

Chapter 28

Preparing Pre-service Early Childhood Candidates for Diverse Classrooms: The Open Doors Program

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ABSTRACT

The demographics of schools in United States (U.S.) are rapidly changing. Therefore, teachers in the U. S. need to be prepared to teach children with a wide variety of diverse backgrounds. This article describes an introductory early clinical experience purposefully designed to provide early childhood pre-service teachers from a large Midwestern university in the U. S. with opportunities to teach children in a high-need and diverse setting. Data from exit slips and surveys associated with the Open Doors program were analyzed over four years. Results indicated that almost 90% of candidates felt the experience was beneficial to their professional growth and would consider working in a diverse school. Slightly over 90% felt the experience increased their knowledge and skills regarding working with diverse students. Implications for similar projects are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Classrooms around the United States (U. S.) are clearly becoming more diverse. Within the last 15 years, classroom demographics in the U. S. have changed dramatically, especially related to student race, ethnicity, economic levels, and primary languages (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). In some school districts in U. S. this includes: “25% living in poverty; 10% to 20% having identified learning differences; 15% speaking a language other than English as their primary language, and about 40% as students of color” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 301). If these trends continue, researchers have predicted that by 2060, current minority groups in our schools are likely to represent the majority (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

Despite these changes in classroom diversity, a majority of Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 teachers in U. S. are White, middle-class females who speak only English. Further, many of these teachers feel inadequate in meeting the needs of diverse students (Hollins & Guzman, 2005), particularly those with backgrounds different from themselves (Helfrich & Bean, 2011). Some researchers have attributed this perceived lack of preparedness to inadequate teacher preparation (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005).

Consequently, leaders from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) emphasized that teacher educators in the U. S. need to prepare teacher candidates for their work with a diverse population through an integrated curriculum focused on knowledge, dispositions, and skills relevant to serving children with diverse backgrounds (CAEP, 2016).

Realizing the importance of diverse clinical experiences in shaping the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher education candidates, early childhood professors at a large Midwestern University initiated this study to assess the impact of a newly implemented diverse early clinical experience for early childhood candidates. Specifically, research questions included: 1) To what extent can an early diverse experience provide a context for candidates to critically reflect upon the experience? 2) To what extent can the experience influence candidate’s knowledge of working with diverse students? 3) After the experience, to what extent would candidates consider working in a diverse school? 4) Overall, how beneficial is the diverse clinical experience to candidate’s professional growth?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Field Experiences

Teacher education faculty can help teacher candidates develop skills they need to support diverse students by creating strong partnerships with teachers in effective high-needs schools (Mascarenhas, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2016). Clinical experiences are a key component of this partnership and perhaps the most important component of pre-service teacher preparation (Prater & Sileo, 2004). These experiences allow teacher candidates to apply their pedagogical knowledge and skills in real world contexts and develop relationships with learners whose racial and ethnic backgrounds, linguistic skills, social class status, school experiences, and cultural practices are different from their own (Anderson & Stillman, 2013).

Influence of Diverse Field Experiences

Anderson and Stillman’s (2013) review of the literature of articles published between 1990 and 2010 served as a primary context for this project. Their review emphasized field experiences that prepared

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