

The Effectiveness of Short Field Experiences in Preparing Culturally Responsive Educators

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Becoming a culturally responsive educator is a process that entails multiple factors including taking traditional courses and field experience. However, the impact of short field experiences in preparing teachers who cultivate learning environments that facilitate success for all, is not clear. Data from this study involving White pre-service teachers enrolled in a small rural teacher education program in Wyoming is encouraging.

Culturally responsive educators make a conscious effort to create a learning environment that is empowering to all learners. These teachers develop teaching resources and instructional strategies that naturally support every learner socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Gay, 2000). Additional skills including being proactive with issues of social justice are necessary. These skills are easily gained through the use of a variety of approaches including field experiences.

Field experiences are resourceful teaching strategies but just how effective they are in educating culturally responsive pre-service teachers was not clear. Cazden and Mehan (1989) viewed field experiences favorably enabling the University of Wyoming/Casper Center (UW/CC) to introduce short field trip dimensions to help pre-service teachers become culturally responsive educators.

PROBLEM

How effective are short field experiences in enabling pre-service teachers to become culturally responsive educators?

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 19 non-traditional pre-service teachers volunteered to participate. In preparation for the visit, guest speakers familiar with American Indian cultures discussed the various aspects of these cultures in the context of schooling and learning. In addition, participants responded in writing to pre and post visit questions.

RESULTS

Data showed that 94% (n=15) of the participants had no experience with American Indian schools prior to the visit. However, a thematic analysis of the description provided after the visit showed that 50% (n=8) of the participants described the visit as wonderful, while 31% (n=5) reported witnessing serious learning.

When asked before the visit if reservation schools provided similar learning experiences as do other schools in Wyoming, 56% (n=9) of the participants reported that the curriculum was modified to meet local community needs. At the conclusion of the visit 75% (n=12) reported seeing no differences. This was an important finding that clearly showed a possible change of orientation possibly due to the new experiences during the visit. Nevertheless, when asked if they would consider teaching in a reservation school, a modest gain (19%, n=3) was evident between pre and post visit responses. A thematic analysis of the willingness to teach in a reservation school showed that 56% (n=9) of the students were willing, viewing it as an opportunity for new challenges.

The participating pre-service teachers provided a variety of questions prior to the visit that seemed to focus on comparing the curriculum structure between reservation and other schools. The possible underlying theme in many of these questions was that schooling in the reservation was inferior as is evident in the following questions.

What goals and dreams do these children have for their future? What is the community and tribal council doing to make a world for their children? Are they encouraged to leave the reservation and return with a college degree to better themselves and their tribe?

Do the children learn the same things about our country that we do? How do they feel about their culture as whole? Are they continuing with the culture of the old and keeping their traditions alive?

Judging by the students' responses when asked to explain the effect of the field experience to their individual professional development, it was apparent that many of these issues they had before the visit were effectively addressed during the visit. For example, 50% (n=8) of the students reported that American Indian children are children and should be accepted.

DISCUSSION

Becoming a culturally responsive educator is a complex process. It may be unrealistic, then, to expect a one-day field experience to facilitate the acquisition of all the skills necessary to become culturally responsive. Nevertheless, a comparison of pre and post-visit data in this study shows a possible development of a new orientation towards teaching in the American Indian schools.

CONCLUSIONS

- Although pre-service teachers may not have become fully culturally responsive educators, the short field experience may have helped them develop a favorable outlook towards American Indian schools
- The field trip was effective in helping pre-service students appreciate the centrality of American Indian culture in learning

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Due to lack of enough data, it is impossible to conclusively state whether short field experiences are effective strategies for preparing culturally responsive educators.

Thus, a more in-depth study, possibly involving a control group is recommended.

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