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Journal Title: Journal of teaching in social work.

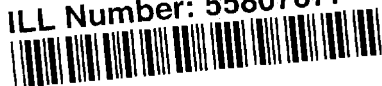
Volume: 25 **Issue:** 3/4
Month/Year: 2005 **Pages:** 157-176

Article Author:

Article Title: Petrovich, Anne; Developing Cultural Competence; Student and Alumni Perspectives.

Imprint: New York, N.Y. ; Haworth Press, [c1987-

ILL Number: 55807877



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Developing Cultural Competence: Student and Alumni Perspectives

Anne Petrovich
Mitzi Lowe

ABSTRACT. One of the areas of increased importance to social work pedagogy is the development of culturally competent practice skills. In focus groups, first and second year students, and recent alumni reflected on their growing awareness and competence concerning cultural diversity. Meaningful patterns emerged emphasizing the importance of psychologically safe but challenging learning environments, encountering theory through personal impact, the power of role models, and the need for a greater focus on the transfer of learning to the world of work after graduation. Classroom climate and teaching implications of the findings are proposed. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Cultural competence, student perspectives, pedagogy, transfer of learning

In the context of significant demographic changes in the United States, it has never been more important for social work educators to

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Journal of Teaching in Social Work, Vol. 25(3/4) 2005
Available online at http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JTSW
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doi:10.1300/J067v25n03_10

prepare culturally competent practitioners. The National Association of Social Workers has responded to the increasing diversity of American society by charging all social workers with the ethical responsibility of constructing a learning environment which teaches culturally competent knowledge and skills (NASW, 2001). Ten standards for culturally competent practice, prepared by the National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity, were adopted by the NASW Board of Directors (2001). Multifaceted in emphasis, the standards emphasize self-awareness; knowledge about, and respectful sensitivity to diverse client cultures; awareness of conflicting and complicated personal, professional, and cultural values and ethics; communication and referral skills; and the need to advocate for culturally relevant services at all levels of education and practice.

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Accomplishing this mandate, however, is a complicated challenge which is easier said than done. Recent professional literature has elaborated on core concepts involved in an adequate understanding and application of cultural competence: social justice, diversity awareness and competence, adequate systems of care, and an empowerment perspective. *Social justice* is generally understood as equal access to resources and opportunity (Gil, 1998; Gilligan, 1988; Maning, 1997; Reamer, 1998; Robinson & Reese, 2000). *Diversity awareness* is variously described as the ability to identify, understand and celebrate differences among individuals and to intervene sensitively with respect to these differences (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997). *Diversity competence* refers to behaviors, attitudes, and policies which come together to provide effective service and is considered an ongoing developmental process, involving the continual acquisition of knowledge, self-evaluation, and skill (Cross, 1989). *Culturally competent systems of care* incorporate values which embrace differences as positive and construct institutional responses to specific cultural needs in ways which empower clients (Cross, 1989). Related to this, an *empowerment perspective* highlights problems facing oppressed populations, focuses on mediating the role powerlessness places in creating and perpetuating social problems, and encourages and supports clients to become their own advocates (Diller, 1999; Solomon, 1976). This continuum emphasizes a dynamic, ever changing process involving self-awareness, the acquisition of knowledge and skill; and the application of both at all levels of practice.

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THE CHALLENGE: PEDAGOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Curriculum and teaching methods are part of the ethical imperative for institutional changes needed in order to respond effectively to diverse communities; yet faculty members seldom receive preparation in instructional strategies for a multicultural society. Including cross cultural material in course content, either in specific courses or infused throughout the curriculum, is only part of what it needed. Diversity perspectives ideally need to inform all aspects of the learning environment, both formal and informal, and should influence teaching methods so that students can relate effectively to the real worlds of their clients. It was with this goal in mind that the social work education faculty at this public university adopted a mission statement in 1992, focused on the infusion of concepts of social justice, cultural diversity, and empowerment as guiding principles for the educational process.

The San Joaquin Valley, where the campus is located, offers an array of both challenging and unique opportunities for social work educators. Population growth outpaces both state and national growth rates, with both legal and illegal immigration contributing heavily to the increase. During the 1990s, the Hispanic population increased by 20 percent; the Asian population, by more than 50 percent. Unemployment rates average 14 percent; and per capita income ranks 38th out of 50 counties in the state. The San Joaquin Valley is officially designated by the federal government as one of the most multicultural regions in the country. This diversity exists in the context of high rates of poverty, social unrest, and crime; the historical class distinctions and power discrepancies of an agricultural economy; the aforementioned population explosion and chronic unemployment (Richardson, 2002; Palacio, 2001).

Given the compelling challenges described above, and the commitment of the faculty to a mission statement devoted to making the social work education process relevant to the population to be served, it was important to explore to what extent the students experienced themselves as growing in diversity awareness and competence as they went through and completed the program. Were the students aware of and influenced by the mission statement? Did they experience its values throughout all aspects of their education? From the students' viewpoints, what graduate training and educational experiences facilitated or hindered the development of diversity competence? The authors decided that the most fruitful beginning step toward an understanding of the phenomenology of cultural competence was to use a qualitative, exploratory research

method with maximum opportunity for flexibility, openness, and variation of response.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

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The respondents for this study were 23 social work graduate students and recent alumni from the campus environment described above. First and second year graduate students were recruited by open verbal invitations to all students, delivered by the investigators at the start of required courses at the beginning of the fall semester, 2001. The authors briefly described their interest in learning about how students perceive aspects of their educational experience and asked the students to indicate on a sheet of paper their interest in participating in focus discussion groups and their time availability. It was emphasized that participation was completely voluntarily and would have no bearing on grades or other forms of evaluation. The authors of the study were not teaching the required courses from which the students were recruited. Students who participated signed a written consent form, acknowledging their voluntary participation, the confidentiality of their participation and their awareness that results would be published in summary form, with identifying information deleted from any quotations used as examples of student opinion. Participants were then matched with time slots and invited to group focus sessions, lasting ninety minutes each. Approximately 40 first-year and 40 second-year graduate students were present when the offer to participate was made. Five first-year students were interviewed in two separate focus groups; and six second-year students participated in a third focus group. Recent alumni were randomly recruited by locating student files of alumni who had graduated the previous year. Approximately 20 alumni were phoned to invite them to participate in focus groups. Of these, 15 alumni responded to the phone calls; and five participated in the study: three in the context of a focus group and two in individual phone interviews. The ethnicity and gender composition of the respondents were as follows: 8 Southeast Asians, 9 Caucasians, 6 Hispanics, 14 females, and 9 males.The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed, and the researchers also took notes.

Because this research was exploratory and preliminary in nature, a qualitative focus group methodology was chosen, using the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher as the key instrument (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The researchers, a classroom instructor and

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the Director of Field Education, were concerned with how students make sense of their educational experiences in relation to the development of cultural competence. The data collected is termed "soft," in that it is rich in descriptive statements about a variety of formal and informal experiences and is not easily analyzed by statistical procedures. Questions were formulated to explore graduate education from the student's frame of reference. Open-ended in nature, they inquired about responses to the classroom, assignments, informal and formal contacts with teachers and peers, the composition of the faculty and student body, fieldwork, special educational conferences and trips, and for alumni, experiences in the world of work after graduation. Participants were asked to describe both positive and negative to all aspects of their learning experience and were invited to add comments about areas the authors may not have thought to include. For the purpose of this study, the focal point of this research was to uncover the meaning that students ascribe to the development of cultural competence. In contrast to other forms of inquiry, qualitative inquiry is characterized by depth and attention to the meaning people derive from their environment. Interview, document analysis, and participatory observation were the primary data collection methods used.

Using grounded theory, responses were analyzed for emergent themes, which were identified independently by the researchers working separately, and then compared for reliability and coherence of meaning. Aspects of both inductive and deductive inquiry were utilized, in that questions were formulated, using the aforementioned concepts of cultural diversity, social justice, and empowerment while allowing for additional themes to arise from the spontaneous perspectives and experiences of the students. Interview data was summarized, highlighting salient themes which included the following: meanings of cultural awareness and competence; classroom and field pedagogy that facilitated or hindered effective practice with diverse cultures; formal and informal faculty and student roles in a diverse learning community; and recommendations for social work educators.

FINDINGS

Distinct themes emerged from an analysis of the data arising from the focus groups. Detailed descriptions, with illustrative quotes, follow.

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Diversity Competence as a Developmental Process: Awareness, Competence, Confidence

In response to a request to discuss what the terms "diversity awareness and diversity competence" meant to the participants, differences existed between first and second year students and alumni. First-year students tended not to differentiate between awareness and competence; they emphasized self-awareness and understanding others:

> (They mean) having an understanding of different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities . . . of the differences we have. In order to understand other cultures we need to understand our own. Otherwise we couldn't work with people in our community who come from so many different cultures.

Second-year students tended to go beyond self and other awareness to add a focus on skill development and an attitude of respect and acceptance, as reflected in the following statements:

> To me cultural competence means the ability to engage with a specific population . . . without depriving them of their dignity, to be respectful, and not have them be ashamed of their differences . . . being able to get a certain degree of comfort. I think awareness is understanding the theoretical and historical point of view, but I think the competence comes from the direct experiences and actual engagements. When you are competent, you don't bring in your own judgments. You are more open. You're not telling people what their issues are and what to do about them. If you just have awareness, that doesn't necessarily give you the tools to deal with that family appropriately. I would judge them without knowing it. I used to think of a certain client as enmeshed without realizing how important it was for her to be at home taking care of her mother.

Alumni added a dimension of role conflict and the need for confidence in order to maintain accepting attitudes and apply the skills learned in graduate school, underscoring the need to maintain the stance of a lifetime learner. Diversity competence was seen as an ongoing challenge throughout one's career:

> One of the most important things is to be comfortable with not knowing everything. I am always learning, but now I have the confidence to relate to any ethnic group. I can learn from the client, and if I don't know, I can always go look it up. It is an attitude of respect and not judging. But at work they don't always practice what they preach and they (agency staff) are not always open to what I think just because I got my master's degree.

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These alumni comments are consistent with Green's (1999) conclusion that "cultural competence is a systematically learned and tested awareness of the values and behaviors of a specific community and an ability to carry out professional activities consistent with that awareness."

These respondents repeatedly emphasized confidence as distinctly different from competence, in that it was possible to view oneself as trained in self-awareness, respect for other cultures, and skill in relating to diverse groups, but at the same time lacking in confidence to put the skills into practice in a variety of situations. One alumnus stated:

> I spent all that time and hard work getting my MSW and learning how to work with different cultures, but I learned not to rock the boat on my job. I see things that need to change–for example, they need different hours and more interpreters–but when I speak up, I always get a reason why things can't change. When I got out of school, I felt like I had a lot to offer, but now I feel less confident, even when I know what should be done.

In stressing confidence as an unanticipated, but essential component of diversity competence, these alumni seemed to be describing Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to carry out the skills needed in order to achieve an identified goal. This is a construct increasingly emphasized in social work, as well as in a variety of other educational, therapeutic and training arenas, and has recently been cited as an important factor in whether social workers engage in political participation after graduation (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001). Very important to alumni, the dimension of confidence highlighted the complexities students face in translating educational experiences into practice and in internalizing a professional identity. This alumnus emphasized his awareness of the process of socialization he had undergone, resulting in his identification of diversity competence with the essence of his sense of self as a social worker:

> We never stopped hearing about it. It was emphasized in every class, every paper, every role play, every everything! It's in my mind all the time now. It has really changed me.

These respondents were clearly undergoing a transition during their time in the program. The development of cultural competence seemed to begin with self-awareness and the awareness and appreciation of difference, followed by deepened empathy and skill acquisition. The third dimension–confidence in one's ability to apply the competence acquired during education–was unanticipated by the researchers and emerged as vital to the effectiveness of diversity training.

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The Impact of Unacknowledged Cultures

Many participants repeatedly referred to the presence and power of "hidden" or "invisible" cultures, the need to make them "visible," and acknowledged as influential. These were described as the culture of family of origin, the culture of the dominant society, the minority culture to which the student may belong, the blend of these cultures in the current lifestyles of students, the peer culture of the social work student body as a whole, the subcultures of minority groups within the student body, the cultures of fieldwork agencies, and cultures of agencies where students also worked as paid employees, the culture of the university as a whole, and the culture of the social work department within it. Different and often conflicting expectations and norms among these cultures or subcultures strongly impacted the students and often caused role strain. A first-year student, who felt she lacked the skill to assert herself with those in different student subcultures, emphasized:

> There are the minority students who hang out together and the "smart students" who hang out together and everybody knows who they are.

Several second-year students were concerned that unstated cultural preferences among the faculty rendered some cultures invisible and made negative judgments about others:

> Some cultures were invisible. When they talk about multiculturalism in class, the examples are always specific minority groups, and others are left out. I have a lot of Native Americans in my field

> placement, but that wasn't really addressed. There are "favorite" minority cultures featured–Hispanic, Hmong, gay-lesbian–but others are ignored.

> White cultures were either invisible or bad. We always heard about white culture as if it was all alike, and we always heard what white people did wrong to oppress other people. It felt like I should be ashamed to be white. It wasn't presented as if white people came from a variety of cultures or that their cultures were a mixture of good and bad. For example, I'm Italian, and I'm proud of my cultural heritage, but it was never taught. We should be taught to understand and respect all cultures if we're really multicultural.

Alumni, reflecting on the multiplicity of cultures, obvious and subtle, also noted subcultures within the social work faculty and profession, as well as in their places of employment:

> The faculty has its own cultures between the macro and the micro people. They should respect each other and not badmouth each other. They shouldn't fight with each other. We need all kinds of social workers.

> In school and fieldwork we were encouraged to speak out, and our opinions were valued. But the agency has its own culture, and I'm supposed to go along with it.

At all levels, these respondents were aware of, and affected by both the multiplicity of cultures in the personal, academic, and professional world and by those "hidden" cultures which were not always acknowledged during their educational experience. Conflicting values in these cultures had a strong impact on both students and alumni, and for especially the latter, appeared to affect the dimension of confidence, considered critical to the application of diversity values in practice.

The Importance of Commonality Within Diversity

One of the most frequent suggestions made by respondents at all levels was to de-emphasize culturally separate groups and to create more opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to experience their commonalities and mutual commitments as social workers. Respondents wanted these opportunities on both a personal and professional

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level, and their notion of commonality extended beyond ethnic identity to commonality with faculty, part-time and full-time students, and the community-at-large. Said a second-year Asian student:

> The need to mix, as well as separate the ethnicities. I guess I understand the need for African-Americans, Asians, and Hispanics to have their own identity, but even within these groups there is so much diversity. All Asians or Hispanics or African-Americans are not the same, and sometimes I think these divisions assume that. We need to be together. We're stronger that way. When I talked with students from other ethnic groups in class, I discovered that I had more in common than the differences. That was very important to me.

This alumna emphasized the need for commonality in addressing community issues:

> I wish we could all work together on these (referring to suicides in Hmong community), and I wish we could work from the perspective of the way the cultures are now, which is different from the way they were in the past. And students and faculty should work together with the community on these issues instead of separately.

The desire for unity within diversity, commonality within difference was a consistent theme among these respondents. Both students and alumni were interested in the mutual interests which united them and held values which were inclusive and altruistic. Although their membership in a particular ethnic or cultural group was salient to them, their identities as social work professionals who valued promoting social justice and empowerment for all groups was equally, if not more crucial. For these respondents, the needs of particular groups in a diverse community should be the concern of all.

From Theory to Practice: Personal Encounters Bring Theory Alive

When respondents were asked about the relationship of theory related to cultural competence to the application of practice skills, a strong preference for the concrete, personalized encounter with theory, as opposed to its study in the abstract, emerged. Both students and alumni had a difficult time articulating which theories they considered relevant

to diversity competence. Specific theories mentioned included attachment theory, strengths perspectives, and systems theory, but students could not easily describe how these theories or perspectives were usefully applied. These comments, from an alumnus and a second-year student, were typical:

> Seems like systems theory comes to mind. I can't remember all the other ones. Well, I just think knowing where people come from, and having a basic understanding of theories . . . you may not use them all, and you may not be able to follow them step by step, but if you have an idea, you can kind of incorporate pieces of them together, I think.

But when presentation of theory either accompanied or followed concrete personal encounters, the experience had an impact. One student wanted more historical encounters with the persons who created theories:

> We need heroes. I wish we had more films or dramatic presentations or reading from the actual heroes of different cultural groups or learn more about the original writings or life experiences of the people who made the theories. That would make theories more real.

Personal memoirs and media accounts which illustrated diversity material taught in class were valued highly by all the respondents, as illustrated by these comments:

> I really got an appreciation for the adolescent culture and how vulnerable these kids are when we watched that film about those teenagers in Georgia. The theories about identity really hit home.

> It was great when we saw, "The Color of Fear." You could really see the people changing as it went on. I had all kinds of feelings too. At the beginning I was angry, but later I understood the different points of view better. I went through some of the same changes as the people in the film.

The theme of emotional impact, heightened self-awareness, and deepening empathy came up repeatedly whenever students described

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assignments which promoted personal encounters with human diversity:

> We had a POW from Southeast Asia; we had a Nazi camp survivor. It was interesting to hear how their backgrounds kept them going–the strengths they had. I think that was more helpful than anything else in developing awareness and competence.

> We had a take-home assignment to interview a family member. I learned so much more about my mom's experiences. It was so hard for her to come to a different country. She never wanted to talk about it before, but she did it because she knew it was a class assignment and she wants to help me in school.

Similarly, writing assignments which promoted self-awareness about one's own cultural heritage and attitudes toward others were highly valued. Journal keeping, in a format requiring exploration of personal feelings, was described by several students as especially useful. A second year student stated:

> I didn't know I had a culture until I started writing about it and thinking back on our family traditions. It really helped to realize I actually have a culture!

This alumnus spoke of the confidence and self-awareness that came from exploration through writing:

> At first I was annoyed to have so much writing to do. Besides, I never felt any good at it. But when I had to write about what we talked about in class and apply it to myself or my client, it began to be real to me, and I could see how I could use it. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Now I can really say I know how to write. I sometimes do journaling now to figure out my attitudes about a client.

The Sine Qua Non of Practice Skills

Respondents at all levels were adamant about not sacrificing the teaching of practice skills to generalized theories about cultural diversity. Skill proficiency was experienced as empowering, enabling these respondents to put a cultural diversity perspective into practice. Any experiences in which students were taught intervention skills and had the opportunity to practice

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through role plays, media techniques, or take-home practice assignments were highly valued. Typical comments included the following:

> Ethnographic interviewing is a great way to approach understanding a client and doing an assessment . . . We need more DSM IV. I don't know what they're talking about, so I keep quiet (at agency field placement). I have ideas about how they're not relating to Hmong clients, but I don't know how to hold my own in the staff meetings. They use all these terms I don't understand . . . I loved the videotaping of me doing an interview. I could see the mistakes I made. Now I think about it and notice it when I'm with a client. It made me uncomfortable at the time, but now I realize how valuable it was.

At the macro level, these students wanted more training in how to make speeches and presentations before community groups, large and small, about issues related to diversity. Stated this alumna:

> I wish we had the chance to study and take action on an issue each year. It takes confidence to speak and make presentations before community groups. If we could study an issue and make suggestions, we could maybe prevent some of the problems and learn to be leaders.

Learning about relevant social policy issues by traveling to the state capital, in order to see laws in the process of development and enactment, was mentioned as extremely valuable in helping students connect diversity themes to action:

> The legislative days were a fantastic experience. I could really tell how powerful social workers could be. There were so many there in Sacramento and I didn't feel like such a small minority.

These hands-on experiences regarding social policy formation and implementation related to diversity issues were empowering to students who had been intimidated by macro processes previous to their personal involvement.

A Multicultural Faculty, Student Body, and Community

Many respondents considered the multicultural composition of the student body, faculty, and community to be equal in importance to teaching

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or training techniques in contributing to the acquisition of diversity competence, as illustrated in this comment:

> The most important thing is just being here in this valley and this school with so many different kinds of people. I learn the most from my friends here. I don't know how they'd do it in other social work schools where the students are less diverse. I guess they'd have to arrange trips to places where students could get a chance to interact with different cultures, but that couldn't possibly be as good as what we have here all the time.

Faculty diversity was valued for the availability of ethnic and racial role models similar to oneself and for the opportunity to learn from those dissimilar from oneself. An African-American alumna stated with intense feeling:

> I loved watching (names African-American faculty member). I never thought of myself as smart, but I watched the way she teaches, and she is nice and always willing to help. I wanted to be like her; and because of her, I thought I could be just as good as anyone else.

A second-year student expressed his gratitude for the presence of a faculty member with a disability:

> I'm so glad we have a faculty member who is disabled. I learned so much from him, and I would have been missing something important if he hadn't been here.

Although a diverse context for learning was considered extremely helpful and important, respondents commenting on faculty composition continued to emphasize the primacy of skill acquisition in acquiring diversity competence and confidence:

> A multicultural faculty is very important, but skill is more important. I learned the most from professors who were able to teach me real skills for helping people.

The Learning Climate: Faculty and Field Instructor Attitudes

This theme contained some of the most deeply felt sentiments, both positive and negative, of the respondents. Participants continually em-

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phasized the value of being pushed outside their comfort zones to relate to persons and groups different from themselves. At the same time, they emphasized the anxiety they felt when doing so and the need for an environment characterized by emotional safety and support, in order to take the risks necessary to achieve diversity competence and confidence. Student and alumni described classroom and fieldwork cultures ranging from engaging to detached and isolated. Factors related to emotional safety in the classroom had to do with size and faculty behaviors and attitudes. Smaller class sizes, small group or one-on-one experiential exercises in which students did not feel exposed were valued for their supportive atmosphere. In the aforementioned setting, students who were naturally shy, struggled to express themselves in English, or lacked confidence in speaking out, felt able to participate actively and tackle the challenge of diversity communication. These student comments were typical:

> I never talk in big classes. It's always the same ones talking but when (names faculty member) had us break into small groups, I could express myself. . . . I liked the role plays. I would never volunteer to do them, but when we all had to do them in small groups, it was really helpful. . . . It really helped me to practice the skills at home too. My family didn't seem to mind my practicing on them!

Respondents valued faculty members and fieldwork supervisors who were supportive, approachable role models, teaching by example and engaging in self-disclosure about their own processes of growing awareness concerning cultural biases and difficulties in multicultural communication. They were able to identify with these instructors as believable role models:

> I really like (names professor). She is so encouraging and positive and patient. It makes her really approachable. . . . Taking time for us is the most important thing. . . . My supervisor told me every client has a special story to tell and it's up to me to listen. She told me about times she had made mistakes and felt very awkward with clients. . . . I watched her do it for awhile, and then she let me try it. It was great to see exactly how she communicated with them . . . It helped that my field instructor had a perspective that he modeled. He showed me literature that addressed the issue from a Hispanic point of view.

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These comments illustrate the importance of providing coping role models with whom the learner can identify, elaborated upon by Bandura (1997), and emphasized as important for the development of desired attitudes toward learning in the adult trainee (Gagne & Medsker, 1996).

Being pushed to take the risks necessary to growth was also important to these participants:

> Make us do it. We need to be told we have to go out into the community and find them (persons of a different ethnic group) and really talk to them and get to know them . . . She challenged me to go beyond my comfort zone, and that was really good for me (referring to a field instructor) . . . I wanted to try out an idea about creating a group of mothers. I wish I'd been encouraged to be creative. I would have learned more about the rural families.

When the participants perceived faculty or field instructors as arrogant, too busy, opinionated, self-righteous, or exploitive, they withdrew from the challenges of diversity, and became more cautious and cynical, as illustrated in these comments:

> She said she wanted us to express all points of view, but she attacked one student for expressing a point of view different from hers. That student never spoke up again. She (referring to student peer) was going through a rough time. It is a culture shock for her to be here, but I can see her mind opening up slowly. The professor should have been more sensitive to that.

> I hate it when teachers are arrogant. Tell them not to preach at us–we can't learn that way. In fact, the opposite happens because we stop asking questions . . . it is a real problem when professors take things personally (describes a particularly painful encounter). They should be able to respond professionally if they're asking us to become professionals.

> I know some of our faculty are brilliant, but they are scary to talk to and always look busy, as if they don't really want to spend the time. Some are real distant, you know. I probably could have learned more from them if I hadn't been so scared of them. (Faculty member) is so negative. Every time I would think I had a good idea, she would shoot it down. But (other faculty member) always had something encouraging to say to me so I knew what to do next.

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Southeast Asian participants resented being utilized as interpreters or practitioners for agency clients who were members of their own ethnic groups. These students experienced intense role conflict as a result of what they perceived as a lack of sensitivity to their culture:

> They always assign me to the Laotian clients because I can speak their language. That's not fair. They should be learning how to communicate with these families. I was not put here to be an interpreter. Besides, these families don't take me seriously because I'm young and female. If my supervisor understood my culture, she'd know why it's hard for me to work with them.

> My field instructor always wanted me to handle Hmong clients because she said she didn't understand their culture. I didn't like being used as an employee. The clients say to me, "I'm Hmong and you're Hmong, so I don't get it." Now when they see me in the community, they'll hate me.

Participants recognized the anxiety involved in the growth process and welcomed being encouraged to take risks, as long as they were led to do so by faculty and field instructors who were able to model respect for diversity, to create safe, supportive learning environments, and to make themselves available to these learners.

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DISCUSSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS

Just as human service organizations are increasingly recognizing the need for diversity competence in their employees and in the structure of their programs, social work educators are faced with the challenge of developing pedagogical methods and styles which go beyond curriculum content to facilitate the development of skilled, confident professionals. The themes which emerged from this study emphasize several practical applications for social work education:

Personal awareness and skill competency does not necessarily translate into the confidence to apply what has been learned about diversity in a new setting. Faculty and field instructors would do well to anticipate the role conflicts involved in the transfer of learning to professional

life by creating teaching and training experiences that focus on self-efficacy in the workplace so that graduates feel empowered in a variety of settings.

All of the diverse cultures that make up the learning community need acknowledgement and inclusion in the learning process. Definitions of culture need to broaden to include subcultures among the faculty, differences within ethnic or racial groups, and the subcultures within formal and informal student organizations.

Workplace and academic cultures are, at times, in conflict. Educators train beginning professionals to respect and celebrate culture diversity when they model respect for one another, allow for open acknowledgement of "hidden cultures," and avoid the impression of favoring some cultures over others.

The discovery and celebration of commonality is as vital as the awareness of difference. Often the deepest respect for difference emerges out of an awareness of the common humanity that unites diverse groups. Teaching methods which promote the experience of unity within difference have powerful impacts. The professional identity of social worker is strengthened as students come to view the problems and strengths of particular groups as the ethical concern of all.

Theories are unlikely to be retained or thoughtfully applied unless they are encountered on a personal level. The most powerful pedagogical techniques take students into the community and bring the community into the classroom through personal encounters, memoirs, class speakers, and written reflections. Face-to-face encounters with living applications of theory heighten empathy, deepen understanding, and motivate the retention of theory.

Skill development is a necessary precondition for the application of diversity competence. Acculturating students to the professional values of social justice, empowerment, and diversity competence is important, but insufficient for the creation of effective practitioners. Intensive, repetitive training in micro and macro practice skills, with many opportunities to practice them in a variety of settings, is essential to the educational process; otherwise the new professional lacks the ability and confidence to put diversity theory into practice.

Students benefit from diversity among peers, faculty, and community. Often diverse community groups exist but are isolated from the larger community, and students often segregate themselves into groups within which they feel more comfortable. The social work faculty and student body would ideally mirror and even exceed diversity in the community, creating an environment where communication within difference hap-

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pens naturally and where the learning environment offers many role models.

Social work educators are always teaching by example, whether consciously or not. It appears critically important to develop classroom environments and teaching tools which avoid shaming or humiliating students for their honest expressions of opinion, and which allow them a variety of opportunities, in safe settings, to explore their awareness of self and others. Similarly, being mindful of one's own struggles with the complexity of diversity issues, and striving to model warmth, humility, availability, and encouragement appear to be vital qualities of the educator with whom the learner can identify. While creating a setting of sufficient emotional security, it is then possible to challenge students to open themselves to a deeper self-awareness and to take the ongoing risks involved in nurturing a just and diverse community.

Future Opportunities

Social work education has an opportunity to provide leadership to other fields of practice and to the practice community in the development of culturally competent practice skills. Attention needs to be directed towards the implementation of professional development seminars that address the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the real world of social work practice.

This study suggests that active teaching methods in the classroom and the field, using a format that is inclusive, promotes a climate that is comfortable and engaging. By modeling inclusive teaching methods with students and field instructors, student engagement in the learning process occurs. Further research is needed to identify more effective professional development activities to strengthen the transfer of learning and the overall quality of classroom and field instruction.

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