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Faculty Perceptions of Differences between Teaching Rural Appalachian and Urban Social Work Students

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Abstract: *Faculty who teach social work students in both rural Appalachian colleges and urban settings often notice differences in how these students approach learning and respond to the classroom environment and university setting. There is limited research on how Appalachian college students experience higher education and how they perceive the benefits of a college degree. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of social work faculty members at three Appalachian and three Midwestern universities, who have taught rural Appalachian students, as well as students from urban areas. Findings indicated that faculty mostly viewed Appalachian students as being different from urban students. Appalachian social work students often focused on the practical aspects of learning, but like many urban students they were intuitive, creative, and adept at problem-solving and critical thinking. Rural students were more inclined to benefit from practice methods oriented toward rural practice. Implications for practice are discussed with an emphasis on faculty members being aware of Appalachian culture and, in turn, directing their teaching style and methods to possible learning differences.*

Key Words: *rural Appalachian students, urban students, rural social work education, social work educators' perceptions of students*

Introduction

Educators have observed that rural Appalachian college students often approach learning differently than their urban counterparts and may require alternative approaches to instruction and support services from the university. Dees (2006) called for educators working with Appalachian students to take stock of their own perceptions and consider culturally sensitive strategies in their classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore faculty perceptions of differences in teaching and working with rural Appalachian and urban social work students. The authors interviewed social work faculty who had taught rural Appalachian students in either Baccalaureate or Master of Social Work classes in the Central/Northern Appalachian region and Midwest. Social work faculty stated that their students are generally committed to a professional or pre-professional educational curriculum that prepares them to work with others in community-based service delivery. There was an expectation that faculty who had taught both rural Appalachian and urban students would perceive distinct attitudes toward learning in each of these student populations and also be able to suggest strategies for culturally competent teaching and support.

Literature Review

Appalachian students in higher education demonstrate attitudes and learning approaches that are unique to the culture and warrant careful attention by the classroom instructor. Some studies have found that Appalachian students are strongly affected by their culture which influences attitudes toward education as well as learning style (Cox, Sproles, & Sproles, 1988; DeYoung, 2007; Dees, 2006; Speer, 1993; Wallace & DieKroger, 2000). Appalachian students frequently attempt to form a more open, holistic perception of the world, while adhering closely to the cultural perspectives of sense of place and community (Dees, 2006). These struggles are often complex and change in accordance with their negotiation of the cultural system that exists within each university classroom. Dees (2006), moreover, stated that educators need to better

understand the complexities of this struggle which might, in turn, enhance faculty practices and perspectives with rural/Appalachian students. Helton (2002) found that faculty members working with Appalachian students frequently spend additional time helping them with their class work and utilizing university support systems, such as tutoring and mentoring services, in order to assist student with learning continuity and matriculation.

Appalachian students' perceptions of education, as well as their learning styles and methods, seem to be undergirded by definitive Appalachian cultural values. Jones (1994), a well-known sociologist and Appalachian scholar, identified ten beliefs and traditions that comprise Appalachian cultural values. Appalachian people espouse the values and beliefs of their pioneer ancestors. These values are: a) independence, self-reliance, and pride; (b) neighborliness; (c) familism; (d) personalism; (e) religion; (f) humility and modesty; (g) love of place; (h) patriotism; (i) sense of beauty; and (j) sense of humor. These core values affect the students approach learning and how they perceive the possible benefits of continuing their education beyond high school.

These Appalachian values and life traditions affect not only interpersonal relationships but also affect how Appalachian people view their world. Appalachians are personalistic and value interpersonal relationships and may go to great lengths not to offend others (Hicks, 1976; Jones, 1994; Weller, 1965). They generally prefer an informal style of communication, are individualistic, and self-reliant, and develop strong kinship ties that they maintain throughout their lives (Helton & Keller, 2010; Crissman, 1989; Hansen & Resinick, 1990; Jones, 1994; Yeltson & Nielson, 1991). Historically, Appalachian people, who largely live in rural areas, have depended on neighborliness and hospitality and support one another during times of need. Appalachians, moreover, tend to be spiritual and have strong religious beliefs, grounded primarily in Protestant fundamentalist belief systems. These religious beliefs lead Appalachians to possess an egalitarian attitude toward others, feeling that they are not better or less than their fellow human beings. They typically have a strong sense of place and an extremely close attachment to the Appalachian region. Appalachians are also characterized by an inherent sense of beauty as evidenced by their closeness to nature, their love for music, and their ability to create exquisite handmade crafts such as baskets, dolls, quilts, and furniture. A sense of humor is also identified as a common Appalachian cultural trait and has often helped the people to cope during hard times (Jones, 1994).

Cox, Sproles, & Sproles (1988) studied secondary students and found that rural students appear to be more committed to and engaged in the educational process than urban students. A large proportion of rural students, in fact, were found to be serious analytical learners and active, practical learners. From the teacher' perspective, this represents a desirable characteristic of rural learners. It may also appear that teachers in rural settings do not experience the same magnitude of potential learning problems as do their urban counterparts. This research suggested that teachers in rural settings should tailor their teaching toward youth with more serious and active learning styles.

Several crucial elements have been identified as critical for educating students for rural social work practice. Students seem to benefit most from a generalist education as well as completing their field instruction in a rural area. Moreover, the curriculum should contain materials that address rural social problems, rural social policies, rural community behavior, and rural intervention methods. Students should also be prepared for independent, minimally supervised practice and have a high degree of sensitivity and skill in relating to various socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups (Ginsberg, 1976; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005).

Appalachian parents/families hold to a pragmatic philosophy of education and subscribe to educational methods that they perceive as being useful to their children. That is, children are

expected to enter into a vocation or trade that is practical and has concrete returns, i.e. steady pay and adequate resources to support a family (Helton, 1995; Reck & Reck, 1980; Wilson, Henry, & Peterson, 1997). Children are also expected to learn to deal with the world at large and cope with present circumstances (Borman & Stegelin, 1994). DeYoung (2007) conjectured that young people in Appalachia do not perceive a college education as practical or as an enrichment of their lives; this attitude is frequently engendered by the family who hopes their children will stay in the community and take whatever general labor jobs are available close to home. Wallace & DieKroger (2000) found that Appalachian families communicate discouraging messages about pursuing higher education, especially for young women. Some regional and urban Appalachian parents hold high educational expectations for their children, although they may not be able to articulate how such aspirations will be realized (Helton, 1995).

Research Methodology

This qualitative study involved ten social work faculty members, two males and eight females, from three regional Appalachian universities in Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky and three urban universities in the Midwest. The selection criteria were that these faculty members had taught both rural Appalachian and urban students of social work at the pre-professional or professional (BSW or MSW level). A convenience sample was used and participants volunteered to take part by completing a 10-question survey followed by a one hour qualitative interview in person and/or by phone. Possible participants were either contacted directly, or requests for participation were mailed to their departments of social work. For their convenience, faculty members were also given the opportunity to complete the survey and submit it by e-mail attachment. This study was approved by the researcher's Institutional Review Board, which ensured ethical research procedures and confidentiality for all participants in data gathering, data analysis, and information dissemination.

Consistent with qualitative research methods (Spinelli, 1989), the author completed cross-case thematic content analysis by identifying and coding themes across each set of participants' responses, compared the two separate analyses and then reached agreement on the themes' content and interpretation. A colleague who had taught both rural Appalachian and urban social work students also reviewed and provided input regarding data analysis. From the beginning of the data analysis period, the researcher carefully bracketed or separated out and set aside any a priori assumptions about the participants and the subject being studied in order to approach the study and findings with an open mind (Gearing, 2004). A non-Appalachian social work colleague reviewed the data collection and analysis procedures and provided ongoing feedback. Since the researcher is Appalachian, this collaborative arrangement to avoid researcher bias may have yielded a more genuine approach to data gathering, decontextualization, recontextualization, and analysis of the central themes and relationships across data sets. That is, data could be cross checked for unbiased conceptual analyses of meanings. One limitation to this study was its being limited to social work faculty who had taught both rural Appalachian and urban students. Faculty members who had taught only in one area (i.e. urban or rural Appalachian) were not included in the study. Another might be its inclusion of only university faculty in the Central/Northern Appalachian and Midwestern areas.

Research Findings

Qualitative data from the surveys and interviews were analyzed, coded, and separated into five major categories: Rural Appalachian and Urban Students' Values and Beliefs; Differences in Students' Learning Styles and Language/Speech Patterns; Different Teaching Techniques Used with Appalachian vs. Urban Students and Suggestions for Teaching Social Work to Appalachian Students for the First Time.

Rural Appalachian and Urban Students' Values and Beliefs

From the data, a range of images arose regarding Appalachian students in the classroom. These students were observed to demonstrate an informal manner of communication and to lack “good writing skills.” Faculty sensed that many Appalachian students were not prepared for college in terms of not having had the necessary pre-requisites especially in writing and math. Nevertheless, Appalachian students were thought to be earnest and highly motivated about getting an education. They were often empty nest females returning to school, hard-working women who expect education to take a long time. Many Appalachian students were working class and adhered to the philosophy that life is a struggle. On the other hand, faculty members reported that their twenty year-old rural students “look like everyone else” in terms of their learning and believed that technology and media access have made a difference for rural Appalachians. Appalachian students were also described as not unlike other students who have experienced or been affected by high poverty rates, low employment opportunities, and low literacy levels.

Social work faculty members noticed distinctions between first generation and second generation Appalachian students. First generation Appalachian students were described as being more entrenched in Appalachian values and truly considered education to be a privilege. Sometimes, they appeared to seek acceptance about being in school—they needed validation that they could “make it” in college. They also asserted that they would “carry their learning back home” and share their success within the culture. Appalachian students' approaches to learning were described as being similar to those of older and minority students.

Second generation Appalachian students demonstrated better literacy skills and “were less colloquial in both their values and their speech.” Second generation Appalachian students tended not to identify their cultural heritage as readily because of possible stereotyping. One faculty member noted: “They seemed more forward, direct in communication, and more liberal and flexible in terms of values and world views.” Moreover, faculty members perceived second generation Appalachian students as more motivated to pursue advanced graduate or professional studies and seemed similar to other students in the classroom, perhaps in part due to media exposure. A faculty member expressed, “it’s as if second generation Appalachian students grow up with a strong expectation for success, the motivation to do better than their parents have done, educationally and economically.”

Appalachian and urban social work students expressed clear differences in their personal values and beliefs. Appalachian social work students demonstrated a strong sense of humility, were personable, eager to help others and more tolerant of individual frailties. Male Appalachian students tended to be more reticent and non-verbal, yet they were good with written work. One faculty member stated, “I sometimes encourage my male Appalachian students to engage in classroom dialogues by posing key questions from their field practicum logs or other written assignments; that seems to break the ice a bit.” Appalachian students hoped for a better life through education but had lower expectations regarding grades and achievement. Some needed help from student services to address their learning needs. Some students felt that they were discriminated against and did not fit in.

Overall, Appalachian social work students were more conservative in their beliefs about gender roles, sexual orientation, and pro-life issues. Religion played a major role in their lives and contributed to their fundamentalist beliefs. They were family oriented, had a slower paced time orientation, were dominated by the work ethic, and believed that education should always be practical. These values and worldviews were especially thought by faculty to enhance the rural Appalachian students' capacity to succeed in community-based field work internships. Most faculty members interviewed indicated that they expected their students to remain in the

Appalachian region or to work in rural areas where many of their core values would be more easily accommodated in their work.

Conversely, urban students were upwardly mobile and were often overachievers. Urban college students were less likely to be first generation college students and possessed not only high aspirations but a definitive plan for their education and career. They seemed to feel that education was more of a right and were more open to being mobile, i.e. not seeming to be tied to a place. However, those urban students similar to the Appalachians were African American and they often felt “outside the norm.”

Overall, urban students had a faster-paced time orientation and were more liberal. They were more open to diversity and alternative lifestyles and seemed to be less tied to moral values. They were upwardly mobile, more competitive, and future-oriented. They generally were not first generation college students.

Differences in Students’ Learning Styles and Language/Speech Patterns

A major theme which emerged was identifiable differences in language, speech patterns, and written expression. Appalachian students spoke with more of a dialect and had informal speech patterns, especially if they were first generation. Also, students from different parts of Appalachia demonstrated dialectical variation. Organizing written work was a major challenge and grammatical errors seemed to be related to regional dialect and spoken language style. Typically, written expression fell short of the richness of their verbal expression. A faculty member asserted, “Appalachian students “talk like they write and write like that talk.” Still, they exhibit an excellent ability to “tell stories and use symbols and metaphors related to their life experiences.” One social work practice professor discussed a divorced mother of three, in her mid-fifties, who returned to college for her baccalaureate degree. She had told the story of her father’s quest to become “an educated man.” He had been a coal miner, but when the mines in West Virginia were closed he worked a full time job as a laborer and attended night classes to pursue his college degree in secondary education. The student proclaimed, “That was my motivation to get my G.E.D. and go back to school; my Daddy was my role model.”

Differences in Rural Appalachian and Urban Students’ Learning Styles

Appalachian students were thought to be more reflective and to take more time to process information. They demonstrated an eagerness to learn and were “very inquisitive.” One participant noted that although they were excited about learning, students tend to work and go to school concurrently; therefore they may cut corners on assignments. Their learning may be affected by economic pressures, i.e. a lack of funds and they may “put family needs first and school second.” They seek additional help at the outset but quickly catch up. Appalachian students do not ask many questions but demonstrate “a unique creativity in thinking outside the box.” They are less technologically oriented and show more interest in the application of concepts as opposed to theoretical paradigms.

Urban students were thought to demonstrate a more direct learning approach, to be more verbal, to ask more questions and to speak out more in class. Urban students, moreover, work more independently on assignments and are less likely to ask for outside help. They show more abilities at the outset of the learning process and show more initiative, especially in expressing their own ideas. Urban African Americans were observed as having similar speech patterns to Appalachians and also experienced challenges in written expression. Urban students were noted to apply critical thinking and better understand theory bases.

Different Teaching Techniques with Appalachian vs. Urban Students

Faculty indicated that they spent more time with Appalachian students, who often require more written prompts and assistance with written assignments. Others shared that they give more concrete examples and shorter assignments to Appalachian students. Some stated that more discussion is necessary so that students can relate the material to their own experience. Faculty sometimes allowed more lenience in grading the writing assignments of Appalachian students. Providing reading lists, calling absent students, and referring students to the writing center were techniques thought to be instrumental in helping Appalachian students succeed. However, some faculty members stated that there is really no difference between learning styles of Appalachian and urban social work students. That is, one's teaching style should be tailored to the students' unique learning style, regardless of culture.

Appalachian students were perceived as relating well to the needs and issues of rural populations. This teaching focus should include an emphasis on the significance of networking with other professionals due to further distances and fewer resources in rural areas. Faculty members stated that they taught to the values of the culture, that is, they showed cultural sensitivity to Appalachian values and beliefs which most likely affect interventions (e.g. family centered counseling, the role of religion, traditional gender roles and the use of informal resources). Appalachian students tend to be underexposed to other geographic areas and different ethnic and religious groups.

Some faculty also indicated the need to focus more on "at risk" issues as opposed to geographic settings because some students choose to work in urban areas. Case studies and ethical issues from rural areas were thought to be more appropriate for Appalachian students, who for the most part, choose to stay and work in rural areas where they grew up. Urban students often have more resources and access to services may be more immediately available, e.g. crisis intervention, emergency services, age-specific, and specialized services. Some faculty felt that it was important to use their own practice experiences in rural and urban areas in their teaching.

Suggestions for Teaching Social Work to Appalachian Students for First Time

Social work faculty suggested a range of strategies for teaching Appalachian students for the first time. They believed it essential to learn about the Appalachian culture, especially the students' history and values, and struggles in adapting to the larger American culture. They thought, moreover, that faculty must recognize and appreciate unique Appalachian ways of learning affected by the culture. They felt that faculty should not lower their standards, advising that one should start where the students are and then slowly move them to higher levels of expectation in verbal and written communication, classroom performance, and practice skills. Diversity in Appalachian students can be expected, and as one faculty member asserted, "we should always challenge our assumptions and stereotypes about this cultural group."

Conclusion

Social work faculty viewed Appalachian students as different from urban students, but also perceived similarities between the two groups, especially in urban minority students. Moreover, faculty had more specific and often stereotypic views of Appalachian versus urban students. Appalachian students were thought to benefit from learning social work practice methods directed toward rural practice, as many will work in rural areas. Educators need to be aware of the Appalachian experience in order to direct their teaching to possible learning differences.

Social work educators perceived both rural Appalachian and urban college students to exhibit distinctive learning patterns and attitudes. The author's findings concur with those of Dees (2006) who indicated that, early on, rural Appalachian students are strongly socialized into a culture with a strong commitment to family, community, religion, and traditional gender roles.

However, the strengths of this cultural value system, based in a significant commitment to family and community, may paradoxically be the greatest challenges for many university educators.

This study concurs with Dees' contention that educators must consider their own perceptions of and attitudes toward Appalachian college students and their culture. Such reflection can go a long way in creating a less stressful and more culturally competent classroom environment for students from Appalachian cultural backgrounds. Appalachian college students are often intuitive and creative and reflect an intense dedication to learning. The findings of this study are also consistent with those of Wallace and DieKroger (2000) who found that many Appalachian students who succeed at higher education possess a strong internal locus of control, i.e. an innate penchant for learning. Educators must be forever aware of the differences between rural Appalachian and urban college students and adapt their teaching style to accommodate the learning needs of each group.

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