nothing about it (Ladson-Billings 2001). Therefore, the purpose of the project was to provide cross cultural experiences through cross cultural partnerships between preservice teachers and English Language Learners over the course of a semester at a medium size public university. This was a critical task embedded in a required teacher education program course—Multicultural Education. It was aimed at sensitizing the preservice students to cross cultural diversity issues and awareness in their future classrooms.

Multicultural Education Course

There is evidence to suggest that most teacher education faculty are ill prepared to train preservice teachers for the diversity challenges of the twenty-first century (Ray et al. 2006). Additionally, there are of course, teachers who have low expectations of students from particular backgrounds and who are, in the worst cases, insensitive and racist (Nieto & Bode 2008). However, to make assumptions about the nature of diversity in our nation's schools is self-defeating in the sense that those assumptions continue to deny millions of American children fair and equal opportunities to succeed in the classroom.

Many teacher education programs have tried to compensate for the lack of cultural diversity knowledge, skills, and experiences by incorporating stand-alone multicultural education courses in their programs. A typical multicultural education course is focused on assisting prospective teachers understand the forces that shape the system of schooling in the U.S and those that generally affect student achievement. It is hoped that if forces such as, differences in race, culture, gender, language, and religion are well understood, the students will engage in the process of identifying ways to manage them to shape their own educational practices.

Multicultural education courses are also necessary due to the need for most teacher education programs in the nation to meet the diversity requirement in order to be accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). For instance, Standard 4 (Diversity) requirement in teacher education programs must incorporate assessments that:

Indicate that candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P–12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P–12 schools (NCATE.org 2009).

Multicultural Education goals are centered on raising personal awareness about different categories of individual differences, and how these differences enhances or hinders the ways students and teachers generally interact with each other. However, teaching multicultural education courses is generally not easy given that diversity programs are not uniform across states and the few existing programs have limited funding to sustain them (Nieto & Bode 2008). Further, success in teaching diversity courses depends on individual teachers' knowledge, and skills to incorporate appropriate cultural activities into their lessons and to facilitate lessons that appreciate students' own cultural experiences.

The multicultural education course offered at the Midwest university is designed both as a professional education course for preservice teachers and as essential studies course. The course explores the relationship between educational practices and social-cultural patterns related to race, ethnicity, culture, social class, gender, sexual orientation and other exceptionalities. Specifically, the course is aimed at promoting a critical understanding of one's self as a social being in order to understand the 'how' and 'why' that shape dominant perspectives on political opinions, socioeconomic class roles, religious beliefs, gender roles, and racial self-images.

Course Objectives

The course is intended to help preservice teachers develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will facilitate one's ability to work and communicate more effectively with individuals who are culturally different from oneself. Additional objectives include:

- (a) Increase self-awareness about one's own cultural background;
- (b) Learn about the values, beliefs, and behaviors of various ethnic and cultural groups;
- (c) Identify personal cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs about diverse populations; and
- (d) Assess the impact of culture on individual behavior, family or societal interactions.

Course Activities

During the Fall semester of 2008, the author provided various cultural diversity opportunities for the preservice

teachers enrolled in the multicultural education course. The preservice teachers were required to take a field trip to a culturally diverse school setting and observe student–student and student–teacher classroom interactions. Specifically, the preservice teachers observed the relationship between teachers and the students; the learning environment; the characteristics of learners; the teaching styles; and strategies for addressing classroom management issues. After the trip, they wrote reflection papers focusing on strategies that they learned during the classroom observations and described how those strategies translated to their future classroom practices. Their field reflection focused on key questions that included: (a) What do education and learning experiences mean to these students; and (b) Is the educational system ensuring that the diverse needs of those students are met?

The preservice teachers' understanding, appreciation, and affirmation of diversity were explored through course activities and assignments that included: reflective writings on course readings and discussions, viewing and critical analysis of cultural films, and completing cross cultural activities with English Language Learning (ELL) partners. The class sessions focused on active and experiential learning; large and small group discussions, role play, reflective writings, multimedia classroom activities and storytelling. The preservice teachers were assessed through various methods including: pop quizzes over course readings, reflection papers, PowerPoint diversity research presentations; case studies, and final diversity topic essays. They also designed and presented collaborative lessons modeling culturally relevant pedagogical practices related to their field trip experience. This article focuses on the cross cultural partnerships between preservice teachers and ELL partners.

The Cross Cultural Conversation Project

The cross cultural conversation project is of focus in this paper because this course activity provided the preservice teachers with unique “hands-on” opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge covered in the multicultural education course. Twenty-eight preservice teachers ranging from 20 to 25 years were enrolled in the course and thus participated in the project. The preservice teachers were all white and female. Twenty-two majored in either early childhood or elementary education while six pursued double majors in early childhood and elementary education.

Student profiles were completed to match them with appropriate (female or male) ELL partners. The 28 preservice teachers were then matched with English Language Learning (ELL) students enrolled at the university's English Language Learning Center throughout the semester. They met with their ELL partners ten times for

an hour each time in the course of the semester to converse, play games, and engage in other appropriate social and academic activities. The preservice teachers kept brief journals of each visit and wrote reflection papers describing specific experiences interacting with their ELL partners.

Twenty-four preservice teachers grew up in racially and culturally homogeneous rural white communities while four grew up in white suburban towns and communities in the Midwest. The ELL partners were young international students with varying language abilities and coming from a variety of countries in Asia and the Middle East. Before this project, the preservice teachers were not provided with any initial training on cross cultural interactions. Therefore, this project provided preservice teachers with cross cultural experiences in less threatening social and academic environments since they were all young college students.

The preservice teachers were provided with two open-ended questions at the end of the semester that generated comments on their experiences interacting with the ELL partners. These two questions also guided the purpose of this project:

1. What challenges did you encounter interacting with the ELL Partners?
2. Was this project helpful in preparing you to teach culturally diverse children?

To solicit honest feedback from the participants, these questions were not graded and participation was voluntary but encouraged. Twenty-five preservice teachers (about 90% of the participants) submitted complete responses to the two questions.

Preservice Teachers' Responses

The purpose of the project was to provide cross cultural experiences through cross cultural partnerships between preservice teachers and English Language Learners over the course of a semester at a medium size public university. The preservice teachers' comments revealed one major theme: Preservice teachers' limited knowledge and understanding of other cultures. The majority of the preservice teachers were concerned of their limited exposure to other cultures yet they were noticing cultural and linguistic diversity in their practicum classrooms. They expressed fear of doing or saying the wrong thing when interacting with students from different cultures because they lacked cross cultural competencies. Three preservice teachers who reported had interacted with "diverse" cultures also faced unexpected cultural challenges that they had not anticipated before engaging in this project.

Question 1: What Challenges did You Encounter Interacting with the ELL Partners?

The main challenges reported were linked to fear, assumptions, language barriers, cultural barriers, and scheduling meetings. Majority of the preservice teachers reported that their initial reactions about interacting with the English Language Learners (ELL) were punctuated with anxiety, fear, and even shock. Many preservice teachers reported to be nervous during their first meeting with the ELL partners. They did not know what to expect and the fact that their partners had limited English ability made it even more difficult to interact. One preservice teacher noted:

I was nervous to meet Jin Ah and try to make conversations. I still find it hard to think of things to talk about, but that is something that is a problem even without talking with an ELL student. I am from a very sheltered tiny town in a rural area...everyone, and I mean everyone is white and we all speak the same language...to be put with someone who was so different and have to spend all this time with them was a very scary thing for me.

The preservice teachers had limited experience interacting with someone "different" and were generally scared going into this project. Additionally, given their lack of cross cultural experiences, they were very skeptical of the whole experience. One preservice teacher noted:

The thought of having to spend time with a person of another background scared me. I am neither what they call a 'racist,' nor do I have anything against people of different skin color than my own. I simply haven't been given the opportunity to get to know someone with a different ethnicity. I wasn't sure how to act around my partner, what to say, what to ask or even if I would be able to understand their language...I think this is a good project to do and that it was set up in the right way.

Some harbored assumptions about their ELL partners. This is revealed in one preservice teacher's comment: "I had heard that Saudi Arabia men tend to look down upon women and I let this affect my attitude going into the first meeting." They also experienced cultural shock during their interactions with the ELL partners. One preservice teacher stated: "I grew up in Minnesota and a culture shock to me was when I met someone who did not know what 'Lefse' was."

Perhaps the main challenge reported by the preservice teachers was that of language barrier. Many preservice teachers reported facing serious miscommunication problems; it was tough to keep conversations going and to have the patience to listen to what their ELL partners were saying at the beginning. One preservice teacher stated:

I found out that it was hard for me to communicate with the partner I had because I have never been exposed to different languages and their accents. So most of the time, I played along and pretended like I knew what he said...Although it was still hard for him to carry on full conversations by our last meeting I could tell that he's really come a long way with his English skills.

Other challenges in this project were establishing meeting times and the ELL partners' sense of time. It was difficult to establish schedules for meetings as ELL partners were occupied with their English classes during the week while majority of the preservice teachers were busy with work during the weekends. Additionally, the preservice teachers were "time conscious" while their ELL partners were not. This frustration is reflected in one preservice teacher's comments:

In the future, ELL partners need to hold up their end of the deal. It was hard to schedule meetings and communication is obviously less clear when you are crossing language and other cultural barriers. My partner stood me up a couple of times and never apologized when we met again. I guess this is a cultural difference.

Question 2: Was This Project Helpful in Preparing You to Teach Culturally Diverse Children?

All the preservice teachers indicated that they benefited in some way by participating in this project. The majority indicated that the project provided them with an understanding of basic cross cultural facts—that all human beings have the ability of communication regardless of their languages. The preservice teachers reported that this project taught them to go beyond "individualism" and learn about other people and cultures, learn to be patient, and become better listeners. One preservice teacher noted, "I had to be very patient, but also if I didn't understand to have the courage to ask him to say it again instead of just nodding my head in false affirmation." Another added:

Once I got to meet my partner, I realized that these people are just like me; they were all so eager to meet us and to interact with us. I realized after meeting my girl that she was as nervous as I was. We thought that it was really funny that we were scared of each other. We laughed about this and conversations began to pick up easily afterwards.

Many of the preservice teachers had limited knowledge about different cultures besides their own. The project helped them to realize that they were likely to have

students from other cultures and who speak other than English as their first language in their future classrooms. As one student noted, "I might not understand my student and they might not understand me, but it is important to be comfortable asking the other person to repeat or explain themselves again."

A remarkable benefit for the preservice teachers as reflected in their responses was hitting the "realization factor," which is the point where they understood that they held some stereotypes and bias against other cultures. One preservice teacher wrote:

I have learned about what it is like to come to somewhere foreign, and not really understand what is going on. It has pushed me to learn more about other cultures, and helped provide insight into my own ways of thinking and question my bias and stereotypes about other cultures. We need get to know people rather than judge them on what we have heard about a particular them...No matter where we come from or what our background is, we all basically share the same values and want the same things in life. We all want to be respected, successful, and be good citizens of the world.

The preservice teachers reported that they learned that some of the sayings used on a daily basis might not always be understood. For example, one preservice teacher noted:

When talking to my partner from Saudi Arabia, he eventually stopped me and asked what 'okey dokey' meant. I use it a lot in place of Okay or good. It is a phrase I grew up saying and I did not even realize that I use it a lot. I am sure there are a million other things I say that may be confusing to someone from another culture. I know realize that when working with culturally diverse students in the future, I am really going to have to be aware of the things I say and do to prevent conflict and misunderstandings.

The preservice teachers reportedly learned the need to treat and interact with students as individuals. At the beginning of the project, they "lumped groups" of people together based on their country of origin or continent. at the beginning of the project. They learned that, as future teachers, the initial reaction with their students was important and the element of looking beyond a stereotypical culture or race and seeing each student as an individual was critical for student learning and success. The ELL conversation project also helped the preservice teachers to be accepting of other cultures and respect people from other cultures. One preservice teacher noted: "ELL partners are beneficial in learning about different cultures from that culture's point of view, instead of from a book. I would

definitely recommend continuing this program.” Another preservice teacher observed:

Many children in America are unaware of other cultures or religions...After 9–11, most children associate all Middle Eastern cultures and Islamic Religion with being a terrorist or view them negatively. I want to share my experience with my future students and demonstrate to them that having this cultural connection with someone from another country is a great cultural and academic learning experience.

The preservice teachers documented that approaching each culture, language, or people with an “open mind” is helpful to be able to succeed in cross cultural school settings. One preservice teacher noted: “I was able to learn about a culture other than my own, develop some cultural competence skills to interact with other individuals and, as a bonus, was able to make a new friend from outside the U.S.” Another preservice teacher added:

My partner and I have a lot in common. She deals with the same issues girls in America face: boys, school, family and friends. Li Han has a zest for life and really acts like she enjoys everything, even when I know that she probably cannot understand half of what I am saying. Her openness and readiness for an American friend made me like her even more. Her attitude made my experiences with her very worthwhile.

All the preservice teachers admitted that the ELL project helped them to accept and respect other cultures and people. One preservice teacher noted, “I have learned through this process that while some cultures may be much different from my own, people from other places really are quite similar to me.” They began to realize the challenges students might face when placed in different social and academic environments. One preservice teacher concluded:

We live in a world that is full of people of different skin colors, different religions and different beliefs. By meeting with my ELL partner and visiting about our life experiences, family, friends and future plans, I was able to broaden my horizon and explore cultures other than my own... I couldn’t imagine leaving at this point in my life, going to a new country and learning the language so I could attend college there. It would be a big challenge, but I think it’s phenomenal that these students have such a drive to do so. It’s not like Ching Wen couldn’t have gotten her business degree in Taiwan either, but she chose to come here and learn...and struggle to do so in a new language.

The comments above reveal that preservice teachers perceived the benefits of cross-cultural conversations to enhance their social skills such as becoming better listeners, more patient, acceptance and respectful of other cultures and people. They also noted that the project was a great tool not only in multicultural aspects but in all classrooms. The ELL conversations helped them to experience and understand the struggle that children would go through when English is not their first language. One preservice teacher wrote, “If I can incorporate trust and comfort into my classroom, I can eliminate some of the struggles for the students who are ELL.”

Discussion

Teachers should acknowledge that different cultures exist in modern diverse classrooms and provide the necessary accommodations for those differences. For instance, when addressing our students, we should strive to use appropriate language: choose our vocabulary well, even if we individually feel confused about which terminology to use. We have an obligation to request clarification or admit our ignorance as to what terminology will be most welcomed by an individual or group of children (Nieto & Bode 2008). Further, we should inquire from the students about the names they like to be called and use languages that affirm diversity.

Teachers should attempt to “even the playing field” so that the languages and cultures of individual students are perceived as equally valued and powerful. In practice, teachers must be willing and ready to establish sound pedagogical practices that recognize diverse learners. For instance, it would be important as a teacher to treat all the questions an English Language Learner would have as important, no matter how trivial they might seem to an adult. It would also be important to follow up and make sure the student understood the explanation.

Teachers should go beyond the cultural mismatch theory (Sowers 2004) to ensure high expectations for all learners as well as ensure that those expectations are realized. Teachers from less diverse backgrounds should also acknowledge that they have their own racial background that affects their perspective of the learning process (Burt et al. 2009). To ensure that teachers have an appropriate understanding of their children:

Teacher training should include training in different minority studies so that teachers of European ancestry would be less likely to misinterpret behavior and be more likely to expect academic success from not only their white students but their culturally diverse students as well (Burt et al. 2009).

Teaching culturally diverse children is not easy. Because expectations and demonstration of appropriate behavior are culturally influenced, conflicts often occur when teachers and children come from different cultural backgrounds (Weinstein et al. 2004). Therefore, specific training should be provided including direct instruction, video and guest presentation, and “hands on” workshops or lessons covering various aspects of cross-cultural interactions. Initial training as this might help preservice teachers to start thinking and exploring effective strategies to teach culturally diverse children.

Cross cultural conversations require tolerance, acceptance, and a deep sense of awareness and understanding of cultural divergences between one country or group and another. As a result, teachers must work to recognize the beliefs, values, and behaviors that characterize the various cultures of their children. When teachers ignore or reject different cultural expressions of development that are normal and adequate and on which school skills and knowledge can be built, conflicts can occur which may lead to student failure (Nieto & Bode 2008). Therefore, understanding the differences in culture and language and how these differences affect children’s learning can help teachers understand or establish effective strategies to improve the social and academic achievement of their students.

Diversity is valuable because it empowers teachers and students; decreases stereotypes, prejudice, and racism in America and the world; and generally promotes equity and social justice (Nieto & Bode 2008). Teachers’ understanding of the cultural context of children’s behavior and the explicit teaching of classroom rules such as respect for other cultures and people allows a student who is culturally diverse a successful transition from home to school culture. Therefore, teachers must strive to create a culture where all students can achieve, and are provided with the best opportunities and tools to learn effectively. Embracing and affirming diversity implies equal opportunities for all students to learn in a safe and conducive environment. Additionally, a student from any racial or cultural background can excel if challenged with high expectations and provided with the best opportunities and appropriate tools to achieve (Keengwe 2007).

Conclusion

The preservice teachers perceived the benefits of cross-cultural conversations to enhance their cultural competence skills such as gaining insight on what they can do as future teachers to help children who are English language learners. Moreover, they indicated that they understood the importance and benefits of this cross cultural experience.

They also believed to have gained a greater appreciation for all cultures by engaging in this project. The conversation project inspired them to learn more about other cultures and different people. Additionally, they were able to learn many different aspects of culture and how different aspects of students’ “cultural baggage” were kept with them at all times.

Based on the comments generated by the two questions, the author recommend that preservice teachers be provided with more cultural experiences to prepare them to teach in diverse school settings. An example of such opportunities would be to offer preservice teachers with multiple and meaningful field observation trips to culturally diverse school settings. The pre-service teachers believed they would be more effective if they received diversity training and more experience. Some preservice teachers suggested to “have come a long way and learned a lot but pointed out that one cross-cultural project was not sufficient to their preparation”.

It is also recommended that preservice teachers be provided with initial cultural diversity training to enhance their experiences interacting with students from other cultures. Additionally, teachers need to understand the cultural diversities represented in the classroom and first be ready for the challenge. If teachers subscribe to the idea that all children (irrespective of their cultural differences) can achieve, their actions and expectations must reflect that noble belief. However, it is important to educate and provide relevant cultural diversity training to those teachers who have low expectations of students from particular backgrounds and who are, in the worst cases, insensitive and racist (Nieto & Bode 2008).

Diversity is about raising personal awareness about different cultural categories of individual differences, and how these differences enhance or hinder the ways students and teachers generally interact with each other. Every teacher needs to learn effective teaching centered on diversity of their students. Specifically, teachers need to engage in self-reflections about their own biases and develop respect for the differences, and the willingness to approach teaching from a multicultural perspective. Keeping journals of their actions, attitudes and interactions with their colleagues and students (Gay 2002) can be a powerful tool to enhance their ability to embrace and affirm diversity of their students. This project helped preservice teachers to become knowledgeable about other cultures, reduce bias, develop respect skills, and become accepting of ‘others.’ As one preservice teacher noted, “As ashamed as I am to admit this personal flaw, I am happy to say that this experience really showed me that you cannot make assumptions about people and other cultures based solely on what you hear.”

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