

Diversity Awareness: How Pre-service Teachers Notions of Diversity Were Effectuated After Attending a Multi-cultural Conference

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Abstract

Pre-service educators need to become aware of how to interact with diverse students and school settings before they enter the classroom. Trainings and multi-cultural awareness opportunities need to be provided to pre-service educators and they need to be researched in order to evaluate relevant impact. This article describes a multi-cultural conference that provided several workshops and discussions to pre-service teachers about a variety of topics related to diversity. Pre-service teachers who attended the conference provided reflections about their experiences that were analyzed which gave insights into how pre-service teachers notions of diversity were impacted or challenged. Findings were that attending a one day conference on diversity issues made an impact on pre-service teacher's notions of diversity and provided the pre-service teachers with specific strategies for future classroom instruction. The findings are useful to academicians and educational professionals who are interested in better preparing teacher candidates for the inclusive environment they will face upon graduation.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, diversity, multi-cultural, conference

1. Introduction:

Diversity training awareness is crucial for future educators considering that minority students now make up the majority of the student body in public schools (Maxwell, 2014; Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014) and that the teaching force continues to be predominately White (Subedi, 2006). It is not surprising then that a significant number of first year teachers are going to be placed in schools where they are either the minority or the school itself has a diverse population of students. Pre-service teachers are going to need a significant amount of training in order to be prepared to create spaces for voices of difference, meet different learning needs, and challenge their own assumptions (Butin, 2007a; Lynskey, 2015; Marshall, 2006).

To address this challenge, a small liberal arts school in Pennsylvania funded a diversity grant initiative that sent pre-service educators to a multi-cultural conference. In this article, the effect of the conference on pre-service teacher's notions of diversity and future classroom practices will be described based on the analysis of their reflections that were written during and just after the conference.

2. Multicultural Education

Multicultural education began around the 1960's as a way to help educators start to have conversations about the impact of culture on schools and teachers (Sleeter & Delgado, 2004). Since then, multi-cultural awareness and training has become a central theme in preparing new teachers in U.S.A but has had little effect on preparing teachers for urban schools or to work with diverse students who have a variety of academic needs (Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004). How to best prepare teachers to meet the demands of the increasingly diverse area of public education is becoming increasingly important and mandated by accrediting agencies such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2006). Research suggests that one way pre-service teachers can prepare themselves for teaching diverse populations is to help them develop their social-cultural consciousness around identity and privilege (Allen, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004). When pre-service teachers have been exposed to opportunities that give them a new awareness of their own privilege, they are more equipped to lead their own students in transformative learning (Cole, 2011). Additionally, teachers need to create an inclusive environment that reflects strategies for diverse learners (Cushner et al., 2006).

A review of the research revealed that studies focused on pre-service teachers involvement in multicultural courses or diverse student teaching placements (Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford, 2010; Bennett, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Forrest & Alexander, 2004; Pfeiffer & Frazier, 2014). Few studies, if any, looked at how short term diversity awareness opportunities, such as multi-cultural conference attendance, affected pre-service teacher's diversity awareness. This is concerning considering that there is currently a decreasing emphasis on multicultural education in teacher preparatory programs in the form of coursework (Butin, 2007) so schools of education need to look at alternative opportunities, such as multicultural conferences, that will move pre-service teachers out of their comfort zones. The data from this study suggests that attending multi-cultural conferences is one way to help pre-service teachers start to recognize their own privilege and develop teaching strategies that will move their classrooms into an inclusive place.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research project is to determine if offering one conference opportunity to pre-service teachers at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania impacts notions of diversity and provides them with inclusive teaching strategies. The intended outcomes of this research are to provide recommendations on how academia can provide opportunities for pre-service teachers who are currently enrolled in rural educational programs with opportunities that will help them feel more prepared to teach diverse student populations.

4. Methods

Diversity awareness has become a focus at a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania and it is being supported by mini-grants provided by the campus Teaching and Learning Committee. In the spring of 2017, the education department was awarded a mini grant in order to take students to a multi-cultural conference. Emails were sent out to students in the education department asking if they would like to attend the conference and 20 students signed up. The students that signed up for the conference identified as white, female, and were predominately middle class.

Each student was informed that they would be filling out a reflection about the conference experience. Every student was given a reflection form that included questions about the workshops they attended, keynote speaker points, and if they were impacted in any way as a result of attending the conference. Seventeen students turned in their completed reflections from the conference which provided the data used in this article. Of the seventeen students that turned in their reflections, seven were seniors, six were juniors, three were sophomores, and one freshman attended.

The conference was held at a University in central Pennsylvania. The theme of the conference was to explore multicultural education in order to develop communal consciousness. Over the course of the conference, several workshops were offered on a variety of topics including creating inclusive environments, recognizing systematic educational inequalities, and how multi-cultural practices can disrupt institutional forms of racism. The student conference participants were able to choose what workshops they attended and most of them chose to attend the keynote speaker session. The topics that were covered in the workshops the students attended included activism beyond the classroom, race and culture, a contemporary look at multi-cultural education, using picture books to teach about diversity, translanguaging practice, creating multi-model learning encounters, reflections from white teachers on building relationships with students of color, getting beyond assumptions to increase literacy development in diverse households, how gaming helps English Language Learners (ELLs), influencing schools about mattering and marginality, and negotiating sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, socio economic status, and health status. The keynote speaker talked about storytelling and how the stories people tell or don't tell are connected to social justice.

5. Findings

Three themes emerged from the data in regards to how pre-service teachers notions of diversity were challenged or impacted. The first was that the conference changed pre-service teacher's thinking. The second theme involved how the pre-service teachers were provided with steps to take at the conference that challenged or impacted their notions of diversity. The third theme was that the conference made an impact because it provided a space for reflection. Two themes emerged from the data in regards to how pre-service teachers reflected on applying what they learned to the classroom. The first theme was the specific strategies they learned and the second theme was about how they learned to plan for greater inclusivity.

5.1 Notions of Diversity were Challenged or Impacted

The pre-service teacher's reflections revealed that attending the conference helped them to change their thinking about diversity, provided them with steps to take in their future teaching placements, and gave them a space for reflection.

5.2 Changed Thinking

The thinking around being colorblind was altered for students at the conference. One student says, "The conference changed my thinking on color blindness. A workshop I attended said we should not be colorblind but embraces all students equally. I will most definitely apply it in my student teaching classroom and my future classrooms. I've always thought that it was good to be colorblind because to me it meant that you saw everyone the same, but we are not the same. We should use our differences as an advantage and share them with other people and be culturally diverse" (student 3). Two other students wrote, "I was influenced by the idea that colorblindness is not the ideal way to address the fact that there are differences for a reason" (student 10) and that "Colorblindness is not a good view to have because you miss out on seeing differences" (student 17). Additionally, one student reflected that she learned about the issues that being colorblind creates. She writes, "Something that I found influential are the issues occurring due to colorblindness. All students are individuals

and have great differences. You should not try to act like they are all the same due to fear” (student 12). The students seemed to reach a new understanding of the concept of colorblindness tied to difference. They learned that in order to create an inclusive environment as teachers you need to make sure you are recognizing the diversity of your room instead of trying to view students as homogenous. This connects to Cushner’s et. al (2006) recommendation that teachers find ways to create inclusive environments.

A few students left the conference with a new understanding of the achievement gap. One student writes, “I’m definitely leaving this conference with a better idea of the gap there is in schools when it comes to student’s culture, color, and beliefs” (student 12). Another student writes, “During the conference, there was a quote about how closing the achievement gap shouldn’t be a burden on the student. This was a big take away because I am passionate about closing the achievement gap and that conference helped me see that students should not suffer in order to try to close the gap” (student 14). The pre-service teachers gained awareness of how there are gaps in the education system that are tied to diversity issues beyond learning differences. Pre-service teachers reflected on learning how students might suffer when policies are put into place that are meant to create greater equality but can have a negative effect on certain populations.

Additionally, students reflected on how the conference really helped them to take an inward look at their own values and beliefs. One student writes, “The keynote speaker showed an image of people going about their business without any awareness of the suffering going on around them or within them. This was very powerful to me an inspired me to be more conscious of the differences among other people and to embrace them in order to move toward peace” (student 11). One of the seminar’s helped another student reflect. She writes, “The second seminar about race was very inspiring because it showed both sides of the classroom and made me question my values and how I view myself as a person. It was also quite emotional and I hope that I can have a safe environment like that in my classroom” (Student 15).

5.3 Steps that they can take as teachers

Beyond changing thinking patterns, the conference provided pre-service teachers with various steps they plan on taking in regards to diversity. A pre-service teacher writes, “These workshops encouraged me to become better educated on a wide variety of people’s backgrounds. They helped me to recognize the importance of collaboration so that a student receives the best opportunity to succeed “(student 11). Another student writes, “I think my biggest take away from the conference is that there are so many ways that we as teachers can improve our schools. The entire conference was eye opening because there is so much research out there about bilingual students, culture in schools, and diversity that people don’t know about. Students need an environment where they feel accepted and have the freedom to talk about their culture, heritage, and beliefs. Teachers need to find ways to bring their students cultures into their classrooms” (Student 12). Another student writes, “While I think about diversity often, I am very aware I have a lot to learn, this conference highlighted steps I should start taking now to prepare me for the future. I know that I will have students from many backgrounds in my future classrooms, and I will need to adapt to each individual’s needs” (Student 13). Pre-service teacher’s reflections reveal that they feel like the conference gave them specific ways to think about diversity, prepare for a diverse classroom, and seek resources that will help them become more informed educators.

5.4 Space for reflection

Apart from giving student teachers steps that they plan to take in order to recognize diversity, the conference gave them an opportunity to reflect. One student writes, “I think it is extremely important to reflect on the topic of diversity and this conference was a great way to do so. These talks helped me consider my own (very diverse) classroom and think of ways to bring a positive perspective on diversity into the classroom. I also realized I need to reflect on my perception of my students all the time” (student 4). Another student writes, “The workshops helped remind me that it is valuable to consider unique ways of engaging students, meeting them were they are. They helped me open my eyes to areas of my own privilege which is important to recognize as an educator. You need to be able to create rapport with your students, all of them” (Student 16). Another student writes, “The conference taught me that teachers need to constantly self-evaluate, deconstruct and reconstruct” (student 5). The conference allowed students to inwardly reflect which put them on a road to helping them develop their social-cultural consciousness around identity and privilege (Allen, 2002), a recommendation from the literature for pre-service teachers.

5.5 Application to Classroom

As a result of attending the conference, several pre-service teachers reflected on learning about how to apply diversity teaching techniques to their future classrooms. Some students wrote about partaking in specific strategies at the conference that they plan to use in their future classrooms. Other students talked about learning how to apply information they gleaned from the conference when thinking about planning for instruction.

5.6 Specific Strategies

Several pre-service teachers at the conference learned about how to teach students about recognizing the diversity of a classroom by engaging in strategies that were led by workshop presenters. Below are three specific discussion strategies that pre-service teachers experienced as a result of attending the conference that they plan to use in the future.

“I really liked the example the presenter from the second presentation gave about writing down one thing that makes them their own person or created who they are today then afterwards talk and discuss what they wrote down with their peers in pairs or groups then have them rip up their papers and throw them in the trashcan. After that she asked them how ripping up something so important to them, something that is part of their identity made them feel. Afterwards, she explained how it is important to recognize one another’s differences and accept one another for each person’s uniqueness. I will most definitely use this in my future classroom” (student 1).

“The first workshop I attended touched on the importance of finding common ground with students you think you could never relate to. She mentioned how she used an exercise in which everyone began by sharing what they’re thankful for. This allowed her to get to know her students better as well as find ways to connect” (student 8).

“In my third session, we talked about privilege. We did a checklist and raised our hands to identify if we responded yes to a statement. This showed me that people who were a different race than me were just like me in many different aspects of life such as family and social experiences. The conference stressed to not be colorblind, but see race and engage in discussion about it which I plan on doing with my students” (student 5).

A few students found that the conference provided them with specific ways to think about the books in classrooms. One student reflected, “I learned to branch out with the books used in the classroom, the books should be able to touch on a multitude of traits that students can relate to. There are so many books that are important to use in the classroom. I want to steer clear of the silly books that do not touch on children’s experiences” (student 2). In regard to being able to select books a student writes, “I feel like I am now more prepared to choose books for an elementary classroom. I feel like I know what to look for in a picture book and I have a list of books with certain characteristics” (student 13). Another student reflected, “Teachers can use diverse picture books to develop characters and cognition. I will apply this by having books in my room and projects that are based on different cultures” (student 7). According to the literature, being able to select diverse books for the classroom helps to create a more inclusive environment for learners (Salend, 2005).

5.7 Teachers need to plan for diversity

The conference seemed to motivate some of the students toward planning for diversity in their future classrooms. A student writes, “One of the sessions opened my eyes to the importance of implementing authentic connections in and out of the classroom. I can apply this for my future as a teacher by engaging in teacher prep programs, extracurricular activities, etc.” (student 11). Another student reflected, “Culture and language need to be considered in the curriculum, we need to incorporate content and examples that reflect other backgrounds. It is imperative that teachers bring in different cultures into our classroom and that teachers are encouraging acceptance” (student 5).

Some students reflected on exactly how they were going to implement the planning ideas from the conference. A student writes, “The conference helped me think about how I want to incorporate multicultural diversity in my pre-K classroom” (student 15). Another student reflected, “The biggest take away is that there is always more I can do to include and support minorities in my classroom and beyond. I now have many ideas for my work with the orientation team at my university and I have added more strategies to my “teaching toolkit” that I will need to use with every class I teach in the future” (student 13). One of the students reflected that, “Students and teachers need to learn more about other culture/language and this can happen if friendships are built and if teachers give students more opportunities to converse” (student 6). Pre-service teachers were able to use the information they gained at the conference and think about several ways that they could play that information forward into educational settings that they were going to experience in the future.

6. The Significance of the Data

With an increasing number of learners with diverse academic needs, with diverse learning styles from diverse cultures pre-service teachers need to arrive in classrooms with cultural competency, or they will have little chance of delivering their subject matter successfully (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Results from this data are significant because the data demonstrates that even short term professional development opportunities, such as conferences, can have a substantial effect on pre-service teacher’s diversity awareness. This is especially important for pre-service teachers who are currently enrolled in teacher education programs in areas that do not afford as many opportunities for student teacher placement in diverse settings. It is also important for teacher

education programs to offer opportunities for multi-cultural training geared towards education if their current curriculum does not include a specific multi-cultural course. This study offers valuable insight about the impact conference attendance can have on notions of diversity and applying ideas gained at the conference to future classrooms. The participants of this study add to the body of knowledge in the field of pre-service preparation and multi-cultural education.

7. Conclusion

Although no single experience can transform anyone, some experiences can jolt complacent behaviors and encourage cross cultural engagements (Ladson-Billings, 2005). The goal of the conference was to help educators become more aware and prepared to recognize and address diversity in classrooms. The goal of Education department within a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania was to offer more opportunities for diversity awareness for pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers that attended the conference offered data that demonstrate the conference provided a space that did, in fact, encourage cross cultural engagement. The conference also helped the student participants understand how to wrestle and celebrate diversity in classroom settings as well as in everyday life. It is important to provide pre-service educators with experiences that talk about diversity so that they will be better equipped to deal with and appreciate the diversity of their future classroom spaces. Future research on diversity training needs to explore new teacher's experiences in diverse classrooms, student teacher's reflections about diversity, and how methods classes are helping to prepare pre-service teachers for diversity. Research could also look at conference presenter's goals for participants and if those goals were met through participant's feedback.

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