ABSTRACT

This study explored the use of virtual world role-play activities to increase pre-service teachers’ sense of teaching efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion. These constructs are also important for teacher identity development since they influence teacher dispositions, effort, professional development and beliefs in intrinsic obligations. The activity was embedded in an undergraduate course for first-year Education majors that focused on supporting diverse learners. Pre-service teachers played the roles of various diverse learners including students with physical, behavioral, socio-economic, emotional and mental challenges. Data were collected at three points during the semester in order to assess changes in efficacy and attitudes. Open ended questions also provided insight into the experience of identity experimentation. Results suggest that perspective taking activities using virtual worlds can provide powerful experiences to support identity development.

Keywords: Avatars, Diverse Learners, Identity, Inclusion, Pre-Service Teacher Preparation, Role-Play, Teaching Efficacy, Virtual Worlds

LITERATURE REVIEW

The classroom has been described as “perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (Shulman, 2004, p. 504). Preparing new teachers for this new role is multifaceted and should focus on the identity development of future teachers. Teacher preparation programs must not only prepare new teachers to be competent in knowledge domains but also must feel confident in transferring this knowledge, as well as teaching skills, to the realities of a dynamic classroom. It is essential that these teaching skills include the ability of new teachers to adequately manage a classroom. This includes eliciting student cooperation while also decreasing disruptive behavior and effectively handling misbehavior when it occurs (Brophy, 1988). In order to serve the needs of their students, teachers must also have positive attitudes toward inclusion, the right of all children regardless of their disabilities to participate actively in a natural setting within their school, and the ability to create supportive learning environments within the general education setting (King, 2003).

Research has identified two main constructs that are important to the development of teacher identity and the success of teachers; teaching
efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion. These two constructs are related to teacher identity since “the identities that teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role” (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 384). Ideally, future teachers will be prepared to understand and respect the diversity of their students and create a classroom climate that is supportive of their needs.

Findings suggest that teachers’ perceptions of their professional self-efficacy have a significant effect on the nature and quality of their work and subsequently on the educational success of their students. Teacher efficacy is an important educational variable that can facilitate enhanced school experiences for teachers and students by accounting for differences in teacher effort, preference for particular discipline strategies, and choice of instructional goals (Emmer & Hickman, 1991; Rich, Lev, & Fischer, 1996). Finally, research suggests that teachers’ efficacy beliefs are related to students’ achievement, motivation and students’ own sense of efficacy (Leyser, Zeiger, & Romi, 2011; Tschannen-Morana & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

Teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion are also important because they impact the way that teachers respond to students with disabilities and their acceptance of inclusion practices (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Valletutti, 1969). Attitudes include the comfort level felt when interacting with a disabled person, acceptance of learners with different needs and concerns about implementing inclusion (Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011). Based on the literature, preparing teachers to deal with the challenges of inclusion is critical to developing positive teacher attitudes (Ernst, 2006).

Current attrition rates of new teachers and research suggests that teacher preparation programs are not doing enough to adequately prepare new teachers in the area of classroom management and inclusion. These programs have been criticized for placing too much emphasis on curriculum and not providing enough opportunity for future teachers to develop practical skills in supporting diverse students (Carroll et al. 2003). Even though teacher preparation programs include field-placements to provide practice in real classrooms, these experiences vary in quality. One reason for this inconsistency involves the controversy surrounding the removal of the experienced teacher from the active teaching role in order to allow novice pre-service teachers the ability to lead the instruction (Dieker, Hynes, Hughes & Smith, 2008). The concern is that the quality of instruction provided by the pre-service teacher will be inferior to that of the experienced teacher and may hinder student learning. In addition, the main teacher may not allow the pre-service teacher to take on the primary role in the classroom since the main teachers is still ultimately responsible for the students’ success. Finally, field placements may only expose pre-service teachers to a small sample of the many diverse learners that they might encounter as a new teacher in their own classrooms (Periathiruvadi & Tyler-Wood, 2010).

In an effort to bridge curriculum content and real world application, teacher preparation programs have investigated the incorporation of various mastery experiences (Lancaster & Bain, 2007). Several technology-mediated simulations and role-plays have also been developed (Andreasen & Haciomeroglu, 2009; Christensen, Knezek, Tyler-wood, & Gibson, 2011; Ferry & Kervin, 2007; Girod & Girod, 2008; Gregory et al., 2011; Mahon et al., 2010). These programs are designed to provide ill-structured authentic tasks in order to provide learners with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and apply it to real-world contexts (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). These technology facilitated experiences are similar to practice fields (Senge, as cited in Duffy & Barab, 1998) in that they provide a safe place to make mistakes and practice skills but also support enculturation into a community of practice (Wenger, 1999).

These technology-mediated experiences can be categorized as “epistemic games” (Shafer, 2005) since learners develop the knowledge, skills and abilities of a practitioner in a professional domain. Identity formation results from
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