

Making the Grade: Examining the Racial Awareness of White Preservice Teachers at Illinois

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Overview

While the U.S. continues to become more racially diverse, it is interesting to note that approximately 87% of teachers remain White (Frankenberg, 2006). This imbalance, especially when paired with inadequate education on racial diversity, can lead to unreasonably low expectations and stricter discipline for racial minority students, inappropriate blame placed on home environments, and unequal assignment of racial minority students to special education classes (Gay, 2002). Though racial diversity is frequently addressed in education courses at Illinois, White preservice teachers often graduate feeling insufficiently prepared to teach in racially diverse classrooms and rarely choose to pursue careers in city schools that are in need of well-qualified teachers. Therefore, my research explored the racial awareness of White preservice teachers and investigated the reasons why many feel apprehensive about teaching racial minority students.

Method

Participants consisted of two White, female preservice teachers who are currently seniors in the Elementary Education Program at Illinois. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and focused on strengths and uncertainties in teaching racially diverse students. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and used thematic analysis to identify key themes and ideas.

Results

Fatigue and Frustration in Learning about Diversity

Participants expressed that they were tired of learning diversity content in the same manner repeatedly throughout several classes, and hinted at the need for reformed instruction.

“We do *tons* with race in education...everything, all day long... it’s something that we talk about in our classes *a lot*.”

Request for More Experiential Learning

Though difficult to accommodate in only a two-year program, participants discussed how increased experience would better prepare them to work with racially diverse youth.

“I can learn as much as I want with people telling me, but it’s not until I sit down with that individual student and really try to learn where they’re coming from that I’ll be able to teach them.”

Minimizing Race and Culture in Addressing Student Learning

With the program’s heavy emphasis on viewing each child as an individual with his or her own unique strengths and weaknesses, White preservice teachers can feel overwhelmed and often view cultural diversity as just another individual difference to account for.

“I think most of it is not so much planning for different cultures, but— I mean that does play in because obviously different cultures learn differently too— but I think a lot of it is just the way students learn and their abilities.”

Perceived Inability to Relate to Racial and Ethnic Minority Students

Participants expressed a variety of perceived challenges in working in urban classrooms, including an inability to effectively manage their classroom and relate to the students.

“If students are African American they’re going to respond better to someone who is African American... I definitely think there’s nothing you can do about that barrier because I feel like it’s always going to be there just because kids live in the real world... it’s kind of intrinsic that you respond better to people that are like you.”

Discussion

One of the most intriguing findings from this study is that White preservice teachers appear to repeatedly minimize the influence of race and culture in the classroom despite frequent teachings on the importance of diversity. Potentially linked to course structuring and a lack of experience, it appears that White preservice teachers fail to fully develop multicultural competency, which the literature defines as including knowledge, awareness, and skills (Spanierman et al., in press). These findings provide further documentation for the existence of racial color-blindness, as participants consistently lacked awareness of institutional racism and considered the effects of race on an individual level (Neville, 2009). Despite the discussion of racial diversity in education courses, preservice teachers are still left with an “us” versus “them” mindset (McIntyre, 1997) that leaves White preservice teachers feeling disconnected from struggling racial minority students. White preservice teachers often view their decision to avoid city schools as “natural” and justified, which demonstrates White privilege by their defending the status quo and failing to consider the choice they have in helping to maintain or close the racial divide (Lewis, 2003). These findings could have important implications for the university, suggesting that education courses embrace a sociocultural approach (Adams et al., 2008) and provide more comprehensive exposure to racially diverse classrooms, including greater encouragement to work in Chicago Public Schools.