CHANGING PRESERVICE TEACHERS’ ATTITUDES/BELIEFS ABOUT DIVERSITY
WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FACTORS?

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This study focused on determining whether there are particular factors that may be associated with the development of greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity in preservice teachers. The researcher conducted extensive interviews with one 22-year-old White female teacher candidate and identified six factors that appeared to play a critical role in her positive multicultural development. Three of the factors were dispositional and included openness to diversity, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, and commitment to social justice. The other three factors were experiential and included intercultural experiences, support group experiences, and educational experiences. Several implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: preservice teachers; multicultural teacher education; preparing teachers for diversity; preservice teacher attitudes

A major goal of the multicultural focus of many teacher education programs is to better prepare a mostly White and female teaching force to work effectively with students from racial/cultural backgrounds different than their own. To accomplish this goal, we need a better understanding of the various factors that are associated with prospective teachers’ developing greater multicultural awareness (i.e., recognizing significant racial/cultural differences) and sensitivity (i.e., being appropriately responsive to these differences). An improved understanding of these factors should enable teacher educators to increase the effectiveness of their efforts to provide the types of information and experiences that will facilitate the development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity in preservice teachers. In this article, I identify several factors that appeared to play a critical role in one prospective teacher’s multicultural development and discuss why these factors are important for teacher educators to consider.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

To prepare teachers for our increasingly diverse schools, teacher education programs are endeavoring to find effective ways of raising the multicultural awareness and sensitivity of prospective teachers. As a result, courses on diversity and/or multicultural education have become a common feature in teacher preparation programs; however, there are different conceptions of what specific issues such courses should address. Some courses address diversity broadly defined, including issues of race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, disability, sexual preference, and so on, while others are more narrowly focused. Because my research centers on issues of racial/cultural diversity, in my review of the literature I concentrated on determining what impact multicultural education and diversity courses (whether broadly defined or focused primarily on racial/cultural diversity) appear to have on prospective teachers’ attitudes toward and beliefs about different racial/
cultural groups. I found that research results on the impact of such courses have been mixed (Sleeter, 2001; Weisman & Garza, 2002). For example, some researchers (e.g., Artiles & McClafferty, 1998; Bennett, Niggle, & Stage, 1990; Bondy, Schmitz, & Johnson, 1993; Delany-Barmann & Minner, 1997; Reed, 1993; Ross & Smith, 1992; Tran, Young, & Di Lella, 1994) have reported that students’ racial attitudes and beliefs have been changed in a positive direction by a course on diversity, however others (e.g., Barry & Lechner, 1995; Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Colville-Hall, MacDonald, & Smolen, 1995; Garmon, 1996; Haberman & Post, 1992; McDiarmid, 1992) have reported little or no change in students’ attitudes and beliefs. The discrepant findings of these studies raise a number of questions. For example, are the disparate findings merely attributable to unique contextual factors in each study, or are there identifiable variables that can be rather consistently associated with courses and experiences that positively affect students’ attitudes and beliefs about diversity? Are there particular student variables that are associated with the likelihood of a particular course or experience affecting their beliefs and attitudes? These would appear to be important questions for teacher educators interested in maximizing the effectiveness of their efforts to prepare teachers for diversity. However, my review of the literature revealed that these particular questions have not yet received much direct attention from researchers.

Although the studies cited above reported whether a diversity course had an overall positive impact on the participants, other studies have found that such courses may have different effects on different students. McGeehan (1982) and Garmon (1996) observed that students who began a diversity course favorably disposed toward racial/cultural diversity tended to become more favorable during the course whereas those who were unfavorably disposed tended to become less favorable. In other words, students holding more favorable racial attitudes at the outset of the course were much more likely to move toward embracing viewpoints generally considered to be more sensitive to the needs of diverse learners. This finding is consistent with Kagan’s (1992) observation that “candidates tend to use the information provided in course work to confirm rather than to confront and correct their preexisting beliefs” (p. 154). The idea that prospective teachers’ entering attitudes and beliefs serve as filters for subsequent learning has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Anderson & Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Goodman, 1988; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Richardson, 1996).

Acknowledging that prospective teachers’ entering perspectives serve to filter what they learn, Pohan (1996) studied the personal and professional beliefs of 492 prospective teachers to identify variables related to the development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Pohan found a significant relationship between prospective teachers’ personal beliefs and their professional beliefs. Students who bring strong biases and negative stereotypes about diverse groups will be less likely to develop the types of professional beliefs and behaviors most consistent with multicultural sensitivity and responsiveness. Another relevant finding from Pohan’s study is that personal and professional beliefs are significantly related to students’ cross-cultural experiences. Although causation cannot be inferred, the clear implication is that prospective teachers who have more cross-cultural experiences are more likely to develop favorable personal and professional beliefs about diverse learners.

Smith, Moallem, and Sherrill (1997) conducted another study that also sought to identify the factors that contribute to prospective teachers’ developing greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity. These researchers identified four factors that appeared to be instrumental in initiating positive change:

- exposure to different cultural backgrounds (e.g., friendships, dating, sports),
- education (e.g., influences of teachers and colleges)
- travel (e.g., moving, vacationing, and military experience), and
- personal experience with discrimination as a child or an adult (p. 54).
The findings of the Smith et al. study lend further support to the idea that students’ experiences are critical factors in shaping their multicultural sensitivity.

Although there is considerable evidence that prospective teachers’ entering beliefs and attitudes, along with their intercultural experiences, are important factors influencing the development of their multicultural awareness and sensitivity, research conducted by Garmon (1998) suggests that certain personal dispositions (or character traits) may be yet another important factor. Garmon sought to explain why students from similar backgrounds and with apparently similar racial attitudes and beliefs appeared to respond differently to a diversity course. He found that students demonstrating a quality of openness, along with self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, were influenced in a positive direction whereas students not displaying these two characteristics appeared to be unchanged by the course. The above study suggests that, in addition to students’ beliefs and experiences, certain dispositions that they bring to courses on diversity may also influence their development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity. The current study extends this line of research by further exploring the factors that may be associated with preservice teachers who undergo changes in their attitudes toward and beliefs about diversity.

METHOD

The subject of this investigation is a 22-year-old White woman named Leslie P., who grew up in a small rural Michigan community that was about 99% White. Leslie was enrolled in the teacher education program at a fairly large regional university with a minority enrollment of approximately 11%. An honor student who plans to become an elementary teacher, Leslie is very intelligent (4.0 GPA) and quite serious about her education. She is also a friendly, outgoing person who has a very strong religious faith. I chose Leslie as the subject of my study primarily because, over time, I saw evidence of considerable change in her level of multicultural awareness and sensitivity, in contrast to most of my students, who typically demonstrate only small to moderate change, if any at all. Although she had come to the university with the intention of teaching in a school very similar to those she had attended as a child, during her senior year she expressed an interest in teaching in an urban school. Furthermore, in conversations with me she reported seeking out opportunities for intercultural contact, and for her Honors College thesis, Leslie chose to write about the development of her multicultural awareness. Although I have worked with a number of students who have demonstrated higher levels of multicultural awareness and sensitivity than Leslie, I do not recall ever having a student who, through the course of the education program, changed his or her beliefs and attitudes toward racial/cultural diversity as substantially as Leslie appeared to change hers. The question I wanted to investigate was “What are the factors that appeared to be most critical in the development of her multicultural awareness and sensitivity?”

During her senior year, I conducted more than 10 hours of interviews with Leslie in which I asked her to talk about her experiences with diversity, from her earliest childhood memories up until the present time, and to reflect on what she had learned about racial/cultural diversity during college. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), where a researcher, through repeated systematic analysis of the data, inductively derives his or her categories or propositions. I read and reread the interview transcripts and grouped seemingly related comments into broad categories. Then through a process of successive reanalyzing, reconfiguring, and renaming, these categories were continually refined until I had finally settled on a listing of six categories of factors and experiences that appeared to have contributed most to the changes in her perceptions about racial/cultural diversity. To ensure that I was not misinterpreting any of her statements or experiences, I also engaged in member checking, where I consulted with Leslie on the accuracy of my interpretations of her remarks.
during the interviews. In the interview excerpts included below, false starts, repeated phrases, you know, and so on, have been omitted in most cases. Although presenting the student’s talk in unedited form might, in some respects, provide a more complete picture of how she sometimes struggled to express her ideas, I have elected to edit her talk for ease of reading.

Because the participant in the current study was a young, White, female student while the researcher was an older, African American, male professor, I should acknowledge that these age, race, gender, and power differences may have subtly influenced the results of the study. Every semester, most of my students are young, White women; however, for Leslie, I was her first African American teacher. Nevertheless, Leslie and I developed a positive relationship during the year prior to the beginning of the study, when she was a student in one of my classes. Even after the conclusion of the course, she occasionally stopped by my office to visit and just talk. Then early during her senior year, she asked me to serve as a member of her Honors Thesis committee. Thus, a level of comfort and trust existed between us before the study began. During our final interview, I asked Leslie whether she thought my being African American had influenced how she had responded to any of my questions. She assured me that, though it had been difficult at times, she had done her best to answer my questions as honestly as possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From my analysis of Leslie’s interviews, I identified six major factors that appeared to be most critical in facilitating the changes that occurred in her beliefs about and attitudes toward diversity. Three of these six factors were dispositional, relating to her character traits or personal dispositions, while the other three were experiential, relating to experiences that she had had.

Dispositional Factors

Several of Leslie’s personal dispositions or values appeared to be highly instrumental in fostering the changes that occurred in her beliefs and attitudes toward diversity. Two of the three dispositional factors, openness and self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, were the same as those identified in earlier research (Garmon, 1996, 1998). The third disposition was her strong sense of social justice.

Openness. I define openness as receptiveness (i.e., open-mindedness) to others’ ideas or arguments, as well as receptiveness to diversity. Leslie was quite open to and interested in discussions about diversity. One indication of her openness was her willingness to talk with me at length about her multicultural awareness and sensitivity. In addition, for her Honors Thesis, she elected to investigate the development of her multicultural awareness, a project for which she eagerly read a number of books and articles on diversity. Her openness to considering others’ perspectives was also apparent in the fact that she enjoyed debating issues with her peers, instructors, and parents, and she reported doing so often. Leslie’s willingness to consider others’ perspectives not only exposed her to new ideas but also led her to sometimes question her own ideas.

Another important aspect of Leslie’s openness was her readiness to accept people who might be different than she. She grew up in a very religious home and appeared to have internalized the oft-repeated idea of loving your neighbor. In addition, from her mother’s example, Leslie developed a great sense of empathy for others. Therefore, even though she had had very little prior experience with diversity, she began college with a willingness, almost an eagerness, to accept and interact with people from backgrounds different from hers. She was surprised and disturbed, however, by the high degree of racial segregation that she observed in the dormitory cafeteria during her first year of college. Furthermore, Leslie reported that her reaction to the segregation in the cafeteria was different from that of many of her peers.

I mean, I would bring up to people sitting at my table: Well, why do you think all the African American people sit at their own table? I would want to talk about it, and I would say most people just, like, [inaudible] I don’t know. I mean, I just was learning that it didn’t matter to most people of my culture.
In one of our interviews, I asked Leslie to identify what she considered to be the major ways in which she had changed since her freshman year. One of her responses was that she had become more open to diversity.

Okay, your question was what are the biggest ways that I have changed. Just a sense of openness and not being satisfied with being in my comfort zone anymore, and this extends into more than just racial issues, but basically wanting to see what's out there, feeling like I was missing out on other cultures. I wouldn't listen in class, I would learn about other cultures, so to speak, on a surface level, but to really try to understand them. I wasn't that interested. I'm interested now, you know. It might seem like a small change, but it's not a small change to me.

Self-awareness/self-reflectiveness. The second dispositional factor, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, I define as having an awareness of one's own beliefs and attitudes, as well as being willing and/or able to think critically about them. Similar to most of the White students in the teacher education program at this university, Leslie came from a very homogeneous background, and her prior experiences with individuals from different racial/cultural groups were extremely limited. Throughout our interviews, however, Leslie demonstrated extraordinary insight into and understanding of her attitudes and behaviors, quite unlike most of her classmates. For example, in our first interview, Leslie talked about her feelings about African Americans.

LP: I believe that it stemmed largely from ignorance, but I think as I came to college and started to come in contact with different racial groups and ethnic groups that there were some stereotypes, like I really thought that a lot of African American people were lazy. In my classes I didn't understand—it just seemed like they just weren't motivated, and I've kind of placed that label on, you know, all African American people.

AG: This is at college level?

LP: Yeah, that's at college. Well, in high school I felt that way, too. I mean, I think it was under the surface in high school, and I didn't have to deal with it, and then in college I started to see how those attitudes were coming out, you know, and that's why I say college. In high school, I probably couldn't have identified myself as having those prejudices. I mean, if anyone were to have said, "well, I think, Leslie, that you have some prejudiced racial attitudes," I would have argued until I was blue in the face that it was not true and given many, many reasons why it wasn't so. Do you see what I'm saying? I didn't have to think about it in high school. Maybe I didn't have to think about it in college either, but I started to (laughs) for some strange reason.

Leslie made a rather astute observation when she said that she really did not have to think about her biases. Although she chose to examine and try to understand her biases, she could easily have avoided doing so.

Later in the same interview Lesley reflected on the origin of some of her thoughts about African Americans.

I remember a lot of negatives in the media. (Pause) Well, we lived about an hour north of Detroit, and I know that some things I learned in school and some things I heard that I associated with Detroit as being an almost entirely African American city, so therefore when I heard negative things about the crime and all those kind of things in Detroit, I just assumed, you know, I just put two and two together and I thought, well, you know, the crime all stems from the African American people that are in Detroit. I mean, that's hard for me to say (laughs), but it's true. I mean, it's gut-level honesty, so, yeah, the media and my parents' fear. They expressed fear of even going to Detroit. I had a great aunt that lived there, and two times we went to visit her and there was always talk about danger, the danger of getting hurt going to Detroit. My parents never said the fear is because Detroit is a largely African American city and we fear these people, but somehow indirectly that's how I brought it all together, and I'm sure if I told them that now, they would probably be upset that that's the kind of message I was getting. They didn't openly discuss race issues, so it was left for me to interpret in my own way, based on no experience.

Once again Leslie showed more insight and self-awareness than most of the students in the classes that I teach. To say that Leslie demonstrated more self-awareness than most of her peers does not necessarily imply that her level of awareness was exceptionally high in comparison to that of individuals studied by other researchers (e.g., McIntyre, 1997). However, whereas many, if not most, of the students with whom I work appear to be "dysconscious" (King, 1991)—lacking a critical consciousness—of their racial biases, Leslie appeared more willing and able to be critical of some of her biases. Her willingness and ability to look at herself critically certainly facilitated her growth.
A final example of Leslie’s self-awareness/self-reflectiveness occurred when she talked about how some of her intercultural experiences during college had altered her beliefs about teaching students from diverse backgrounds.

I think the orientation experience, the mentoring, just the fact that I was partnered with two African American girls. I think before that I kind of had this ideal that because I cared so much about kids and because I’d always had this lifelong passion for being a teacher, that it was going to, not necessarily be easy for me, but that there weren’t that many obstacles because I really loved kids. It didn’t matter that there were any differences between me and the kids. All those language, cultural, and racial differences were just kind of going to melt away because I loved them so much, and I’m not saying that that compassion isn’t important, but you can’t be blind to the fact that there are cultural differences or religious differences that are going to come into play . . . and you can’t effectively connect with [students] unless you try to understand where they’re coming from. So, your class, orientation, all those things came together I think to make me consider whether I was ready to be a teacher of all children or just the kids that I readily related to.

The “love-is-enough” misconception seems widespread among prospective teachers and is usually difficult to dislodge prior to their internship. Leslie, however, through reflecting on her experiences, had already come to that understanding. Just as she was able in the above excerpt to identify specific ways in which she had grown, at other times in the interview she was also able to identify ways in which she was still struggling. Her self-awareness/self-reflectiveness is certainly one of her strengths.

Commitment to social justice. The third dispositional factor that Leslie possessed was a strong sense of social justice. I would define a sense of social justice as a commitment to equity and equality for all people in society. This factor appears consistent with one of Levine-Rasky’s (2001) “signposts” of a multicultural educator: displaying an “internalized desire for change” in educational inequality and social injustice. Leslie reported having an early awareness of and dislike for some of the injustices that regularly occur in classrooms.

I could look back to my elementary, middle school, high school years and think about the students that were so marginalized in my class, in my rooms, and I—we noticed those things, like, all of us knew what was going on. When in fourth grade, when so-and-so was going to do oral reading, you know, and the teacher cringed and all the students cringed because they knew that this person was a slow reader. Things like that all the way up. Of course, I didn’t have really any classes with any African American. I don’t think I had any classes where there were major cultural differences and I could see that a certain culture was marginalized, but I could see that that concept of a low-achieving student could translate into minority students, into any student that their background experience didn’t fit with what the teacher was expecting in the class, and that bothered me because I didn’t want to be a teacher that automatically disregarded certain students whether I did it consciously or subconsciously, you know. That just bothered me, and I had seen well-meaning teachers do that, teachers that cared about kids do that, all throughout my experience, so it bothered me, and I thought, well, how does this happen? How can you avoid it?

Leslie’s sense of social justice seemed to grow primarily out of her strong religious beliefs. For example, in our interviews she spoke frequently about racial reconciliation, an idea that became particularly salient for her during her sophomore year of college through her involvement in the Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF), a campus religious organization. Although Leslie’s religion is foundational for her, it is important to emphasize that a person does not have to have strong religious convictions to have a strong belief in social justice.

Leslie’s response to learning about the gross inequities between urban and suburban schools is perhaps the best illustration of the strength of her sense of social justice.

In ED 395 (pause) that whole class is about schools in the setting of the larger United States and the globe and how everything meets in schools, and we read part of the book Savage Inequalities by Jonathan Kozol, which blew me away completely. We watched a video on the disparities between inner city and suburban schools, and I mean I was so moved by that video! When I got out of that class, I think I must have told 40 people about that. I mean, I cried. I thought there’s no way that it’s this different for urban students as it is for suburban students, and the video made it clear that a lot of the urban schools were largely minority students in the school, and so I
was just completely unsettled by it, completely upset.

Her exposure to Kozol’s work, taken in conjunction with events that were occurring at or near the same time in other classes and in other facets of her life, was a pivotal point in her development. She later expressed an interest in teaching in an urban school, and I believe this was partially a result of her increased awareness of the inequities between urban and suburban schools. It is not surprising that a person committed to social justice would want to work where he/she perceives that the most injustices exist. McIntyre (1997) has explored the issue of how some White prospective teachers seem to regard themselves as “white knights” going to teach in inner-city schools to “save” the poor minority children there. Based on my conversations with her, I do not think Leslie would fall into that category, though it is possible. In either case, however, I would argue that she is still farther along than most of the White teacher candidates in my classes, few of whom ever express to me any interest whatsoever in teaching in an inner-city setting.

**Experiential Factors**

Three categories of experiential factors emerged from my analysis of Leslie’s interviews. Two factors (intercultural and educational experiences) are consistent with the factors identified by Smith et al. (1997), however the third factor (support group experiences) did not appear in their study.

**Intercultural experiences.** The first of the three experiential factors that I identified was the fact that during her college years Leslie had had several significant intercultural experiences that appeared to have a profound impact on her thoughts and feelings about diversity. I define an intercultural experience as one in which there was opportunity for direct interaction with one or more individuals from a cultural group different than one’s own. In our interviews, Leslie described numerous intercultural experiences, however two of her most powerful experiences were being an orientation leader and participating in the Detroit Residential Program.

The summer after her sophomore year, Leslie served as an orientation leader and was responsible for hosting groups of incoming freshmen when they visited the university campus during their summer orientation program. That summer, there were 30 orientation leaders who had been intentionally selected to represent many different types of diversity, including racial, cultural, religious, and gender. Furthermore, many of the training sessions for the orientation leaders focused on diversity issues. This was Leslie’s first truly intense contact with a diverse group of individuals, and she found it to be an almost overwhelming experience in some ways.

Here’s 30 orientation leaders, and we’re having to deal with working together day by day, closely; so there’s all those diverse experiences and perspectives and ways of handling conflict and communication on top of the religious and cultural diversity, all that stuff mixing together every day; plus our whole training was on diversity and how to deal with students that are coming from all these different backgrounds, so I would say it was pretty intense, and there were points where I just couldn’t take in any more information.

In addition, although Leslie began the summer confident that she would be able to handle the multicultural situations she would encounter as an orientation leader, she soon realized that, because of her limited prior experiences with people from different backgrounds, she was not prepared for all of the diversity that she was facing. Therefore, rather than embracing the diversity that she encountered, she found herself instead retreating from it, as she partially explains.

I knew we had a lot of diversity in the group, but I didn’t really want to deal with it. I think—now this is hard for me to say. I think that I avoided building relationships with the African American leaders because I started to realize that I didn’t have a handle on their experience.

Leslie reported that during the summer, she formed friendships only with the orientation leaders who were most similar to her, feeling that the others were just too different from her
and that she wouldn’t be able to understand them.

Just to give you an example so you’ll understand that it’s not just a White versus African American thing, there was a guy that was an atheist in the group. I mean, we talked about beliefs, and we talked about a lot of the stuff in our team-building things, and I was so intimidated by that, just so blown away. I just did not want to deal with the differences between us. I wanted to be comfortable. I had my set of beliefs. They were working for me, you know. I think the whole summer was just (pause) I was fighting with that stuff but I wasn’t letting it come out in my behavior.

Leslie's summer as an orientation leader was an invaluable learning experience for her. She had her first substantial, sustained contact with individuals from a variety of different backgrounds, she learned firsthand about how dealing with diversity can be challenging, and she realized that she was not as ready as she thought she was to handle diversity. Fortunately, Leslie's retreat from diversity was only temporary. As a result of her orientation experience, she started her next year of college with a new determination to try to understand people from different backgrounds.

A second pivotal experience for Leslie occurred the summer after her junior year of college when she participated, along with six other girls, in the Detroit Residential Program sponsored by the Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF). For 6 weeks she lived with a family in Detroit and volunteered at a church in an inner-city Detroit neighborhood. Working alongside two African American college students (Datrell and Bruce) who were from Detroit, she assisted in planning and conducting a Vacation Bible School for children from the neighborhood. In addition, as part of the CYF program, she attended weekly Bible study groups and weekly seminars on urban issues. She also had the opportunity to visit some of the major attractions in the city and several of its ethnic areas. It was an extremely rich and rewarding experience for Leslie, who reported learning a tremendous amount. In our interviews, she described numerous incidents that were particularly significant for her.

The key thing for me above all else I think was the relationships we built at the church with the college students that were interning with us. That’s not one incident; it was like the summer-long experience of little conversations with them about God, about their lives, about cities, about college, you know, all that kind of stuff. There were just some key conversations that I had with, especially Datrell and Bruce, which were two of the students that grew up in Detroit, ‘cause we finally got to the point, I mean, working together day in, day out, we finally got to the point where we were pretty relaxed in conversation and just talked. We talked about racism, we talked about how our experiences were so different, you know, growing up in [Leslie’s hometown] versus Detroit, and I think that’s where I learned the most, is just talking with them.

Being able to relate comfortably to individuals from a different racial/cultural background was an especially noteworthy accomplishment for Leslie, considering the fact that the previous summer she had avoided establishing relationships with African American orientation leaders because she felt as though they were too different from herself.

During one of our interviews, Leslie talked about how her experiences in Detroit had brought to her awareness some of her hidden biases, some of which surprised and disturbed her. In the following excerpt, she had just described an incident in which her fear of using a bathroom in the home of an African American and sharing a drinking utensil had come to light.

LP: I didn’t even want to mention those things, but I did. I had moments where I was like, (pause) what’s it like to truly just totally be intermingled with African American people, you know, like living quarters and everything. I mean, I don’t know. I guess you can probably tell that it really bothers me that I even had those ideas, but I still, like, back to the whole inter-racial marriage thing, I still am like, wow, what do I really think about that? What are my views on that? Why not? It’s tough. It’s tough when you just kind of have nothing to go on up to that point, and you find yourself with these ideas but never having had the experience to test them out or the chance to—I just think if, as a child, if I had had a chance to just interact with African American people, if I had gone to school with African American people, given the fact that my parents were pretty open-minded about—or tried to be, I think that I wouldn’t have those fears,
and that just makes me sad that I ended up as a 21-year-old person having fears like that.
AG: Most of the biases were just fears of the unknown.
LP: Yeah, yeah. Unfounded, completely.

I believe that Leslie’s comments above make a powerful statement about the importance of people having early intercultural experiences. Who knows how long she might have held on to her unconscious fears about African Americans if she had not had experiences which forced her to confront those fears.

**Support group experiences.** A second important experiential factor was that Leslie had the benefit of support group experiences that helped foster the growth of her multicultural awareness and sensitivity. I would define a support group as individuals who encourage a person’s growth (e.g., through listening to him or her, helping him or her process and make sense of relevant information and/or experiences, questioning or challenging the person’s words and/or actions as a means of pushing him or her to think more deeply, and sometimes expanding the person’s knowledge or awareness by providing additional information when needed). Just as important, these individuals also provide feelings of acceptance, caring, safety, and support. Although Leslie received encouragement and support from many different people—including her roommates, her parents, and a number of close friends—one particularly important source of support for her was the CYF, a campus religious organization of several hundred members. Throughout her college years, she was actively involved in CYF, and numerous times during our interviews I found that conversations or events connected with this organization had been an impetus for many of Leslie’s thoughts and actions. For example, during Leslie’s sophomore year, several members of the organization began to push the other members to grapple with the fact that their group was all White and that it may not be inviting to students from racial minority groups. Leslie reported, however, that she was not initially supportive of their efforts.

I still kind of viewed that as an add-on, to really reach out to other cultures. That would make me to-

tally change my style, you know. I thought that was really stretching it. . . . I wasn’t seeing the fact that I would have to be intentional in reaching out like that, and I still wasn’t very accepting of that idea.

As the group discussed this issue over the course of the school year and sought ways to address it, Leslie was prodded out of her comfort zone and prompted to confront issues of racial disharmony and separation that, up until that point, she had not regarded as being particularly relevant to her.

Although Leslie was undoubtedly influenced by many different members of the organization (and she sometimes mentioned talking with other friends outside the organization), she had three or four good friends, all members of CYF, who were clearly her core support group. One of these good friends, Dan, seemed to play a particularly influential role in encouraging Leslie’s development. He and Leslie were orientation leaders together during the summer after her sophomore year, and his encouragement was a major factor in getting Leslie to sign up for the Detroit Residential Program the summer after her junior year. This program ultimately had a powerful impact on Leslie. In addition, Leslie reported that, without the support of some of her peers, she would not have had the courage to undertake alone some of the other intercultural experiences in which she became involved.

Not only did Leslie’s support groups offer her encouragement and support, they also provided opportunities for her to process her experiences through talking with others about her intercultural experiences and about issues of diversity in general. Opportunities for processing are important because it is often through reflecting on and explaining one’s beliefs and experiences to others that one moves to greater understanding of self and his or her experiences. Furthermore, as Haberman and Post (1992) cautioned, “Direct experiences are not necessarily educative” (p. 31) and may instead serve to reinforce existing perceptions. Therefore, it is sometimes important to discuss one’s perceptions with peers and “more knowledgeable others” so that they may assist the person to understand his or her experiences and put
them in proper perspective. Leslie had numerous opportunities to process her intercultural experiences and to dialogue about her beliefs about diversity. Leslie appeared to engage in this type of processing regularly with other members of the CYF, which was her primary support group. Although many of Leslie’s discussions about diversity took place in the context of the CYF organization, she also reported discussing diversity issues with friends outside this group. In addition, processing opportunities were a regular part of the diversity training sessions in which Leslie participated during the summer that she served as an orientation leader. The weekly seminar that Leslie attended as part of her Detroit experience assisted her in making meaning of her experiences there, and she also gained many important insights from her frequent informal conversations with her coworkers. Furthermore, she found some class discussions and individual conversations with some of her professors to be helpful in furthering her understanding of diversity issues and of her feelings about them. Finally, my interviews with Leslie served as yet another way for her to process her experiences and her feelings about those experiences. For example, during one interview we had a rather intense conversation about her feelings of guilt about the way her race has historically treated racial minorities. I explained how her feelings related to the stages in Janet Helms’s (1990) White racial identity theory. After doing some reading about this theory, she eventually used it as the basic framework for her Honors Thesis. I would say that the many opportunities that Leslie had for processing her experiences greatly facilitated the development of her multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

Educational experiences. Finally, some of Leslie’s educational experiences were a third experiential factor that contributed to the changes in her beliefs and attitudes. Although her personal experiences clearly had far more impact on Leslie, some of her class-related experiences did appear to support and extend her learning. In particular, her first semester of professional education courses, the fall semester of her junior year, stood out as significant for her. It is worth noting that the summer prior to her junior year, Leslie had had her first intensive experience with diversity when she served as an orientation leader, and she had left that experience with some unsettling questions about diversity. Because of the questions raised during her orientation leader experience, she entered her classes that fall with a special readiness to learn more about diversity. As a student in my educational psychology class that semester, she also had her first exposure to an African American teacher, and that, too, seemed to pique her interest.

I know when we talked about diversity issues that I really tuned into what you were saying, more so than I had other teachers because you were an African American person and I thought, I just want to hear what his views are on this, plain and simple. And I just remember the passion that you had when we talked about how are you, as a White middle-class student, when you become a teacher, how are you going to relate to students that come from very poor backgrounds? How are you going to relate to African American students? How are you going to relate to other cultures? And I could tell that you were very passionate about it and so, you know, I keyed in on that and I really listened to what you had to say. I think that semester in all of my Ed classes that issue was just coming out. How are you going to reconcile your background with your teaching style and with reaching the learning styles and the backgrounds of your students, and from your class, I just came away with the realization that I guess had never been stressed to me, that your first priority as a teacher is to understand your students, and if you don’t understand their prior knowledge and their prior experience, then there’s no way you can make your teaching style effective for them.

In several of her classes that semester, through readings and discussions, she was introduced to new ideas and pushed to re-examine some of her existing beliefs and attitudes. For example, not until she read Kozol’s Savage Inequalities did she begin to truly comprehend the great inequities that exist between inner city and suburban schools. This new understanding led her to question her belief that all students have essentially equal opportunities to learn. For one of her classes she was required to do tutoring, and she was paired with a 12-year-old African American girl. This proved to be a powerful learning experience for Leslie. A year after this course...
had ended, Leslie commented, “I still tutor her, and it’s just been amazing what I’ve learned through being with her and seeing her whole life.”

It bears repeating that, because of other significant events that were occurring in her life at that time, Leslie entered her first semester of professional education courses with an unusually high degree of readiness to learn more about diversity. Had Leslie not come with such readiness, had she been more like most of her classmates, it is questionable whether she would have gained as much as she did from her courses, even though she was predisposed to be a fairly open and accepting person. Leslie explained that in prior years she had taken a few courses that had addressed diversity issues, however at that point in time she had not been quite ready to receive the information.

I also had SOC 304, Introduction to the Non-Western World class, and that was all about diversity. I mean, it was all about how we don’t recognize the influence of the non-Western world on our country, how we’re so ethnocentric. I mean, the whole world centers around the United States basically in a lot of our minds; that’s what the professor was arguing, and I took that to heart what he was saying and I listened in class and I learned some things, but I think in the course of that semester I was still thinking, why do I really need to know all of this, you know? This isn’t really affecting me.

Even though she typically displayed an openness to diversity, Leslie did not fully comprehend the relevance of the information being presented to her. With her characteristic insight, Leslie went on to explain further.

I need to understand, you know, politics in Asia. I need to try to incorporate this into my worldview. I wasn’t in that frame of mind yet. When I think about it, that is kind of scary to me because I have always been the type of person that tries to take every view into account, and I’m just saying that because I think how resistant I was to those ideas, and I wonder about students that aren’t very sensitive by nature. Do you see what I’m saying? I wonder about students who came from families that didn’t foster that at all. I mean, my parents were tolerant people, were curious, you know, trying to understand different cultures and different ways of thinking, and I wonder about some of my peers who came from backgrounds that were completely closed off, what kind of struggles they are going through in that area.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory study of one student’s development of multicultural awareness and sensitivity is, at best, a beginning. Because this research is a case study of a single student’s experience, it has very limited generalizability. Nevertheless, the results of the current study are suggestive of several important points that may be worthy of consideration and further investigation by teacher educators.

First, although it is certainly true that students’ entering attitudes and beliefs serve as filters for what they learn about diversity from their teacher education program, there appear to be several other factors that may also play a critical role in facilitating students’ learning about diversity. Specifically, it is likely that the dispositional and experiential factors identified as important in Leslie’s multicultural development are important to the growth of other teacher candidates as well. Furthermore, the dispositional factors may be particularly significant because they may determine prospective teachers’ readiness (or lack thereof) to learn from their intercultural and educational experiences.

Second, although multicultural teacher education courses and field experiences are certainly important tools for developing students’ awareness of and sensitivity to diversity, these courses and experiences, by themselves, may be insufficient to counteract the power of students’ preexisting attitudes and beliefs. For Leslie, her course work and field experiences supported her learning about diversity, however it seems very unlikely that she would have changed as she did without the concurrent influence of the dispositional and experiential factors identified in the current study.

Third, the three dispositions identified in the current study (i.e., openness, self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, and commitment to social justice) may be important predictors of how likely preservice teachers are to develop greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity during their preparation program. Consequently, it may be advisable for teacher education programs to consider these dispositions when making admission decisions. Haberman and
Post (1998) argued that teachers for culturally diverse students should be selected on the basis of their ideology and predispositions. They contend that “training is useful only for those with appropriate predispositions” (p. 103). Levine-Rasky (2001), although acknowledging some of the potential challenges of doing so, has also argued for the selection of prospective teachers. The findings of the current study would seem to lend further support to this argument by suggesting that students with certain dispositions may gain more from their diversity courses and experiences. Thus, rather than attempting to change the views of resistant teacher candidates, prescreening prospective teachers and then selecting only those with favorable predispositions may be a more effective strategy for teacher education programs. If students are not dispositionally “ready” to receive the instruction and experiences presented to them, even the best-designed teacher preparation programs may be ineffective in developing appropriate multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

Finally, students’ having personal experiences with diversity, along with the opportunity for appropriate processing of these experiences, may be critical to their developing greater multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Although Leslie began her teacher education program with favorable dispositions for learning about diversity, it was her intercultural experiences that actually stimulated her multicultural growth by pushing her out of her comfort zone and challenging her to re-examine her racial attitudes and beliefs. The implication for teacher educators is that even though prospective teachers may begin their teacher education program with the desired predispositions for learning about diversity, they still need to have actual experiences with individuals from different racial/cultural backgrounds. Along with providing opportunities for mediated intercultural experiences during the teacher education program, it may also be advisable to require some type of intense diversity training experience (such as that Leslie experienced the summer before her junior year of college) or some other meaningful intercultural experiences, perhaps as a condition for admission into the program.

Leslie is certainly not a typical preservice teacher. She seemed to show a greater propensity for developing multicultural awareness and sensitivity than most of the students in our program. However, by looking at the dispositions and experiences that seemed to be key in promoting Leslie’s development, I believe that we may find indicators of the types of dispositions we might want to look for or seek to develop in other students, as well as ideas for the kinds of experiences we might need to provide or encourage them to pursue on their own. This investigation certainly needs to be followed up with additional investigations involving more students. If subsequent research in this area determines that these factors are rather consistently associated with the students who make the greatest gains in multicultural awareness and sensitivity, then we may have a better idea of what dispositions/qualities we need to look for in prospective teachers and also what kinds of experiences we will need to provide to facilitate the development of their multicultural awareness and sensitivity.

REFERENCES


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