Chapter 11

Fostering Diverse Praxis: Pre-service Teachers’ Perceptions of Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to describe a partnership between a local university and a summer academy that provided a space for pre-service teachers (teacher candidates) to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Teacher candidates in a literacy assessment course assessed and tutored students in this summer academy. The chapter describes the tutoring program and the pre-service teachers’ response to a teaching efficacy survey based on the work with students. Findings indicate that after the tutoring experience, teacher candidates felt more competent to engage students and to use literacy strategies with the students.

The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking. --Albert Einstein

BACKGROUND

Preparing educators to meet the needs of all students has been receiving attention in the media for good reason (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCATE, 2010). According to multiple census projections, the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in public schools is going to increase exponentially in some states over the next decade. For example, in the southeastern United States, the number of students
projected to be from families whose primary language is not English and who will be free and reduced lunch eligible is going to quadruple by the year 2020 (www.census.gov). There has been well-documented concern that teacher education programs are not adequately preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of diverse students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Delpit, 2006, 2013). In response to these needs, many teacher educators are working to ensure that pre-service teachers are able to support students with diverse learning needs.

Meaningful field experiences are fundamental in enhancing teaching practice for pre-service teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). With the student population becoming more diverse, one major challenge teacher preparation programs are facing is adequately preparing pre-service teachers to meet the learning needs of students from diverse populations, particularly issues related to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. Hart (2004) suggested that teacher beliefs are a critical tool in teacher preparation and failure to attend to teacher beliefs may hinder the acquisition of professional knowledge necessary for becoming an effective teacher. Research suggests a teacher’s belief in his or her ability to work with students from diverse populations predicts his or her attitude and willingness to work in a diverse setting (Lifshitz, Glaubman, & Issawi, 2004). When a teacher has a stronger sense of personal efficacy it is an indicator of a more positive attitude towards students from diverse backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Therefore, it is essential that teacher preparation programs create meaningful field experiences that allow pre-service teachers to work with diverse student populations and apply content knowledge and instructional strategies to meet their needs.

Additionally, the researchers understand the importance of cultivating social justice teaching in today’s teaching climate. Ritchie (2012) posits that “rather than being a vehicle that leads to democratic citizenry, fostering community participation and preparing students for rich and rewarding personal lives and high levels of understanding, education has increasingly become more technical and instrumental” (p. 120). The researchers felt strongly that placing pre-service teachers in an environment where they could engage in mentoring students from low socio-economic backgrounds and partnering with an organization focused on social work and community engagement would contribute to their understanding of the needs of children (Ritchie, 2012; Cochran-Smith, 2004). The “varying modes of teacher preparation” described by Ritchie are precisely the type of preparation this field experience was designed to provide (p. 120). The sense of efficacy, improved after the field experience, allowed our candidates to feel increased confidence in their abilities to work with diverse populations; we hope that they will also practice more critically and with a social justice lens after working with students from the Fast Start Academy (Sleeter, 2009).

In our institution, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on pre-service co-teaching (Strieker et. al., 2015). The focus on clinical experience is critical; yet we wonder if as much emphasis is being placed on initial field experiences occurring prior to student teaching. We want our candidates to enter the teaching field prepared to do the work necessary to transform students’ lives (Ritchie, 2012). We asked ourselves, what do those field experiences need to look like? We designed this field experience and the accompanying study hoping to answer some of those questions.

Definitions

While the literature reviewed for this article and the knowledge base of the researchers is most closely aligned to culturally relevant pedagogy (Sleeter, 2001; Su, 1996; Su, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; King, 1991),
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