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Minnesota State University, Mankato
Center for Excellence in Scholarship and Research
An Interview with Dr. Elizabeth J. Sandell
Fall 2013

[Editor's Note: Elizabeth Sandell is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies in the College of Education. She has a bachelor's degree in social work, a master's degree in educational administration, and a doctorate in curriculum and instruction. She is a licensed pre-kindergarten teacher, parent educator, supervisor of pre-kindergarten, and qualified administrator of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). She was named MSU's Outstanding Undergraduate Research Mentor of 2012.]

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

My teaching practice has been most related to early childhood education, parent education, and teacher education. My administrative practice has been in areas such as early childhood family education, Christian education, grants management, program development, and faculty development. I have also had several leadership roles, including President of the Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children and chairperson of the Department of Educational Studies: Elementary and Early Childhood. My teaching assignments at Minnesota State University, Mankato have emphasized early childhood education and human relations in a multi-cultural society.

My personal and professional mission is to teach and organize people in transition, so they grow in faith and hope, control their own decisions and resources, and use their gifts and talents. I believe if I am going to teach people about teaching and about multi-cultural relationships, I should also practice what I am teaching. So, I consult for faculty development at Alaska Christian College (which serves primarily Alaska Native students), and I facilitate Prejudice Reduction Workshops for the Greater Mankato Diversity Council.

2. Tell us about your interest in research as an activity.

I have always been curious about "why?" and "what if?" and "how is it different?"

For my first field experience as an undergraduate, I was an intern in the Foster Care unit at Ramsey County Human Services. I learned that many families were licensed for foster care but ended their participation after a very few years. The County repeatedly invested in recruitment and training, but could not retain foster homes for long. I interviewed former foster parents to answer my question, "Why do foster parents in Ramsey County decide to stop being foster parents?" The answers had an impact on the support structure for continuing foster families.

Later, in an undergraduate child development field experience, I wondered about how three-year-olds think differently than six-year-olds. I used tasks designed by psychologist Jean Piaget to study cognitive development in young children. The answers had an impact on expectations for children in early education and on the ways that I conduct assessments.

My master's research was about the longitudinal effects of an Early Childhood Family Education program. And my doctorate research was about the impact of training in teacher observation of mother-toddler problem-solving interactions. As you can see, I have integrated research activities into my professional roles. I try to connect the theory with the practice, in my case, the practice of teaching and learning. I want to learn (from research) in order to improve practice. I want to go beyond what I call "smiley face" program evaluation and move into research on effectiveness of educational programs.

3. In what research areas are you interested?

Three years ago, I was assigned to teach a course that is required of all licensed Minnesota teachers: Human Relations in a Multi-cultural Society. The goals of this course include:

- a) Understand issues of diversity in a multicultural society
- b) Recognize and appreciate the contributions, culture, norms/value, oppression which groups experience in our society
- c) Develop personal communication skills and to listen to, respond to others with different ideas and values
- d) Awareness of personal dispositions, especially related to professionalism
- e) Develop and act upon personal power in working with diversity

At the end of my first semester, I realized that the students had learned a lot *about* people with cultures different than their own, but the students still did not actually have relationships with people from cultures other than their own. So, I became curious about how to measure one's "gracefulness" at interacting with persons who are perceived as different or "other." And I wondered how my teaching (only 45 hours of class time each semester) could possibly have an impact on their cultural competence.

For educators, 'cultural competence' is the ability to respond to different cultures while valuing and preserving the dignity of cultural differences and similarities between individuals, families, and communities. Cultural competence involves an understanding of the hidden rules within different economic and cultural structures in order to have productive relationships with students. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often do not fare well in public education and are plagued by problems such as the achievement gap, over-representation in special education, high suspension and expulsion rates, and high drop-out rates (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Townsend, 2000).

Eventually, I settled on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as a way to measure cultural competency. The IDI points to stages of development for learning about and experiencing cultural differences and similarities. The IDI is a theory-based test demonstrated to be valid and reliable. Cross-cultural validity testing of the IDI has been extensively conducted with thousands of people throughout the world (Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & Dejaeghere, 2003; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Hammer, 2011).

At the same time, faculty members in the College of Education were asking how can we prepare new teachers to understand how students from diverse backgrounds and cultures relate and respond to educational environments and expectations. Learning *about* different cultures was no

longer adequate. Teachers need to experience cultural differences and similarities and be able to respond, with gracefulness, to the cultural differences and similarities.

4. Can you review the aspects of your work with which CESR has been able to assist?

During the past three years, I have consulted with CESR for several activities:

- a) Data analysis (with SPSS) of baseline, pre-instruction data for students at MSU, Mankato.
- b) Data analysis (with SPSS) of pre-instruction data compared with post-instruction data for students at MSU, Mankato.
- c) Review of conference presentations for appropriate data images, etc.
- d) Review of two articles for publication and suggestions for editing and illustration of data.
- e) Data analysis (with SPSS) of baseline, pre-instruction data for students in Russia's Far East.

5. What? Where did that Russia connection come from?

Well, that's another long story. It's part of an established collaborative partnership between teacher education colleagues at MSU, Mankato and North-eastern State University in Magadan, Russia. We are collaborating on faculty and teacher exchanges, student short-term study trips, joint research projects, and cooperative instruction.

6. What are you finding out about cultural competency of MSU's students?

I have used the IDI at the beginning of each semester to understand the students' entry level of cultural competency. With the assistance of CESR staff with data analysis, we found that students' perception of their cultural competency was higher than their actual cultural competency, based on experience and behavior. All students perceived that they were in the high level of minimization or higher than minimization orientation. In other words, all students perceived that they were in an ethno-relative world-view. Among the respondents, 74.71% (nearly three-fourths) perceived that they were in the acceptance orientation and 22.99% (nearly one-fourth) perceived that they were in the minimization orientation toward cultural differences and similarities.

In contrast to the students' perceptions, more than 95% of the students were actually in ethno-centric orientations toward cultural differences and similarities. More than half (51.70%) of the respondents were in minimization orientation. Another 44% of the respondents were in either denial or polarization orientation.

7. Did you learn how the course instruction has an impact on cultural competency?

In Fall 2010, I used the IDI at the end of the semester to understand the students' level of cultural competency (after they finish the course). Again, with the assistance of CESR staff with data analysis, we found no significant changes for the perceived or developmental cultural orientations among students in the course during Fall 2010. Evidently, the teaching strategies used this semester did not have an impact on cultural competency, as measured by the IDI. And

student cultural competency did not automatically change over the period of this semester. Remember, this was the semester when the course was taught as originally conceived – with more of a focus to help students learn *about* other cultures.

By Fall 2011, I had made changes in my teaching strategies to provide more intentional and purposeful exposure to persons from other cultures. With the assistance of CESR staff, we analyzed the pre-instruction data and the post-instruction data. The data showed that students in the course with curriculum revisions during Fall 2011 had statistically significant higher post-instruction mean IDI scores compared to their pre-instruction mean scores. The instructional revisions appear to have helped students improve their perceived orientation and their developmental orientation scores.

8. With what conference presentations did CESR assist you?

My sabbatical goals included presentations at three national or international conferences. CESR staff members assisted with *how* to present data within those presentations. The results included, actually, my participation at *five* conferences:

“The Impact of a Cultural Partnership on the Intercultural Competence of Undergraduates.” Education Conference, North-eastern State University, Magadan, Russia, June 11, 2012.

“The Impact of a Cultural Partnership on the Intercultural Competence of Undergraduates.” Global Studies Conference, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia, June 20 – 22, 2012.

“Changes in Undergraduate Students’ Orientation toward Cultural Differences.” European Early Childhood Education Research Association, Instituto Superior de Engenharia do Porto, Porto, Portugal, August 30, 2012.

“Changes in Cultural Competency among Undergraduates during a Human Relations Course.” Intercultural Development Inventory Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, September 22, 2012.

“Changes in Cultural Competency among Undergraduates during a Human Relations Course.” American Evaluation Association, Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 25, 2012.

9. With what articles did CESR assist you?

My sabbatical goals also included writing, editing, and submitting articles to professional journals. CESR staff members assisted me by making suggestions on presenting the data within those articles and on editing the text within those articles. The results included two articles.

"Where Cultural Competency Begins: Assessing Intercultural Competence of University Students" was submitted to the Journal of Teacher Education. "Changes in Undergraduate Students’ Intercultural Competency after an Intensive and Intentional Human Relations Course” was submitted to the Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education.

10. Where do you find funding for your research activity?

The first key is that I include the research as part of the course assessment, instruction, and evaluation, so the data collection becomes embedded in my regular teaching job. There is a charge for being trained as an IDI Qualified Administrator and for each time an individual takes

the IDI online (\$11.00 per person per assessment). Network for Excellence in Teaching (NExT) (a program of the College of Education that is funded by the Archibald Bush Foundation) supported my tuition and travel expenses to be trained as an IDI Qualified Administrator. NExT also supported baseline data collection (at the beginning of the semesters). Additional funding was received with a MSU Faculty Research Grant. And members of my undergraduate research team have received several grants through the College of Education Dean's Office, the Undergraduate Research Center, the MSU Foundation, and the MSU Honors Program.

11. Tell us about your undergraduate research team.

Each year for the past four years, the research team includes four to five undergraduate research assistants. I act as a mentor, regularly providing counsel and direction on how to conduct the research. Requirements of team members include:

- a) Admission to MSU
- b) Demonstrated success in oral and written academic communication
- c) Ability to work harmoniously with other students and faculty members
- d) Skills in software related to word processing, data analysis, and reporting
- e) Project management, time management, and organizational skills

Responsibilities may include:

- a) Transcribe audiotapes or videotapes
- b) Read, analyze, write, conduct research in library
- c) Edit, present and evaluate data
- d) Develop and use coding manual for observations
- e) Schedule appointments with research subjects
- f) Gather information from research subjects
- g) Participate in oral presentation at undergraduate research conferences at MSU, in Minnesota, and at National Conference on Undergraduate Research

Benefits of working on the team include:

- a) Gain significant insight into the world of academic research
- b) Learn a wide variety of research approaches and terminology
- c) Learn specific skills in designing and conducting scholarly research projects
- d) Be involved in research typically only available to advanced graduate students and faculty members

12. What have former team members experienced?

Past team members have told me about what they learned through their experience:

I learned a lot about academic research; I am thinking about going to graduate school.

I learned that you need to be organized with all of your research material. I learned something about designing research projects.

I also learned that it is best to be well read on what your research project entails.

I learned about following procedures with human subjects in research.

I learned to be confident in the way I present my research to other professionals.

I feel like what we are doing is actually influencing the community and education in other countries.

I feel that such a research project can help improve our education programs.

I also learned that people like to know the results when they contribute their ideas to the study.

Past team members have been happy recipients of grant awards, which always looks good on their resumes and applications for graduate school. Everyone has participated in designing proposals for the Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects at MSU. All team members have participated in oral or poster presentations at local, state, national, and even international conferences, including conferences in their professional subject matter as well as undergraduate research conferences. Many team members have written articles for scholarly journals and conference proceedings. Several team members have received scholarship awards, due in part to their research experiences. One former team member has completed her master's degree and another former team member is making good progress through graduate school.

13. What will the direction of your research take in the near future?

So, now, I am asking, “How can I change my teaching methods to better lead undergraduates along the journey of cultural competency?” and “What difference do cultures and instructional strategies make between Russia’s Far East and southern Minnesota?”

14. If a faculty/staff was undecided whether to consult with the CESR or not, what would you say to them?

Absolutely! Just go for a consultation! CESR staff members can help faculty members “think through” their research ideas. CESR staff members can also help with research design, IRB applications, data collection instrumentation strategies, data analysis, presentation of results, book proposals, and reviewing drafts of academic articles or book chapters.