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Acquisition of Cultural Awareness in Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

It is the desire of teacher educators in Australia that their mandated unit of study on multiculturalism and indigenous studies produces a cultural awareness in future teachers of the issues faced by multicultural and indigenous students. This paper reports a study where one cohort of 119 pre-service teachers was surveyed in the first and last lectures of the unit on what they believed would be the factors affecting their teaching in multicultural and indigenous classrooms. A significant perception change ($p=0.05$) of the students was measured between the first lecture and the last lecture. Students moved from a perception that physical, religious and language factors would be the main issues to their belief that prejudice, stereotyping, sensitivity and ethnocentrism would be the factor they would need to work with.

Keywords: teacher training, multiculturalism, indigenous, racism, stereotyping

INTRODUCTION

Teacher training institutions in Australia need to ensure their courses contain a mandatory unit of study covering multicultural studies and indigenous education. While this unit is in many cases initially seen by the students as a necessary but tiresome and unrelated part of the teacher education program as they begin their studies, the unit coordinator at one teacher training institution has noticed significant perception changes during the course of its presentation. This paper will examine factors affecting multicultural education and will report on trends in student perception changes as a result of studying this unit.

There are several reasons why the study of multiculturalism is so important for pre-service teachers:

1. Future teachers need to understand the complex nature of a multicultural society because their classrooms will be microcosms of that very society.
2. These same teachers need to know the history and factors around multiculturalism so they can facilitate in their students tolerance and understanding for the society they live in.
3. Multicultural Studies is not only a mandated area of study in initial teacher education, but it is also a required area of study at primary and secondary school level in the Australian Curriculum.

This paper examines some of the significant recent research on how tertiary students acquire a cultural sensitivity and how these students' attitudes change as they are confronted with a unit of study on diversity, multiculturalism and racism. It then goes on to examine the changes one particular cohort of students made as they were confronted with this type of unit.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has specified 7 *General Capabilities* for the Australian Curriculum all of which are to be addressed through the *Learning Areas*.

One of these capabilities is called *Intercultural Understanding*. This capability is intended to help students deal more with thoughts, feelings and concepts including empathy, acceptance, understanding, responsibility and reconciliation (www.acara.edu.au).

These requirements make it vital for pre-service teachers to not only have an understanding of the factors, terms and history of multicultural and indigenous education in Australia, but to be exposed to and make their own decisions on some of the more complex, political and even emotive issues and concepts that present themselves in the study of cultural diversity.

BACKGROUND

A worthy objective in any pre-service teacher unit on multicultural education is to facilitate student reflection on issues of diversity. As Willis (2000) points out, teaching methods and best practice in multicultural classrooms should be secondary objectives to expanding the student's thinking about how culture influences society. This means: ". . . not for glamorized ideas of tolerance, but something much more important, respect for one's self, one's culture, and the culture of others." (p. 276)

How does the teaching of diversity affect students' awareness of racism and White privilege? Kernahan and Davis (2007) used the CoBRAS (Colour Blind Racial Attitude Scale) developed by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee and Browne (2000) to survey 49 undergraduate students to discover the students' awareness of racism and racial privilege that had developed over the course of the unit. They also used a qualitative measure consisting of three different scenarios for participants to comment on. Their findings indicated the success of the unit in that the students ". . . became more aware of racism, including its pervasive and institutional nature, and more clearly realized the extent of White privilege" (p. 51).

In similar fashion Kernahan and Davis (2010) researched another cohort of students taking a diversity class and this time measured their attitudes to racial issues before the unit was taken, after the unit was completed and then one year later. It was discovered that after one year, while some of the strong feelings gained from the unit of study had subsided, ". . . this is balanced by increased feelings of comfort with racial issues and an apparent increase in interaction with those of other races" (p. 41).

More positive reports on the teaching of prejudice and racism are highlighted in Chick, Karis and Kernahan (2009), who discuss the increases in student awareness of white guilt, privilege and student desire to take some sort of action. In the mixed method study they conducted on four tertiary level classes and their perceptions of what they had learned in a class on cultural diversity, they discovered:

. . . what helped students learn, cognitive and affective obstacles to learning, and the benefit of exposing students to multiple perspectives, empathy-enhancing activities, and emotional regulation skills. (p. 2)

Fink (2003) as cited by Chick et al (2009) designed a multi-step process for creating significant tertiary level courses. The concept of "significant learning" is referred to and it is stated that when students learn something about themselves and the way they relate to others, then significant learning is occurring. When students are confronted with a subject that teaches diversity, racism and tolerance, it is inevitable that they will be challenged to consider their own attitudes and the way they see others.

The learning of cultural awareness in the training of medical students is an interesting parallel to teacher training. Roberts, Saunders, Mann & Wass (2010) used a grounded theory and thematic analysis approach to assess the attitudes of medical students. They found that these students did not see the relevance of diversity training to their area of study. "They felt it should be learnt experientially in the workplace and socially among peers." (p. 559)

In medical education several techniques for creating student awareness of cultural issues have been adopted. These include: a cultural sensitivity campaign based on an awareness of diversity (Kai et al, 2001), a frank discussion of issues that arise from different cultures that may confront professionals

(Frank and McLeod, 2005), developing a social responsibility type response to the outcomes of racial intolerance (Frank and McLeod, 2005), ensuring students reach a level of 'cultural competency' (Betancourt et al, 2005) and ensuring students can work in a culturally 'safe' space. (Gray et al, 2003).

In an effort to remove racism from the classroom and treat every student the same there is the real risk that teachers develop a totally 'colour-blind' philosophy thereby ignoring the fact that they do in fact have multiple ethnicities in their classrooms. This of course can lead to a teacher denying the class of potentially rich learning experiences for their students. Atwater (2007) points out that:

Teachers who adhere to the color-blind ideology of not noticing racial difference may minimize differences and emphasize similarities. Thus, they may avoid children's racial questions or comments in the elementary years – during a crucial time of their development of racial cognition. This avoidance can thwart the child's ability to engage in constructive discourse and to develop critical thinking on the subject ... (p. 2)

The gradual unveiling to students of a system of society and education that they have been brought up in, have believed in and in fact has delivered to them the very education providing such insights, can be unsettling to students. The viewing of video documentaries of Jane Elliot's 'Blue Eye/Brown Eye' human experiment in racial awareness is disturbing to many students. The author of this paper has witnessed students needing to leave the lecture theatre when these are shown. The overwhelming belief of the students however is that they constitute necessary knowledge.

Willis (2000) describes the same sorts of reactions. In her classes she sees it necessary to consider race alongside the teaching of literacy. She reports that: 'Learning to deal with diversity and individual instances of racism and discrimination pales in comparison to learning about the historic and institutional racism that exists and from which they have continued to benefit' (p. 270).

METHOD

In the process of conceiving a way of evaluating the impact of the unit of study called Multicultural Studies and Indigenous Education, the unit coordinator requested that the students taking the unit fill in the same survey in the first lecture of the semester and then in the last lecture. This was to measure if there had been a shift in the thinking of the students as a result of taking this unit of study.

The survey simply asked the students to list three factors that they would need to take into account when teaching classes of multiple ethnic backgrounds including indigenous students. The survey asked them to write the name of their first pet at the top as a means of matching their answers in the first lecture to their answers in the last lecture while keeping their identity confidential. The remainder of the survey had three blank lines to write their response to the three factors they believed they would need to consider in a multicultural classroom.

The sample of students surveyed was 119.

Each of the student responses was categorized into one of three themes: *physical aspects, personal values, and beliefs/traditions*.

DATA ANALYSIS

The process of analyzing the data involved firstly attributing students' responses to one of the three broad categories: *physical, personal values, and belief/traditions*. The answers were then collated and are now presented in Table 1. This table ranks the responses by number, theme and semester.

To ensure an accurate representation of the priorities students place on the different themes, the number of responses for each answer was weighted with its ranking to give an overall value for each theme. This data is represented in Table 2.

As further evidence of the difference between perceived student issues in multicultural education at the beginning and end of the unit, a Wilcoxon matched pairs signed rank t-test for non-parametric data was taken comparing the top ten responses before and after the unit was studied.

RESULTS

The students were asked to complete the same survey in the first lecture of the semester and the last lecture of the semester to see if their ideas had changed as a result of their multicultural studies. The outcomes of the surveys are shown in Table 1. The ten most popular responses in each semester are printed in bold.

The results of the survey indicated the following:

1. The *language* barrier was replaced by *prejudice* as being the most common issue anticipated by students. In fact *language* only received half the responses at the end of the semester as it did at the beginning even though it was still seen as the second most significant issue at the end of the semester.
2. The issue of diversity of *Religion* was the second highest perceived issue before the semester of study started but was not in the top 10 factors reported at the end of the semester.
3. *Dress* received 22 responses in the first survey but did not appear as such in the second survey. *Appearance* was reported in the second survey, but only by 1 respondent and as such was not reported in Table 1.
4. Concrete concepts reported in the top 10 of the first survey such as *religion, dress, family roles* and *discipline* were replaced in the second survey by more abstract concepts such as *prejudice, stereotyping, sensitivity, and ethnocentrism*.
5. *Teacher education* is introduced in the second survey (with 16 responses) as a new idea.

Table 1: *Student perceptions of classroom factors in multicultural classes*

First class of semester	Theme	Last class of semester	Theme		
Language	physical	63	Prejudice	values	37
Religion	beliefs	58	Language	physical	32
Racism	values	37	Stereotyping	values	22
Traditions	beliefs	23	Sensitivity	values	20
Beliefs	beliefs	22	History	beliefs	18
Dress	physical	22	Learning styles	physical	17
Background	beliefs	21	Teacher education	physical	16
Learning style	physical	16	Customs	beliefs	15
Family roles	beliefs	15	Racism	values	14
Discipline	physical	15	Ethnocentrism	values	13

Customs	beliefs	13	Religion	beliefs	12
Skin colour	physical	9	Family	beliefs	11
Values/ethics	values	9	Diversity	values	10
Gender	physical	8	Acceptance	values	8
Relationships	values	8	Equality	values	8
Respect	values	7	Respect	values	7
Communication	physical	6	Inclusion	values	6
Food	physical	5	Teacher language	physical	6
Equality	physical	5	Cultural diversity	values	6
Prejudice	physical	4	Awareness	values	6
Education	physical	4	Integration	values	5
Awareness	values	3	Beliefs	values	5
Social behaviour	values	2	Indigenous education	physical	5
Interactions	values	2	Attitudes	values	4
Different understanding	values	2	Community	physical	4

Of added significance however is Table 2 where the responses for each theme were weighted by multiplying the number of responses for each answer by it's rank value and then compiling the results by theme. When this was done there was found to be a vital reversal in the popularity of the themes.

Table 2: *The weighted values of each theme at the beginning of the semester and at the end.*

Theme	Start of Semester (weighted value)	End of Semester (weighted value)
Values	296	727
Physical	803	437
Beliefs	768	153

Also gleaned from Table 1 is the fact that answers fitting into the physical aspects numbered 11 at the beginning of the semester and 6 at the end. Answers that referred to beliefs started the semester with 6 responses and ended the semester with 4. The largest change however was in student answers that reflected values where before the unit there were 6 types of answers that reflected values but at the end of the semester there were 15 different answers that were based on values.

More importantly however is the fact that at the beginning of the semester only one of the top ten student responses was values based but at the end of the semester five of the top ten student responses were based on values.

When the Wilcoxon matched pairs signed rank t-test for non-parametric data was taken comparing the top ten responses before and after the unit was studied, it was found that the two banks of responses

were significantly different ($P < 0.05$) with a P value of 0.0039. This is further evidence of the paradigm shift students have made during this unit.

DISCUSSION

It appears that for this particular cohort of students, the unit Multicultural Studies and Indigenous Education has had an impact on the way students think about and relate to cultural issues. This was a desired outcome but is more significant than expected.

We do not necessarily want to train teachers to anticipate significant issues with prejudice. The key finding here however is that the emphasis has been removed from a physical attribute such as language and has been replaced by a personal value such as prejudice. This indicates that students finished the unit thinking more deeply about issues than the visible and superficial.

This result is supported by the fact that other superficial factors such as dress, food, and family roles have been relegated to insignificant on the list of factors.

While many would not agree that religion is an insignificant issue, the students have relegated it from the top ten factors. This may indicate that as an issue it can be successfully dealt with and even used to enrich the classroom as long as the teacher keeps in mind the values based aspects that ended up in the top ten at the end of the semester.

While being absent from the first survey, the teacher training factor was introduced into the data by 16 students at the end of the semester. This appears to be direct acknowledgement of the place of multicultural and indigenous issues in the teacher training courses.

CONCLUSION

The result of this study is positive from a teaching and learning point of view. It reassures the unit coordinator that learning is occurring at a high intellectual level to the extent that multicultural and indigenous factors have been recontextualised.

This study is just a starting point however. The next step is to create an Australian version of the CoBRAS (Colour Blind Racial Attitude Scale) developed by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee and Browne (2000). Once created and implemented with a group of students, a factor analysis will be executed on the data to validate items and create scales. This will enable the CoBRAS to be used alongside the instrument used in this study for future cohorts of students.

The teacher trainees in this class will be integrating multicultural issues into their Australian Curriculum units when they are employed in schools. It is hoped that some of the awakenings to cultural factors they have experienced in this unit can be translated into their own classrooms.

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