

January 2010

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Recommended Citation

Jung, Eunjoo, "How field experiences prepare future teachers" (2010). *College Research Center*. 24.
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How Field Experiences Prepare Future Teachers

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the current research in a field of teacher candidate training: how field experiences address diversity issues with teacher candidates, and if the field experiences support future teachers' understanding and growth in the ever-changing field. The review indicates that field experiences prepare future teachers for diversity in three areas: perceptions of diversity, beliefs and attitudes about diversity, and their actual learning about diversity. Based upon the findings, implications for teacher educators and policy makers are discussed.

Introduction

The current arena of education is represented by diverse and dynamic students of different ethnic backgrounds, learning preferences, socio-economic status, stages of emotional development, cultures, and special needs (Pluviose, 2006). All people are diverse with varying characteristics. Diversity is not a topic or issue that belongs to "someone else", nor is it a place that exists where one can visit. All people live in diverse environments and experience a range of different issues. Teachers / educators have responded to this reality in a variety of ways (Cruz-Janzen, 2000; Cushner, 1998). One way has been to modify the field experience model for teacher candidates. Many teacher education programs have initiated the inclusion of field experiences into their curriculum, in order to prepare teacher candidates for educating diverse classrooms. Yet, the debate continues regarding the adequacy of preparation of teacher candidates by teacher educators for the challenges of meeting diversity in the nation (e.g., Mark & Hicks-Townes, 2006; Schultz, 2001).

Future teachers often feel uncomfortable with learners' different cultural and ethnic characteristics, behaviors, customs, practices, and attitudes (Mannings, 1999; Salinas, 2002). Often, they are overwhelmed by their upcoming tasks, or tend to teach as they themselves were taught, and according to their own experiences (Knowles, 1992). Their interactions are frequently based upon existing assumptions and beliefs (Boyer, 1988; Irvin, 2003). Since many future teachers in the field are evaluated mainly with the focus of required behaviors as suggested by supervisors (Darling-Hammond, 1992), their behaviors may reflect the evaluative criteria, but not their inner thoughts or attitudes. Therefore, the involvement of in-the-field experience in diverse settings would not necessarily support teacher candidates' transition into the real field if existing assumptions or attitudes were maintained. According to Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1991), many teacher candidates who participated in field experiences left in frustration, and accommodated existing institutional conditions without attempting to make significant changes in themselves, or influence the situations around them. Sergiovanni (1984) also reported that behaviors found to be effective in a learning environment may be counterproductive or might not be transferrable when used in different circumstances.

If more attention is not given to the challenges of diversity that future teachers will be facing, the intention of field experience which is "to begin apprenticeship in teaching" (Carter & Anders, 1996, p. 569) might not be successful in this consideration (Hawley,

1990; Metcalf, 1995). When teachers are not prepared for the reality that they will meet, that could lead to the lack of competence in making a myriad of decisions, and in interactions with the diverse learners (Breault, 2004; Mannings, 1999). In that regard, there is a clear need for teacher education programs to actively seek ways to prepare future teachers to meet the diverse needs of the learners (Sleeter, 2008). Teacher educators need to examine how, and in what way future teachers are challenged and effectively learn in the diverse educational settings.

The purpose of this study is to provide a review of the current state of research how field experiences address the diversity issues with teacher candidates and if/how they support future teachers' understanding and growth in the ever changing field. We first provide the procedures of the review process. Secondly, we delineate our findings of the existing literature on teacher candidates in the diverse educational field. Finally, we provide a summary and implications for the teacher educators and policy makers.

Methods

In order to locate the relevant studies in diversity education through field experiences, the researcher conducted a search in PsycINFO; ERIC, Education Full Text, and EBSCO academic databases. Searches were conducted using terms such as "diversity," "education", "teacher", "programs", "activities", "field experience", "preservice", "instruction", "teaching" "multicultural", and "training". Then the terms were combined in an advanced search with the following: "diversity education", preservice education", "diversity programs", "diversity activities", "field experience and diversity", "multicultural education", "multicultural training and teachers", "field experience and education". Criteria were set for the type of articles from databases would be highlighted for further review, and consideration for inclusion in the literature review. Only articles that reported diversity education using quantitative data, experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and qualitative studies were included. Therefore, literature reviews and anecdotal articles were excluded. Only articles published from 2000 until April of 2009 were included. In addition, articles were excluded for the following reasons: if not pertaining to research conducted in the United States, were not peer reviewed, and were not related to teacher education (i.e. teaching diversity for medical students). In the execution of this process, the number of articles that met our criteria was a total of 14. The list for inclusion was finalized via reaching a 100 percent inter-rater agreement with the research assistant regarding the literature and criteria for inclusion.

Results

A review of the eligible studies indicated that field experiences prepare future teachers for diversity in three areas: perceptions of diversity, beliefs and attitudes about diversity, and their actual learning about diversity.

Perceptions toward Diversity

A body of research addressed the perceptions of teacher candidates involved in field experiences. The first study of interest focused on the change of perception toward diversity after involvement in field experiences. Almarza (2005) reported that student perceptions about their preparation to teach in a diverse classroom were challenged after participating in a field experience program. The research study included 240 teacher candidates and addressed their reflections qualitatively before and after participating in an immersion course, where the teachers were to shadow a student from a diverse background. The teacher candidates believed that after completing two multicultural courses they could translate their learning to the classroom. However, after completing the field immersion course, the teacher candidate's perceptions were changed in that

they acknowledged the course was beneficial in preparing them for teaching to a diverse population. Therefore, this demonstrates the importance of relating theory to practice, because teaching about diversity alone does not prepare teacher candidates for the reality of a diverse classroom. Thus, field experiences in diverse settings are imperative for training future teachers. This particular study highlighted the importance of field experiences for the teacher candidates.

The second study addressed the changes in perceptions of teacher candidates acquired as a result of their experiences. As teacher candidates learn about diversity in the classroom they might have brought negative perceptions of teaching in an environment that is unlike what they have experienced in the past. Wiggins, Folloa, and Eberly (2007) studied the responses of 47 teacher candidates, and 15 substitute teachers, who were given a pretest and posttest Likert scale to address the teacher candidates' perceptions of teaching in a diverse classroom and using the permanent substitute teachers as the control. The data indicated that teacher candidates having more experience with teaching in diverse settings can change their perception of their ability to teach to diverse classrooms. The study found that teacher candidates who completed a field experience and had sufficient time to reflect upon that experience reported that they perceived themselves as being more able to provide a positive classroom experience in a culturally diverse setting.

Gronlx (2001) qualitatively assessed the perceptions of 41 teacher candidates about urban schools before student teaching, and then again, after completion of teaching experience in four schools. Results indicate that teacher candidates changed their interest and comfort level positively for teaching in an African American school, and decreased their interest and comfort level for teaching in a private school. Hence, initially the candidates had negative perceptions about teaching in an African American school, including issues related to safety, parental involvement, student discipline. Whereas initially it was perceived that the private school students would be well behaved, eager to learn, and parental support would be high. After completing the field experiences, the perceptions were quite changed and teacher candidates became more comfortable and more interested in the African American schools. Results of this study suggest that simply exposing teacher candidates to a diverse classroom can remove stereotypes and positively change their perceptions about teaching to diverse learners.

Thompson and Smith (2005) also found that the perceptions of teacher candidates regarding teaching in a diverse setting were changed after completing an internship in an urban classroom. The study included 27 teacher candidates who answered both pretest and posttest questionnaires with Likert scales, and open responses and taped group discussions. The teachers reported the most beneficial component of the program was the time spent in the classroom and they learned a lot about the culture of the students, and how to teach to a variety of learners in the classroom. It appeared that the teacher candidates were able to learn a lot about the urban culture from the internship, but the positive reports were more in emphasis of the importance of learning from being in the environment, and applying skills with feedback from the mentor teachers in the classroom. Overall, the teacher candidate reports were in support of using a field experience in order to enhance the skills needed to be an effective teacher.

Lastly, Kidd, Sánchez, and Thorp (2008) found that for 19 teacher candidates, their perceptions about the most beneficial experiences in their program included both participating in a diverse internship and contact with diverse families. The teacher candidates were enrolled in a course that both taught about preschool education, but also included an internship in a diverse preschool. They qualitatively assessed teachers, citing the experiences that they felt contributed to the development of culturally-responsive dispositions and teaching practices, and asked how the teacher candidates perceived the experiences, and did they interact with each other to influence the development of culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices? Therefore, as noted above, the teacher candidates believed that in order to be an effective teacher, exposure to diverse populations was important.

Beliefs and Attitudes toward Diversity

In addition to field experiences changing teacher candidate perceptions, they also influence beliefs and attitudes toward diverse settings. Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2006) showed that teacher candidates' beliefs about classroom diversity became more positive after involvement in a diversity seminar and practicum. Their participants were 92 white teacher candidates who were given a Likert scale before and after a practicum in a diverse setting. Beliefs had changed in reference to becoming more sensitive to cultural differences. These results suggest that the teacher candidates would be better prepared if training for cultural sensitivity is part of the curriculum.

Cicchelli and Cho (2007) studied 61 teacher candidates in a four-year program, who were given a pretest in the first semester of the program and a posttest at in the last semester of the fourth year of the program. The program both provides coursework and field experience related to multiculturalism. They found that the white students in the program had significant positive gains in their attitudes about teaching to diversity. However, the students from diverse cultural backgrounds did not have significant changes in their attitudes. The teacher candidates of diverse backgrounds, being raised in may already possess more stable attitudes about diversity. This study showed that programs that emphasize multicultural teaching both through coursework and field experience can affect the beliefs of students about diversity.

Furthermore, Flores (2007) surveyed 102 former teacher candidates about a service-learning program that included multicultural education. They found that the teacher candidates participating in the service-learning program were positively impacted on their beliefs and attitudes regarding diverse students, analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Therefore, programs that incorporate multicultural education into their framework better prepare teacher candidates for effective teaching in their classrooms. Results of this study indicate the value and utility of programs committed to teaching diversity awareness.

However, Kyles and Olafson (2008) suggest that although they found that 15 teacher candidates changed their beliefs about cultural diversity during a diversity practicum experience, there is still a need for more than one limited experience in a diverse setting to effective teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. From this study, we can postulate that the more experience a teacher candidate has with diversity, the more s/he will begin to change their beliefs about teaching in a culturally diverse setting.

Learning about Diversity

Research suggests that field experiences can also result in teacher candidate's learning about diversity. Field experiences have value in that they can impact learning about diversity in the following ways: learning to focus on teacher attitudes and beliefs about diversity, learning to use culturally-responsive teaching approaches in their content areas, and learning to understand that students are connected to a complex social and cultural network (Barnes, 2006). Hence, field experience with 24 teacher candidates was capable of changing their learning process with regard to diversity in the classroom as measured by reflections, discussions and inventories. By being immersed in diverse classrooms, the teachers were better able to learn about how to be more culturally sensitive. This study demonstrated the importance of teaching diversity through field experience models.

Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisill (2007) found from reflections and interviews of 41 teacher candidates that they learned to question their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching diverse students. The study found many of the teacher candidates held beliefs that diverse students were unmotivated and do not like school. However, after the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs through field experiences, the teachers were able to learn to change these assumptions. Therefore, field experiences can possibly help student teachers to learn more about their own biases, and learn to change them for the betterment of their teaching.

In addition, Bell, Horn, and Roxas (2007) showed that teacher candidates with the opportunity to participate in a mentoring service-learning program developed a better understanding of diversity than teacher candidates in a tutoring service-learning program. So, the teacher candidates that acted as mentors to these students had more of an opportunity to see the students in multiple contexts, by doing activities that are not as traditionally power related. Therefore, it is suggested that not only having a field experience is essential, but the type and quality of that experience is significant in the power to help teacher candidates learn about diversity.

Likewise, Phillion (2005) studied 76 teacher candidates enrolled in a virtual field experience course. The course connected the college classroom to a diverse classroom over the internet, where the teacher candidates were able to assist in lesson plans and activities for the diverse classroom. Journals, portfolios, and surveys were analyzed and revealed that the students learned about their own expectations and stereotypes regarding diverse learners and felt more capable to teach and understand diverse learners. This demonstrates that even though the students were not able to be physically present in the classroom, just being a part of planning and observing a diverse classroom can have an impact on a teacher candidate's learning about diversity in the classroom.

Although there is research in favor of field experiences enhancing learning about diversity, Downey and Cobbs (2007) found after 98 teacher candidates participated in a structured field experience, the teacher candidates acquired little new understanding of the learning needs of diverse children. Again this highlights the need for a variety of structured experiences in the field, with more than one opportunity with culturally diverse classrooms to promote or change a student's understanding or perceptions about the specific needs of these environments.

Discussion

We approached the task of review in a way that would create a balanced examination of the data in the field and a clear interpretation of the available research for policy makers and researchers interested in the relationship between field experiences and teacher candidate learning and perceptions of diversity. We found three important themes in the leading research: perceptions of diversity, beliefs and attitudes about diversity, and actual learning about diversity.

In relation to the perceptions of teacher candidates, it was found that students having experiences with teaching in diverse settings could change their perception of their ability to teach to diverse classrooms. Interestingly, even simply exposing teacher candidates to a diverse classroom could positively change their perceptions about teaching to diverse learners. In relation to beliefs and attitudes toward diversity, it was found that teacher candidates' beliefs about classroom diversity became more positive after involvement in a diversity seminar, practicum, course work, and field experiences. The review also highlighted the importance of the service-learning program in shaping teacher candidates' positive beliefs and attitudes regarding diverse students. In relation to learning about diversity, it also showed the importance of teaching diversity through field experience models. Overall, it was suggested that field experiences can possibly help teacher candidates to learn more about their own biases, and learn to overcome biases for the betterment of their teaching. Learning about diversity means learning about oneself as a life-long endeavor in the context of all people from the past, in the present, and into the future. Diversity does not occur at isolated times.

Overall, teacher candidates surveyed or assessed in the studies were in support of using a field experience in order to learn the skills needed to be an effective teacher. Teacher candidates indeed changed their perceptions through participating in a diversity internship and having contact with diverse families and learners. In addition, programs

that incorporate diversity education into their framework better prepared teacher candidates for effective teaching in their classrooms. From these overall results, we can postulate that the more experience a student has with diversity, the more the student will have acceptance and interest in teaching in a culturally diverse setting. The study results indicate that there is still a need for more than one limited experience in a diverse setting to change perceptions or beliefs about teaching to a culturally diverse classroom. It is important to note that not just having a field experience is essential, but the type and quality of that experience is significant in the power to help teacher candidates learn about diversity.

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