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ABSTRACT

Creating a relevant integrated multicultural education program in a sparsely populated, rural, mountainous state (Idaho) whose minority residents constitute barely 5 percent of the population poses unique challenges not present in more populated urban areas. The population of Idaho is 94.5 percent White, 5.3 percent Hispanic, 1.4 percent American Indian, and 0.3 percent Black. Minority populations experience a significantly lower standard of living and are less educated than their White counterparts. This document describes the efforts of the College of Education faculty at the University of Idaho to ensure that preservice teachers develop the needed skills, knowledge and dispositions to face the challenges of working with children from diverse populations. A multicultural committee was formed and took the position that the College of Education would work simultaneously to: (1) recruit and retain diverse faculty and students, and (2) empower children from diverse groups through education. The paper also traces the emergence of a holistic model that focuses and responds to the dynamic tension created as faculty, students, and the community together strive to come to fuller understanding of and commitment to the issues involved. (Contains 18 references.) (LL)

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EMERGENT MULTICULTURALISM: A RURAL MODEL

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Abstract

Creating a relevant, integrated multicultural education university program in a sparsely populated, rural, mountainous state whose minority residents constitute barely five percent of the population, poses unique challenges not present in more populated urban areas. This paper describes the attempts of one faculty to ensure that preservice teachers develop the needed skills, knowledge and dispositions to competently face the challenges of working with children from diverse populations. It traces the emergence of a holistic model that focuses and responds to the dynamic tension created as faculty, students and the community together strive to come to fuller understanding and commitment to the issues involved.

Introduction

Due to changing demographics in the United States, there is a heightened awareness of the need for education which is multicultural in perspective. Concepts and definitions of multiculturalism have evolved over the years. From the original "melting pot" theory of the early 1900's, the definition has evolved to include issues of racial and ethnic awareness and pride as well as cultural pluralism. Today, many include in their definition of multiculturalism both an inclusive view of cultures in all areas of the curriculum and a forthright confrontation of discrimination accompanied by engagement in social change (Ramsey and Derman-Sparks, 1992).

From its inception, there has been controversy surrounding the content to include in multicultural education. Arthur Levine (1992, p. 5) draws parallels between the current struggles to establish multicultural education as a legitimate discipline at the university level, and the struggles of the field of science as it was first introduced in its modern form to American colleges early in the 19th century. First, doubts were raised about the "academic merit" of the new field. Second, the field was adopted, but given marginalized, second-class status. The third stage was a period of intensely heated and emotional debate as issues of evolution and current religious views came into conflict. The final stage of the field of science emerged as the character of the new field became clearer, not only to the academic community, but also to the scientists themselves who were developing the new discipline. Today, other established fields are borrowing from techniques and approaches of science.

According to Levine (1992), a similar evolution may be taking place in the area of multicultural education as it evolves from a marginalized discipline to its entitled place in the curriculum. Further, the need to become involved in multicultural education is evidenced by the need to prepare students of all ages to engage in active inquiry concerning the rights, roles and responsibilities of individuals in this society.

Multicultural education encompasses countless issues with which we all struggle from varying perspectives. No one approach is possible or appropriate. There is one set of issues for students of color and another set for students of the dominant culture. There are issues of clarifying goals and values that affect issues of classroom practice. There are issues of content and issues of methodology. The list is endless, but in the final analysis, these issues condense to basic issues of access and equality.

Demographics and particular difficulties facing the Intermountain West Region

The ease with which the tenets of multicultural education are accepted in various parts of the country must depend, to an extent, on such characteristics as the ethnic makeup and general income level of the population, the conservative or liberal political sway of the population, and even the geographic features of the area. Idaho's population and geography pose a number of unique challenges to the implementation of multicultural education that are not present in more densely populated areas.

Idaho is a primarily rural, sparsely populated state, which covers a large geographic area. It is a state characterized by conservative politics and a traditionally low funding level for education. In 1990-91 Idaho ranked 50th in the nation for per

pupil spending for education (NEA Research Division, 1991). While its population is slightly over one million, only three cities in Idaho have over 40, 000 people. According to the 1990 Census (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1991), the population of Idaho is 94.5% White, 5.3% Hispanic, 1.4% American Indian, and 0.3% Black. Within the past decade Hispanic, American Indian and Black populations in Idaho have increased 44.6%, 31% and 24.1% respectively, compared to a 5.4% increase in the White population.

As is true in the rest of the nation, the minority populations in Idaho are also disproportionately low income and have attained a lower level of education than the White population. Income figures indicate that while less than 10% of Idaho's White families have incomes below the poverty line, all minority groups in Idaho have a higher percentage of families living below poverty. Hispanic and American Indian families whose percentages of incomes are below poverty are more than double that of White families (Bureau of the Census, 1985). In addition, nearly 75% of White Idahoans, aged 25 and over are high school graduates, while only 56% of American Indians and 39% of Hispanics are have graduated from high school.

Idaho's university population does not reflect the same proportion of minority students as the state population at large. At Idaho State University (1991c), 1.7% of students are Hispanic, 1.3% are American Indian, 0.5% are Black, and 1.1% are Asian. Salzman (1991) states that in the College of Education 2.7% of students are bicultural, i.e., during their lifetimes they have contended with two cultural systems whose values

are often in conflict (Darder, p. xvi.). As would be expected, the number of certified bicultural educators in the state of Idaho is even further disproportionate to the bicultural population. State Department of Education information (1991) indicates that 98% of Idaho's certified teachers are White. Percentages of certified teachers who are Hispanic, American Indian, and Black are 0.8%, 0.2% and .08% respectively.

Demographic trends related to Idaho's bicultural minority populations appear to parallel those of the rest of the nation. Minority populations experience a significantly lower standard of living and are less educated than their White counterparts. In addition, these populations are increasing much more rapidly than the White population. When these figures are examined in terms of a rural, sparsely populated state with a large geographic region, the following speculations might be made.

First, with the exceptions of a few "pockets" where minority populations are concentrated, i.e., several Indian reservations and the agricultural area along the Snake River where migrant families have "settled out", it is not unusual for Idaho's towns to have only a few, if any, minority students.

Second, a large number of Idaho's White children grow up without ever having experienced the opportunity for friendships, personal interactions, or even having shared a classroom with non-White classmates. Their perceptions of bicultural populations may be limited to that which they have been exposed to on television or other media. This is especially disturbing when one considers research that suggests that children begin to make judgements about racial differences as early as age four

and that attitudes about these differences may have crystallized by ages 11 or 12 (Katz, 1983).

Third, minority children who live in these small town environments are isolated and often have little in the way of cultural validations and support from their communities. Derman-Sparks (1989, p. 59) asserts that when a child or a few children come from a different background than the rest of the children, they are in an especially vulnerable position. They may not want to be different in school, yet they need support in feeling comfortable in who they are.

Darder (1991) cites a number of explanations and factors which may be related to the way in which children from minority cultures react to America's dominant culture. Among these explanations are such factors as the availability of cultural translators, mediators and models in the community; the degree of dissimilarity in physical appearance from the majority culture; degree of urbanization; degree of prejudice in the community; degree of economic and political strength of a minority population; and degree of contact with others not from one's own culture. In Idaho, these factors, or the lack of them, can combine to exert powerful influence on children of color in these small towns to conform and attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture and to deny their own cultural identities. These children and their families can often be unaware or unwilling to ask or expect educational considerations from their school districts.

Fourth, in general, Idaho's educational community is not calling for change in

the way minority issues are addressed. Although a number of educators who work in the pockets where minority populations are denser, recognize the need to be better prepared to educate bicultural students, a large number of Idaho's teachers today do not encounter a significant number of bicultural students. Therefore, the voices of those who seek a concerted effort to nurture diversity in schools do not predominate. As a group, Idaho's educators tend to focus on the struggle to negotiate the conservative nature of the state's politics and level of educational funding rather than the issues related to multiculturalism.

Fifth, the extremely small percentages of teachers in Idaho who are, themselves, bicultural translates to mean that few students in Idaho ever see non-White classroom teachers. Far more common, at least in areas of substantial bicultural populations, is the bicultural classroom aide who, as Darder (1991) states, may have "ten or more years of experience in the classroom working under inexperienced White middle-class teachers who know very little about the actual needs of bicultural students (p. 121)."

Sixth, the typical ISU education major is White, female and an Idaho native (Salzman, 1991). In addition, nearly half of these students are non-traditional, i.e., they are over age 25 and have returned to the university after an interruption in their schooling. This student probably grew up in a small town where the population consisted of only a few, if any, minority residents. Further, 88% of ISU College of Education graduates find employment in Idaho. Thus it is likely that the majority of

these students perceive themselves returning to the same type of environment they left.

Finally, undergraduate minority students in ISU's College of Education number less than fifty. The voices of these few students are easily overlooked.

Obstacles to change

A number of barriers exist in making significant curricular, attitudinal and competence changes in a substantially dominant culture institution and state. In public schools throughout Idaho, the issues are similar to those expressed by Jones and Derman-Sparks (1992), i.e., teachers believe that they are not prejudiced, they are proud of being colorblind, they believe that White children are unaffected by diversity issues and assume the bicultural children they teach are "culturally deprived", and they exemplify a "tourist approach" in their efforts to provide multicultural curriculum.

The Idaho State University faculty community is somewhat more cosmopolitan than the public schools and the ISU student population. Faculty members originate from a broad cross-section of the United States and from a few other countries. They have at least resided in areas with a greater extent of diversity than that of Idaho. Nevertheless, the faculty is predominantly White and middle class and has little professional experience with rural Hispanic or American Indian populations (Idaho State University, 1991b). This lack of experience with the primary minority populations in Idaho, along with the lack of a strong minority voice for education in Idaho, appear to magnify the difficulties.

In addition, Ramsey and Derman-Sparks (1992) assert that a backlash against antibias and multicultural education at all levels is spreading. They attribute the backlash to three underlying factors: the unwillingness of those in control to yield their power to others; fear of the unknown in the current economic recession; and the overwhelming magnitude of the tasks of evaluating and reordering our national priorities and educational mission.

In sum, the issues surrounding multiculturalism in Idaho are complex and value laden. On the one hand, they reflect trends that are present in all parts of the country. On the other hand, the rural nature and sparse population of the state facilitate ignorance and denial of issues in ways not possible in more urban areas. A major challenge of the College of Education's Multicultural Committee has been to create awareness and convince others of the need to reorganize the curriculum in order to meet the needs of the world of the future.

A Model for Change

In the Spring of 1989, several faculty members approached the Dean of the College of Education about the need to address multicultural issues in a more direct way. A number of faculty members had indicated uncertainty about their own knowledge bases concerning ethnic diversity. An Ad Hoc committee was formed to address issues and education of both faculty and students concerning multiculturalism.

In the Fall of 1990, membership on the committee was formalized and the following

definition of multicultural education was developed:

Multicultural education is a means through which diversity is nurtured, preserved, and extended. It is an active, personal, and political process designed primarily to promote opportunity to overcome injustices and inequities within the education system based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or exceptionality.

The position taken by the Multicultural Committee of the College of Education is the following:

Multicultural education must be an active process through which we acknowledge and examine access and bias and find ways to initiate change. At the heart of a successful approach to multicultural education is the recognition that within American society certain categories of people are denied equal access to power, while other groups experience superior privilege and access to power....

The role of Teacher Education at Idaho State University is to provide professional development to educational personnel for the purpose of nurturing all forms of diversity. Embedded in teacher education courses will be awareness of one's own and others' oppressive attitudes and practices as well as methods and strategies for change.... The College of Education will work simultaneously to (1) recruit and retain diverse faculty and students, and (2) increase the awareness and capability of all College of Education faculty and students to empower children from diverse groups through education to achieve full educational equity.

The final outcome of multicultural education will be to affect society so that the interests of all people will be served and that the personal diverse resources which

each person possess can be developed to the highest potential (Idaho State University, 1991a).

Emergent Multiculturalism

In trying to meet the challenges of assisting faculty as well as students in developing competence in multiculuralism, a holistic approach which involves students, faculty and the community, has been taken by the committee. As planning and decision-making began, it was accompanied by the awareness that many pitfalls existed that potentially could sabotage efforts (Haro, 1992), yet the committee determined to persist in finding ways of developing curricular approaches which truly embodied the ideals of equal access and opportunity for all students.

Several members recognized that the process they were experiencing was similar to the emergent literacy of young children. Indeed, Teale and Sulzby (1986) claim that the term "emergent" has a considerable history of use in such fields as philosophy, sociology, biology, and developmental psychology. They elaborate that the core features of the term connote something in the process of developing and becoming, as well as the creation of something that has not previously been present. They compare the process to the first years of life when development "proceeds in fits and starts, with periods of vigorous growth and periods during which the child seems to be consolidating knowledge. (p. xxi)."

In the field of psychology, Carl Rogers (Combs, 1962, p. 264) describes the process of "becoming" as awareness of "all the feelings, reactions, and emergent

meanings" in which one finds oneself. Further, in the field of education, Inlow (1966) suggested that a curriculum emerges which emanates from the time-tested disciplines, the emergent disciplines, and from the ongoing society.

These core features apply to the emergent nature of the ISU College of Education's Multicultural Committee's approach as well. As can be seen in Figure 1, a need in one area creates a need in another. The students' need to understand, articulate, and act on multicultural issues affects the faculty's need and motivation to find, transmit and dialogue about the necessary information. Further, the community's needs provide the backdrop and are inexorably interwoven in meeting and creating the needs of the others. This results in a dynamic tension which drives further action.

Students

Faculty Community

Emergent Multicultural Education

Figure One

The committee seriously examined ways to distribute information concerning ethnic diversity which would not give superficial treatment to the issues involved. It was recognized that in order to accomplish the committee goals, a state of disequilibrium would be created within the college affecting both students and faculty as stronger attempts were made in this area. Due to demographics, it was implicitly known by the committee that much of its work needed to focus on creating schemata concerning multiculturalism with faculty and students. Therefore, a number of different types of experiences, many of them occurring simultaneously, needed to be provided for students and faculty.

One of the first challenges identified was that of creating dialogue among faculty members and with students in classes. Through this beginning approach, questions could be raised concerning the "whys" of multicultural education for Southeastern

Idaho. Once the questions surfaced, the stage could be set for future endeavors.

Accomplishments of the Multicultural Committee

The position taken by the Multicultural Committee and recognition of the needs of our constituents provided direction in terms of formulating goals within the College.

As a starting point, the committee identified and provided support for existing commitments and involvements of faculty members with the bicuitural community. Among these were the creation of a Visiting Author's Conference and an Hispanic Women's Writing Seminar, as well as ongoing efforts to make connections with the nearby Indian reservation.

The next step was to network with other university-wide activities to promote multicultural understandings. Members were involved in a study to gauge campus climate as it related to recruitment and retention of American minority students.

The committee then communicated the goals and the model to the rest of the College of Education faculty and provided them with selected reading materials for further study. In addition, a number of faculty inservice activities have been provided, such as having a nationally known expert on multicultural education present to faculty. Inservices have been well accepted by faculty who have chosen to participate. Slowly, a change in attitude is emerging.

Having a support system in place, faculty members are empowered to make changes and to feel their own accomplishments are important. As faculty members develop, they are increasingly capable of dialoguing with their students and providing

appropriate information about multicultural issues. In response, student awareness and comfort has increased. Students are more willing to risk availing themselves of experiences which will further their learning. Groups of students are now engaged in weekly tutoring at the nearby Indian reservation, others have reported the value they gained in attending activities during Indian Awareness Week and Martin Luther King Week. One professor excitedly reported that her students were actively involved by asking questions at a panel discussion during Martin Luther King Week.

Visions for the future

We have taken some initial steps. Much remains to be done in terms of multicultural education at Idaho State University. As a faculty, we need to come to feel increasingly comfortable experimenting with and discussing issues of diversity among one another and with our students. In many cases we need to dialogue and attempt to "establish cause" for multiculturalism among those whose life experiences have not led them to encounter a way of life different from their own. It will be important to conduct careful research to come closer to truly understanding the experiences and perceptions of our students, both those of color and those of the dominant culture, who have lived in this environment.

We need to strengthen the connections we have begun to forge with local minority populations through genuine collaboration on restructuring the college setting into one that will attract and retain increasing numbers of faculty and students of color.

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