

personal understanding of culture, and (c) identify underlying themes that emerged through the service experience.

8. THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN DEVELOPING THE CULTURAL SENSITIVITY OF PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION CANDIDATES

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The authors used school-based and peer collaboration activities to develop the cultural sensitivity of teacher candidates preparing to work with students with mild to moderate disabilities. They examined data from fieldwork observation and peer coaching notes. The participants are four females (three Euro-American and one African-American) and one male (Euro-American). During school-based collaboration activities, participants worked with public school educators who provided special, general, and bilingual education for ethnically and economically diverse students. During peer collaboration activities, participants engaged in peer coaching with one another regarding their school-based experiences. The

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first author and candidates jointly examined the data from each participant's case study and determined that, though collaborative activities contribute to the development of cultural sensitivity, no single collaborative activity is sufficient. The most useful collaboration activities for fostering cultural sensitivity are field-based peer-to-peer activities.

One reason to continually examine how well preservice programs prepare special educators to teach in a multicultural society is the continuing record of poor academic and postsecondary outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners who are from families of limited economic resources (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). In addition, disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education continues to exist (Skiba et al., 2008). It is logical to assume that preservice teacher preparation that provides candidates with the knowledge and skills to successfully teach CLD students will result in improved academic and postsecondary outcomes for each and every student. This paper discusses how a preservice integrated master's degree and mild/moderate special education credential program prepares candidates for a multicultural society by including program candidates in a critical examination of their collaboration experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is drawn from two strands in the literature: (a) what is known about preparing educators, particularly preservice special educators, about culturally responsive educational services for CLD students; and (b) how the practice of collaboration suggests an approach to the development of cultural sensitivity especially when culture is defined broadly as "an organized set of thoughts, beliefs, and norms for interaction and communication, all of which may influence cognitions, behaviors, and perceptions" (Ingraham, 2000, p. 325).

Culturally Responsive Teacher Education

As discussed by Trent and his colleagues (2008), diversity standards for teacher education programs became common in the mid-1970s. Scholars have described types of teacher preparation programs and approaches to develop multicultural competence. There have been only a handful of special education scholars who have conducted studies related to multicultural education. Without attempting to be inclusive of all research reviewed by Trent et al.,

(2008), the findings relevant to this paper were: (a) multicultural education should be addressed at the course, fieldwork, and programmatic levels; (b) inquiry-based approaches should be used to help preservice educators transform theory into practice; (c) studies should clarify the contextual factors within teacher preparation programs under examination; and (d) the definition of culture should be broadened to include characteristics other than race (e.g., disabilities). In keeping with these recommendations, the exploration described in this paper uses qualitative methods to understand the experiences of preservice teacher candidates and focuses the unit of analysis, not upon a single course, but upon a method used across the entire program–collaboration.

Collaboration

The development of educational consultation and collaboration skills among special educators in preparation programs has been ongoing since the mid-1970s (Heron & Harris, 2001). In her review of the literature, Harris (1991) identified the following as essential competencies for educators collaborating to provide services for CLD students with special needs: (a) understand one's culture and its relationship to other cultures; (b) understand the role of collaborators; and (c) use effective interpersonal, communicative, and problem-solving skills. Specific interpersonal and communication skills include the following: (a) respect individuals from other cultures; (b) identify the needed multicultural knowledge base; (c) work effectively with an interpreter or translator; (d) acknowledge cultural differences in communication and relationship building; and (e) ensure that problem identification does not conflict with cultural beliefs (Harris, 1996).

Program

The program has two strands: an autism strand and a school-based strand. Each strand can be completed in one year. Candidates also have the option of completing both strands

simultaneously in one year as full-time graduate students. Across the strands, there are four themes: multicultural education, collaboration, autism, and family perspectives. This paper focuses on how the theme of multicultural education is developed through the use of collaboration in the school-based strand. Throughout all three quarters, all candidates are working in schools within a 35-mile radius of the university. Candidates who do not have another teaching credential (e.g., elementary or secondary teaching) are placed in schools that have at least 10% English learners.

Multicultural Content

Based on the characteristics of teacher preparation programs for culturally responsive instruction (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Trent et al., 2008), the program that is the focus of this paper uses an integrated approach, offering a stand-alone course in multicultural education as well as infused multicultural content throughout coursework and fieldwork.

Prior to starting the program, candidates must successfully complete three courses: (a) a course in characteristics of students with special needs; (b) a course in lesson planning and classroom management; and (c) a course in teaching reading and language arts. Each of these courses has a fieldwork component. Goals of multicultural education are presented in these courses and include the following: (a) recognizing and prizing diversity; (b) developing greater understanding of other cultural patterns; (c) respecting individuals of all cultures; and (d) developing positive and productive interaction among people and among experiences of diverse cultural groups (Davidman & Davidman, 2006).

In the first (fall) quarter, candidates take the stand-alone course in multicultural education. Candidates also visit special education programs in schools with at least 10% English learners. These programs represent a variety of grade levels and service delivery options (i.e., resource programs where students receive special education services less than 50% of the day; and special day class programs where students receive special education services more than 50% of the day). In addition, candidates work with a

special education mentor teacher in the area of assessment one-half day a week (candidates remain with this mentor teacher throughout the academic year). In the second (winter) quarter, candidates work two full days a week in their school-based placement. Candidates teach students with mild/moderate disabilities using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP; Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008), to guide lesson design and implementation. During the third (spring) quarter, candidates complete their student teaching experience. Candidates are supported by their mentor teachers and university supervisors to develop competence across several domains including "Commitment to Diversity." The candidates are reviewed, in collaboration with their mentor teacher and university supervisor, at the conclusion of winter and spring quarters with regard to the following elements under this domain: (a) demonstrates behaviors that exemplify recognition and promotion of diverse opinions and perspectives of individuals and groups; (b) provides multiple learning opportunities and diverse teaching strategies that demonstrate belief that all students can learn; (c) demonstrates an understanding of one's own privileges and prejudices, the stereotypes that are hidden in textbooks and other classroom materials, and the cultural bias that is a feature of assessment; (d) demonstrates an understanding of the harmful effects of racism and prejudice on human development and develops cross-cultural communication strategies to reduce effects; and (e) demonstrates compassion for those experiencing difficulty.

Collaboration Content

Collaboration is widely considered to be a critical element of successful partnerships and is believed to improve schooling through mentor-trainee linkages. Individuals engaged in collaboration, "are considered harmonious and interconnected bodies where all partners are involved in rich, intense, and stimulating exchanges with one another" (Kuter & Koc, 2009, p. 415). The program develops collaboration knowledge and skills through an integrated approach. Two courses emphasize the collaborative role of the special educator and collaboration is

infused throughout coursework and fieldwork. Mentoring relationships between public school special educators and preservice teacher candidates are established and candidates are engaged as a cohort in collaborative activities in program courses. As reported by Dinsmore and Wenger (2006), research indicates that using a cohort structure can support the development of a sense of community which enhances learning in teacher preparation programs and helps to foster skills such as collaboration and teamwork. Brownell, Ross, Colon, and McCallum (2005) found that more than a third of the special education teacher preparation programs they reviewed organized students into cohort groups to develop collaboration skills. The Posture of Cultural Reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) is used in the program as a framework for collaboration. The following steps comprise this approach (Kalyanpur & Harry):

Step 1: Identify the cultural values that are embedded in the professional interpretation of a student's difficulties or in the recommendation for service.

Step 2: Find out whether the family being served recognizes and values these assumptions and, if not, how their view differs from that of the professional.

Step 3: Acknowledge and give explicit respect to any cultural differences identified, and fully explain the cultural basis of the professional assumptions.

Step 4: Through discussion and collaboration, set about determining the most effective way of adapting professional interpretations or recommendations to the value system of the family (p. 118-119).

Demographics

The program is delivered at a public university that is located in a rural and semi-urban area on the west coast of the United States. The university is primarily an undergraduate institution with a small (10 full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty) School of Education Graduate Program. There are approximately 260,000 residents of the county where the university is located. The racial make up of the county is 73% Euro-American; 19% Hispanic

or Latino; 3% Asian; 2% African American; 1% Native American; and 2% from two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Method

Participants

The program is run by two full-time faculty members (the first and last authors): one female, one male, both Euro-American and both over 50 years of age. Approximately 20 candidates are admitted as a cohort once a year. The current cohort is composed of 18 full-time candidates and one part-time candidate, (the part-time candidate is currently completing only the autism strand). Seventeen of the 18 full-time candidates in the school-based strand are Euro-American. Seventeen are female and one of these females is African-American. The male candidate and two of the female Euro-American candidates are in their 30s. The rest of the candidates are in their 20's. The male candidate is single and 12 of the 17 females are single. Given the demographics of candidates, this program has focused on developing the cultural sensitivities of a predominantly Euro-American cohort of preservice candidates (Sleeter, 2001).

In an effort to gain the candidates' perspectives on the ability of the program to develop their competence in multicultural education, the first author invited all candidates in the school-based strand to examine their experience from a multicultural perspective through a series of collaboration activities. Five of the candidates agreed to participate. Among the participants are the one male candidate, the one female African-American candidate, and four of the single female candidates who are in their 20s.

Research Design

A case study approach was used to give readers the perspectives of program participants and to provide an understanding of the applicability of this program to other programs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 1994). The process of designing this qualitative exploration follows.

Once the participants consented to participate, they met with the first author and developed a process for examining the program. We decided that participants would examine their collaboration with their mentor teachers in their school-based placements as well as collaborate with one another regarding this school-based experience. All five participants were placed in local elementary schools with a minimum of 10% English learners. Three of the participants (one male, two females) were placed with mentor teachers who deliver special education services through a special day class (SDC). Two of the participants (one African-American female and one Euro-American female) were placed with mentor teachers who deliver special education services through a resource room program (RSP). One of these participants (the Euro-American female) was placed in a school that delivers a dual immersion English-Spanish program. All mentor teachers are Euro-American, married females who have been working as special educators for 10 or more years.

To provide an opportunity for participants to collaborate with one another, the first author set up electronic group pages where participants could share their field notes as well as references they found useful in the examination of their experiences. In addition, participants requested face-to-face meetings to discuss their experiences with one another. We held eight weekly meetings where we discussed what each participant was experiencing at their school site, asked questions of one another, and helped each other to develop a focus for observations and reflections. During the last few meetings, the first author and participants took responsibility for: (a) reading posted electronic notes and references of one of the other participants; (b) providing feedback to the selected participant; and (c) jointly examining with the first author each participant's field notes, confirming or negating identified themes.

Results

School-Based Collaboration

In this section, each participant's narrative is presented. The narratives discuss issues that participants experienced and the insights that occurred as a function of collaboration with mentor teachers in their school placements. Specific students are referred to using initials to ensure confidentiality.

Jennifer's school experience. I worked with my mentor teacher in examining the appropriateness of the classroom curriculum for students in her third through fifth grade SDC. I found large discrepancies in how the students of diverse backgrounds related to each other and achieved within the classroom curriculum.

I focused on three students: one African-American female, SH, (4th grade), one Euro-American female, LE, (4th grade), and one Mexican-American male, MA, (5th grade). The three students are relatively similar in socioeconomic status (low-middle) and academic ability (one grade level behind in academics, but high achievers in this classroom). There are 12 students in this classroom: four Euro-American students (three girls and one boy), one African-American girl, and seven Mexican-American boys. The teacher is a middle class Euro-American female. Assisting her were three aides, who are also middle class Euro-American females.

The curriculum for the classroom was largely based on middle class Euro-American standards and norms. During class time, the students were engaged in independent seatwork, or in small groups based on ability, and led by either the teacher or an aide. The reading curriculum included the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. AR offers books at all elementary reading levels. All students in the classroom were required to read three AR books per week and pass a comprehension test for each. After examining the books, I found that the characters were predominantly White. There were a number of books which offered the story in Spanish, and some that offered the story in both English and Spanish. These books contained Hispanic characters.

I collaborated with the teacher to create time for SH and me to go to the library to look for books. It was my intention to discover books for SH which contained characters of African-American heritage. At SH's reading level, we were unable to find any books that depicted African-Americans as the main characters. I later discovered that there were books that featured African-American main characters, but at a higher reading level.

Much of the language arts material reflected unfamiliar activities or events for the students in this class. For example, in the language arts workbooks, there was a question relating to a simple rule in baseball. MA was unable to answer the question because he had never played or watched baseball and was unfamiliar with the rules. With MA, I experienced many instances in which his confusion with a language arts assignment was due to his lack of familiarity with the content. Another example occurred in a prompt for the journal writing of the day. The prompt was "What did you do for Super Bowl Sunday?" SH, who lives between the homes of her single mother and her grandmother, did not watch the Super Bowl. There was no alternative prompt provided for those students who did not watch the game. SH appeared confused and distressed about what to write. We worked together to write about what she did over the weekend, instead of what she did for the Super Bowl. In contrast to MA and SH, I found nothing in the curriculum culturally unfamiliar to LE. Nothing in the curriculum limited her success in the classroom.

Adam's school experience. My student teaching placement was in a fourth-to-sixth grade SDC with 14 students. I began by looking at the role of culture in social interactions among the following students: (a) a 10-year-old Euro-American boy (CHNE), in fourth grade, and diagnosed with emotional disturbance and specific learning disability (SLD); (b) a 12-year-old African-American boy (NASM), in sixth grade, diagnosed with SLD; and (c) an 11-year-old Mexican-American boy (EZCA), in fifth grade, diagnosed with SLD. During the course of my observations, I became more interested in the effect of culture on the behaviors and academic success of the Mexican-American boy (EZCA), the role of

culture in the effectiveness of behavior support for this student, and his closest friend JAGO, a 10-year-old Mexican-American student, in 4th grade, diagnosed with SLD. EZCA displayed bullying behaviors (non-physical for the most part) and many of his negative behaviors seemed related to a desire to seem "cool". When given negative consequences, the undesired behaviors increased. The classroom team used positive reinforcement of desired behaviors, praise, humor, hugs, and good-natured, affectionate embarrassment to support EZCA in promoting positive behavior. I worked to develop my own style of interacting with EZCA in this way and was at times successful in using humor to reduce his negative behaviors, particularly his refusal to do independent reading and writing. When I asked EZCA why he acted negatively, he withdrew and said he did not know. I also asked him several times who he was trying to emulate and who his role models were; he either did not answer or said he did not know.

I found it interesting to compare EZCA with his 4th grade friend JAGO. Though they were friends, they differed in many ways. JAGO and EZCA were both English language learners but JAGO read at a significantly higher level (third grade) than EZCA (first grade). Varying levels of proficiency in English language skills may play a role in JAGO and EZCA's behavior at school, as EZCA was the second lowest reader in the class. It is possible he felt self-conscious or embarrassed by his reading skills and this contributed to his behavior. JAGO had a positive role model in his 18-year-old brother but we were not able to identify a positive, older, male role model for EZCA. JAGO and EZCA had very different home lives. According to their teacher, JAGO's parents were very affectionate but also had high expectations for how JAGO should behave. JAGO's relationship with his parents clearly had a positive effect on his behavior at school and he cared what they thought. EZCA did not have a comparable relationship with his parents. Both EZCA and JAGO had connections to Mexico, both with family members who lived there and others who were recent immigrants to the United States.

Both EZCA and JAGO displayed some learned helplessness

at times and both often asked for help, particularly with writing assignments, when they were capable of doing it alone. For example, even though the instructional team was consistent in their response to EZCA's requests for help in spelling a word (i.e., that he use his spelling dictionary), he showed no signs of becoming more independent. JAGO, in turn, often tried to false read sections when reading aloud. He tried to mumble his way through challenging words or skipped them unless prompted to try again by an adult.

Clearly both culture and family had a large impact on the behaviors of EZCA and JAGO. Working with these two students required me to actively reflect on the effectiveness of my actions with them.

Learning from my mentor teacher about these students' backgrounds and approaches to working with them was important. Specific knowledge regarding appropriate strategies for these students in this classroom was very useful for me and was one of the biggest things I was seeking from her (Telléz, 2008). She was very helpful in role modeling and sharing strategies that are effective with these students as well as giving me feedback on my interactions with them. Her understanding of JAGO and EZCA's family dynamics, although not explicitly focused on culture, helped me to explore the role of culture in their school experiences.

Reflecting on the challenges of working with students from a different culture than my own helped me be more self-aware of how I'm viewed by my students and to consider this when interacting with them. I found this to be particularly important when I am trying to support their behaviors. Comparing JAGO and EZCA emphasized for me the importance of considering each student on an individual basis. These two boys were friends and, at first glance, one might expect them to have similar behaviors and backgrounds. This was clearly not the case. Though actively reflecting on the role of culture in each of these boys' education was important for me in understanding them, ultimately I found it to be insufficient on its own. By developing a relationship with each of them, learning about their families, and learning about their

academic strengths and deficits I was able to form a more complete picture of each of these boys as learners.

I am still wondering about the role of culture on the behaviors and attitudes toward school of my students. In particular, I wonder if the learned helplessness and lack of motivation for some academic tasks shown by EZCA and JAGO had a cultural basis. This experience piqued my interest in the intersection of disability and culture.

Ashley's school experience. I worked with my mentor teacher at a local elementary school. In addition to her obligations as the school's sole resource specialist, she carried many other responsibilities outside of the classroom. Some of her duties included leading student study teams, developing curriculum for a social skills class, and designing appropriate interventions for students. She also served as an officer in a statewide professional organization during much of my time with her. Consequently, she spent much of her time collaborating with colleagues, parents, and others. What I will take away most from my time with my mentor teacher was her strategic ability to effectively communicate her needs to colleagues and parents, and her talent of comforting others through active listening. Whether through email, a written note, over the telephone, or in person, she was clear and direct when expressing herself. Even when she had something to share that may not be pleasant for those on the receiving end, she did not conceal the truth. However, my mentor teacher rarely seemed to offend others because she was able to articulate her thoughts with utmost sincerity and honesty. On many occasions, I watched concerned parents freely share their fears and concerns with her. Each time she provided a listening ear and reassurance that she would take action to address their worries.

When working with people of backgrounds different from her own, she was consistent in her approach to collaboration. I have noticed this to be true in our interactions also, as she is Euro-American and I am African American. Early on she gave me much responsibility within her classroom and relied upon me to help her meet deadlines. Our differences in cultural backgrounds came up

from time to time in personal conversations. For example, we were comfortable enough with each other to freely exchange opinions about topics that could be considered culturally sensitive and did so regularly. Within her classroom she was an advocate for embracing diversity. As an example, when I began observing her classroom, an all-male sixth grade reading group was reading *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli, a racially charged book that addresses segregation between blacks and whites in Pennsylvania. The boys were fully engaged with the story and were not at all shy with their questions about the racist themes throughout the book. This literary experience became all the more interesting when I led their thirty-minute guided processed reading (GPR) group. Though they must have noticed that I am African American, they never overtly made a connection between what they were reading and me, even when directly asked by my mentor teacher if they noticed our difference in race.

Through working with my mentor teacher I had the opportunity to interact with many professionals, parents, and students, from a variety of cultural backgrounds. I have worked with people of different backgrounds before, but culture had not been the major focus of my attention. The fieldwork portion of this program presented a very rich opportunity to delve deeper into the breadth of the definition of culture and practice cross-cultural collaboration.

Sadie's school experience. My field placement was in an RSP classroom at a local elementary school that offers a two-way immersion program for students in the district. The school used the district adopted K-6 curriculum but provides half of all instruction in English and half in Spanish. Within my mentor teacher's program, I worked with seven students who had individual education plans (IEPs). Five of these students were English language learners (ELLs).

The importance of cross-cultural parent-teacher verbal and nonverbal communication, such as sending letters updating parents on their child's academic and behavioral performance, encouraging parent involvement in the classroom, and inquiring about ways to

assist the family in receiving support, is believed to make teachers more successful because parents and teachers are more likely to be working toward a common goal (Davidman & Davidman, 2006). During my field placement, I observed that my mentor teacher was not regularly in contact with parents. However, when she did contact families, she reported positive and supportive responses. I believe her ability to speak Spanish fluently helped break down potential barriers that would otherwise inhibit her from connecting to parents cross-culturally.

Similarly, class-building activities and appropriate content selection are important for students' self esteem (Davidman & Davidman, 2006). I observed an absence of selective cultural curriculum content (language arts curriculum highlights middle-class, Euro-American culture). However, I believe my mentor teacher had a close relationship with her students, despite the lack of a curriculum that matched the students' cultural backgrounds because she was able to speak their language.

In regards to my personal collaboration with my mentor teacher, culturally we were similar. We are both White middle class females who value education. She provided me with the opportunity to work freely within her classroom, make changes where I deemed necessary, and work with students on a variety of topics and issues. Although I had to request this freedom and responsibility, I don't believe any hesitation she may have experienced in allowing me to assume more responsibility was a result of differences in cultural backgrounds.

Rebecca's school experience. I grew up in Southern California, in a middle to upper-middle class environment, and attended parochial schools through high school. Growing up in such an environment was certainly a privilege, and I have come to realize how different the educational experiences and upbringings of children can be. Having not been exposed to issues such as financial hardship or a lack of family support for education, I was somewhat taken a back in my first months as a student teacher in a low-income community elementary school.

My assignment was in an SDC for grades four through six. In the class there were 13 students: 2 female, 11 male; 5 Euro-American, 8 Hispanic; 4 with Autism, 9 with SLD. Though their disabilities and skill deficits were apparent, the children in this class were a happy group overall. Initially, I thought that these children were no different than the ones I grew up with or worked with in the past. Their basic concerns were daily conflicts on the playground, what they were going to eat at lunch, and with whom they would get to walk home after school. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first.

After a couple of weeks in the classroom, I began to notice subtle differences that concerned me. There was one boy whose shoes were literally falling apart but his family could not afford to buy a new pair. Another boy often showed up to school late, claiming he had missed the bus and had to walk thirty minutes to school. Over time, even more differences became apparent. Students were missing extended periods of time from school to go to Mexico with their families. Assignment books were coming to school unsigned each day because parents did not check their children's homework at night. Students talked about having to move because of their family's financial troubles. Never before had I seen a group of children with so many personal burdens and challenges outside of the school setting.

After talking with my mentor teacher, I realized that this was not an unusual group of students; rather this was typical for the community. She described the family dynamics of many of the students at our school, as well as community influences on them, and expressed her own concerns for their success in the future.

My original assumption was that the discrepancies between these students and the students I grew up around could be attributed to cultural differences. However, in listening further to the comments of my students, I realized that, more than their cultural backgrounds, the community dynamics appeared to be of greater influence. This became apparent when my mentor teacher told me about some of the Hispanic families and how supportive and proactive they were on behalf of their children. Alternatively,

there were several Euro-American students whose parents were both in and out of rehabilitation centers and were always in trouble with the law. In discussing the family backgrounds with my mentor teacher, I began to think that the children were a product of their environments as a whole, because in some cases their families were not even around. Financial resources and community expectations influenced the children. If the community did not encourage personal growth and development, the children suffered.

As a Euro-American special education teacher from a privileged upbringing, I have learned about the importance and influence that family, community, and friendship can have on a child. In comparing these children's experiences to my own, I saw how my family and the community I grew up in contributed to my development. I think that this teaching assignment has taught me the importance of not generalizing about students based on their backgrounds. Rather, I must be sensitive to the needs and issues of all students, and not assume that any one child may be dealing with fewer issues than another.

Peer Collaboration

We report the findings of two different types of peer collaboration. First, the insights of two participants from different racial backgrounds are shared. Second, the insights from electronic postings and discussions across all participants are shared.

Ashley and Sadie's cross-race collaboration. Ashley, a twenty-two year old African- American female and Sadie, a twenty-five year old Euro-American female, provided feedback to one another regarding selected SIOP components (Echevarría et al., 2008), discussed their personal cultures and shared favorite meals from their home cultures.

Ashley's insights. As an African-American female from a larger city living in a predominantly Euro-American community, culture crosses my mind daily. Up until recently, my focus has been on the lack of diversity only in the form of different racial and ethnic backgrounds existing in this area. With Sadie, I feel my initial focus on our differences in ethnicities prevented me from foreseeing

any possible commonalities. However, I have grown to significantly expand how I define culture. Though there is no one set definition, I feel that this one matches my sentiments exceptionally well:

The explicit and implicit patterns for living, the dynamic system of commonly agreed upon symbols and meaning, knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, behaviors, traditions, and/or habits that are shared and make up the total way of life of a people, as negotiated by individuals in the process of constructing a personal identity (Díaz-Rico and Weed, 2009, p. 236).

With this encompassing definition I have learned to appreciate the other facets of diversity found in this area. According to Solomon (2000), many teacher preparation programs do not insist on candidates critically reflecting on their worldview and the impact that may have on their teaching. Through this partnership, I feel I am much more aware of how my own values affect me in learning to teach (Solomon, 2000).

Sadie and I have much in common. We are both ambitious, young women who desire to do great things in the area of public service. Through our various discussions we have learned a lot about one another's culture. These activities have served us well to get a basic understanding of each other's value system; however, we both agreed they were not sufficient to create a comprehensive cross-cultural understanding.

Often, textbook readings are the only source of multicultural education. While this provides a great foundational knowledge for developing an understanding of culture it should not be the only method. As stated by Sleeter (2001), it is questionable whether or not teacher candidates are truly evolving due to their multicultural coursework and, if they are, is it "enough to become strong teachers in culturally diverse schools?" (p. 100). I feel my time with Sadie was so beneficial because of our ability to talk to one another. We were able to share experiences, openly express thoughts on sensitive topics, and ask questions that may not have been addressed during class. Just as with my mentor teacher, by collaborating with Sadie I

have learned more in just a few weeks about her, teaching, and myself than I ever imagined possible.

Through this experience I have broadened my definition of culture and come to the realization that each person's definition of the word is unique to them. Furthermore, our own preconceived notions of another person's cultural background may inhibit the development of cultural sensitivity. It is impossible to gain a true understanding of multiculturalism through coursework alone; however, growth can occur by actually partaking in activities that create experiences and memories capable of provoking meaningful conversation and deep thought.

Sadie's insights. During the initial weeks of our collaboration, Ashley and I were asked to exchange our personal definition of culture and inquire about the other's post using an online electronic exchange system. This process was extremely challenging for me because I found myself agonizing over word selection in my writing. Concerns, such as tone, word choice, and suggestive language, inhibited me from collaborating out of fear that Ashley might negatively misinterpret my message. After the first author expressed concern regarding our lack of collaboration, Ashley and I spoke and discovered we shared the same concerns. We quickly reorganized our communication tactics and agreed to meet in person for one hour every week and abandoned the use of the electronic system.

The face-to-face discussions Ashley and I shared were extremely informative. I was forced to analyze my personal culture in great detail, something I had not done before that time. I learned that while I recognize race, I did not identify with being White; whereas, I believe, race is one of the cornerstones of Ashley's culture. In addition, unintentionally, my main effort was to find commonalities between Ashley and me in order to build a relationship. For example, we discovered that we were raised approximately sixty miles from one another and valued similar geographic circumstances (e.g., small communities and open spaces). We also shared common interests in music, extracurricular activities, family values, and, of course, a passion for education.

After discussing our culture for two one-hour sessions we both agreed that, although we were learning a great deal about the other person's culture, relationships are built upon common experiences. Therefore, we decided to cook traditional family meals for one another.

The two dinner engagements provided me with a more powerful and memorable context in which to exchange ideas and discuss culture. Food is a powerful part of my Italian-American culture and having the ability to welcome Ashley into my home, cook for her, and share the meal, helped me to think of other cultural traditions that are important to my family and me. In the same light, when I was invited to dinner at Ashley's home, she, her mother and her brother welcomed me. I was able to experience Ashley's culture through food, conversation, and her family.

Sleeter (2001) supports the notion that experiences can be more powerful than coursework or less personal interaction. Sleeter (2001), in discussing community-based cross-cultural immersion programs states, "... when experiences are studied, researchers generally report a powerful impact...in some cases much more important than their formal teacher education programs" (p. 97). Personally, I found this to be true. While I gained a great deal of knowledge and examples for practical application of multicultural education within education coursework and my field placement, I believe I learned volumes, in comparison, from the discussions and experiences with my cohort member. It is important to note, however, that while I believe I have an understanding of Ashley's culture, it is only a glimpse. We agreed that it is nearly impossible to identify all of the activities that could provide individuals with a comprehensive understanding of another's culture perspective.

Participant peer coaching. Participants shared the following insights after reading and commenting on electronic postings and sharing stories and insights in group discussions with the first author.

Jennifer's insights. Becoming aware that we all understand cultural sensitivity differently was eye-opening. I had not considered that we, as individuals, may define or perceive cultural

sensitivity differently. The idea that teachers must be aware of their own culture was an important theme throughout the collaboration process, especially when collaborating with my peers. According to Cartledge and Kourea (2008), culturally responsive teachers are introspective and should confront their own race and beliefs. Much of the time spent collaborating with my peers was spent doing just this. We attempted to understand our own beliefs about cultural sensitivity. Listening to others express their views led me to better understand my own.

Through reading, I have discovered different ways to modify curriculum in order to make it culturally sensitive. Multicultural education is not an entirely separate subject in the curriculum (DomNwachukwu, 2005). Instead, multicultural education consists of ideas that should be infused throughout all subjects and curriculum.

Adam's insights. Collaboration with the four other members of my cohort has helped me clarify my thinking about my school-based observations. Early in our collaboration, our use of electronic posts was useful to help me put my ideas down in writing before sharing them face-to-face. These focused reflections with the group, in person and in writing, have caused me to be more active in processing my time in the classroom and observations on the role of culture in my students' schooling.

My experience with two distinctly different Mexican-American boys highlighted the importance of considering individual students as well as ethnicity and other aspects of culture. I have come to realize that there is a need to examine culture on both a macro and micro scale for ourselves, our colleagues, our students, and their families. I've come to feel that multicultural education must be continually learned through interaction, discussion and collaboration with students and colleagues in authentic environments.

Rebecca's insights. In collaborating with my fellow student teachers and in doing some research, I have come to the conclusion that providing students in communities such as the one where I am teaching with a strong support network is vital to their success. As a

group, we discussed the detrimental effects of an environment that fosters learned helplessness and lacks encouragement of personal growth and development. However, as special educators, it is our duty to provide these children with the best support and modeling that we can. I have come to realize the importance of exposing students to a culturally diverse curriculum to enhance their development of cultural sensitivity to others around them. I also came to value the need for teachers to truly understand and appreciate all of the cultural influences that impact a child, including their ethnic background and neighborhood influences.

Discussion

It is apparent from the experiences and insights shared by participants that collaborative activities contributed to the development of each participant's cultural sensitivity. Though no single collaborative activity was deemed sufficient by participants, there are collaborative activities that are helpful in developing cultural sensitivity even in a small special education teacher preparation program in a primarily Euro-American community.

Though we did not discuss the coursework and fieldwork in the autism strand of this program, participants' accounts reflected the family focus that exists in the autism strand as it was often used by participants to understand the culture of students in their school placements. In fact, it seems based on the participants' insights above, that they viewed culture on a spectrum. In keeping with a person-centered approach to special education, participants focused on the child first, then the family, and then school and community influences on the child as a way to enhance their cultural sensitivity to the students that they taught.

Participants identified several peer-to-peer collaboration activities that they felt helpful to foster cultural sensitivity: (a) have candidates reflect on their personal definition of culture at the beginning and then at the end of the program; (b) observe a wide variety of CLD students even if that requires travel by candidates; (c) observe the use of effective cross-cultural communication

strategies in the field; (d) examine the intersection of disability and culture, not just theoretically but in fieldwork; (e) provide intentional peer-to-peer collaboration every quarter of the program; (f) pair candidates across cultural characteristics (e.g., race, gender, religion, SES) in school placements so that they can spend time co-teaching with one another in the same school-based placement and can explore similarities and differences with one another as did Ashley and Sadie; (g) require peer-to-peer pairs to keep logs of their cultural conversations and experiences as these offer a different perspective from discussions with mentor teachers; and (h) critically evaluate with mentor teachers the cultural opportunities afforded their students.

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