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Pre-Service Teachers' Multicultural Competence: Is It just about Course Attendance?

With multicultural classrooms currently forming the norm in most Western World societies, teacher training departments are constantly challenged to produce multiculturally competent educators (Chiu et al., 2017). So far, studies examining pre-service teachers' multicultural competence have been focusing predominantly on the effect of diversity-related course attendance during teacher training (Seidl et al., 2015). But are these studies drawing the whole picture?

According to a recent qualitative study, the concept of 'accumulated experiences', understood as the cumulative impact of prior and present experiences and personal dispositions, across formal and informal educational spaces along time, was suggested as a better analytical lens for the examination of multicultural competence development (Parkhouse et al., 2016: 280). Taking this as my starting point, I decided to empirically test the validity of the aforementioned argument through a small sample quantitative study. Rather than focusing solely on the institutional context, this study examined the effect of a range of learning contexts and individual experiences, which are not usually brought together in one methodological framework (Hull & Schultz, 2001). More specifically, the present study drew on existing literature (see Sotriopoulou, 2017) to examine the extent to which gender, place of residence, socioeconomic status, attachment to national homogeneity, diversity encounters, studying-abroad experience, as well as perceived inclusion of diversity in teaching practice during teacher training, affect pre-service teachers' multicultural competence.

Research was carried out in Greece in June 2016. Fifty student-teachers in their final year of undergraduate studies in Primary Education formed the sample and data was collected through self-completed questionnaires.

Multiple regression analysis showed that gender, place of residence, socioeconomic status, attachment to national homogeneity, diversity encounters, studying-abroad experience, as well as perceived inclusion of diversity in teaching practice during teacher training, account for nearly 42% of the variance in multicultural competence. Among the predictors, only socioeconomic status, attachment to national homogeneity, studying abroad and inclusion of diversity in teaching practice were found to be statistically significant. More specifically, having experience of studying abroad had the highest impact on multicultural competence score, increasing it by 2.261 units. Perceived inclusion of diversity in the teaching practice experience also boosted students' scores in multicultural competence. On the contrary, higher socio-economic status and stronger attachment to national homogeneity, understood as abiding to a common language, religion and traditions, were found to negatively influence multicultural competence.

Highlighting the interrelation between subjectivities, learning spaces and the delivery and consumption of formal and informal curricula in multicultural competence development, this study fits with the ongoing attempt 'to grow a bigger entanglement [...] around ways of thinking and doing space, place and social justice in the broad field of education' (Bright, Manchester & Allendyke, 2013: 747). Despite its limited sample size and single institutional background focus, this study's findings point at the added value of factors other than diversity-related course attendance to the examination of pre-service teachers' multicultural competence. Formal education has the potential to ameliorate multicultural competence in more ways than diversity-related courses' addition to the teacher training curriculum, with the engagement of students in studying abroad experiences, the facilitation of critical reflexive engagement with the processes of (re)production of national imaginaries of homogeneity and the inclusion of diversity as a fundamental component of the teaching practice being some indicative suggestions based on the study's findings.

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