

Diversity Needs: Preparing Family and Consumer Sciences Teachers for the 21st Century Classroom

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Changing student demographics have resulted in a great deal of attention in Illinois on how to best prepare family and consumer sciences (FACS) pre-service teachers for entrance into a diversified classroom. The research objective of this study was to determine diversity curricular needs for Illinois FACS teacher educators. Qualitative responses from two groups, FACS teacher educators and FACS beginning teachers in Illinois, formed the data. Findings indicated more diversity education and training is needed among both groups. Cases studies were identified by both groups as an effective instructional tool to teach about diversity. Sample cases studies on diversity are provided.

In Illinois, diversity in education has been recognized as a top priority among state and local educational leaders. As the student populations in schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the [Illinois] State Board of Education (ISBE) needed to respond with educational reform efforts that meet the needs of all students. As a result, Illinois recently modified the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (IPTS) and identified *Teaching Diverse Students* as the number one standard to be addressed. Standard 1 – *Teaching Diverse Students* is defined by the State as “the competent teacher understands the diverse characteristics and abilities of each student and how individuals develop and learn within the context of their social, economic, cultural, linguistic, and academic experiences” (ISBE, 2010). By giving preference to diversity, Illinois is aligning with the instructional dynamics needed to teach in a 21st century classroom.

The changes in population demographics have prompted the examination of programming and practices of diversity among teacher education programs. Researchers have confirmed teacher education programs have not adequately kept up with the cultural climate of today’s classroom (Alexander, West & Ebelhar, 2007; Zeichner, 1992). The lack of teacher preparedness can have negative effects on students’ academic performance and persistence, (Zeichner, 1992) thus underlining the need to increase diversity education in teacher education programs. Education diversity is defined as the interaction between individual differences among teacher and students in, but not limited to, learning needs, emotional needs, culture, gender, life experiences, life situations, age, sexual orientation, physical abilities, cognitive abilities, behavior, skills, strategies, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics, and values (Lenz, Deshler & Kissam, 2004).

The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that by 2018, one in two students in school will be labeled as a diverse student. All the while, the national pre-service teacher population continues to be reflective of white, female, and middle-class characteristics which results in greater social, cultural, and academic distance within the teacher-student interaction (Chisholm, 2004; Teachers Shortage Areas, 2006). Chisholm (2004) indicated that most novice teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and experience that build the requisite professional assurance for working with diverse students. In fact, Brown (2003) suggested one of the top three challenges causing major frustrations in the beginning teachers’ classroom was diverse student needs.

Diversity in teacher education programs continues to be integrated in a fragmented way by looking at issues separately from other university and practical experiences (Valentin, 2006). For example, programs may require a course in multicultural education taught by the education department and/or observation in a diverse classroom setting for a minimum number of hours. In both of these strategies, the pre-service teacher is a passive participant and not engaged in the learning process. Rehm and Allison (2006) emphasized teacher candidates need to understand how diversity impacts their application of teaching strategies to meet the learning needs of all students.

Acknowledgement of the changing demographics has resulted in a great deal of attention focused on how to best prepare pre-service teachers for entrance into the diversified classroom. Brown (2003) reported that teacher educators struggle with the challenge of preparing teachers for a pluralistic society. In the area of Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) education this issue is no exception. A common problem among Illinois FACS teacher educators is how to adequately address diversity in their teacher education programs (D. Hopper, personal communication, April 2011). Therefore the objective of the research project was to determine diversity curricular needs for FACS teacher educators in Illinois. As a result, Illinois FACS teacher educators can be better positioned to prepare their teachers for entrance into diversified classrooms.

Methodology

Research Objective

The research objective of this study was to determine diversity curricular needs for Illinois family and consumer sciences teacher educators.

Method and Procedure

A qualitative research design was selected to examine the phenomenon in detail and allow the respondents to describe the situations in their own words (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006). Two questionnaires were developed: 1) for FACS teacher educators and 2) for beginning FACS teachers (teaching fewer than four years). The questionnaires contained questions to help guide the respondents to answer the research objective. Both questionnaires were pilot tested with university FACS faculty members (N=4) and secondary career and technical education (CTE) teachers (N=4). The questionnaire for the FACS teacher educators focused on diversity content needs while the questionnaire for beginning FACS teachers allowed them to reflect on how to assist their former teacher education program in efforts to strengthen diversity content.

Part one of the data collection processes was targeted at Illinois FACS teacher educators. Illinois has six accredited FACS teacher education programs. One FACS teacher education faculty member from each institution was contacted to request an interview. Each interview was conducted via the phone by the primary investigator and approximately 30 minutes in length. The questionnaire guided the interview process. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed by themes and frequencies. A total of six interviews were completed.

Part two of the data collection was aimed at Illinois beginning FACS teachers. The survey was placed online using surveymonkey.com. A convenient sampling frame was used to email a cover letter that included the questionnaire link to beginning Illinois FACS teachers. Thirty-one respondents completed the questionnaire. The primary investigator transcribed the data, established response categories, and responses were placed in the categories. The

questionnaire, coding rubric, and final results of the coding were presented to FACS education professional colleagues to independently review to establish credibility of interpretation and to ensure conformability. Following a group discussion, data were recoded to establish the reliability and validity of the process.

Findings

Responses from two groups formed the data to determine diversity curricular needs for Illinois FACS teacher education programs. The focus for FACS teacher educators' data was on content needs while beginning FACS teachers reflected on their experience in effort to assist in strengthening diversity content within their former FACS teacher education program.

Illinois FACS Teacher Educators

A total of six FACS teacher educators, which represented one from each accredited FACS teacher education program in Illinois were interviewed. Respondents were asked, on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = poorly to 5 = extremely well) "How well do you address diversity within your FACS teacher education program?" Five of the six respondents indicated a score of 3 or felt they were doing an 'average' job of teaching diversity within their program.

With the new Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, specifically addressing Standard #1, Teaching Diverse Students respondents were asked if they had to alter their curriculum to include the topic of diversity. Four respondents reported, "Yes, modifications to the curriculum are needed." One FACS teacher educator stated, "We need to expand the ways we meet the diversity standard within our methods courses. I'm in the progress of developing a diversity lecture on differences of learners." Another educator communicated, "I'm looking for a diversity course taught within the education department at our university."

The educators were asked, "Do you feel adequately qualified to teach diversity to pre-service teachers?" Two educators indicated, "not really, but will educate myself." One educator reported, "She's taken a class on diversity in graduate school," and another stated, "she taught in a high school with a high percentage of diversity."

In a final question the FACS teacher educators were asked, "What type of curriculum would be most beneficial for you to address diversity within your FACS teacher education classes?" Four respondents noted, "case studies," and two identified, "hands-on activities."

Illinois Beginning FACS Teachers

Thirty-one beginning FACS teachers completed the questionnaire. Respondents were asked, "How do you define diversity?" The most common term used to begin each definition was 'differences' followed by 'characteristics.' The top five characteristics identified were gender, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and religion.

When asked on a scale 1 to 5 (1= poorly to 5 = extremely well) how well are you handling diversity within your classroom, 90% of the respondents reported a score of 3 or 'average.' A follow up question asked was, "What challenges have you experienced with diversity in your classroom?" The top three challenges identified were did not know cultural backgrounds, English as second learners (ESL), and varying academic levels in the same class. One teacher stated, "Pre-service teachers need to witness classrooms with high levels of diversity so that they can get a better feel of what to expect in their future careers and survive." Another teacher noted, "I feel I don't get the students respect because I come from a different background." One responded with, "I am a non-Hispanic teacher teaching in a 90% Hispanic

school. I wasn't prepared for the extreme backgrounds and the effects it has on their attitudes towards me." Other noted challenges were gangs, getting all learners to care, not having a bias in my own teaching, and more time needed with support staff (case workers).

A final question was asked to list suggestions on how FACS teacher education programs could better prepare incoming teachers for diversity within a classroom. Responses included the following: training on students involved in the justice system, diversity teaching ideas, require a diversity course, observation of classrooms with diversity, and case studies.

Conclusions and Implications

The objective of this research study project was to determine the diversity curricular needs for Illinois family and consumer sciences teacher (FACS) educators. The conclusions from the data were framed from qualitative responses of two groups: (a) Illinois FACS teacher educators and (b) Illinois beginning FACS teachers. The data together provides a perspective from both sides of the desk to determine effective strategies to prepare incoming teachers for a diversified classroom.

The Illinois FACS teacher educators reported doing an 'average' job of teaching diversity, so it is not surprising that their recent graduated teachers feel 'average' in handling diversity within their classroom. These findings support Chisholm (2004) who reported most pre-service teachers lack the knowledge and skills to work with diverse students. This finding directly impacts three groups of people: 1) high school/middle school students- they may not achieve to their full academic potential or demonstrate a lack of caring; 2) teachers/pre-service teachers – may lack confidence in their teaching ability and become dissatisfied; and 3) teacher educators – produce teachers with a knowledge gap on student characteristics. The cycle to improve diversity education starts with the FACS teacher educator.

Although there are a host of curriculum that needs to be addressed in pre-service teacher's program of study, FACS teacher educators realistically cannot be proficient in every topic. The findings in this study revealed FACS teacher educators were not professional educated in diversity yet were responsible in either teaching or finding an avenue to include diversity education in their students program of study. To ensure pre-service teachers are being properly educated on diversity in a FACS classroom, FACS teacher educators should seek professional development on the topic of diversity, request educational training on diversity, or team teach with the diversity division at the university. In Illinois, there is one FACS teacher educator per institution, so it would be advisable to consult external sources such as one's advisory board or an educational council committee for ideas on how best to integrate diversity content into the program and not undertake this task alone.

By knowing the challenges beginning teachers face, teacher educators can address these topics within their program of study coursework. Realistic, engaging experiences with diversity such as witnessing and micro-teaching in multiple diversified classrooms should be included as continuous activities within coursework. With all diversity experiences, either through a course, activity, service-learning projects, community outreach efforts, or observation, classroom conversations led by the FACS teacher educator need to occur that connects what a pre-service teacher learned and experienced to their FACS teaching repertoire.

Confirming Valentin's (2006) finding, FACS teacher educators identified singular ideas of how to integrate diversity within their programs such as requiring a diversity education course. Diversity should not be treated as an isolated topic, meaning a single lecture or a class activity is not enough. These methods potentially limit the connection of diversity content,

FACS subject matter content, and true application among pre-service teachers. The topic of diversity needs to be infused using conversations, modeling teaching strategies, increasing cultural knowledge, and reflection opportunities throughout the curriculum so pre-service teachers are able to have a true understanding of diversity in education so all students are valued and supported to achieve maximum potential.

Interestingly both groups of FACS educators identified case studies as an instructional tool to use teaching diversity. Conversations about diversity dilemmas can help beginning teachers identify solutions or consequences in handling situations, sharpen their knowledge set skills of diverse students, and improve their confidence. Additionally, pre-service teachers can reflect on their own biases and application techniques. As a result of this finding, a host of case studies focusing on diversity were developed by the researcher and two urban community high school teachers to implement in teacher education classrooms. Below is a sample of case studies.

Case Study Samples

Group students or independently provide a solution to the following case studies.

1. A female Hispanic student does not return a permission slip required for her to attend an overnight field trip with her class. This trip is viewed as a cumulating experience for this class and you have concerns with her potential non-attendance. Upon talking with the parents and grandparents of this child you discover that the family holds traditional Hispanic family values, where the women of the family are restricted to meet in mixed-sex groups outside of class.
How do you effectively handle this situation with family members?
2. You are a Caucasian female teaching a class where Latino students are in the majority. While they are media savvy and on the surface, quite acculturated, you learn through class discussions about the Latino families that some students hold traditional views about the roles of men and women in the family.
Do you feel comfortable addressing gender issues in this class as a Caucasian female?
How do you address issues such as gender discrimination in the workplace and gender roles in the home while still respecting the norms and values of these Latino students?
How do you empower the female Latino students without taking anything from the male students?
3. A group of American Indian children refuse to engage in activities during indoor recess. Specifically, you offer children the chance to play cards, board games, etc. but all these children want to do is hang out in the corner and talk. While there is nothing inherently wrong with their choice of activity, you are concerned with the lack of socialization they are receiving. After talking with them privately, you learn that they are afraid of losing their Native American culture by engaging in Euro-American games.
How do you effectively handle this situation with this group of parents?
4. Throughout the day, a persistent group of white males love to chase, tease, and bother another group of white females. These behaviors take place during PE, recess, and when the class as a whole is lined up at the door. While the girls never really object to the

attention they receive, you are concerned with the subliminal sexism messages being sent to the children who participate and witness these behaviors.
How do you effectively handle this situation with the parents of the white males?

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