

Chapter 19

Multicultural Education in the Context of Community: Assessing the Impact of Service- Learning in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Using surveys and follow-up interview data, in this chapter, the authors evaluate the influence of an immersive service learning experience from a multicultural education course for aspiring teachers. The chapter examines how required 20-hour field experience is utilized by different professors as part of a professional disposition assessment to pre-screen students for admission into the teaching program, as well as how the field experience impacts teacher candidates' belief system and cultural competency. This research examines and seeks to provide points of discussion regarding the challenges of the service-learning component and recommendations for improving the course. To improve the course delivery and the unique partnership, the multicultural education course has with a variety of community organizations received surveys from hundreds of former students. This project builds on these initial surveys with interviews.

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural education is designed to help educate preservice teachers (PSTs) on various aspects of human diversity in ways that can help them acquire cultural competency, anti-racist education, and social justice skills which are all relevant tools to becoming an effective culturally responsive pedagogue (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990). In this chapter, the authors argue that community field experience is a

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vital aspect of the multicultural education preparation. Within the community of multicultural education researchers, cultural encapsulation of the racial majority is considered one of the main causes of racism and prejudice. Therefore, it is incumbent on teacher educators to provide multiple opportunities for future teachers, who tend to be White, to interact regularly with students of Color in formal and informal settings. Community centers happen to be some of those service learning arenas where many culturally, linguistically, and economically disadvantaged (CLED) students go for after-school programs such as tutoring, sports, and other social skills.

Rooted in an evaluation of a mid-sized Midwestern university's multicultural education course, this current project investigates the required service learning component of the course, Introduction to Multicultural Education (EDMU), required for admission to the university's teacher education program for secondary education majors. Normally taken during a student's sophomore year, the course is taught by a rotating collection of faculty who engage students in an investigation of their understandings, attitudes, dispositions, and assumptions of the modern multicultural classroom.

To initiate the research project, the authors examined at seven years of institutional data and general statistics on the multicultural education course. This initial analysis revealed that since 2010 over 3,000 students have taken the course. Of those students, 88% (2,644) were White; 5% were African American; 56% female; 44% male. In addition, 89% were in-state students and 11% were out-of-state students. The authors found that the demographics for those that responded to the survey matched the demographics for the 3,000 students who've taken the course over the past seven years.

For this study, the researchers used a mixed method design looking at both students' response rates to survey questions, and using a phenomenological approach to the qualitative analysis of their written responses to questions.

PSTs examine themselves through multiple components of identity including, but not limited to, race, gender, and socio economic status. The main objectives of the service learning component of the course is for PSTs to learn how to work with students from different cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds; to apply culturally responsive pedagogic theory in real-life classroom situation; to familiarize themselves with people who are culturally, racially, economically, at times, religiously different from them (Cole & Zhou, 2014). Many prospective teachers come into teacher education programs without giving enough thought as to the public school curricular and pedagogic intricacies. The field experience affords them the opportunity to play the role of a teacher by actually working directly with children of different racial, economic, gendered, religious, linguistic backgrounds. By so doing, they begin to relate the course readings with the reality in schools and then try to apply the theories being learned in the course to their tutoring and their field experiences.

This research provides points of discussion regarding the challenges of the service learning component and recommendations for improving the course. With an end goal to improve the course delivery and the unique partnership the multicultural education course has with a variety of community organizations, surveys were received from 105 former students. This project builds on these initial surveys with interviews.

This research study began with the following research questions:

1. Why is multicultural service learning important? And
2. How do students experience the course?
3. What impact does multicultural service learning have on future PSTs?

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