Multicultural Teacher Education Matters

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Introduction

The trend underlining the increasing population of diverse students in K-12 classrooms has been well documented (Bauml, Castro, Field, & Morowski, 2016; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Kim, 2011; Kumar & Lauermann, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sanders, Haselden, & Moss, 2014; Sleeter, 2017, Thomas & Vanderhaar, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012), about 48% of the school age population in the United States are students of color. In contrast to this student diversity, the teacher workforce is far less diverse, with White teachers representing roughly 82% of the faculty in K-12 classrooms in the United States (NCES, 2012). More notably, researchers view this teaching force as homogeneous and culturally deficient: predominately white, female, middle-class, monolingual, monocultural, and heterosexual (Banks, Obiakor, & Algozzine, 2013; Cherng & Davis, 2017; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Gist, 2016; Kumar & Lauermann, 2018; Sanders et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2017; Starker & Fitchett, 2013). The aforementioned statistics suggest that teaching in very diverse schools will become the reality for many preservice teachers entering the teaching field. Therefore, Sanders, Haselden, and Moss (2014) suggest that “this rich diversity throughout the nation requires that public schools welcome change and adopt a willingness to implement policies and practices that promote acceptance, respect, and inclusion of all people” (p. 171). However, Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that many teachers have concerns about working in diverse schools and need to examine their beliefs, expand their awareness, and develop skills related to students from diverse backgrounds.

Researchers and advocates have been concerned about the existing and growing differences in the demographics between K-12 students and their teachers (Bauml et al., 2016; Cherng & Davis, 2017; Howard, 2010; Jensen, Whiting, & Chapman, 2018). These cultural differences are not only restricted to race and ethnicity, but also include gender, religion, sexuality, language, and socioeconomic status. This dramatic demographic change is more apparent than ever before; however, this change is not the problem. The problem lies in the way educators, and especially teacher educators, have responded to this change. Undoubtedly, the demographic makeup of K-12 teachers does not reflect the pluralism of the students who need to be served in current classrooms. This cultural mismatch between the increased diversity in the student population and the teachers’ backgrounds, perspectives, and cultural knowledge can significantly impact student achievement (Banks, 2016; Banks et al., 2013; Brown, 2007; Gay, 2010; Hsiao, 2015; Kim, 2011; Kumar & Lauermann, 2018). Therefore, Howard (2010) contends that “a major challenge before the entire educational community is to identify ways of creating schools and school practices that recognize the gifts and talents of all students, in particular those young people who come from historically marginalized backgrounds” (p. 13). Furthermore, many researchers (Brown, 2007; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Ford, 2014; Gay, 2002, Gay, 2010) continue to challenge schools and educators to develop creative ways to work with students from diverse backgrounds to ensure that they receive a high quality and equitable education. This literature review investigated the following questions: (1) What challenges are experienced by multicultural teacher educators? (2) What are the successful strategies utilized by multicultural teacher educators?
Theoretical Perspective

There have been numerous ways to conceptualize the characteristics of successful teachers of diverse students, including how teacher educators develop these successful teachers. This literature review was guided and presented through the lens of critical pedagogy. First coined by Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy offers a theoretical perspective to consider the interconnectedness of multicultural education and teacher education required to develop successful teachers for all students. Darder, Mayo and Paraskeva (2016) suggest that critical pedagogy is “uncompromisingly committed to the amelioration of inequalities and social exclusions in the classroom and society at large” (p. 1). Therefore, critical pedagogy challenges individuals to become conscious of their own consciousness as part of the self-transformation process. Advocates of critical pedagogy suggest that classroom teachers must immerse themselves in the lived experiences and culture of the students the desire to teach.

Methods

Based on the topic of this literature review, the researchers used the following criteria to select articles: (1) study content included a focus on multicultural teacher education, multicultural education, or teacher education; (2) study participants included K-12 students, teacher candidates, undergraduate or graduate students in teacher education, or faculty in traditional preparation programs; (3) researchers reported findings from empirical research designs; and (4) the article was published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The researchers completed simultaneous electronic searches of peer-reviewed articles using the follow online databases: Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Full Text, and Academic Search Complete. The descriptors used were multicultural education, teacher education, multicultural teacher education, multicultural teacher strategies, multicultural teacher challenges, and culturally responsive teaching. This initial search yielded numerous articles which were reviewed for their relevance, then these articles’ bibliographies were reviewed for additional relevant books, articles, and papers. After the researchers independently read each of selected articles and reviewed the selected books, the final list of 18 articles and six books met the inclusion criteria for analysis.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is described as a field of study and an established discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for diverse students from various racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups (Banks & Banks, 1995). However, multicultural education is not only for diverse populations, it supports all students. Banks (2016) suggests that multicultural education is an idea, a reform movement, and a process. It is an idea that all students should have access to educational equity despite their culture, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or social class. It is a reform movement that seeks to transform schools so that all students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to function in a diverse society. It is also a process that promotes philosophical ideals of social justice, equality, equity, freedom, and human dignity.

Multicultural education emerged out of the Black struggle for political power, freedom, and economic integration; more so, its origins began in the civil rights movements of historically oppressed groups. From an academia standpoint, it emerged from the scholarships of Black studies and ethnic studies to become known as multicultural education, a term that is inclusive of
all groups. Advocates of multicultural education (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2010, Ladson-Billings, 1994) posit that its goals are to encourage individuals to gain self-awareness through understanding different points-of-view, to eliminate prejudice and discrimination through knowledge, and to ensure an equal educational opportunity to learn the skills necessary to function effectively in a global society. Multiculturalists believe that “education within a pluralistic society should affirm and help students understand their home and community cultures [and] it should also help free them from their cultural boundaries” (Banks, 2016, p. 6).

Multiculturalists suggest that multicultural education has implications for decision making that affects all levels of school operations, such as administration, governance, school climate, and most importantly classroom instruction. Nieto (2000) suggests that:

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools’ curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflections, and action as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice (p. 305).

To accomplish the goals of multicultural education for our current pluralistic society, it has to be implemented successfully at all level of the educational system.

For effective implementation of multicultural education, Banks (2016) proposed these five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure. Content integration, the first dimension, is the infusion of diverse voices into the curriculum and a movement away from the Eurocentric and additive models of diversity used previously. The second dimension, the knowledge construction process, is an important part of multicultural teaching because it is the acknowledgment that knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon. Prejudice reduction, the third dimension, focuses on “strategies that can be used to help students develop more positive racial and ethnic attitudes” (Banks, 2016, p. 39). The fourth dimension, equity pedagogy, emphasizes the usage of teaching techniques that facilitate academic success for diverse students. Culturally responsive teaching was proposed by Gay (2010) as a suggestion for reversing the underachievement of students of color. Empowering school culture and social structure, the last dimensions, stresses the need for a reformed school culture that promotes equity for diverse students and reflects the pluralistic nature of society.

In response to the changing demographics of K-12 classrooms, scholars have articulated the need for varying approaches to education, one that identifies and embraces the intricacies of all diverse backgrounds, while seeking to promote academic success for all students (Banks, 2016; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Sleeter, 2017); furthermore, advocates of multicultural education support the infusion of multicultural curriculum into teacher education programs because of its ability to transform preservice teachers’ perspectives about diversity, therefore creating teachers who will be responsive to the needs of the diverse populations in current and future classrooms. In 1977, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) adopted the multicultural education standard; this mandate was the major factor in the growth of multicultural education in teacher education
programs because it “requires individuals preparing to become teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions needed to work effectively with diverse student population groups” (Banks, 2016, p. 13). Due to this mandate, teacher educators were required to include multicultural education into their teacher education programs to maintain their accreditation. However, this standard is mostly satisfied by teacher education programs through requiring only one diversity course; and unfortunately, the idea of multicultural education is not infused in other teacher education coursework.

**Teacher Education Programs**

Teacher education programs across the nation are being pressured to prepare future teachers to serve in an increasingly diverse student population. Researchers (Gay, 2002; Sanders et al., 2014) have reported that part of the responsibility of teacher education programs is to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively with diverse students and communities. Additionally, other researchers (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Howard, 2010; Thompson, 2014) suggest that this preparation is one of the most pressing issues in teacher education, and it requires continuous analysis.

Scholars (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Gorski, 2012; Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2012; Howard, 2010; Sleeter, 2017) assert that a majority of students enrolled in teacher education programs are White middle-class females who speak one language and come from monocultural backgrounds with limited or no experience interacting with minorities. Sleeter (2017) suggests that this issue is further complicated by preservice teachers’ beliefs, shaped significantly by their life experiences and years of observing their own teachers, well before enrollment into teacher education courses. Sadly, these beliefs and experiences that are deeply rooted within the psyche have proven to affect the future development of positive perceptions of diversity and urban teaching for preservice teachers (Kumar & Lauermann, 2018).

Very similar to the faculty demographics of the K-12 classrooms, the teacher education faculty members are majority White middle-class individuals (Gorski, et al, 2012; Sleeter, 2017). The whiteness of teacher education faculty has huge implications as to how curriculum is developed and transmitted, the recruitment and selection of students, the hiring of new faculty and the support they receive, how timely the program implements issues of diversity and lastly, the level of support received by faculty who teach the multicultural education courses (Sleeter, 2017). Also, some teacher educators wrongfully assume that their preservice teachers will teach at culturally homogeneous schools, very similar to the ones they attended and/or began their teaching careers; and therefore devote less effort in preparing preservice teachers for diverse environments (Cherng & Davis, 2017).

Some researchers (Bauml et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2017; Thompson, 2014) suggest that the field of teacher education is more complex and more committed to equity than in previous years; however, teacher education programs have historically been slow to implement concepts of diversity and pedagogy for diverse populations. The diversity standard of NCATE requires teacher education programs to include multicultural education principles and to improve the overall cultural competence of preservice teachers. To accomplish this standard of preparing teacher candidates for multicultural education, teacher education programs include courses directly related to cultural diversity and provide field experiences in diverse settings. However, despite the continuous thrust for integration of multicultural studies into teacher education, studies still suggest that recent graduates feel underprepared to work with diverse populations (Cherng & Davis, 2017; Kumar & Lauermann, 2018; Sleeter, 2017; Starker & Fitchett, 2013;
To change the perceptions of these preservice teachers, Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016) assert that:

By examining issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and other diversities often taught in diversity courses, preservice teachers are faced with the disequilibrium and an opportunity to reframe human diversity from a deficit perspective to an asset or strengths-based perspective (p. 329).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

“Teaching is a contextual, situational, and personal process; a complex and never-ending journey” (Gay, 2010, p. 22). The instructor and more importantly the instruction provided to students in the classroom make a huge impact on students’ overall academic achievement. For many decades, scholars have demanded the need for diverse students to receive high quality and equitable education (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2002; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a result, educators began trying to develop teaching techniques that can better match the home and community cultures of their diverse students. This technique has been referred to in the literature as culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally responsive teaching has been used interchangeably with several terms coined by numerous researchers; these terms are culturally relevant, culturally centered, culturally mediated, culturally compatible, culturally sensitive, and culturally congruent. Although referred to by many names, the concepts of matching the classroom instruction with the home and community cultures of diverse students who previously struggled to succeed academically are very much parallel.

Gay (2010) describes culturally responsive teaching as the process of “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them [and] it teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (p. 31). Culturally relevant teaching, a term coined by Ladson-Billings (1994), is described as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural and historical references to convey knowledge, impart skills and change attitudes. Howard (2010) suggests the following:

Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in a framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools, and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well-being (p. 67).

Culturally responsive teaching is based on the assumption that when instruction is positioned within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, then the instruction is more meaningful and has a higher interest appeal; and content is learned more easily and thoroughly (Gay, 2010). By providing a curriculum infused with the major tenets of diversity and multiculturalism, in addition to providing instruction which recognizes the diversity of all students in the classroom, educators can create an environment inclusive of all individuals. It is in this type of environment where students feel protected and empowered.

This atmosphere of empowerment allows students to be more tolerant and accepting of the differences between themselves and other individuals, in addition to creating an environment where students are more eager to learn due to the knowledge that they are fully accepted among their peers and by their instructors, regardless of how much or how little the individual student
has in common with any other individual represented within the academic setting (Gay, 2010). Ultimately, empowerment becomes tantamount to creating a positive environment full of highly motivated students who are eager and willing participants in the educational process.

When students believe that they are accepted by their peers, and more importantly their instructors, these students are often more willing to take risks academically; in this sense, students are not afraid to assume an active role in the academic process and provide others access to their beliefs and thought processes (Gay, 2010). In this type of environment, opinions derived from an individual’s background experiences and his or her exposure to the beliefs and opinions of others play a significant role in determining the level of involvement the individual student has in his or her own education (Gay, 2002).

When learning is facilitated in this fashion, all parties involved become much more receptive to participating in the educational process because students are able to see that their opinions and experiences are valued and necessary in order for the learning process to occur; because these students feel respected and valued, they are more forthcoming in sharing ideas and concepts as they have the security of knowing that a high level of respect and decorum has previously been established (Hsiao, 2015). Additionally, the learning process is enhanced as students are taught not to rely solely on their own perceptions; rather, they are taught to identify and focus on the perceptions of others involved in the academic process and how those perceptions are influenced by the beliefs, customs, and experiences of other individuals who may or may not be represented in the classroom. Howard (2010) suggests this practice builds communities of culturally and politically aware citizens as these students are trained to acknowledge the opinions and perceptions of others when forging their own opinions and perceptions.

The primary purpose of culturally responsive teaching is to empower diverse students through academics, while simultaneously embracing one’s own culture and developing the individual’s ability to create a system of self-efficacy (Howard, 2010). To be effective, the knowledge must be assessable to all students and connected to their lives and experiences outside of school as this provides a sense of relevancy to students. If teachers have an understanding of their students’ backgrounds and provide instruction in a culturally responsive way, then several educational issues might be alleviated, such as low academic achievement and disproportionate representation in special education (Banks, 2016; Brown, 2007; Gay, 2010; Hsiao, 2015). Bowers and Flinders (as quoted in Hsiao, 2015, p. 241) suggest that “being responsive means to be aware of and capable of responding in educationally constructive ways to the ways in which cultural patterns influence the behavioral and mental ecology of the classroom.”

Gay (2010) suggests that culturally responsive teaching is multidimensional; she further explains that culturally responsive teaching comprises “curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management, and performance assessments” (p. 33). When working to develop culturally responsive teachers to work with diverse populations, Gay (2010) identifies five important elements that should be addressed: (a) develop a culturally diverse knowledge base, (b) design culturally relevant curricula, (c) demonstrate cultural caring and build a learning community, (d) build effective cross-cultural communications, and (e) deliver culturally responsive instruction. These five elements should be utilized by teacher educators while pursuing to transform the perceptions of their preservice teachers.
Findings

A review of the literature revealed a number of challenges experienced and successful strategies adopted by multicultural teacher educators while implementing multicultural education into their curriculum and creating culturally responsive teachers. These findings are articulated below.

Challenges in Multicultural Teacher Education

Although very few studies have explored the challenges faced by multicultural teacher educators, some scholars (Gorski, et al., 2012; Sleeter, 2017) identified student resistance and faculty members’ self-efficacy as challenges to implementing multicultural education. As previously stated, many teacher education students are White, middle-class women, who entered their coursework in denial of their privileges and the existence of injustice; and when these beliefs are challenged, “responses can be steeped in anger, defensiveness, and resentfulness” (Gorski, et al., 2012, p. 222). Furthermore, when teacher educators, especially those of color, “challenge White students to grapple with racial issues, students often express their anger in course evaluations, which are then used to undermine and discredit the faculty members rather than the hegemony of Whiteness within which faculty evaluations occurs” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 159). Another challenge is the faculty members’ self-efficacy in their ability to deliver multicultural instruction. Of all the predictors studied by Gorski, Davis, and Reiter (2012) to determine faculty’s feeling about being qualified to instruct multicultural education courses, life experiences were the only one that was statistically significantly correlated.

Successful Strategies for Multicultural Teacher Education

As society continues to become more and more pluralistic, teacher education programs need to respond to the growing need to produce preservice teachers who recognize the importance race, culture, language, gender, sexuality, and class play in the process of teaching and learning. Some scholars (Gorski, 2012; Gorski, et al., 2012; Sleeter, 2017) have expressed key factors and strategies adopted by teacher education programs to create effective culturally responsive preservice teachers such as implementing multicultural education in a holistic manner, providing field experiences in diverse environments, and careful selection of multicultural teacher educator faculty.

Implications

Teacher education programs need to give multicultural education an essential place in the curriculum. It is important for teacher education programs to expose preservice teachers to literature on multicultural education and especially culturally responsive teaching strategies. For teacher educators, this research will provide tangible strategies for successful implementation of multicultural education. Teacher educators must recognize the infinite benefits of multicultural education and then fully commit to making it the hallmark of their teacher education programs.

Conclusions

As many researchers suggest, the task of preparing teachers for diverse classrooms can be daunting; but it is imperative that teacher education programs critically re-examine their policies and practices in terms of their preparation of culturally responsive preservice teachers. Additionally, to realize the goal of preparing teachers for a changing world, teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers opportunities to become increasingly self-aware of
their own prejudices and stereotypical beliefs through well-designed coursework and field experiences in diverse school environments. Lastly, for novice teachers to succeed in diverse schools, teacher education programs must effectively prepare monoculture teachers to teach in multicultural classrooms (Sanders et al., 2014).

References


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