An Exploratory Study of Cultural Competence Education in Human Development and Family Science

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Article Info

Article History

Received:
13 January 2024
Accepted:
4 May 2024

Keywords

Cultural competence
Diversity
Higher education
Family science

Abstract

This research investigated cultural competence education within a Human Development and Family Science educational context. The two research questions guiding this study were: (1) In what way(s) does taking a cultural competence class impact students' cultural competence and (2) In what ways is a cultural competence course essential in preparing Human Development and Family Science students for careers with diverse families? The primary objective was to determine students' perceptions regarding the efficacy of a cultural competence course in shaping their cultural awareness and proficiency. By investigating the impact of such coursework, this study aimed to explore students' attitudes and knowledge about cultural competence. Furthermore, this inquiry extended beyond individual reflections to probe the broader pedagogical landscape, evaluating the perceived necessity of integrating cultural competence education within Human Development and Family Science curricula. By addressing the second research question, the study explored the perceived relevance of cultural competence training in equipping future professionals for careers working with diverse family structures. This research offers insights into the intersection of education, cultural competency, and professional preparedness. The findings are anticipated to inform curricula development initiatives and instructional approaches to foster inclusive and culturally responsive educational environments within Human Development and Family Science disciplines. Ultimately, this study attempted to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding diversity in higher education and professional practice.

Introduction

Developing cultural competence can allow an individual to better understand oneself and the people in their communities. Cross et al. (1989) first described cultural competence as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (p. 13). With refinements and revisions over time, there is no definition accepted by all fields (Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar's, 2014). However, a working definition of cultural competency is one's ability to not only understand but also communicate and value people who are from different backgrounds in comparison to one's own (BCT Partners, 2021; DeAngelis, 2015).

There are four components of cultural competence, and these are awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills. Awareness entails self-exploration as well as ridding ourselves of the stereotypes and prejudices we may hold about different groups of people (BCT Partners, 2021; Wilson, 2021). For instance, moving from being culturally unaware to being aware of our own cultural heritage while valuing and respecting differences at the same time (Livingstone, 2014).

Attitude encompasses the positions we hold regarding different cultures, and they are exhibited in our behaviors (BCT Partners, 2021; Wilson, 2021). An example of this is an awareness of our own values and biases and how they may affect diverse individuals we work/interact with (Livingstone, 2014). Knowledge revolves around how informed we are about different cultures (BCT Partners, 2021; Wilson, 2021). An instance would be, being knowledgeable about both social and political factors that influence how marginalized groups are treated in different contexts (Livingstone, 2014).

Skills involve putting into practice what we know regarding culture (BCT Partners, 2021; Wilson, 2021). An example would be the ability to accurately and appropriately communicate with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Livingstone, 2014). According to Livingstone, in addition to these components, cultural competence operates at individual, service, and system levels. Below is how the levels differ:

1. individual level – the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors of individuals
2. service level – management and operational frameworks and practices, expectations, including policies, procedures, vision statements and the voices of children, families and community
3. the broader system level – how services relate to and respect the rest of the community, agencies, Elders, local community protocols. (Livingstone, 2014, para. 15)

Williams (2006) suggested that the ability to engage in different ways of thinking to work with individuals, should be the definition of cultural competency. Such a position is crucial because it helps in dealing with issues such as racism and other discriminatory attitudes. According to Williams (2006), practicing skills that are considered culturally competent is a requirement to be culturally competent. Skills practice is needed because in general, the more one practices, the better they become competent in whatever is being practiced. For example, the Barr Foundation (2006) proposed that among other things, cultural competence can be used to improve the child welfare system if service providers consciously practice respecting the individuals they are serving. This includes individuals from different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, social classes, and ages.

Being culturally competent is important for understanding other cultures, their practices, and viewpoints. When service providers gain such understanding, they are better equipped to work with diverse individuals and families. In addition, cultural competence is believed to be one of the keys to “effective communication, intervention, and outcomes in the multicultural environment pervasive in the helping professions” (Gallegos et al., 2008, p. 52).

There are different cultural competency training models in existence to date. For example, Cross et al. (1989) proposed that cultural competence developed based on the following continuum:

- Cultural Destructiveness: Engaging in deliberate actions that harm, invalidate, or erase another culture.
- Cultural Incapacity: A lack of ability to effectively and appropriately respond to the needs of culturally diverse individuals. It is often illustrated by unintentional biases and stereotypes.
- Cultural Blindness: Operating under the assumption that culture makes no difference thereby ignoring strengths in minority cultures.
- Cultural Pre-Competence: An awareness of cultural diversity and a willingness to improve cultural understanding, though challenges in effective application may remain.
- Cultural Competence: The ability to interact respectfully and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, integrating their beliefs and practices into communication and decision-making.
- Cultural Proficiency: A deep commitment to cultural awareness, actively incorporating diverse perspectives into policies, practices, and interactions.

However, in this paper, we are highlighting the Michigan Technological University's (MTU) Cultural Competency Training Model, an eight-step foundational tool that was developed in 2011 to "engage, inspire, challenge and provoke serious conversations" as they relate to cultural diversity (MTU, 2011, p. 2). MTU's model is designed to be delivered in the following order:

- Step One: Defining Diversity and Exploring Identity Development—Exploring different aspects of diversity, how identity develops, and the process of socialization.
- Step Two: Deepening Our Self-Awareness—Exploring the shaping of people's senses of self as well as memberships in various social groups.
- Step Three: Unpacking Your Cultural Baggage—Exploring personal prejudices and stereotypes people hold about different groups and implicit biases as well.
- Step Four: Exploring ISMs—Exploring common ISMs, ways in which discrimination happens at different levels in society and how it leads to oppression.
- Step Five: Privilege Part I—Exploring how people are privileged within their societies in addition to how and why systemic sources of privilege in society are difficult to identify.
- Step Six: Privilege Revisited, Connecting It All—Exploring people's responses to their privilege and the core reasons for those responses.
- Step Seven: Being an Ally—Exploring the meaning of allyship, what it means to be an ally, and the importance of being an ally.
- Step Eight: Building Your Toolbox— Tying all concepts from previous steps together to provide participants with a toolbox to use in their daily interactions with people from diverse backgrounds.

The last quarter century has experienced cultural competence education rising to the forefront of many helping professions and professional organizations alike (Adams et al., 2004; Hancock, 2005; Newsom et al., 2021; Vesely et al., 2014). Interestingly, there are different perspectives concerning the necessity and relevance of cultural competence training in such fields. For example, Weaver's (2008) work noted that some critics cite political correctness as a mandate for incorporating cultural competence into different course curricula while another body of critics argue that it is fear of offending marginalized groups that drives the need for including cultural competence in education curricula. Still, a third body of critics argue that, because culture is salient in defining individuals' identity and how they function and behave, there is a definite need to prioritize cultural

competence training to produce both effective and culturally sensitive professionals. In addition to these different views, several other scholars believe that the emphasis on cultural competence is inevitable due to the pace at which cultural diversity is increasing in the United States (Adams et al., 2004; Darling et al., 1998; Gustafson, 2005; Hancock, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2005; Kirmayer, 2012; Newsom et al., 2021; Wilson, 2021). A growing number of scholars posited that a growing interest in social justice advocacy adds an additional impetus for incorporating cultural competence in college curricula as well (Adams et al., 2004; Darling et al., 1998; Gustafson, 2005; Hancock, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2005; Kirmayer, 2012; LaRoche, 2005; Wear, 2003; Westermeyer et al., 2006; Wilson, 2021).

Darling et al. (1998) conducted research to determine the nature and extent of multicultural programming in Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) programs as well as to assess support and opposition to multicultural education. Findings revealed that the program directors composing the sample of study were not certain who should be held responsible for developing cultural awareness. While respondents enjoyed learning about other cultures and working with culturally diverse students, majority of respondents did not feel competent teaching culturally diverse groups and thought that their colleagues were not knowledgeable about cultural differences (Darling et al., 1998). Even though some major institutions require courses in cultural diversity as part of general education, the responsibility to reinforce basic awareness rests with administrators of such programs since lack of financial resources and time were perceived as the greatest barriers to multicultural education (Darling et al., 1998).

The purpose of the current research was to explore students' perceptions regarding whether taking a cultural competence course as part of their program of study had an impact on their personal cultural competence. In addition, this study investigated perceptions about the extent to which students thought cultural competence should be taught in Human Development and Family Science. Two research questions for this study were formulated: (1) In what way(s) does taking a cultural competence class impact students' cultural competence and (2) In what ways is a cultural competence course essential in preparing Human Development and Family Science students for careers with diverse families?

Method

The exploratory study took place at Tennessee Tech University, located in a rural area in the eastern portion of Tennessee. Tennessee Tech University is a public, four-year institution that serves roughly 10, 000 students annually and offers undergraduate, graduate and terminal degrees. In addition, Tennessee Tech University is designated a doctoral university with high research activity (Carnegie Classification, 2019; Wright, 2019).

Survey Instrument

Data for the current study were collected using the Intercultural Competence Survey, developed by Chitiyo, G. & Chitiyo, R. (2019), as an adaptation for the purposes of evaluating Human Ecology 3100: Cultural Competence (HEC 3100). HEC 3100 is an upper-level undergraduate course that explores various aspects of

bias based on race, gender, ability levels, body size, mental health, socioeconomic status, etc.; and raising awareness of the need for acceptance regardless of visible and invisible differences. The course was divided into weekly modules with weekly assessments such as online discussions, personal reflections and journals, and video reflections. The Intercultural Competence Surveys included 24 items which assessed perceptions regarding different topics. The course was approved by the university curriculum committee and developed in 2017. It first appeared in the course catalog in fall 2017. It was piloted during the summer of 2018 and is offered every Fall semester. The survey was administered to the HEC class at the end of the Fall 2019 semester. Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of items addressing the nature of the course, including course objectives, topics covered and their applicability to the profession, and teaching methods. Percentages were computed indicating their level of agreement or disagreement on five-point Likert scale.

Prior to administering the survey, the protocol for the current study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Students enrolled in HEC 3100 were provided with details about the purpose of the study as well as a brief background to provide a context for the study. Students were also informed that their participation in the exploratory study was voluntary and confidential and that they could stop completing the survey at any time during its administration. After the informational session, students were provided with a Qualtrics survey link via email. The first step before responding to posed questions was approving their voluntary participation in the study.

Participant Characteristics

During fall 2019, a total of 21 students were enrolled in HEC 3100. Of those 21 students, 19 identified as female and two identified as male. All students enrolled in the course stated that they were White, not Hispanic/Latino. In terms of students' areas of study, majority of students (16 students) were studying Child Development and Family Relations (now Human Development and Family Science), two students stated that their concentration were Child Life, and one student was an Interdisciplinary Studies major.

As for college classification, 62% were seniors and 33% were juniors. There was only one student enrolled in the course who identified as a sophomore. Students were asked why they were enrolled in HEC 3100. Sixteen students (76%) stated that it was a required course for graduation, four (19%) stated they were enrolled in the course to meet elective requirements, and one student stated that enrollment in HEC 3100 for other reasons.

Sampling Procedures

Participants in this exploratory study were selected through convenience sampling by asking students who were currently enrolled in HEC 3100 to indicate their willingness to voluntarily participate in the study. Convenience sampling refers to a research design used to select individuals who are willing and available to participate in the study. Although convenience sampling is inexpensive and useful in research, findings from such a sample cannot be generalizable to all students seeking to earn a major in an related fields (Schutt, 2020).

Results

Quantitative Findings

Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several items addressing the nature of the course, including course objectives, topics covered and their applicability to fields of study, and teaching methods. Percentages were computed for each item, indicating the level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale. Figure 1 shows responses to each of the items assessed.

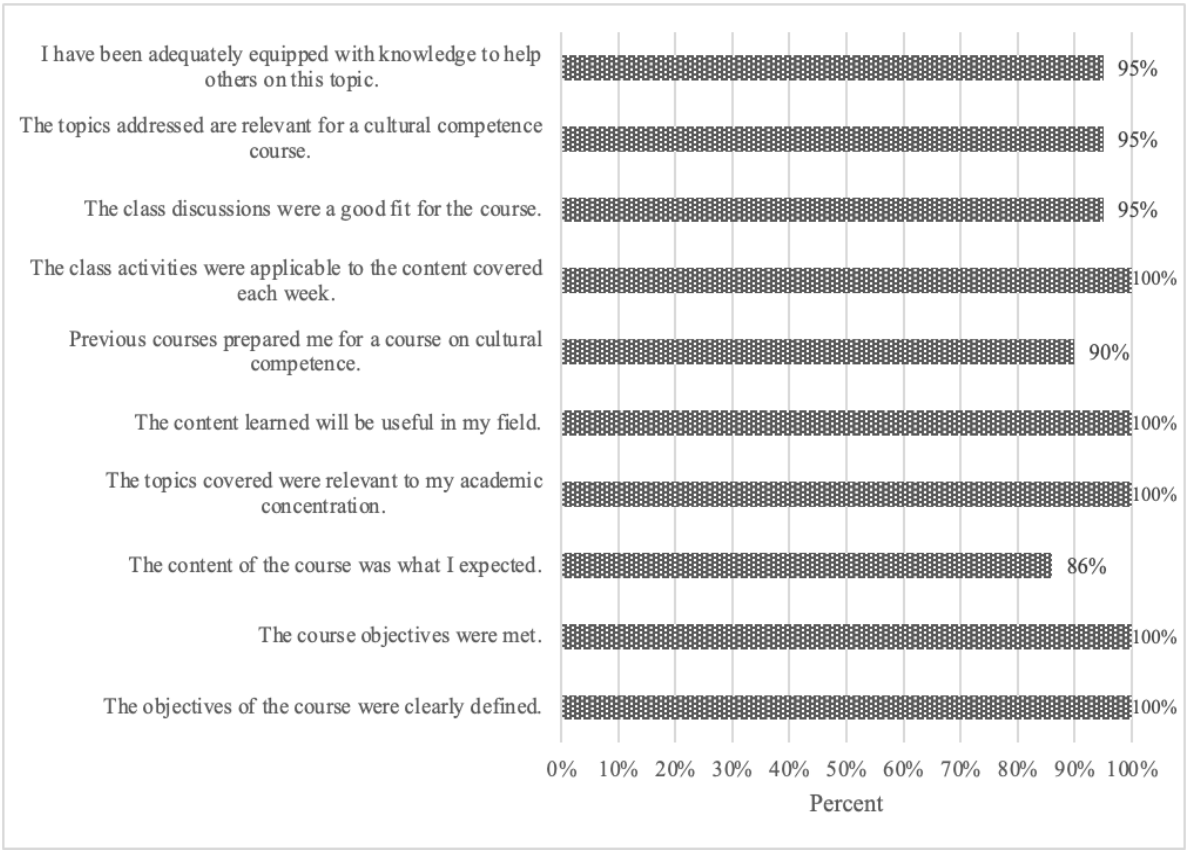

Figure 1. Percent of Students Agreeing with Each Item

(Note: The percent of students agreeing with each item is shown in this figure.)

These results show that all students enrolled in the course believed that the course objectives were clearly defined and met for the duration of the semester. In addition, all students thought that the topics covered during the semester were not only relevant to their programs of study, but also that they would be useful in their careers. Most of the students (95%) felt that the course adequately equipped them with knowledge to help them assist others regarding cultural competence.

A component of the survey included a retrospective pretest component, where the students were asked about their of understanding of several items related to the objectives of the course. Figure 2 shows the aggregated responses for those who indicated proficient/above average and advanced understanding. Based on Figure 2, students' understanding of each of the major topics covered during Fall 2019 increased in comparison to their

understanding before taking the course. For example, at the beginning of the course only ten percent of students enrolled in the course stated that they had some level of understanding regarding cultural competence. However, after completing the course, the number of students who understand the concept of cultural competence increased to 95%. Regarding implicit bias, again, only ten percent of students enrolled in the course understood the concept. This percentage increased to 95%. Although a slightly higher percentage of students understood topics such as privilege, poverty, and discrimination based on gender, body size, disability, age, or race prior to enrolling in the course, these percentages increased as well. When it came to discrimination about mental health, only ten percent of students stated that they an understanding of the topic; however, after completing the course, that percentage increased to 90%.

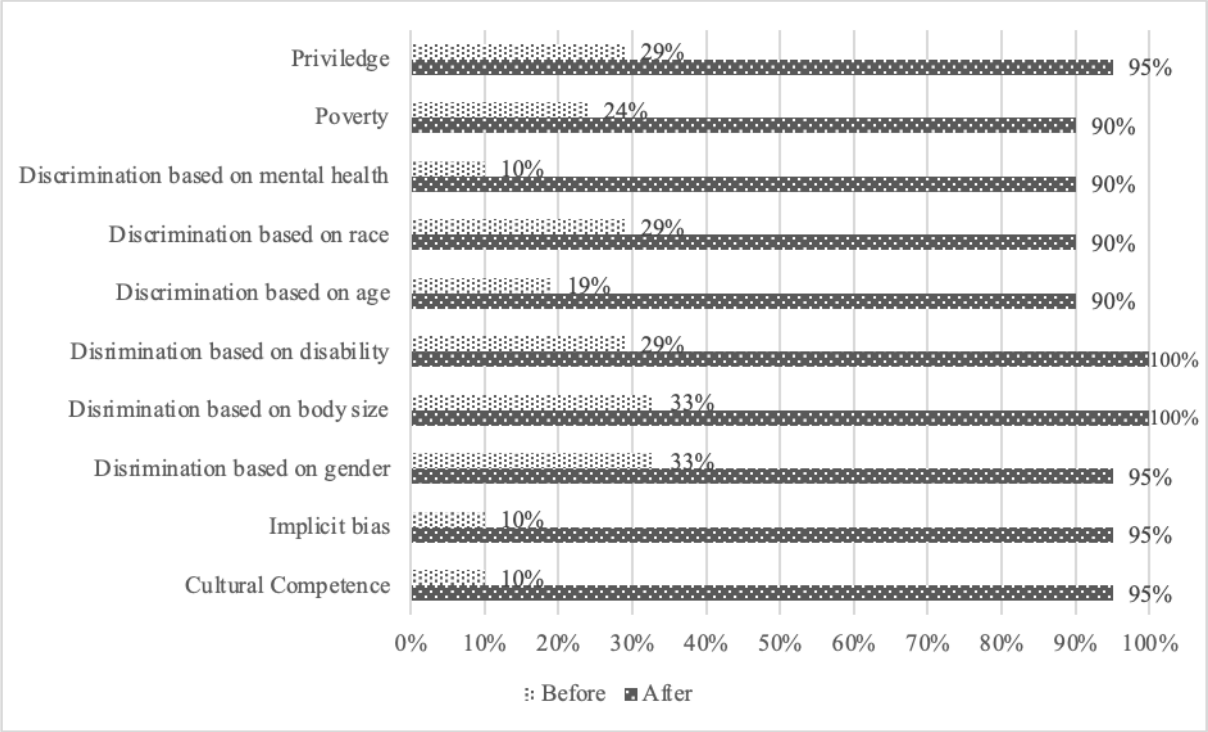

Figure 2. Student Understanding of Topic Before and After Taking Course

(Note: Students' understanding of the different topics before and after taking the course are shown in this figure.)

Finally, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five items addressing their personal cultural competence and the applicability of content in both professional and personal settings. Figure 3 displays responses to each of the items assessed. All students enrolled in the courses stated that exposure to cultural competence made them less interested in being judgmental and improved their understanding of professional and ethical responsibility, including a respect for diversity. Ninety-five percent of the students said the course helped pique their interest advocating for different causes related to diversity. Finally, 90% of students concluded the course with a better understanding of the need for cultural humility while 81% responded that the course helped them develop an interest in not only being aware of, but paying attention, to their own biases.

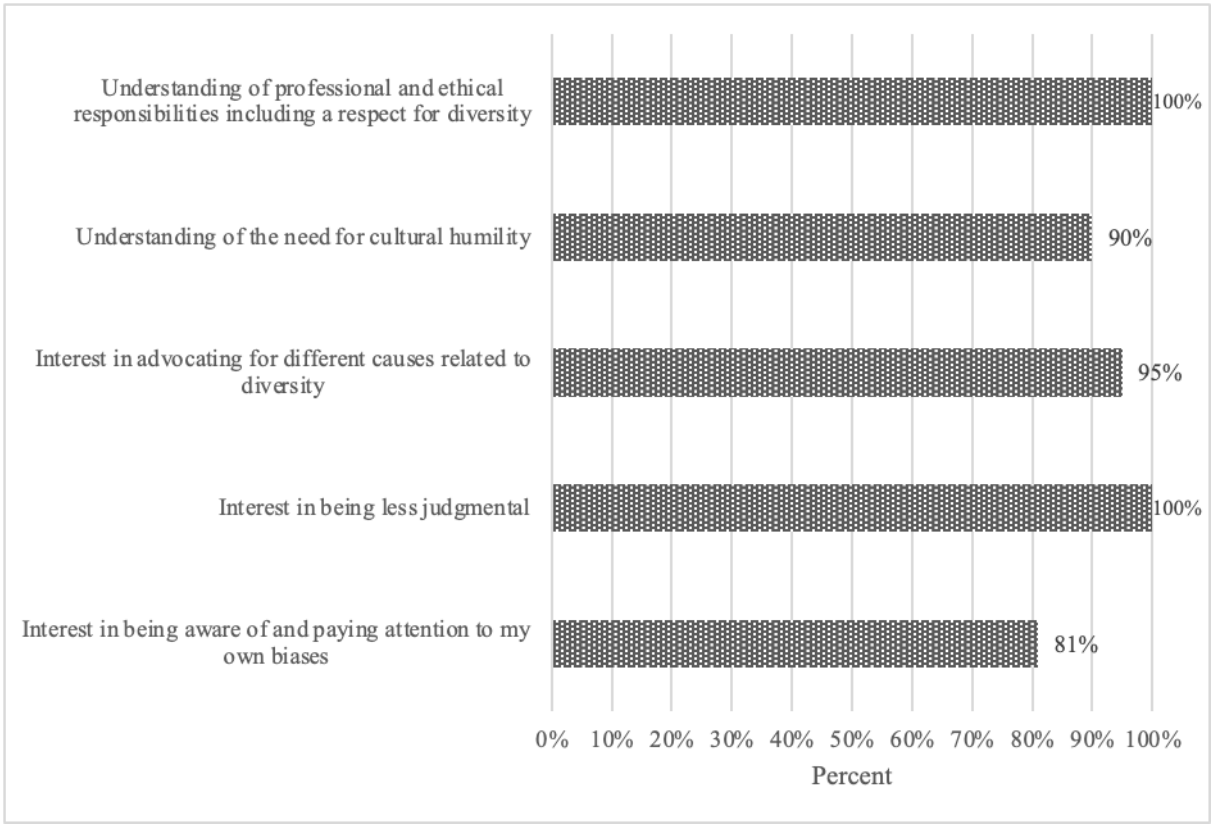

Figure 3. Percent of Students Indicating Increased Understanding After Taking Course

(Note: The percentages of reported students' increased understanding after taking the course are shown in this figure.)

Qualitative Findings

A qualitative component was also incorporated into the survey, which was a set of open-ended questions regarding what students found most attractive about the course, recommended changes to the course, and recommended topics to add to the course. When it comes to the attractiveness of the courses, students stated that they were engaged by both the content and class discussions. For example, one student mentioned that they "enjoyed being able to communicate with people about sensitive topics" while another student mentioned they enjoyed the course "because it is normally things people don't acknowledge or just ignore." Regarding the structure of the course, students appreciated that both lectures and discussions were incorporated into its format. Students also expressed the comfortability they felt sharing their opinions and personal experiences. Quoting one student, they stated "The discussions were my favor part. I felt very involved in the class, and sometimes it's hard for me to have the courage to do but his class helped me with that tremendously." Students also mentioned that discussion topics related to cultural competence allowed for an open, non-judgmental space that helped students understand topics covered in the course.

Second, students were asked to recommend any changes to the course. Overall, students stated that there were no changes needed for the course. For example, one student stated "I think this course is great as it is. I would recommend this to anyone who is wanting to learn more about any kind of discrimination." However, there

were some recommended changes, including provide students with access to handouts or PowerPoint presentations to better assist them in following along with the material being covered in the course. One student recommended incorporating more scenarios in displaying how cultural competence looks in the workplace and how to handle situations related cultural diversity. Another student recommended incorporating current news topics related to the topics being covered in the course.

A final question asked students to recommend additional topics that should be added to the course. Several students stated that they had no recommendations for additional topics that should be covered. For example, student responses included "I believe the class topics were well rounded and what should be included was included," "I think we covered a lot of great topics and there is not one specific other topic I would add," and "I thought we had a good variety of topics". However, some students mentioned including topics discussing discrimination based on disability, bias in the workplace and in schools, and discrimination based on religion.

Discussion

Based on current events, it is becoming more apparent that cultural competence is a controversial, but necessary component in education. Thus, the main goal of the current study was to contribute to growing research on the need to integrate cultural competence into higher education curricula by examining students' perceptions of taking a cultural competence course. Drawing on the previous literature on cultural competence, it was expected that taking a cultural competence course would positively influence students' own cultural competence. Data were collected from a university cultural competence course through a survey provided to students at the end of the course. Several key findings emerged from the analysis. Overall, students enrolled in the course benefitted from learning about cultural competence. More specifically, findings from pre-post questions revealed the percentage of students understanding of the topics (e.g., cultural competence, implicit bias, etc.) covered in the course increased after completing the course. The findings seem to suggest that students enrolled in the course gained a better understanding of cultural competence and its importance in assisting others in the helping professions. Additionally, results revealed that students were satisfied with both the content (i.e. topics covered) and structure of the course (i.e. part lecture, part discussion). Students also expressed feeling comfortable discussing these topics in a college class setting. Oftentimes, there is a preconceived notion that students will not be willing to discuss topics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and mental health, in the classroom due to their sensitive nature. However, it is imperative for students to be exposed to cultural competence because it provides both an educational and semi-controlled atmosphere where they can both feel safe and enjoy discussing these topics. Although several topics were covered throughout the course, students recommended incorporating additional topics, such as discrimination based on disability and religion and bias in the workplace and in schools.

Limitations of The Study

A significant limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in the sample, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Since the sample reflects a specific demographic (White, mostly female), it does not accurately

represent the experiences or perspectives of individuals from other cultural or ethnic backgrounds. This lack of diversity can lead to biased conclusions that overlook or misinterpret perspectives from other cultural or ethnic groups. Additionally, the small sample size presents a limitation that affects the reliability and statistical power of the study's conclusions. With a small number of participants, the study does not capture the full range of variability in experiences or behaviors, leading to results that could be less robust or representative. A small sample size can also increase the risk of sampling bias, as it may be more difficult to ensure that the participants are truly reflective of the population being studied.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the importance of cultural competence training within educational settings, particularly for those preparing for careers in fields like Family Science. As evidenced in this research, a well-structured cultural competence course can significantly improve students' understanding of cultural diversity, implicit bias, and privilege, among other essential topics. The data suggest that after taking the course, students felt better equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage effectively with diverse populations in both professional settings and personal lives. This aligns with prior studies on cultural competence, which highlight its role in fostering effective communication and promoting respect for diversity (Gallegos et al., 2008).

Furthermore, students expressed that the course's interactive and discussion-based format encouraged a safe and nonjudgmental environment for exploring sensitive issues. This atmosphere is crucial, as it helps students feel more open to engaging with challenging topics. The positive feedback on course content and structure also reflects the value students place on learning in a supportive environment. Although students were generally satisfied with the course, some suggested additional topics, like discrimination based on disability and religion to enhance their learning experience further. Despite the valuable insights gained, the study had limitations, such as a lack of diversity in the sample and a relatively small participant pool, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Overall, this research emphasizes the potential for cultural competence education to prepare students for the complexities of working with diverse populations, underscoring the need for its integration across various academic disciplines preparing students to work with diverse individuals and families.

Recommendations For Future Research

Future research should explore the integration of cultural competence training into courses for a broader range of academic disciplines where intercultural understanding is essential. Cultural competence is often emphasized in fields such as social work, education, and healthcare, but its relevance extends to any other professions where people interact with diverse populations. By incorporating cultural competence education into various majors, students across disciplines can develop a deeper understanding of cultural differences and learn practical strategies for effective communication and collaboration in diverse environments. Additionally, research should investigate the most effective teaching methods for different fields and assess how cultural competence training impacts students' professional preparedness and attitudes toward diversity.

Another key recommendation is to conduct research with diverse samples (e.g. race and ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender) to ensure that findings are more representative and applicable to a broader population. Diverse samples would help capture a wider range of cultural perspectives and experiences, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the development of cultural competence. Furthermore, this could help with better identification of barriers and patterns to cultural competence development across various groups and therby resulting in tailoring education accordingly.

Implementing a pre-assessment phase before introducing cultural competence content could provide valuable insights into students' baseline knowledge, biases, and attitudes. By measuring cultural awareness and understanding before instruction begins, educators and researchers can assess the effectiveness of specific teaching methods and track individual growth throughout the learning process. A structured pre-assessment can also help tailor course content to address specific gaps in knowledge and provide more targeted interventions as needed. Future studies should examine different types of pre-assessments, such as surveys, self-reflections, or scenario-based evaluations, to determine which approaches best support meaningful learning and skill development in cultural competence education.

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