

Bringing together Multicultural Awareness and Citizenship in post graduate teacher education*

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Abstract

Multicultural awareness relates to the common world of experiences, values and knowledge at the individual and/or group level which highlights the concepts of identity and diversity. Multiculturalism deals with the recognizing the principles and practices of "accommodating diversity" in ways that guarantee interconnectedness is the area that multiculturalism deals with. Including diversity and specifically multiculturalism is important as teachers need to work successfully with diverse learners at the ideological level, practical level, political level and methodological level. For the purposes of this article we will focus on: how Greek Master's degree candidates taking a Multicultural Education course understand the diversity around him and how it influences identity and citizenship. From the analysis we note that an opportunity for focused, organized and active participation and reflection can positively influence the multicultural awareness of post graduate education students.

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Introduction

In an increasingly diversified global world, society, both inside and outside national borders, is increasingly multicultural. When we talk about citizenship inevitably multiculturalism and its challenges also enter the discourse (Castles & Davidson, 2000; Coleman & Higgins, 2000 as cited in Acordia, 2002; Haas, 2007). A steady stream of both legal and illegal immigration has taxed many countries which were ill-prepared to deal with its consequences. Education's role in relation to citizenship development is something well recognized. Yet many educational initiatives in citizenship have a stronger emphasis on the external trappings of civic behavior rather than a focus on cultivating the necessary values in order to be available to respond responsibly to civic duties (Acordia, 2002; Cajani, 2009).

Teachers are charged with the task of preparing their students to become active citizens; citizens who see diversity as a positive factor. Teachers must not only be able to deal with the challenge of being prepared to teach both mainstream students as well as an increasing number of children coming from diverse backgrounds, but also to prepare both to become active and responsible citizens. As we have stated elsewhere "...we can learn to understand and appreciate the values, expectations, and communication styles of other traditions without giving up our own (Samovar & Porter, 1994). We can adjust appropriately and effectively to different values and communication styles if we learn how to first perceive and then adapt to them." (Spinthourakis, 2006).

A question that university teacher education programs look at is how well teachers are being prepared to meet these changing realities (Cochran-Smith *et al*, 2004; Spinthourakis, 2007). Teachers tend to feel that they aren't adequately prepared and may need more focused professional development on how to adapt their teaching specific to the needs of the changing societal realities (Lynch & Hanson, 1993; Zeichner 1994; Spinthourakis & Katsillis, 2003). As the diversity of the classroom has increased, instructional practices to address diversity have often remained unchanged. An absence of awareness in terms of minority students' cultural realities, negative experiences as well as the glass wall blocking their access to education often result in teachers resorting to stereotyping students (Aaronsohn, Carter, & Howell, 1995; Hansman & Smith, 1997) and using inappropriate curricula and instructional materials (Short, 1999). Based on their personal experiences, teachers who are only peripherally

aware of these issues, often fail to fully recognize the depth and nuances of a student's diversity, arguing that their students are doing just fine with the traditional teaching methods currently employed (Moustairas & Spinthourakis, 2005). As a result, multicultural education as West (1994) posits, is not a frill but rather a necessity. Educational research over the last several decades includes studies that focus on the importance of dealing with multiculturalism in education (Cochran-Smith *et al*, 2004).

Multicultural Awareness and Reflection in Teacher Education

Multicultural awareness relates to the common world of experiences, values and knowledge at the individual and/or group level which highlights the concepts of identity and diversity. Multiculturalism deals with the recognizing the principles and practices of "accommodating diversity" in ways that guarantee interconnectedness is the area that multiculturalism deals with. The evolution of a society in which diversity is recognized as a legitimate and integral facet of the society is a fundamental goal of multiculturalism rather than the promotion of minorities per se (Spinthourakis, 2007a). While members of different cultural and ethnic groups have the right to retain distinctive identities within a framework of key common values to which all adhere (Spinthourakis, 2006). Multicultural education strives to promote this recognition and right for all. Many post graduate teacher education programs focus on developing specializations within a broader context of education. Within the parameters of these specializations though there is increasing attention being given towards inclusion of courses that will enable the future researchers, trainers and teachers to work towards planning interventions that maximize the potential of all children. Therefore, in terms of multicultural awareness, post-graduate teacher education students need to be provided with opportunities to examine and consider their own views and beliefs with respect to diversity.

How do teacher educators provide the impetus for their post graduate students to develop this multicultural awareness. Some of the things that post graduate teacher education programs can do are find ways of having teachers use reflection and inquiry to:

- Learn about themselves and others.
- Identify multicultural situations around them.
- Identify hindrances to teaching and learning in a multicultural setting.
- Identify suitable teaching approaches in a multicultural setting.
- Propose appropriate models for teaching and learning in multicultural settings.

Reflection as a tool for understanding oneself and the other

Studies have indicated that traditional teacher education programs teaching issues related to diversity appear not to have a significant impact on attitudes and beliefs (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2005). The study and use of reflection, among other things, has been used to try to move beyond the traditional methods used in teacher education programs (Spinthourakis, 2007).

In teaching, reflection commonly has to do with teachers using critical analysis to gain knowledge of their own thinking on teaching and learning. This in turn is believed to motivate them to assume greater responsibility for their actions in the classroom. *Various researchers have supported the need to involve teachers in activities that* assist “self-exploration through metacognitive and reflective processes” (Daloglu, 2007 referencing Schon, 1987, Zeichner, 1992, 1993 and Hatton & Smith, 1995). The expression of our thoughts and beliefs are not a side-effect; instead they are an essential element of our emerging cognition (Vygotsky, 1986). However, it should be noted that developing skills of reflection is not a simple task. It is important to encourage and support activities and opportunities for teachers which allow them to utilize reflection.

Journal writing encourages reflection and change where reflection is a process of inquiry, thinking and where action occurs within practice (Schön, 1987). Moreover it can promote student multicultural awareness learning by giving students opportunities to construct their own meanings in reaction to new information and experiences. Towards this end, teacher experiential learning linked to reflective journal writing can have a positive impact (Dymet & O’Connell, 2003). Consequently, as Daloglu (2002) states, maintaining a reflective journal enables students to “...reconceptu-

alize or rework their views and ideas by stating their philosophy or vision, contemplating an image of teaching and teachers, and being insightful about the purpose of education and about self as a teacher (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002).”

Our research explored several questions related to both the post-graduate student experience as well as that of the instructor. For the purposes of this article we will focus on: whether an intensive post graduate course, with discussions, focused reading and reflective journal writing on the part of students leads to increased multicultural awareness.

In the past we have looked at related issues but at the pre-service teacher education level (Spinthourakis, 2007b; Karatzia-Stavlioti et al, 2006). We entered into the present study with questions concerning (a) what prior knowledge, experiences and possible stereotypes the students brought with them, (b) how the components of the course, and (c) which the concrete learning experiences affect post graduate teacher education students’ awareness related to multicultural issues and more broadly citizenship.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in our study were Education Master’s (Med) program students attending a Greek State tertiary institution located in a rural area. The MEd program was open to all undergraduate degree holders who passed admission examinations administered by the specific post-graduate program committee. The participants came to the program from different areas of education profession: elementary school teachers, early childhood teachers, high school teachers, and computer science teachers. They ranged in age from 22 – 45, which translated into teaching experiences from 0 (zero) years to as many as 25. Of the 17 post-graduate students attending the course, 14 were female and 3 male. 70% of the participants were linguistically and culturally Greek while 30% could be described as linguistically and culturally differentiated who while having been born and raised in Greek society had a different cultural heritage (within their family there were nuclear family members who were Slavic or Turkish heritage language speakers).

Situation

The post graduate course the students were enrolled in was entitled: Multicultural Education: Special Topics. It was conducted as a compact intensive course with course sessions every day for two weeks, one at the outset of the semester and the second towards the end of the thirteen week semester.

The course's basic purpose was to extend, augment and challenge, if needed, the students' prior learning in relation to diversity and teaching. The format of the course did not include traditional lectures but rather was constructed around diversity themes and questions intended to promote interaction and provoke discussion. From the outset, the students were asked to consider what diversity means to them by looking at themselves as unique individuals who were also members of a larger collective as well as members of the teaching profession. The students were asked to consider whether or not Greek society could be characterized as being multicultural. Essentially, they were asked to tune into the world around and beyond them; to critically listen, read, see, feel and reflect on their reality and that beyond themselves. Besides having to find, read and write critical reviews of articles linked to diversity, identity, multiculturalism in society and education, and citizenship broadly as well as an research paper on the course theme's in conjunction with their professional background, every student was required to keep a reflective journal for a period of no less than one month. In this journal they were to record and reflect on the following: (a) Who am I? How do I see others? Am I a culturally sensitive person? What experiences have I had with people different from myself?; (b) Are there linguistic and cultural minorities in my town, region, and country? If so who are they—how do I see them?; (c) Listen to the news, read newspapers, magazines, watch TV, when out and about tune into conversations, visuals with a focus on diversity. Keep a dossier of artifacts/articles/etc.; and (d) critically reflect on these—go beyond description. As part of their first assignment they were asked to write an autobiographical piece to be entered into their journal and outlining their culture and identity (Fernandez, 2003).

Analysis

To answer our research questions we looked at the experiences the post graduate students had chosen to include in their daily journal of diversity and multiculturalism around us; their written reflections. Using a qualitative content analysis procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mayring, 2000 as cited by Spinthourakis, 2007b), we focused on the journal entries to identify the students responses in relation to the following research questions: (a) what prior knowledge, experiences and possible stereotypes the students brought with them, (b) how the components of the course, and (c) which the concrete learning experiences affect post graduate teacher education students' awareness related to multicultural issues and more broadly citizenship. Relevant journal excerpts were noted, categorized topically and chronologically. Operationally defined changes were noted when the excerpts contained references to (a) their knowledge about diversity and multiculturalism, (b) critical reflection on that knowledge and (c) statements about the topics, or beliefs about a particular topic that differed from those expressed in earlier entries. From this analysis, three major themes emerged on issues of multiculturalism/identity/diversity: a) what we didn't know, b) what we have learned, and c) journal writing and reflection. In this paper though we will limit our presentation to a brief discussion of our general findings with selected sample excerpts representative of the journal entries submitted and analyzed. Our study findings both in relation to the more detailed analysis findings and those presented in this article should not be considered as representing the general post-graduate student population, but rather be seen as a case study specific to the group of students participating in the study.

Discussion

From the analysis we were able to make the following observations: There was initial and often vocal resistance to the activity, expressed in class and during breaks. This was not unexpected as there tends to be a more general reluctance to engage in written reflection on the part of

Greek graduate students since in many instances it is a completely new technique for many Greek educators. Initial entries were usually short descriptions—bullets—lacking reflective qualities. Some class discussion topics, such as ‘what religions are practiced in Greece’ and ‘who should have access to health care and education’, ‘what does it mean to belong to a linguistic and/or cultural minority’ and finally, ‘who should have the right to become a citizen’ generated heated discussion and led a portion of the students to read on a given theme to find ways forward, possible solutions to problems or support for their ideas.

About half-way through we noted their first attempts at ‘critical reflection’ about themselves and others. For example, over the course of the journal entry period¹ excerpts of what one student wrote include:

“I am Greek, my language is Greek, and I am Greek Orthodox. It’s only recently that Greece has had to deal with ‘immigrants’, with the majority being illegal immigrants and foreigners; aliens. They aren’t Greeks and they shouldn’t have the same rights...If you don’t look around you it’s hard to see things. I never really thought about people culturally different from me living in Greece and what they go through. They were basically faceless. They were all ‘Albanians’. But they aren’t all ‘Albanians’, they can be Russian, Bulgarian or some other ethnicity. They also aren’t just ‘Albanians’. Just like I’m not just Greek, I’m a Greek female but also a xxxxx female as well.²... We’re all individuals. We should be more open to others but it’s not easy. There’s so much to learn. Even if we learn about multiculturalism, will we be able to change anything?”

It appears that it was at the half way point that they came to realize that thoughts and feelings become clearer when they are expressed. However, the fact that it happened approximately half way through the activity may be more due to the shortness of the time they maintained the journals and newness of the activity rather than because of other reasons. Although, the fact that in effect they were progressing through this activity alone may have also served as a factor for the relative delay in their experiencing their first real critical reflective entries as feedback is very important; even though email contact with the instructor was used by some for feedback purposes. It also tended to coincide with reports in the news of instances both in country and abroad that had to do with minorities, immigration and diversity. Given the compact nature of the course and our analysis of the students’ entries, we note that future courses should have more structured ‘interventions’ as catalysts for the students to both reflect on and use as clues for identifying other examples of multiculturalism. Several reported

that journaling was tiring and time consuming. However, about a third of the participants wrote that it allowed them to note changes in their beliefs and behaviors since they could monitor any instances of a change in knowledge and stance by going back and rereading earlier entries. Many of the students noted at the half way juncture that their initial entries about multiculturalism were clichéd statements that after reflection and rereading were more something gleaned from general statements rather than from research and/or in depth discussion backed by facts instead of hearsay.

It should also be noted that the degree of reflection appeared to be influenced more by age, experience and background rather than gender and affinity for writing; with older students who had more life experience being more candid and reflective. Although even here we should not generalize as there was at least one younger student with no teaching experience who kept a very detailed and reflective journal. The students did not often open up about personal experiences as there was a general reluctance to link the issues raised with personal accounts. In those instances where students made entries referring to the benefits of journal writing, these tended to come at the end of the period they were required to keep the journal. Approximately a third though, appeared to move from insularity and defensiveness to a more open-minded stance and discourse. A portion of the excerpts referenced the need for more consistent feedback such as the kind they felt they received during the actual class meetings.

Finally, we noted that the majority of the post graduate students whose reflective journals we analyzed held fairly ethnocentric views of the world at the outset. Interestingly, the references tended to be towards national identity with only two touching upon European and those had to do with Greece being a member of the European Union. Citizenship broadly was referred to in relation to the rights we have. Only one student referenced being both a citizen of Greece and the European Union. Most of the linguistically and culturally different post graduate students also tended to hold much the same Eurocentric views. What was of particular interest was that two of the students who had linguistically and culturally differentiated backgrounds discussed it during class and wrote that this was the first time that they had been encouraged to talk about their background; both went on to do their research papers on subjects related to their families heritage language and family member refugee experiences. However, even with these limited references we can say that what emerges is that when adequate time is available and there are unrestricted opportunities to express their beliefs, the post graduate teacher education students in

our study did appear to move beyond the stereotype, challenging their prior knowledge, augmenting their knowledge base and being more open to discussion.

Conclusion

Through this study we have touched upon questions related to preparing post graduate teacher education students with respect to developing their multicultural awareness through discussion and reflection. Clearly, the latter is not a simple undertaking; to be effective time and organization are needed. How can we as teacher educators move beyond traditional teaching approaches and make learning more personal and thought provoking for future education stakeholders? Do employing compact intensive course structures allow post graduate students the time needed to acclimate to new and different activities such as journal writing? How can we help our post graduate students understand that accommodating diversity and multicultural awareness are fundamental to the identities of all the parties involved, students, teachers, administrators and the general public? Our findings lead us to the conclusion that much more needs to be done. While reflective journal writing holds promise and does appear to be an effective teaching tool, no single strategy can be seen as a panacea. One suggestion is to include in the course field experiences within different sectors of society³ that will enable the post graduate students to experience multiculturalism first hand. Even with suggestions such as this, the questions still far exceed the answers, but research at the university level can help us identify a cache of approaches, teaching strategies and experiences that can provide post graduate teacher education students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to work productively with all students in increasingly multicultural societies.

Notes

1. the ...indicates different journal entry dates, several days apart.
2. The geographic designation is not included here, but its inclusion can be

seen as an acknowledgement of their local identity rather than solely that of the broader ethnic identity.

3. These experiences could be at the local, regional or national level without ignoring the opportunities the EU Life-Long Learning programs makes available.

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