

RESEARCH ASKS, “ARE WE DOING ENOUGH TO BE CULTURALLY COMPETENT?”

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This country has long been described as a melting pot or a salad bowl, and, increasingly, classrooms in every corner of the U.S. reflect that description. The most effective teachers understand and adapt their teaching to cultural differences and have some experience living and/or working in a culture other than their own. And recent changes in Minnesota teacher licensure requirements include a section for teacher candidates to “demonstrate cultural competency.”

But cultural competency is not a new concept for Minnesota State Mankato’s College of Education. Cultural diversity curriculum and international field experience have been staples of the program for years.

Elizabeth Sandell, associate professor of elementary & early childhood education, wondered: Are we doing enough to prepare our teachers? Is what we are doing effective? Can we do better?

Over the past year, Sandell and a team of students have been conducting research to determine the best method(s) for assessing competencies in interacting with and teaching other cultures as well as effective methods for teaching cultural competency.

“I have been teaching human relations in a multicultural society and realized that students take the course early in their teacher prep programs,” said Sandell. “I felt it might be a good place to measure and to enhance students’ cultural competency.”

She began measuring student growth in her classroom with a pre- and post-test using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The IDI measures five core mindsets and behaviors related to cultural competency: unaware; polarization; minimization; acceptance; and adaptation. Movement along the continuum is the developmental goal.

Initially, Sandell found that students were very ethnocentric. “It is hard to be competent with another culture when we are only seeing it from our own point of view,” she said. “And I didn’t realize it until I started assessing it. This is one of the reasons I care about the research, because it helps me teach better—because I can start with students where they are.”

As a result of the first assessment and in an effort to improve student growth, Sandell made teaching changes in three areas—knowledge, experience and reflection. First, knowledge—she adopted a new textbook and designed learning experiences so students would acquire the best information possible about Minnesotans among several specific groups (e.g., Native Minnesotans, Asian Minnesotans, Muslim Minnesotans, etc.) . Second, experience—she added a cultural partnership assignment for her students to spend at least nine hours with someone from a culture different from his or her own. And third, reflection—she led the students in classroom-based reflections and required her students to write reflection papers on their experiences.

The changes made a difference. Sandell’s analysis of the second group of students showed that, according to the pre- and post-IDI tests, every student had grown in their level of cultural competency and many of them advanced one full stage.

She was pleased with the progress but recognizes that the work needs to continue. “The goal is that students will continue to grow and by the time they graduate, they will have moved down the continuum toward competency,” said Sandell.

Sandell's research on cultural competency has many facets. In addition to improving her own instruction, Sandell led a group of undergraduate students researching the most effective method to assess cultural competency. Erika Koenig was one of those students.

There are different ways to measure cultural competency. "The IDI is only one tool," explained Sandell. "There are ways to assess cultural competency with other instruments or through analysis of reflection papers."

Koenig coded and recorded student reflection papers. This coding allowed her to see if the reflection paper assessments matched the students' scores on the IDI. The results did not match.

"Initially, the fact that they did not match disappointed me," said Sandell. "But then we realized that the papers were written in the middle of the semester and the IDI post-test was given at the end of the semester. Because students grew in their cultural competency during the second half of the semester, it made sense that the reflection papers didn't match their final scores on the IDI."

"In addition," said Koenig, "I conducted a subcategory of research related to disengagement. It had to do with how well students knew their own culture. ... we focus a lot on other cultures, but really, how well do we know our own?"

According to Koenig, it is important to understand one's own culture so that each person can appreciate and understand other cultures. Sandell agreed, "When we understand our own culture better, we can engage in other people's cultures. We are not defensive. We are not offensive."

Understanding how cultural competency is learned and finding tools for measuring cultural competency growth are only two of the outcomes measured by Sandell and her students' research.

"We conducted this research for a number of reasons, some of which include making my instruction most effective; making a difference for students; and identifying the optimum time to take the human relations course," said Sandell.

"Teachers encounter a whole range of students and families whose backgrounds are different from their own—different first languages, different social-economic statuses, different religions," said Sandell. "Teachers have to be able to figure that out and be respectful of the differences and similarities to be effective teachers."

POSSIBLE CAPTION

Elizabeth Sandell and Erika Koenig received funding from multiple sources to conduct research on cultural competency. Koenig and her undergraduate student colleagues presented the research at several conferences at MSU and at the 2012 National Undergraduate Research Conference.