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# Recognizing and Working with Multiculturalism: A Reflective Analysis of a University Multicultural Education Course

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*Abstract: Multiculturalism in society and education is a reality in the twenty-first century. How we choose to deal with it is a basic question. Including multiculturalism as a fundamental component of teacher education programs is increasingly of interest given that teachers need to work successfully with diverse learners at the ideological level, practical level, political level and methodological level. Successful implementation of the tenets of multiculturalism is seen as affording teachers with the skills, knowledge and awareness needed to understand their own identity as well as that of their diverse students as basic elements of efficacious teaching and learning for all students. This paper examines how as teacher educators we go about understanding and addressing multiculturalism as an expression of one's identity and how such awareness enables preservice teachers to more effectively deal with diversity. It looks at pre-service teacher's understandings of multiculturalism/identity/diversity and focuses on an analysis of the development, implementation and efficacy of a university multicultural education course. The reflective content analysis is based on the experiences as noted in the reflective journal entries of pre-service teachers taking the course. The course participants: Greek university undergraduate elementary education students and students from other European countries participating in the European Union Erasmus student mobility program. The analysis indicated that that an increased opportunity for active participation and reflection positively influences the multicultural awareness of the course participants.*

Keywords: Multiculturalism/Identity/Diversity, Multicultural Education, Pre-service Teacher Education Reflective Journal Writing, Content Analysis, Erasmus Student Mobility

## Introduction

**M**ULTICULTURALISM IN SOCIETY and education is a reality in the twenty-first century with the resultant diversity impacting not only individuals but the society in which they live. A basic characteristic of the changes in many Western societies is the rapid cultural and linguistic diversification of its population taking them from a seemingly homogeneous status to one markedly heterogeneous. Discussions on multiculturalism and teacher education are historically focused on the United States, Canada and Australia (Banks & Banks, 1995; Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, Davis & Fries, 2004); looking to Europe, the issue of the multiculturalism has been discussed at all levels of society (Debeauvais, 1992; Hillman, 1996; Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe, 2000; Ronge & Simon, 2001; Mavrikos-Adamou, 2003; Mitter & 2007). The need for qualified teachers in an increasingly multicultural world has led many to examine to what degree issues related to diversity make up part of the curriculum of higher education programs (Cochran-Smith *et al*, 2004). Multiculturalism is considered a fundamental component of teacher education programs as teachers need to work successfully with diverse learners at the ideological, practical, political and methodological level (Fox & Gay, 1995). As Banks (2001) points out, teachers

need specific knowledge, skills and attitudes with respect to cultural diversity if they are to serve as positive catalysts of change.

An important concept in cultural diversity is that of identity which connects individual and social spheres of life in societies and thus education. The relationship between identity and culture is both interconnection and interaction; where identity is a relatively stable element of objective cultural reality, and at the same time it is a defining element of subjective reality (Lestinen, Petrucijová & Spinthourakis, 2004). The formation of identity is in part based on cultural transmission. On one level this comes from the family and the cultural environment while the other includes education (Bekemans & Lombaert, 1996) and information access. Individuals may see themselves as a member of more than one group, as identity may be dependent on the group identified with at a particular time (Spinthourakis & Katsillis, 2003).

Pedagogy utilizes several approaches for the development of cultural identity. One such approach is the formation of a learning environment wherein the development of students' cultural identities stimulates the formation of their personalities and enables them to be involved in cross-cultural dialogues. Successful implementation of the tenets of multiculturalism affords teachers with the skills, knowledge and awareness needed to understand their



own identity as well as that of their diverse students (Major & Brock, 2003).

Educational research over the last several decades includes studies that focus on the importance of dealing with multiculturalism in education (Cochran-Smith *et al*, 2004; Gibson, 2004; Grossman, 2005; Abbate-Vaughn, 2006). The manner, in which pre-service teachers are helped to understand, taught to plan, and execute their responsibilities in the classroom, can foster those understandings needed to maximize the potential of all children. It is imperative that pre-service teachers examine and consider their own views and beliefs as they relate to issues of cultural diversity. Journal writing is an approach that fosters reflection and change wherein reflection is a process of inquiry, thinking and where action occurs within practice (Schön, 1987). Furthermore it can be seen as a tool for promoting student learning in a multicultural education course by allowing students to construct their own meanings in response to new information and experiences. Towards this end, pre-service teacher experiential learning linked to reflective journal writing can have a positive impact (Dymet & O'Connell, 2003; Fernandez, 2003; Garmon, 1998, 2004).

This paper examines how teacher educators understand and address multiculturalism as part of identity and how this awareness helps preservice teachers effectively deal with diversity. Relevant is the fact that as studies have indicated traditionally-organized preservice teacher education programs that teach diversity issues do not have a significant impact on attitudes and beliefs (Colville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Weisman & Garza, 2002; Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler & Stallworth, 2005; Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Richards, 2005).

### **The Need for Teachers Who Recognize and Work with Multiculturalism**

In nearly all European countries the percentage of foreigners has increased dramatically. Multiculturalism represents a foundation for a new demographic realism. Changes in population and student demographics in Greece as well as the lack of diversity in the teacher population and limited multicultural teacher education training has led to growing concern about how to meet the educational challenge of learner diversity (Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti, Papoulia-Tzelepi & Karras, 2005; Alahiotis & Karatzia-Stavlioti, 2006; IPODE, 2006; Tsiglis, Tsioumis & Gregoriadis, 2006; Psalti, 2007).

The acquisition of a multicultural and multilingual view of Europe is an integral part of the factual and experiential knowledge of its citizens. Building on this, the question arises on how to address diversity not only within national borders but beyond them

(Heller, 1992; Ferraroti, 1993; Cerutti & Randolph, 2001; Mitter, 2007). In 1987, the European Union established the Erasmus program in as a way for European university students to study in another European country; to actively learn the value of diversity by getting to know and understand other cultures and people (Teichler, 2004; Papastiba, 2006).

Many institutions of higher education have implemented multicultural preservice training programs that as the literature suggests are directed at: 1) ensuring cultural knowledge of different groups; 2) addressing the beliefs and attitudes of pre-service teachers and, 3) training in cultural- relevant pedagogical skills (Gibson, 2004). Preservice teachers need to learn how to analyze their beliefs and attitudes on cultural differences and can do so through guided introspection; they also need to be taught to become change agents with skills that include critical self-analysis, self-reflection, and understanding culture (Gay & Kirkland, 2005). This has led to an infusion of courses related to multiculturalism/identity/diversity. In our situation we decided to look at what we teach, how we teach it and what our students gain in terms of becoming more open to multiculturalism/identity/diversity within a European higher education context.

### **The Basis of our Study**

In this study we used the opportunity to look at the question "How well are we preparing our pre-service teachers to deal with changing societal realities?" vis-à-vis a fourth year undergraduate elective course, 'Multilingual Multicultural Education' in a Greek State University Department of Elementary Education. The course, through its seven year history, and as a result of Erasmus student participation has evolved into one that is multilingual and multicultural given that several different languages are heard with English being the *lingua franca*. It links theory to personal experience, requires individual research, goes beyond Greek based experiences and seeks to promote the tenets of multiculturalism in education through discussion and focused reflective journal writing (Hoover, 1994; Garmon, 1998).

When Erasmus students register, meetings are held with faculty during scheduled meetings to discuss directed individualized study projects since they have difficulty following course lectures are given in Greek. This course is intentionally taught bilingually and sometimes trilingually, using Greek and English and occasionally French. The course is given in the fall semester, meets once a week for 3 hours with the number of registered students usually not exceeding 35. The Greek students when told that English language skills are not what are going to be assessed seem very interested in taking part in a course that

is not exclusively Greek language based, especially since translator services are activated with both instructor and students taking on the aforementioned role.

The first day we meet, the students are asked to work in dyads and/or triads and where possible with a person of a different nationality. They then interview each other with the end task being the development of a biographical narrative as the basis for introducing one another. The class begins with the instructor introducing herself highlighting her multilingual-multicultural life experiences and identity. This is a lively and very atypical Greek university experience. The students are informed that the course seeks to help them understand the changing world around them as well as their role as teachers and citizens in a multicultural Europe. The students are thereafter paired cross-nationally.

They have to take part in the discussions in class, read several academic articles relating to issues of multiculturalism and diversity, and do at least one presentation of their choice. Greek students are paired with Erasmus students and have specific tasks to complete together, outside class. The course tends to be highlighted by a great deal of discussion both in terms of the articles presented by the students, the events going on around them, in Greece, Europe and the world at large; but are always linked back to 'what does this mean to you', 'how would you deal with this', 'how do we understand this' and 'what would you do with this in [name of country]'. Finally, they must keep a reflective personal journal with a minimum of one entry per fortnight of their impressions and thoughts throughout the semester. The entry focus has to be linked, to some degree, with what is discussed in weekly sessions and/or their Greek/Erasmus student task but should not be limited to this alone. The journal should also include reflections on situations, observations and issues tied to culture, identity, diversity and multiculturalism. Explanations on what a reflective journal encompasses are given and discussions ensue on their usefulness (Hoover, 1994; Garmon, 2004). We discuss the educational policies, practices as well as hypothetical and real situations in the various countries represented in the class and debate the pros and cons of each as well as their viability.

### ***Participants and Methodology***

The primary data sources for our study are the submitted journal entries of the 22 students. Ten were at our university as part of the Erasmus student mobility program (4 Poles, 2 Austrians, 3 Czech and 1 Slovak). The gender breakout was five males (two

Erasmus students) and 16 females (8 Erasmus students).

Our fundamental research questions, with a focus on multiculturalism, identity, diversity and preservice teacher education students, were: a) what is their knowledge base; b) does their knowledge base change; c) what instructional methodologies influence their knowledge base, and d) does using a reflective personal journal help students expand their knowledge of base? Qualitative content analysis was used to uncover changes as noted in their journals in their skills, knowledge and attitudes that emerged through the different instructional methodologies applied in the course (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Mayring, 2000).

The analysis of the journal entries was based on a series of steps taken by two<sup>1</sup> individuals independently who read, categorized and coded the journals entries to insure coding reliability after reconciling the differences and ensuring the category borders (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After identifying the journal segments related to multiculturalism/identity/diversity, we separated these segments by topic and organized the coding chronologically. We operationally defined changes as having occurred when students stated that they had learned something, including statements indicating that they had acquired a better understanding or a new insight about the topics, or when students expressed beliefs about a particular topic that differed from beliefs they had expressed earlier. From this analysis, four major themes emerged on issues of multiculturalism/identity/diversity: a) what we know, b) what we have learned, c) what influenced us to change, and d) journal writing and reflection.

### ***Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion***

The analysis of the 22 journals included one hundred sixty-three journal entries (18 students gave journals with six fortnight entries; 3 gave journals with thirteen weekly entries; and 1 gave a journal with sixteen entries covering the thirteen weeks of the course). Reading the individual entries was informative. Things we expected to find weren't there and others we didn't expect cropped up. Some of the early class discussions often were directly transcribed with little personal reflection noted; the same was true of early article reviews. As we saw from the entries the students do not often open up about personal experiences as there is a general reluctance to talk about the issues raised, over the thirteen weeks of the course, the majority though, tend to move from insularity and defensiveness to a more open-minded stance and discourse. Our analysis didn't give us findings that gender played a significant role in re-

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our colleague Dr. Karatzia-Stavlioti for her time and expertise.

sponses, except for the fact that male entries were generally briefer but they were neither less reflective nor more reflective than that of the females.

Nationality in gross terms did however seem to differentiate the findings somewhat. Overall, more than half Greek students from their journal entry analysis appeared to be less knowledgeable, had fewer reflective skills and tended to be somewhat extreme in their attitudes. With the exception of two students, the rest began with moderate knowledge, basic reflective skills and were less extreme in their attitudes. The two remaining Greek students (one in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year, the other in her 4<sup>th</sup> year) while beginning with little or no knowledge, were quite reflective and started from a relatively neutral attitude progressed greatly (see Table 1 entries for Eirini and Agathi). The Erasmus students (all in the final year of their studies) on the otherhand appeared to come to the course better prepared to deal with cultural diversity. This may be due in part to the fact that as Erasmus

students they were informed prior to travelling to Greece that they should be prepared for some differences, although they too had not taken a similar course in their home country. They were though, more attuned to journal writing than the Greek students. Virtually all the students found the opening session of the course, something that surprised them and made them reflect; some more so than others and with deeper reflection. The cross-national pairing of the students was enthusiastically embraced by almost all the students. Two Greek students who were less enthusiastic stated that their English skills were a problem; their group task was also a problem. The indicative journal excerpts presented in Table 1 are from three Greek students (one who wrote 6 entries, one with 13 entries; one with sixteen entries) and three Erasmus students (all with 6 journal entries) distributions by thematic category/subcategory are presented along with the analysis of each category which follows.

**Table 1: Greek and Erasmus Student Journal Excerpts Presentation by Thematic Category**

Theme Categories	Greek Students Indicative Journal Excerpts	Erasmus students Indicative Journal Excerpts
a) What we know	<p>(Eirini) [first week]Multiculturalism is only about immigrants. There are things about diversity I don't know and think as a teacher I should know. I don't know the difference between categories of minorities—what is a minority? Is there a difference between political definitions and reality? Who are the minorities in Greece and the other countries represented in the class and even beyond?</p> <p>(Agathi) [first week] I thought I knew about diversity. When put in front of a class of non Greek students I realized I didn't know how or what to teach them!...I hope this course helps me learn to be a more effective teacher and person.</p> <p>(Dimitri) [first fortnight] The constitution of our country says everyone has equal rights, do they? What is equality and equity? What are minorities? I need to find answers to questions I never thought about!</p>	<p>(Vojtech-Pole) [first fortnight]All people are almost same...but there are differences—some more obvious, some less so. Language is the primary thing that makes us different and can cause us problems.</p> <p>(Adela-Czech) [first fortnight]We can not concentrate only at our own culture and our own situation [<i>she was a student with a physical handicap</i>], because it can makes difficulties with getting to know new people from other countries. Multiculturalism is about all types of people living together and having the right to be treated equally.</p> <p>(Katrina-Austrian) [first fortnight]Being different isn't only about being from a single culture, you can be a mix like me. I faced problems in Austria and in Greece, people need to look at ME and not where I come from!</p>
b) What we have learned	<p>(Eirini) [fourth week]I need to look beyond myself, my 'normal' life and really see others, who they are, how they're treated, people who I haven't 'noticed' until now...I need to look for facts and not rely on café chatting with friends—multiculturalism is about equity and social justice, everyone has rights...[fifth week] the media plays a big role in influencing what people think about differentiated groups—it's not always factual—it borders on sensational-</p>	<p>(Vojtech) [second fortnight] It isn't only language, culture is important—it makes us who we are. But if we don't have the ability to understand each other, working together is a problem! I make subjective characterizations of Greeks even if naturally there are differences between my culture and culture of my host country. Greek people are very different, we all have differ-</p>

	<p>ism. This is not something only in Greece—Hana and Aga told me that it’s like this in Poland too!...The more experiences I have the richer I become.</p> <p>(Agathi) [second week]I’ve always thought I wasn’t a racist...but when I saw a poster in Albanian I got angry that it wasn’t in Greek. If I were outside Greece would I feel the same way? Discussing this with Katina and Adela helps. We’re going to do a presentation on this. Minorities aren’t only immigrants they are also people who may have a disability...[fourth week] “Seek and ye shall find”. If you search you can find someone who can help you find your way—I’m a good student, straight A’s, but I didn’t know where to look, for that matter I didn’t know that I NEEDED to look until I was confronted with this situation... [eighth week]I can learn from others but I can also learn from myself—talking to myself about myself through writing.</p> <p>(Dimitri) [second fortnight] There’s a lot of discrimination all around us and we never see it. I had talked about equality and never stopped to think about people with disabilities. I proudly talked about the new sidewalks made to help the blind. Adela pointed out that the special tiles run right into Kiosks and not around them and that they’re full of tables from the local restaurants...ouch! I shouldn’t talk before I’ve seen things through the eyes of people different from me.</p>	<p>ences and we react to things differently. Experiences with situations make us see things differently. Someone who comes from abroad undergoes a real surprise... Foreigner is standing within an alien culture, listening to noise. Around us are people with different habits, behavior and points of view... [third fortnight] I perceive all around me and try comprehending people and culture. It is very hard but later is it much to my entertainment</p> <p>(Adela) [second fortnight]Laws exist everywhere, they are enforced differently though. People who are different need to become ‘visible’—it’s my task to help people ‘see me’. You can’t be complacent about discrimination whether it’s overt or covert! My discussion after class with Dimitri was really interesting—you should have seen the look on his face when I outlined all the problems with Greek ‘handicap accessibility’.</p> <p>(Katrina) [second fortnight] Being an ethnic mix isn’t the worse thing one can be, my professor is one and she made it sound exciting—it makes her who she is and she’s proud of it. Your background makes up your identity!</p>
<p>c) What influenced us to change</p>	<p>(Eirini) [second week]The information given during the lecture on immigrants and minorities in Greece and Europe, left me speechless...I never realized exactly how much I didn’t know. Talking with Aga and Kinga gave me a chance to see that similar situations exist beyond my ‘world’ [fourth week] ...running to the library and the internet finding facts helps me...re-search, discussing, arguing...writing. My professor telling her story.</p> <p>(Agathi) [third week]This course makes me think, I hadn’t planned on taking ANY classes my last semester at the university but this semester I also had my student teaching and was assigned to a class 10 of the 13 pupils were from other countries. I froze when I found myself having to stand in front of the class to teach religion when 2/3 of my students weren’t Orthodox Christians. When I found the course listed on the semester register, I felt as if I had found an island oasis! I wanted someone to show me the way. [ninth week]...The journal even if I don’t really like writing helps me cla-</p>	<p>(Vojtech) [second fortnight]I like the idea of the lesson which I take part. I like to meet new people, especially to meet them from different countries. There are about five nations and others cultures, so it’s going to be very difficult to know them all, but I really want to. I don’t like writing the journal; I’d rather talk with people.</p> <p>(Adela) [second fortnight] Just because I have a handicap doesn’t mean I know everything. Having a mixed background can lead to discrimination but it depends on how you think about that background, think of it positively like I do my handicap.</p> <p>(Katrina) [fourth fortnight] The discussions make me stop and think. We discuss things in Austria but here the discussions are almost like debates. They make it easier to write things in my journal. This is the first time I’ve had the chance to work with people</p>

	<p>rify things in my mind. Talking with Hana and Monika about their situation in Poland really important... I'm not alone!</p> <p>(Dimitri) [first fortnight] My English is TERRIBLE and this is making it hard for me to work with Jakyb but I'm going to keep on trying—he's learning Greek, I should be able to use my limited English!! The journal writing, it's original and really innovative-glad it's in Greek! I've never kept one and it's making me think! [third fortnight] Having to keep abreast of current affairs—I usually just look at sports and documentaries, I never really thought about everything that minorities and people who are different from me have to face almost on a daily basis.</p>	<p>from different cultures, being a mix helps!</p>
d) Journal writing and reflection	<p>(Eirini) [fourth week] The journal even if I don't really like writing it, I'm soooo tired after my supervised teaching, maybe it will help me??? [tenth week]... The journal is still hard to keep up, I do it more than once a week, its like looking into a mirror or through a window in time.</p> <p>(Agathi) [first week] I've never kept a journal before, it seems strange writing to myself [fourth week]...it gets easier though over time...it helps that only my professor sees it [eighth week]...I shared my journal with Adela and Vojtech, it made me think even more about what I write in it...Adela and I are going to read articles on diversity, mine will be in Greek and her's in Czech—we're going to write the reviews together, it will be comparative [eleventh week]...I plan to keep on writing in my journal...I think it helps me understand what I do and why I do it.</p> <p>(Dimitri) [fifth fortnight] I thought I would hate keeping the journal but it seems to dominate how I see things now. I see something and think about how I'm going to write about it, what I'm going to say. I don't know that I'll have time to continue doing it after the course.</p>	<p>(Vojtech) Journal writing is horrible. I don't like doing it and I doubt I'll do it again. I can reflect without the journal, a good honest discussion is just as good.</p> <p>(Adela) [first fortnight] I've kept a diary since I was little. The journal is a little different since I have to talk about specific things but it helps reflect. [fourth fortnight] I'm going to combine my diary with my journal both help me see things differently like Eirini's mirror; it's all part of my identity.</p> <p>(Katrina) [second fortnight] I like to write and talk, we keep journals in Austria. [third fortnight] Usually the entries are about what we saw here I have to write about what I think and how it makes me feel.</p>

## Conclusion

The findings of our study indicate that our students benefited by the instructional methodologies applied and students tended to be more proactive, blending theory with practice and taking advantage of ample opportunities for different experiences. Many of our students came to the course with a limited knowledge base on multiculturalism/identity /diversity and few had ever attended an experientially based university course. Our findings appear to support much of the literature on how we can make multiculturalism/identity/diversity issues more real and visible in preservice teacher education. The element offered by the

Erasmus students appears to bring students closer to realizing the benefits and problems that diversity harbours, something that many living in seemingly monocultural societies 'don't see'. Journal writing when organized and focused assists students to become more reflective and honest with themselves, especially when they receive active feedback from their instructor. In the excerpts from several of the student's journals, we see them engaging in meaningful reflection on the course content, their identity and diversity.

Teacher's in contemporary society need to be reflective and multiculturally sensitive if they are to effectively support learning for all. Our study supports



the idea that higher education teachers need to continue to research how multicultural experiences influence preservice teachers' perspectives for designing more effective teacher education courses. Learning

to live with others in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is learning to live to the maximum of one's abilities and opportunities, and preservice teacher education courses should be taught with this in mind.

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