



An On-line Journal
for Teacher Research

Through the Eyes of the Other: A Pre-service Teacher's Journey towards Multicultural Competence

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There is an urgent need to prepare teachers to effectively meet the needs of diverse students in classrooms across the USA today. In response to this need, many teacher preparation institutions offer multicultural education (also referred to in the literature as diversity) courses that are geared towards providing prospective teachers with the necessary skills and dispositions necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners. Evidently, multicultural education is viewed as the solution to an educational system that puts many students at risk of failure due to their race, gender, exceptionalities, ethnicity, class, religion, language and sexual orientation (Banks, 1999; King, Hollins & Hayman, 1997; Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). However, the effectiveness of multicultural education courses in transforming pre-service teachers' attitudes towards diverse students, or preparing them to meet the academic needs of these learners is debatable. This is due to a number of reasons: (a) the single subject approach to multicultural education that is obtained in many institutions is considered to be ineffective; (b) the attempt to re-conceptualize pedagogical approaches to embrace diverse perceptions in content, methods and assessment tools across all disciplines is often unsuccessful; (c) the initiative to re-conceptualize the university curriculum to reflect a broader range of human experiences is often met with resistance from some administrators, and teachers and students alike; and (d) some college professors who are competent in their subject areas and are willing to re-conceptualize their courses to

foreground the multicultural component often lack the skills, experiences, and resources to do so (Bifuh-Ambe, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995).

Even when stakeholders in education agree that multicultural and multiracial education policies and attitudes must be adopted in order to accommodate the demographic changes in society, there are differences in opinions as to what pedagogical approaches should be adopted to effectively transmit this awareness to pre-service teachers. In the past, two approaches have generally been used in institutions of higher education. The first focuses on cultural competence through ethnic and gender studies as an avenue to greater individual tolerance, and the second focuses on targeting Whites in an effort to reverse racism. Limitations however, exist in both approaches. Some see the former as too narrow, while the latter is considered too political and sometimes counter-productive (Brandon, 2003; Kailin, 1999; Sleeter, 1996).

Due to the controversies arising from the two major conceptions of multicultural education, teacher education programs have not quite succeeded in providing prospective teachers with the theoretical knowledge and procedural skills that they need to teach particular students in specific contexts (Sheets, 2000). Despite these challenges, many reasons exist to buttress the rationales for offering multicultural education courses and integrating multicultural concepts into pre- and in-service teacher preparation programs.

Rationale for Multicultural Competences in Pre- and In-Service Teachers

The world in which we live today is fast “shrinking.” Through international world peace initiatives, cross-national hiring practices are more frequent, mobility across national boundaries is growing, and global communication is at its highest (Morey & Kitano, 1997). In most parts of the globe, kindergartens through colleges serve student populations that are culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse. Teachers are constantly called upon not only to ensure peaceful coexistence and foster mutual respect among students, but to ensure that each child achieves to his/her fullest potential. To meet this goal, educators must possess both the knowledge and the skills required to effectively teach in pluralistic classrooms.

Educators must practice culturally responsive pedagogy that affirms the cultures and views of the cross section of students represented in classrooms. A culturally responsive pedagogy is based on the premise that culture influences the way students learn, and therefore, students’ real life experiences should be incorporated into the teaching and learning process (Bennett, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Smith, 1998). Multicultural Education courses offered in teacher education institutions seek to provide pre-service teachers with the skills, attitudes and dispositions needed to meet diverse student’s needs. However, in order to be successful, these courses must have both the right content and effective methods of delivery. Lesson content should increase students’ knowledge of various ethnic groups; teaching materials and assignments should reflect multiple cultures and perspectives, as well as represent the richness of the whole human experience. Method of instruction should be both tactful, yet honest (Au, 1993; Banks, 1999; Bennett, 2003; Lasley, & Matczynski, 1997; Zeichner, 1998).

Brown (2004) maintains that often the method is more effective than the content. Pre-service teachers must be encouraged to lower their defensiveness, adopt reflexive thinking,

and be willing to accept alternative perspectives. They may be required to set aside cherished beliefs in order to see the points of views of other beliefs and cultures that may seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them at first. Teacher educators must adopt an inquiry approach that encourages prospective teachers to ask meaningful questions that may not necessarily have easy answers. They must encourage their students to seek answers to such questions through sound reasoning and a dynamic process of inquiry and research.

Conceptualizing the Teacher Educator and Student as Co-Researchers in Teacher Education Programs

Action research is a qualitative inquiry process that seeks to describe complex experiences and enable teachers become more reflective about their practice (Zeichner & Gore, 1995). Through this approach, teachers can be systematic in their observations of the people (students, administrators, instructional specialists, counselors, and other colleagues) with whom they interact in the school environment. They can collect and analyze data in a more rigorous manner and use the information to inform and improve their practice. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) recommend that qualitative research protocol be used in teacher educational training programs because it offers prospective teachers opportunities to explore complex issues and environments. Through qualitative inquiry, pre- and in-service teachers can examine their own beliefs and values to see how these values influence their attitudes towards students and others in the educational setting. The qualitative approach can develop “a more astute observer of the total school environment and helps make the process of learning to become a teacher a more conscious effort” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 231). With proper instructor scaffolding, the qualitative approach can be very effective in helping pre-service teachers in teacher training institutions examine and analyze the tough topics that multicultural education courses deal with.

Ideally, as these novice teachers examine various points of view and study different cultures, they develop empathy and understanding of the people under study.

Over a period of eight years, the teacher educator in this study has taught multicultural education courses in two colleges of education across the U.S. at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Multicultural education/diversity courses are usually designed to help educators examine, confront, and begin to manage the challenges and issues they will face in educating children, regardless of ethnic, cultural, mental, cognitive, religious, physical or other differences. These courses often focus on educators' responsibilities to students at risk of failure in schools. Course content addresses both skills and strategies, and examines dispositions that future educators will need to help them succeed at meeting the needs of at-risk students. Multicultural education courses can be challenging both to the instructor and to the students enrolled in the course for many reasons, but especially because classroom discussions often center on hot-button topics such as racism, stereotypes, homophobia, ageism, sexism, abuse and other "isms." These sensitive topics can easily become volatile as learners approach them from diverse perspectives.

The multicultural education course policies at my university clearly spell out students' expectations and responsibilities, and instructor's roles. My role as the instructor is that of a facilitator and discussion leader. I assign readings, make presentations, lead discussions, and create a climate for interactive learning. Assigned readings and field-based activities are usually geared towards helping students understand the experiences of a broad spectrum of the human race, and encourage them to examine their attitudes towards the various groups represented in the U.S. society. I try hard to create a classroom climate where students feel safe to share their ideas, no matter how "unconventional" these ideas may be. Students' expectations usually emphasize active participation through listening, inquiring, sharing ideas and reflecting about any material covered in class, online and in external activities. An essential goal of the

course is that students develop the willingness to learn and share thoughts and insights as a professional teaching practitioner. Among other professional behaviors, students are encouraged to participate without dominating the conversation, and disagree respectfully when necessary. Class participation actually counts for 10% of the total course grade.

At the beginning of the semester, we spend a considerable amount of time going over course policies and expectations. Throughout the semester, I often have to step in and remind students about the need for civility even when disagreeing. This intervention is especially necessary given the demographics of my student population. Because my teaching assignments have been in predominantly white universities, my pre-service student teacher population is often more than 95% Caucasian. This is not very unusual, and actually reflects the national statistics of teacher demographics—wherein 86% of grade school teachers are predominantly white female (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Despite safeguards to ensure meaningful learning, I frequently observe in my students the discomfort, resistance, anger and other conflicting emotions often reported in the literature. Some of the students' anger is directed towards the course instructor and evidenced in end-of-semester course evaluations.

Course evaluations often show student's conflicting emotions and perspectives, and it is often difficult to decipher a consistent thread in these evaluations. In the same semester, it is not uncommon to read the following students' comments: "This class offers great opportunities to explore tough issues and address them in your own classroom"; "I honestly feel that my view on humanity has changed as a result of this course"; "Great content, very useful"; "I look at culture through a new lens"; "I am now so prepared to deal with cultural minority. This class is a must for all graduate students"; "I really enjoyed this class. Some of the course readings were very interesting. Others were very tough!"; and "I have had to rethink many of my beliefs and values." Then on the other side of the spectrum are comments such as: "This is the worst professor I have ever had"; "I would not

recommend this course to anybody”; and “I was made to feel guilty for being a white male, something in which I not only have no control over, but that I don’t feel is anything someone should have to apologize for”; Whether faced with students’ resistance or willingness to grapple with alternate views, I have continued to teach this course with honesty and tact. I spend considerable amounts of time reflecting on how best to prepare my predominantly white pre-service teachers to embrace the diversity of their future students and develop dispositions for effective interaction with others in a global community. I have been grateful to witness profound transformation in some students during the course of one semester.

One of the assignments that I have found to be most effective in helping students apply the theories learned in the classroom, explore their feelings towards others not like themselves, and come to terms with their deepest, often unacknowledged stereotypes, is the “Minority Experience” field based project. In this assignment students are required to choose an activity that places them in a minority situation for a minimum of three hours. Students must be conscious of being in the minority; that is, aware of their status as different from others in the selected environment. Students are expected to experience varying levels of comfort or discomfort, but should not expect to be in danger at any time. Students are required to write a report describing their experience, including feelings, awareness and lessons learned. They are urged to use their insights and multicultural education theories as a lens through which they analyze the experience and understand the persons in the minority group. Some of the places that pre-service teachers generally visit for their minority experience include: black churches; gay nightclubs, cultural festivals, beauty shops specializing in non-Caucasian hairstyles, or simply hanging out (shopping, eating, and visiting parks) with a another person perceived to be different than them; for example, same-sex couples. (See Appendix A for a full description of the minority experience assignment).

Many students have indicated anecdotally in class discussions that the minority

experience is one of the most powerful and effective learning experiences for them. It catapults them into new environments and all but forces them to look beyond their own experiences to the lives and cultures of others. In the process, students develop an understanding of issues of diversity that they would otherwise not have learned in the classroom. The emotional impact of the diversity experience leads to a real “turning of [the] soul” for many pre-service teachers (Rodgers, 2006). The following is a narrative of one undergraduate pre-service teacher’s minority experience. It is presented here, in almost its original form (aside from teacher educator edits) so that the reader may accompany this student and share her thoughts and emotions at various stages of her “journey” towards understanding the “other” and achieving multicultural transformation.

Powwow!!!

What is a powwow? The Random House Dictionary states that a powwow is “a council or conference of or with American Indians.” What makes a powwow so special that people travel for miles to attend? Can anyone participate in a powwow? Why or why not? I had so many questions and wanted to know the answer to every one of them. So, I went on a search for the answers to my questions and ended up in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Philadelphia MS is known for one of the most infamous race-related crimes in U.S. History. On June 21, 1964, three civil rights workers were murdered by white supremacists. According to the Census bureau of 2000, Native Americans make up 2.01% of the 7,303 population of Philadelphia, MS. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia,_Mississippi)

As I was getting out of my vehicle, I saw two Native American Indian children that where dressed in “costumes.” I asked the parents of the children if I could take their pictures, and was granted permission. Then, I put on my coat and walked towards the gate to the entrance of the powwow. As I was walking, I felt a little uncomfortable because I was not sure what was happening or how

Native Americans would react to me.. I was worried about my dressing, my appearance and behavior. I did not want to do anything that would upset anyone. I wanted to learn about their culture, but I was becoming more concerned with being pleasant. I did not want anyone to think, 'Oh great, more white people!' At the gate, two native American Indian women greeted me with kind words and friendly smiles. This made me feel welcome. But I did not only want to feel welcome, I wanted to feel like one of them, like family – or at least a friend. I felt that the ladies were simply doing their job, just as I do at Wal-Mart. 'Make the customers happy no matter what'. I felt like a customer; not a special guest, family, or friend.

I began asking myself what I could do to fit into this culture – to this great Native American powwow. My heart desired to be a part of this culture, just to feel what it feels like to be a Native American. I decided to walk around and view my surroundings and take in more of the sites. After moving around for a while, I felt kind of disappointment because that was just it. I was only taking in the sites. I wanted more! I wanted to feel this culture - not view it as a tourist with a camera.

I took a moment to reflect on my relationship vis-a-vis these people. What did I have to offer them anyway? What right did I have to come here and expect immediate acceptance? Was I not being arrogant? 'Silly girl.' I thought, 'I have myself!' 'Nobody will run you off.' This thought gave me new confidence, though I still felt nervous. I began walking around, looking at the different art works and asking questions. I was talking to strangers! This made me feel both uncomfortable and yet confident. I knew then that I would use my God given gift of language, to discover the Native American Indian culture. I was walking round the circle looking at the art work when suddenly the loud speakers broke the chatter of the crowd. My heart nearly jumped out of my mouth. I was scared at first because I did not know what was happening. All I knew was that something was about to take place. At first I stood there with my ears ringing in my head. I did not want to move because I was afraid

that the announcer may be praying, and I did not want to offend anyone by stirring. While I stood there, I observed the crowd and quickly realized that it was all right to move. I moved away from the speakers and got to a distance where I could finally make out the words of the announcer. Then I realized what the announcer was saying. It was powwow time! Yes! Saying that I was extremely excited would be an understatement.

The announcer explained what was going to take place and the music started. The people lined up for the powwow. The first in line was a Native American Indian carrying a staff. The staff was red and white. At the top of the staff was an eagle's head.. I asked a gentleman who was standing near me what this staff represented, and he told me this staff is Eagle Staff. He explained that the Eagle Staff at the top represented freedom. The red and white ribbon that was twisted together flowing down the staff represents Indians and white men coming together. A long time ago, the Indians had wanted to be friends with the white man, but the white man stole their freedom and their land and now they were trying to regain their freedom in the white man's stolen world. At first I was upset at this statement, but then it hit me- I should try to understand what the man is trying to tell me, and not judge him. I realized that he was sharing his history and that of his ancestors with me, and this was an honor. So, I quickly suppressed my anger, and asked him instead, why the eagle symbolized freedom. He explained that the eagle is the bird of freedom; it can fly and see what it wants to see. The man went on to explain that the eagle does not answer to anyone. It controls its own path. Man cannot tell the eagle where to fly nor how to fly, or when to fly. The eagle is free.

I just stared at this man who amazed me with his passion for his history. I felt a little lost for words, and wondered if the man thought I had a part in the past of my ancestors' wrong doing. The man smiled at me and laughed softly at my expression. All I could do was laugh with him. I knew then that my thoughts were preposterous, and maybe he wasn't even blaming me. I felt silly. I thanked the man for the information and

walked around the circle. Yet there was this uneasy feeling that the man knew what I was thinking. It was as if he could feel my thoughts and read my mind.

The second group of Native American Indians came in carrying two different flags. One was the American flag, and the other was black with a white circle and writings in the white circle. I could not see what the writing said. I walked up to a lady that was holding a child and ask her if she knew what the black flag said. The lady got upset and looked at me with eyes that said 'leave me alone'. I just stood there for a moment thinking 'lady, who do you think you are to look at me with such disgust?' I did not say anything for a little bit, but as the wind blew and the air became chilly, the blanket that the lady was holding fell to the ground. I bent over and picked it up and gave it to her. She looked at me, and I smiled and said, "It is really cold out here tonight." The lady and I stood there looking into each other's eyes. I felt my heart cry out with a need to be accepted. I truly do not know why, but that lady seemed to have the world in her eyes. Slowly, she grinned and said to me, "That is the great powwow flag." I replied, "It is breathtaking." The lady gently walked away holding her baby close to her, and I suddenly realized that a tear was sliding down my cheek.

I asked myself why I was allowing myself to get emotional. Learning should not be emotional – or should it? How could I learn a new culture and not get emotional? To understand a culture I knew that I must feel it as well as understand it at a deeper level. This was not going to be easy. Emotions would emerge, , but I had to stay objective in order understand without judging .I must stand back and let this great culture speak to me on its own terms. I must see it through the eyes of the Native American Indian. So, I stood there with the image of the look in that lady's eyes floating in my head. I could feel the years of disappointment in her heart. How can one person's body language affect me so much? What was it about this lady that had made me cry? The only reason I could come up with, was that the lady was speaking to my heart and somehow, she had touched it.

As the wind picked up so did the beat of the drums. The next set of people in line was the dancers. The dancers were male and female, young and old. If I had to guess, I would say that the youngest dancer was about five years old and the oldest was around eighty. This was unusual to me because in most events that I am used to, the very young and the very old do not mix. When I was young the adults told me that a child has their place and should be silent until an adult calls for them during social events. The idea was: be seen, not heard.

The dancers danced together with the rhythm of the drums. The dancers had on very colorful outfits. Some outfits had silver cone shaped figurines attached to them. Of course, I had to know why the tin cones! I made my way to a lady that was fixing a young girl's outfit that had the same style and asked her about the cones. She told me the cones are made from snuff can tops. They are sewn onto the outfit to make noises when the dancers are dancing. This allows the dancers to be a part of the music. As I was watching the dancers, I noticed that they were all dancing in a circle. I wonder if this meant something or was it because of the way the area was set up. The answer to this question was to come later. As the dancers were dancing, the announcer was explaining what was taking place. The dancers danced to many different songs. I found out some of the dances are "Victory Dance" "Healing Dance," and "Thank You Dance."

The Victory Dance was for all veterans of war. The Native Americans invited any veteran of war to share in this dance. I noticed a white man walking out onto the dance area. I became concerned and thought that he was wrong in doing this because I thought it was for Native American Indian veterans only. I quickly learned that the invitation was open to any veteran of war. I was quite impressed with this. It made me feel warm inside to know that this culture embraced other cultures as well. The Healing Dance was of course asking for healing of the people. This dance was fascinating. One dancer would dance in a circle around a group of other dancers while dancing in the circle itself. As the others

danced in a circle, this one dancer would dance around them; therefore, that one dancer was dancing around two circles. The Thank You Dance was to thank the creator. I watched as the expression on the faces of the older dancers and knew that at this dance was the most important dance. It seemed that every step was made with precision and grace. I felt the sacredness of this dance through the eyes and movements of the dancers. The younger children knew this was "the dance." Through the beats of the drums, I could almost feel the beats of the hearts of the dancers. I wanted to run into the circle and dance, but I knew this was a time to be still. When the drums stopped, the dancers stood as statues in the night. Then the announcer broke the silence with a prayer to the creator. The prayer went something like this: "Give thanks to the creator. Creator we thank you for the many gifts. Creator we thank you for the warriors. Creator we thank you for guiding us and supporting us and leading us." (I cannot remember the rest of the prayer.) The announcers prayed in both the Native American language and in English. It was a beautiful prayer. It was all inclusive. I realized that even though our cultures are different we still had a common ground.

When the leaders and dancers walked off the field, I felt myself musing on this experience. Had I learned anything that I could hold in my heart forever? I knew that I went there to learn about another culture, but I had wanted more than that – I had wanted to actually live that culture if only for one night, and maybe for much longer. Just about that time the lady with the baby who had dropped her blanket, walked by me and touched my arm – I knew then that I felt accepted and my heart was touched.

I walked around some more, looking for someone to talk to. Then I spotted a man dressed in a red and white outfit. The outfit was gorgeous! It had a breast plate, long brown flowing feathers on the back, and a head piece that had an array of red, white, and brown feathers on it. In talking to this individual I discovered that he was a part of the Red Nation. The Red Nation is what Caucasian Americans might call a band. I

started asking the man questions about the music and what it means and symbolizes. This gentleman gave me a crash course about the drums and the music. The drums are called tom-toms. The tom-toms are made of animal skin that has been dried out by the sun and stretched out over a hollowed log. The hollowed log is hand-made. The natives fall a tree that is thought to hold good spirits. The tree is then cut and hollowed out. After the animal skin is dried and stretched, it is placed over the spirit-filled hollow log.

Before the tom-tom is played it has to be sprinkled with tobacco seeds. This holds the good spirits in, and allows the music to be played. The Red Nation sits around the tom-tom in a circle and each member of the Red Nation beats the tom-tom. Every member of the group hits the tom-tom, but the sound that is made from each strike is different. 'How can one drum make that many different sounds?' I wondered aloud. The answer to that question made my skin crawl. I was told that it was the spirits that make the different sounds, and that is why it is important to pick a tree that holds good spirits.

This talk of spirits actually heightened my quest for more knowledge about the Native American Indian culture. I sought out an older Native American Indian woman, with the thought that if anyone could tell me about the true culture it would be an older member of the community. I stopped and talked to several different older ladies, but the conversations led to too many "I don't know," until I meet this one fabulous older Native American Indian lady. I asked her if I could sit down and talk with her about her culture. She asked me what I already knew about her culture, and I told her that the only thing I knew was what was taught to me in books in school. She smiled and said, "Then you know nothing about my culture." We laughed, and I agreed with her. I explained to her that I came to the powwow in order to learn first hand. She quickly reminded me that white man has been trying to learn and explore her culture for many years. Once again, we laughed together.

I told her that I wanted to do more than learn; I wanted to feel the culture too. The old lady looked deep into my eyes and said "your

soul is pretty.” I was overwhelmed and started to cry. The old lady asked my why I was crying and I told her that, that was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to me and that my tears are tears of joy. To my surprise the old lady hugged me, and she held onto me as if I was her little girl, which made me cry even harder. I felt love and compassion in her arms. I felt my mom who had passed away several years ago. This meant more to me than I can explain. I found more than culture with this old lady—I think I had found a family.

After I stopped crying and the old lady released me, she told me her name, Agaliha Nokwisi, which means ‘Shining Star’. I asked her if I should call her by her American Indian name or by Shining Star. She laughed and said both names are the same; they only sound different. I was shocked at how true that statement is. I never thought of language in this manner. Language is all the same, it only sounds different. I learned that from my new family, Shinning Star.

Shinning Star explained the meaning of the powwow to me. A powwow is a gathering of old friends and new friends. It is a time of gathering and sharing cultures; it is a time to learn about each other and each other’s customs. It is a chance to learn about other people. The powwow is open to all the different tribes. There are several different native American Indian tribes, but every tribe is welcome at the powwows.

The circle that holds the dances is considered sacred. The dance circle is a place of worship. Shinning Star asked, “What better place to talk to the creator than in his own creation?” The circle is a link between the physical, spiritual, and the outside world. The circle does not have walls; it is an open space; a symbol of the Native American Indian church; a place to give thanks to the creator. The dances are done in a circle to represent the individual and the family. Among the Native Americans, there are several tribes with different traditions. One could only tell which tribe from the actions and language of each dancer. The dances also honor the musical instruments that the ancestors have given, especially the drums. When a person is

in the circle everything is sacred. One should be serious, and not play. Once the circle is blessed, one should be careful about everything he or she does or says while in the circle. The circle is not just grass – it is a sacred spot, the church. It is the job of the grandfather to pass on the songs of the dances. If the grandfather does not pass on the songs, the songs will be lost. The songs are not written down, so they must be taught by the grandfather. Shinning Star paused and said, “How can you complain when the young people do something wrong, and yet you refuse to teach them the traditions?”

I asked Shinning Star about her outfit. She said that the first thing I must remember is that a true Indian costume is hand sewn. The material is white elk skin, and the tread is made from skin. The breast plate is adopted from the warriors. It is made from bones. Shinning Stars’ outfit was beautiful.

In about three hours, I had learned so much about what powwow truly meant. In my understanding, it was a gathering of friends and family-- a bringing together of new and old. The reason why people travel so far to attend a powwow is because a powwow is like a giant family reunion; everyone is family. The only requirement for one to attend is to be willing to treat each other with love and compassion.

The search that I began in Philadelphia, Mississippi ended up in a shared understanding between Shinning Star and me. It went beyond the physical location to touch something deep in my soul. I learned that culture cannot be learned only with the mind. It must be felt with the heart. Embracing a culture takes emotions that can be held onto for a long time. The many different people that I spoke with shared their knowledge of a culture with me and gave me new insights into that culture. Culture cannot be truly learned in a classroom; it has to be embraced by immersing one’s self in the new culture. I learned the true meaning of multicultural education that night. It is to love and respect each other even though we may not completely understand each other. It is to see and appreciate the other’s culture as they see and appreciate it. It is a journey that once

started should never end, because culture defines the way of life of a group of people, and in turn defines those who share in it.

Final Thoughts

As described above, the minority experience places students in environments where they are expected to view events through the cultural lens of those that participate in the culture. It is a project that uses inquiry, participation, and reflection to come to a better understanding of a culture that had previously been considered foreign. This student researcher appeared to have experienced a profound change of attitude toward this particular Native American Indian culture, from the time she started her “journey” to the time she completed it. Her emotions went through various phases of trepidation, suspicion, acknowledgement, affirmation, and admiration.

Institutions that prepare teachers continue to explore effective methods through which they can adequately prepare prospective teachers to become culturally competent enough to meet the needs of students in a changing educational landscape. The minority experience assignment appears to be an effective approach in fulfilling that goal. Pre-service teachers engage in an inquiry method that enables them to view and understand other cultures unfiltered through their own or other popular beliefs. Students present a write-up of their experiences to the class, and a question and answer session follows. During this session, further discussions and other artifacts representing the culture under study are shared with the class. Often these presentations turn out to be an epiphany. Many students acknowledge how ignorant they’d been about certain cultures, and many readily share their long held stereotypes about certain groups in the community, views that the project appears to debunk. Tina (pseudonym for the student researcher in this piece) had taken several pictures of the dancers and other participants at the powwow. She shared these pictures and the level of interest shown by the rest of the class was fascinating. This class was made of twenty-one all Caucasian pre-service teachers (twenty females, and one male). All

the students acknowledged that although they had lived in Mississippi for most of their lives, none of them had ever attended a powwow. Classroom discussions indicated that many of them would wish to attend in future. Incidentally, the university where these students attend usually hosts an annual powwow event that even I as an instructor was not aware of. In the early the fall semester, when I saw the announcement on the college web-site I asked a colleague to go with me to the gym where the event would be taking place. I was pleasantly surprised to see two of my former students from the spring semester multicultural education course in attendance as well, and we even ended up taking pictures with some of the dancers.

The minority experience combines classroom theories with practical and direct encounters which results in personal transformation for the individual. Student researchers are encouraged to keep an open mind, listen well, ask questions, and observe details during the data gathering process. These interactions foster empathetic understanding and help students see through the eyes of those that live the culture that the student researcher is experiencing for the first time. For pre-service teachers to acquire multicultural competence, colleges of education must adopt new approaches that do not only emphasize intellectual classroom paradigms, but provide authentic opportunities for students to experience and reflect upon the cultures of others different than themselves.

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