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Henry S. Williams
Central Washington University

Osman Alawiye
Central Washington University

Don Woodcock
Central Washington University

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Student Teachers' Perception of their Exposure to Special Population



Henry S. Williams, Ed.D.
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, WA



Osman Alawiye, Ph.D., J.D.
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, WA



Don Woodcock, Ph.D.
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, WA

ABSTRACT

The preparation of pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive is becoming more critical as America's P-12 minority student population continues to rapidly increase. It is generally acknowledged that the public school classroom is the place where pre-service teachers experience and acquire culturally responsive behaviors such as interdependency with in-service teachers and students, parents, administrators and stake holding associations. The most critical among these is the experience the preservice candidates receive with culturally diverse students. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which a Pacific Northwest undergraduate teacher preparation program provided its pre-service candidates work opportunities with special student populations in the program. Analyses of the study indicate that the pre-service teachers rated their experience with exceptional students high (63% for exposure with special education and 77% for experience with the highly capable). The pre-service candidates who did their student teaching in urban areas had higher exposure to students with ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds than the candidates who student taught in rural areas. No differences in exposure were found between the male and female preservice teachers.

Preparing future teachers for the rigors of teaching in our increasingly diverse school systems is a daunting task for most teacher preparation programs (Mason, 1997). As P-12 learners become more culturally diverse and their learning needs more varied, future teachers must acquire a high level of professional skills if they are to successfully meet the educational needs of all learners. To this end, teacher preparation programs are expanding field experience components (field experience) of their programs to better assist pre-service teachers in acquiring the effective practitioner knowledge and skills needed to create a positive impact on the learnings of all P-12 students (Gallego, 2001).

Anyone who has walked into a classroom knows that teaching and learning are about relationships; teacher/student relationships have profound impact on students and what they become in the future (Nieto 1991). For many teachers, creating educational relationships with students are difficult to develop when they have little or no understanding of their students' cultural frames of reference; their homes, families, or communities. Because of this difficulty, some schools and teachers have entirely discounted or ignored these cultural identities students bring into the classroom by arguing they are not related to academic achievement.

In order for institutions to produce teachers

who are both exemplary and competent facilitators of learning in a pluralistic society, the Task Force on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Education stated that an understanding and appreciation of this nation's cultural and linguistic diversity are an absolute necessity when designing research and developing policy if we are to meet the educational needs of all children (Task Force on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Education, 1993). Robert Rothman's 1992 study, based on 18 months of in-depth conversations at four Southern California schools, finds that such issues as low student achievement and problems in the teaching profession, which many reformers have focused on, are in fact symptoms of what the author sees as the real problems in school. The underlying issues of unsatisfactory relationships between students and staff members, differences of race and class, and deep concerns about school safety are the true issues that must be addressed. You can restructure until the cows come home but if relationships are wrong between teachers and students, for whatever reason, transformation won't take place (Rothman, 1992, p. 8).

As our nation becomes increasingly more diverse, what intercultural skills are needed by our future teachers? In their article, *Promoting Multicultural Education: A Holistic Approach*, Hamilton, Richardson & Shuford (1998) argue that the question is no longer whether multicultural education should be advanced, but how. Alvin M. Pettus and Violet Anselmini Allain (1999) clearly assert that future teachers must be prepared to teach students from any culture to function in diverse communities, and to promote prosperity for all citizens. These researchers contend that teachers are more likely to be effective if they are culturally responsive and maintain positive attitudes toward diverse groups.

A study conducted by Barry and Lechner, however, indicates a movement beyond awareness is necessary if teachers are to succeed in a diverse classroom. The pre-service teachers Barry and Lechner surveyed reported confidence with their awareness of the issues of multiculturalism, but lacked confidence in their ability to teach in diverse classrooms (Artiles & McClafferty, 1998). One can imagine these fu-

ture teachers thinking, "OK, you've convinced me. We need multicultural education, but how do I do it?" This report suggests that the training of attitude must be accompanied with the training of culturally responsive pedagogical behaviors, which can mostly be acquired through field experience in a multicultural classroom.

Carl A Grant (1992), states that education that prepares teachers for teaching culturally different children would, by extension, not question the dominant culture's traditional aims. Instead, emphasis should be placed on techniques for building the bridge between pupils and the institution and helping pupils adapt to the norms of society. For a teacher to be culturally responsive, Grant (1992) suggests that teachers are to be trained in "Human Relations Approach" (p.21). The HRA according to Grant, foster positive affective relationship among individual members of diverse groups. Preservice teacher preparation based on HRA prepare teachers to respect and honor diverse student backgrounds and promote understanding and harmony among students and teachers.

In *Education USA* (1992) the Indian Nation At Risk Task Force, calls for "a multicultural environment" in the classroom. To achieve this goal, schools must adjust their curriculum to serve the variety of cultures. Consequently, teachers must be trained to integrate the contemporary, historical, and cultural perspective of not only one culture, but also "give education a multicultural focus to eliminate racism and promote understanding among all races (p. 117)."

Also, Carolyn Ruck (1992) in her study about reaching out to at-risk youth, concluded that preservice and inservice teachers can learn to modify their curriculum, instructional strategies, and relationship with youths in order to meet the special educational needs of students from diverse cultural or ethnic groups. To achieve the goal of cultural responsiveness, preservice or inservice teachers should be trained on how to use community resources and agencies to support the economic and social needs of the pupils. To be culturally responsive, students from ethnic, racial or cultural populations who differ from preservice and inservice teachers have to be accommodated. Consequently,

pre-service and inservice teachers need to learn how to alter regular teaching strategies to match student learning styles and by using culturally relevant materials or remedial teaching strategies that would otherwise be used in a pullout program.

FIELD EXPERIENCE

In most, if not all, teacher education programs clinical field experiences serve as preparatory excursions into the world of the school and the classroom. These excursions may take the form of introductory Pre-Autumn Experiences, more general term long practica or content specific practica and or yearlong internships. Virtually all programs culminate in an end of program capstone, student teaching apprenticeship. Each course compliments the teaching major as well as the general education requirements for the Bachelor of Education degree required for certification.

As the demographic makeup of schools become increasingly diverse, stand alone campus-based classes, by themselves, are not enough to prepare pre-service teachers for the world they will be entering. Thus, attendant field-based clinical experiences are expected of pre-service teachers. These experiences provide guided contextualized opportunities to observe, learn, interact, strategize, reflect and practice teach as they are encouraged to develop "...dispositions, knowledge and skills that can contribute to culturally responsive teaching..." (Villegas and Lucas, 2002, p. 138).

By apprentice teaching in the public school classroom, pre-service students gain additional professional knowledge and skills in authentic learning environments. These venues, where the success of all students requires teacher responsiveness to each student's existing cultural capital, (Oakes and Lipton, 1999), provide pro-active mentor models for the facilitation of learning in a diverse world.

Some research with early field experiences implemented in a traditional fashion, indicates inconsistent outcomes. The implications of which found that early experiences that are carefully designed and monitored, have specific learner outcomes, are in authentic and varied

settings and engage pre-service teachers in the real world of the classroom have influence on future teaching and career choices (Aiken and Day, 1999). Thus it behooves any teacher preparation program to gather information regarding the perceptions its pre-service teachers have of opportunities to work with special populations in the public school settings.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It is an axiom that people learn best from what they experience (Bennie, 1982; Zahorik, 1977; Dickinson, 1992). Much learning takes place through listening and reading, but learning is likely to be more meaningful and lasting if it is supplemented with real world experiences. Sometimes these experiences can be as direct as reviewing with the master teacher the special services used throughout the school year, observing instruction at different grade levels or a list of aspects of the school's curricular and extra-curricular programs that are in direct collaboration with the community.

In light of the explosive growth of diverse populations within the State of Washington, a 228% jump in the past two decades (WA-OFM, 2000), the likelihood of teachers and preservice teachers finding their classrooms populated with an increasing number of students from special populations is great. Special population means students from ethnic, racial or cultural groups, students with different linguistic backgrounds, special education students, highly capable students, and students with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Recognizing the classroom is a place where preservice teachers experience interdependency with inservice teachers, parents, students, administrators, and stake holding associations, and considering the field experiences the preservice teachers have had, the goal of the study was to determine the extent of exposure the preservice teachers had with diversity experience in the Teacher Education Program at Central Washington University.

METHOD

In Fall 2000, 107 students were placed in the various schools to student teach. 32.7% were

male and 67.3% were female. The students were assigned to 48 different school districts that varied in terms of city type (rural or urban). We had 49.5% of the students assigned in the urban areas and 50.5% in the rural areas. In other words, we had approximately an equal representation of preservice teachers in both urban and rural areas.

The students were also equally distributed by gender into rural and urban groups. Seventeen percent and 18% of the male preservice students were respectively placed in urban and rural areas. Also, 36 percent of the female students were placed in the urban and rural areas.

The pre-service students were also assigned to a number of districts that varied in terms of diversity of population (monolithic versus diverse). Thirty nine percent and 61% were respectively placed in monolithic and diverse districts. Due to the explosion of diverse populations found within the schools in the State of Washington, the number of monolithic districts is rapidly decreasing, and placement opportunities is thus limited.

Further, students were assigned equally, by gender, to diverse and monolithic school districts. Sixty three percent of male preservice students and 60% of the female preservice students were assigned in diverse school districts, and 37% of male preservice students and 40% of the female pre-service students placed in monolithic school districts.

To establish continuity in field experience, the pre-service teachers were required to complete a period of observation within a district before starting their student teaching experience. Data analysis showed that 47% of the preservice students have completed their observation in the same school district and 53% have completed their observation in a different school district.

A week before the end of student teaching, an evaluation instrument designed by the Department of Curriculum and Supervision was administered to the preservice students. Each preservice student was asked to rate their field experiences in terms of preparation for and experience with diversity found in the schools where they had worked throughout their training. The information sheet asked respondents to rate specific areas of experience from 0 (no ex-

perience) to 5 (high experience) (See Table 1 for the list of specific areas).

Table 1: Considering all of your field experiences as a whole, please circle the extent to which you have had experience with the following. If there was no opportunity circle 0. Low is indicated by 1 and high is indicated by 5.

	NONE	LOW	HIGH			
A. Students from ethnic, racial or cultural population/s who differ from the student teacher	0	1	2	3	4	5
B. Students with linguistic backgrounds different from the student teacher	0	1	2	3	4	5
C. Special education students	0	1	2	3	4	5
D. Highly capable students	0	1	2	3	4	5
E. Students with diverse socio-economic backgrounds	0	1	2	3	4	5

Data from the completed evaluation instrument were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Chi Square, which is a nonparametric test, was used to compare frequencies occurring in the different categories, and to determine if there are significant differences (at the .05 level of significance) between preservice students in the monolithic and diverse groups.

RESULTS

It was not possible to statistically analyze the first two areas due to low counts within cells. It was found in the areas of Special Education and highly capable, the students rated their experience as high (circling 3, 4, or 5) significantly more often than they rated it low (circling 0, 1, or 2). The data analysis showed that 63% of the preservice students rated their experience as high in working with Special Education students. Also, 77% of the pre-service students rated their experience high in working with highly capable students. Furthermore, these statistical results are true across gender; there was no significant difference between how males and females responded in these areas (no analysis available for diverse socio-economic backgrounds due to low counts within cells).

Results were further analyzed with regards to how the preservice students responded to ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds

from rural districts as opposed to those from urban districts. Students' responses were significantly different on these questions. Fifty eight percent of the preservice students from urban districts rated their experience significantly higher than students from rural districts, which was 42%. Students' responses were not significantly different on the questions regarding special education or highly capable students. This maybe the result of demographic and geographic population numbers. With significantly larger pupil populations found in urban areas, combined with the State of Washington's practice of mainstreaming identified Special Education pupils, pre-service teachers were more likely to have significant experiences with this population in urban rather than rural settings. Further, with a de-emphasis on identifying and servicing talented and gifted pupils, coupled with limited funding for instruction of this population, the likelihood of pre-service teachers even knowing they were working with this targeted group is in question.

With regards to students' responses from monolithic districts as opposed to those from urban districts, similar results were found. Students' responses were significantly different on the questions regarding ethnic background and linguistic. Responses from students placed in diverse districts rated their experience, on average, significantly higher than students from monolithic districts. Students' responses were not significantly different on the questions regarding special education or highly capable students and no analysis could be completed on socio-economic background due to low counts within cells.

DISCUSSION

The increased number of diverse student populations in our public schools is raising questions about the quality of diversity training received by pre-service teachers. According to a 1998 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, as few as 20% of the respondent teachers reported feeling they had been very well prepared to meet the needs of culturally diverse or limited English proficient students. In the same survey only 21% felt they were very well

prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities. Implicit to the consideration of teachers' feelings about their preparedness to deal with these populations was that these feelings were deemed an "important indicator of the extent to which teachers' training has prepared them to meet the challenges that characterize their profession. (p. 57)"

Preparedness to meet the needs of diverse populations, as measured by the field experience survey administered, seems to indicate that field based experiences with these populations, especially in rural settings was limited, prior to student teaching and initial entry into the profession. Though traditional college classroom settings may provide the pre-service teacher with a theoretical framework for working with pupils from diverse backgrounds, as Oakes & Lipton (1999) note, "People cannot separate how thinking takes place from what knowledge is available in the place where learning happens" (Oakes & Lipton, 1999. p. 77). For the pre-service teacher to become an effective facilitator of learning in a diverse society, they must throughout their preparatory experience, be provided opportunities to bridge theory and practice in real world settings which reflect the diversity they will find and where formal instruction takes place. "...students can reach society's highest standards for knowledge and skills only when schools allow them to use all the knowledge (from all cultures) they have experienced" (Oakes & Lipton, 1999. p. 77). Failure to be provided with or take advantage of classroom based field experiences where diverse populations are found, short changes the pre-service teacher, the students they will eventually be expected to teach, and society as a whole.

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Dr. Henry S. Williams is a professor of education in the Department of Curriculum & Supervision at Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington 98926. Email: williamh@cwu.edu

Dr. Osman Alawiye is a professor of education in the Department of Curriculum & Supervision at Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington 98926

Dr. Don Woodcock is an associate professor of education in the Department of Curriculum & Supervision at Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington 98926. He is also a member of the consulting editorial board for this journal.

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