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AUTHOR Lampe, Judith R.  
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ABSTRACT

Many teacher educators share the concern that preservice teachers on predominantly white campuses are inadequately prepared to teach effectively in a culturally pluralistic society. This descriptive, exploratory study examined the experiences, observations, and reflections of 10 nontraditional, post-baccalaureate students seeking teacher certification and/or a teaching degree. Results are reported in narrative, case study form with excerpts from student writings. The intervention of a multicultural education course provided an important first step towards preparing future educators for the classroom. Following this intervention, students became more aware and sensitized to the needs of others as well as more accepting and open-minded concerning ethnic diversities. A discussion of the study's results focuses on ways preservice teacher education might be modified to better prepare students to be effective educators for an increasingly diverse student population. Suggested modifications include: additional field experiences for working with minority students; open forums for discussion of ideas and strategies; multiethnic guest speakers; and the review of multicultural children's literature. (Contains 30 references.) (LL)

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**MULTIETHNIC CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AND  
ATTITUDES OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS**

Judith R. Lampe  
College of Education  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, Texas

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Abstract

Many teacher educators share concern that pre-service teachers on predominantly white campuses are inadequately prepared to teach effectively in a culturally pluralistic society. This study examines the multiethnic cultural perceptions and attitudes of ten nontraditional education students. Results are reported in narrative, case study form with excerpts from student writings. Changes in perceptions and attitudes were observed following intervention of a multicultural education seminar course. Such a course is seen as an important first step in preparing preservice teachers to teach in a pluralistic culture. Suggested modifications for teacher education to better prepare teachers for an increasingly diverse student population are given.

## MULTIETHNIC CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

There is increasing concern among teacher educators that those pursuing a teaching degree are inadequately prepared to function effectively in a multicultural society. Teacher education students have at best been only superficially exposed to the history and culture of American racial minority groups and have limited understanding concerning the implications of our nation's increasingly diverse population (Ascher, 1990; Lauderdale & Deaton, 1993). This lack of knowledge or multicultural "illiteracy" can result in stereotypes, prejudice, and ultimately discrimination. Many major American universities have recently reported racist activities and/or incidents which have resulted in research, forums, and revised policies to address racial issues (Ascher, 1990; Schoem, 1991). Rather than take this reactive, after the fact approach, it might be better to proactively and systematically address the problem by seeking ways to better prepare college students to function effectively in a pluralistic society.

The lack of appreciation for and sensitivity to minority cultures by teacher education students is an extremely critical problem. These preservice teachers will soon be responsible for educating our nation's children and will serve as sources of information and as models. Young children are aware of the racial differences within adult society, and their racial attitudes reflect those of adults (Banks, 1992; Cross, 1991).

While our nation's student population is becoming increasingly diverse ethnically, the projected trend for teachers is for a continued predominance of white monocultural teachers (Whitaker, 1989). According to the National Council of Social Studies Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines (1992), students of color will make up nearly half (46 percent) of the nation's school-age youth by 2020. In order to meet the needs of our nation's increasingly diverse youth, teachers must develop heightened sensitivity and cross-cultural awareness. Without adequate professional preparation and ongoing systematic reflection and examination, we may be condemning another generation of our youth to being taught by teachers who do not understand them (Cross, 1993). Teacher educators should become concerned, even alarmed, about this state of affairs. The stakes are indeed high.

Why, then, does such widespread multicultural "illiteracy" still abound in our colleges and programs of teacher education? First, many non-minority faculty perceive multicultural education as dealing only with negative societal experiences of minorities. Cultural pluralism is viewed as a recognition of minorities, not as a different way of perceiving society as a whole (Garcia & Pugh, 1992). Secondly, many teacher educators do not feel qualified to teach about multiculturalism due to lack of knowledge themselves or to lack of involvement with any group associated with cultural pluralism. Furthermore, some experience discomfort with their own ethnicity, and talking about racial differences is difficult (Ladsen-Billings, 1992; Bey, 1992). Thirdly, a myth of "color blindness" has pervaded our educational institutions--the belief

that ignoring differences is in the best interest of our students (the assimilation "melting pot" approach). Vivian Paley (1979) confronted her own battle with the pretense of color blindness in the highly acclaimed book White Teacher. Until confronted by an African-American parent, Ms. Paley discovered that she had perpetuated stereotypes of children with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Instead of ignoring diversity, multicultural educators now promote the attitude that what you value, you talk about--in terms of different ethnic groups' uniqueness, contributions, and heritage. Desired is a healthy attitude of respect for the strength and beauty of diversity instead of a fear of people who are different. Finally, teacher education students themselves oftentimes see no need for multicultural education based on the belief that they are white students with no perceived ethnic identification who plan to teach in all-white communities (Garcia & Pugh, 1992). Without a comprehensive view of multiculturalism that includes them, these students have difficulty seeing applications and implications in their future classrooms. Furthermore, they will not seriously consider the charge that, "When knowledge is prejudicial and/or stereotypical, teachers have a moral and ethical obligation to correct it." (Gladson-Billings, 1992, p. 10).

This descriptive, exploratory study examines multiethnic perceptions and attitudes. The purpose of this study is to discuss the experiences, observations, and reflections of students enrolled in a multicultural education seminar course. A discussion of the study's results will focus on ways that teacher

education might be modified to better prepare students to be effective educators for an increasingly diverse student population.

### **Method**

#### **Subjects**

Participants included ten nontraditional students enrolled in a multicultural education seminar class in a small, private Southwestern university. Gender and ethnic distribution consisted of four Anglo-American males, two Hispanic males, two African-American females, and two Anglo-American females. All were post baccalaureate students seeking certification and/or a teaching degree.

#### **Treatment**

This descriptive, exploratory study examines multiethnic perceptions and attitudes of ten nontraditional students enrolled in a twelve-week multicultural education seminar course. These students, from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, shared common class experiences such as challenging speakers (i.e. drug rehabilitation counselors, Native American advocate), challenged their multicultural awareness and possible misperceptions through class discussion of case studies and/or other related readings, worked in cooperative learning groups, shared multicultural children's literature, watched videotapes, discussed highly charged issues (i.e. R. King and R. Denny trials; L.A. riots), confronted prejudices and stereotypes through role playing activities, and dealt with frustrations of those who will soon instruct an increasingly diverse student population. The text

for the class was Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives (2nd Ed.) by James and Cherry Banks (1993) with case studies from Kierstead & Wagner (1992), and related readings on prejudice, stereotyping, race relations, and discrimination (Banks, 1992; Marshall, 1993; Molnar, 1993; Wade, 1992).

Although the course curriculum examined diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability, gifted/talented, religion, and socioeconomic status, this study focuses on ethnic perspectives.

The students' multiethnic cultural perceptions are presented in narrative form using a qualitative, case study format.

Excerpts are included from their individual responses that were written during the last class meeting. Demographics, including age group, gender, and ethnicity are given for each student.

Names have been changed for confidentiality.

### Results and Discussion

GWEN, a single African-American female in her thirties, was taking one of her last classes before graduating and then pursuing a teaching career. She had spent several years as a para-legal in the Air Force. While very straightforward and oftentimes outspoken in expressing her views on the rights of Blacks and females, she listened carefully to opposing viewpoints and was respectful in her responses. At times she seemed almost overly diplomatic and accommodating, like a politician. Though emotionally charged discussions ensued during some class sessions, she was able to see the humor in almost any situation and enjoyed the teasing and joking by other class members. Some of her reflections on this class experience are presented:

This class has given me an opportunity to see the other side of the ethnic coin and to see and hear what others think about the whole issue of ethnic differences. I've spend my whole life being Black, so my feelings on this issue were very clear. However, this class has given me hope, in that we were able to talk openly and honestly about our feelings on this issue. The exchange of ideas we've shared has confirmed, even more, for me that we are all people. We come in different packages and sizes, but when all that is put aside, we share similar hopes, dreams, and hurts. We can change the awareness of ethnic differences, but it must begin with each of us. We may go about the change differently, but if the end goal is the same, we should be secure enough within ourselves to allow one another that freedom. I can incorporate this in my life and classroom by getting to know the differences and respecting their differences. The most important key to the ethnic issue is being informed. I don't fear that which I know.

- Gwen

BEN, a married Anglo-American male with two children, was taking one of his first education courses following a tour of duty in the Air Force. By his own admission, he was not sufficiently aware of cultural diversity in our society and potential students and tended to be very conservative in his viewpoints. Ben shares some of his thoughts following the classroom experience:

This class has done alot to increase my awareness of the culturally diverse. First, I am more aware of the various ethnic heritages--African-American, Native American, etc. and the backgrounds associated with these ethnicities. I have also developed a feel for how various ethnic groups may feel oppressed, and how bilingualism affects the learning process....While making me aware of these particular problems, I have also developed a few ideas to incorporate in the classroom environment. Our Native American speaker's adage of "teach to where the students are" goes a long way when dealing with the multicultural. Incorporating specific ethnic curriculum in course study will prove to ethnic groups that you are aware of their culture and are ready, willing, and able to "get to where they are." In general, I (now) look at the paper, TV, and other media with a critical eye for multiculturally biased information and still, unfortunately, don't have to look far to find it. Maybe we can all change that.

- Ben

DON, a single, Hispanic male in his early thirties, was also involved with the military. Though a man of few words, he spoke with conviction borne of experience. Always questioning, Don was a bit skeptical and not very hopeful in his viewpoints concerning agreement and mutual respect among the different ethnicities. His frustrations are evident in these reflections about the course experience:

I have lived in most situations, except for white upper class that is. The military is a great big mixture of all that. We studied, receive training, punishment, and rewards for how we deal with these type situations. I guess this course made me even more aware of the different attitudes between civilian and military personnel. I was listening to our guest speakers, and I remember thinking, "Can these people really not see the difference or the benefits of working together instead of separate? Surely we wouldn't want our tourists to go where they would be robbed, mugged, beaten, or killed. Hey, most of us don't go to some sections of the city, if we are smart. I guess this experience could make me aware of and respectful of civilian mentality, no matter how wrong it might be. Just kidding! I believe everyone is entitled to their opinion, and I am willing to give my life for their beliefs, the military way.

- Don

CHERYL, an Anglo-American female, widowed, with young adult children, was employed as a counselor. A compassionate, caring individual, she listened attentively and sympathetically to viewpoints different than her own. Although admittedly conservative, she openly embraced and accepted some challenging thoughts and ideas. Cheryl shares her reflections:

This class has helped me understand the many needs of different races, ethnicities, gender, and the awareness of the multicultural diversities of the people we associate with daily. To begin with, we are not adequately prepared to enter the classroom, as the future educators of tomorrow, to deal in a caring but sensitive way with the different issues that are involved in the educational process. By listening to the different minority groups and asking each and every student in your classroom to be listening to the

many needs, maybe we as a collective few can make a difference. We can go a step farther than listening. We can help by getting involved in communities, by being culturally aware of the many needs, by asking people of other races to give informative talks on their cultures, and by asking the parents to get involved in the students' class activities. If we all try to encourage each other, making sure we are in tune with the other person's feelings, then we can all live in a more culturally aware world.

- Cheryl

JEFFREY, an Anglo-American male, married and father of two small children, was nearing the end of his coursework towards the completion of a teaching degree. A real presence in the classroom in the sense of being intently involved in all class discussions, experiences, and activities, Jeffrey became outspoken at times and engaged in verbal bantering with one particular African-American female, Gwen. The interaction between them was entertaining and enlightening in that they could disagree and be at opposite ends of issues, yet could joke and lighten even the most tense situation. Many times, the professor wished for a videotape to preserve their unique dialogue which was evidently the result of a deep mutual respect developed from taking many classes together. Jeffrey, a White middle-class American, openly admitted that he sometimes felt like a "man without a cultural identity." He shares his thoughts:

This course has been very interesting and eye opening. I have had mixed emotions through the semester. Sometimes I feel guilty because I am White, middle class and educated. I felt that all of the wrongs of my forefathers were mine to pay retribution for. Other times I felt very good about myself because I felt that I had an open, unprejudiced mind. During the course of this class, I feel that I now know that I don't know. If I am to make a difference, culturally, in my classroom, I need to educate myself culturally. I need to know about Asian-American, Mexican-American, African-American, etc., culture and history. I don't need to be an expert, but I need to be knowledgeable. My students must know I care and must feel equality in my classroom. I realized how much I did not know when our speakers talked. I

owe it to my students to be able to speak with confidence about their background/cultures. There are role models and books out there for all cultures, nationalities, and I must take the time to bring them into the classroom for the benefit of all my students. It is not enough to be knowledgeable about one's own culture, you must also be sensitive to the cultural differences of others.

- Jeffrey

JAMES, also completing one of the last courses of his program, was an Anglo-American male, in his late forties, married with children, and brought up in a very conservative, southern rural area. Currently employed in a service occupation, James had much experience in the world of work and a down-to-earth, common-sense attitude. Initially, not very positive about the class, James was challenged by a forceful Black male speaker and role playing situations that allowed him to experience new perspectives on different ethnic groups. James comments:

My awareness has been expanded to a degree I did not expect. I came into this class thinking that I knew what it would be about, and that I had already experienced all situations. I was brought up in a predominantly White area with Mexicans sprinkled here and there. Blacks attended a different high school in Columbia (fictitious name). Mexicans did not participate in any sports. Not until I got to a country school outside Columbia, did I experience integration. That was in 1965. Since then, I spent 20 years in the Army. Blacks caused the most problems throughout my career. The group of speakers we had (one of them a Black male) perked me up. I now look at Black and Mexican children in a different light. I don't see them as potential teen-adult problems. I can start seeing a better generation through help and caring from people such as myself. I can't be a father figure for them but maybe a role model to show that I do care what happens to them.

- James

DEBBIE, an Anglo-American female, married but with no children, was employed in the health profession, but with a desire to someday join the education profession as a teacher. A quiet member of the class, an intent listener, Debbie was

nevertheless a significant contributor to discussions and activities. She seemed very comfortable with her own cultural identity and respectful of others as well. Debbie shares some of her reflections:

Well, I am extremely glad I took this class. I got a lot out of it, and I also felt it confirmed many of the thoughts and feelings I've had for sometime now. I have thought and felt that I have a pretty open mind about people in general. I do feel it's important to have self-respect and respect of others. I feel, as a Christian, this is congruent to my beliefs. My awareness was increased just by being around and listening to the comments made by fellow classmates. I work with primarily Hispanic and African-American children and families in public health clinics around this area, so I'm very comfortable with these folks. I try to make people comfortable and try to make parents and their children feel important and valued when they are with me during exams, teaching aspects of preventive health, doing nutritional screening, and developmental screening, etc. I'm comfortable with (multicultural) issues in my daily life and with the members of this class, as far as race, ethnic groups, gender, etc. I think I'm sensitive to the feelings of others and thus the bottom-line is exhibiting respect and living it on a daily basis!

- Debbie

SAM, a single Hispanic male in his mid-thirties, also had experience in the military. Having lived in many different areas of the country (i.e. Miami, Michigan), Sam had a very cosmopolitan, broad-based perspective of multicultural issues. Although liberal and open-minded in many of his viewpoints, Sam was admittedly offended by the label "Hispanic," and much preferred Latino to either Hispanic or Mexican. Perhaps a bit hesitant to express his views openly, his feelings were nevertheless strong. Sam shares some of his thoughts:

I've learned that multicultural education is an educational reform that is an ongoing process, an idea or concept. The purpose is to foster students' respect for the existence of other cultures as well as support students in the maintenance of their own culture. I do believe that the best thing I learned is that principals

and teachers and parents equal child. We need to be innovative in our schools. Teachers need to learn from each other. Principals and teachers need to share their authority. We need to get the parents involved as much as possible. And last we need to know that the child is first.

- Sam

ALICIA, a single, African-American female in her mid-twenties, was mother of a five year old son. This multicultural seminar course was the first in her program towards fulfilling a teaching degree. In the first class meeting it was apparent that Alicia was somewhat uncomfortable and defensive when discussing ethnic issues. She strongly voiced her opinions about the injustices dealt to her as a Black American female and resented being labeled or stereotyped. It was revealing that later during class discussions she sometimes referred to Native Americans or other ethnic groups as "they" or "them" in the sense that all members of that particular group were the same. Later in the course, she apparently became sensitized to this stereotype and openly expressed the changes in her own mindset. Her deep-seated feelings were borne out of painful life experiences. Alicia shares her reflections:

This class has drastically affected my opinions, beliefs, and added to my values. Because of my job as an alcohol and drug abuse counselor, everything I learn in class affects my job, and what I learn at work, I bring to the classroom experience. I love this class; but in the beginning I was depressed. At work I was dealing with discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping, and it becomes totally draining to confront these attitudes to let people know that you will not be part of the perpetration of these ideas. I came to learn that the fun and enjoyment in life comes in expanding yourself, your knowledge, your ideas, and becoming open and willing to allow people to be who they are and believe what they want without trying to fix or change them. This class has helped me with this because a lot of times the people are acting or reacting because of their cultural mindset. Even in the midst of others who are critical, unaware, unwilling, and totally ignorant, the joy comes in being steadfast and unmovable in those beliefs and

values you hold most sacred. Disabilities, exceptionalities, cultural differences--all of what this class is about--are only stepping stones to becoming self actualized. I was 21 when I graduated from college and met my son's father. When I was 9 months pregnant and overdue, he left me for a White girl. I was devastated, bitter, and hurt, and went through a lot of resentment and grief to heal my hurt. It took so much to rise above the hatred and malice that I felt. I do understand this class more so than you could ever know. I have lived these situations and am still living them. Life is full of pain and suffering but is also full of the overcoming of it. Helen Keller.

- Alicia

ROBERT, an Anglo-American male, former construction worker, was married and the father of three small children. He openly admitted that he had never given multicultural issues much thought before this class experience. Conservative in his viewpoints, nevertheless, he was willing to honestly admit his lack of knowledge and to expand his awareness. Robert shares some thoughts:

I have never really sat down as a group like this class and discussed these issues so openly. When the class first started, my ideas or perceptions were not as centered on the needs of minorities as they are now. I've always felt that I've respected other humans and never held anything against them, but now because of what I've learned in this class, I see that my understanding of the issues fell far short of reality. I guess I've always expected others to have the same opportunities as I have had and that they are getting equal treatment. Probably one of the strongest eye openings I got was when the Black man came from the Rehabilitation Center (fictitious name) to talk to us. Even though I didn't agree with everything he said, it finally hit me that these people are in trouble and need our help instead of us accusing them for their lifestyles. Too many minorities are stuck down in their way of life and aren't able to overcome the problems they face without those of us who might be on the other side. As a teacher those kids are in danger of not making it in society, and if I as a teacher let any bias stand in the way, I'm condemning those children to the same life they came from. I feel that now I will be tolerant, patient, and adaptive in working with minorities, more than before.

- Robert

The dynamics of the classroom interaction were powerful. Something very significant had occurred, and everyone knew that

they had witnessed a small miracle--ten very different, diverse, opinionated individuals had openly discussed some extremely "hot" topics, and yet there was an atmosphere of acceptance and respect. A microcosm of democracy had emerged. These nontraditional students' multiethnic cultural perceptions and attitudes underwent changes following the intervention of the multicultural course curriculum and experiences. Their own diversity in terms of attitude, ethnicity, and background became a strength as they explored many facets of multiculturalism and learned from each other. Ten education students became more aware and sensitized to the needs of others as well as more accepting and open-minded concerning ethnic diversities. The real test, however, will be living it out in their future classrooms.

#### Conclusions

Although older, nontraditional students might be expected to be more "set in their ways" and resistant to change than their younger, traditional counterparts, the nontraditional students in this study readily responded to the content and experiences of the multicultural course curricula. It seems logical to expect that traditional students might be even more open-minded and willing to adapt their attitudes and perceptions when challenged with multicultural issues and concerns. In this sense it is hopeful for teacher educators as they attempt to sensitize their teacher education students to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The intervention of this multicultural education course provided an important first step towards preparing future educators for the classroom. During the

course of this study, the students' attitudes changed to be more positive and accepting of ethnic diversities.

According to Banks (1987), the attitudes and beliefs of an instructional staff must be altered in ways that will allow the school to promote educational equality. The implication here is that how you teach children is equally as important as what you teach them. While a change in attitude is a necessary first step and creates the social climate of acceptance, Cross (1993) warns that future teachers need ongoing professional development that is systematic and focused on the problems of racism. Otherwise, teacher preparation is likely to be monocultural, single perspective, and uncritical (Ladson-Billings, 1993).

At least one aspect of multicultural education is remedial due to the students' educational gaps, particularly in history and the social sciences. Rather than focusing on teaching strategies and techniques, multicultural teacher educators need to first provide prerequisite knowledge and understandings to their students. Following remediation, then prospective teachers can plan and implement creative and innovative teaching strategies (Ladson-Billings, 1993). Research supports the existence of culturally based learning style preferences among cultural groups (Gooden, 1993; Grant, 1989). Thus, teachers need to diversify and individualize patterns of instruction to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Teacher educators must be open-minded, themselves "remediated" concerning historical and cultural background knowledge of various minorities, and committed to the importance of multicultural education. According to Ladson-Billings (1993),

teacher educators have responsibilities for advocacy and action. We need to advocate more and better undergraduate liberal arts preparation in history and ethnic, women's, and cultural studies. In addition, "we need to act in our college and university departments to provide stimulating, substantive courses that begin to fill in those knowledge gaps that our students demonstrate. In the spirit of equal education, we need to meet our students 'where they are.'" (Ladson-Billings, 1993, p. 56)

Modifications for teacher education programs might consist of: providing additional field experiences for working with minority students; offering more multicultural courses and/or integration of multicultural content and concerns in required curriculum (Boutte & McCormick, 1992; Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986); providing open forums for discussion of ideas and strategies for discovering teacher educators' own and their students' misperceptions and ignorance (Kierstead & Wagner, 1993); writing in student response journals; presenting multiethnic guest speakers; participating in role playing of multicultural issues; viewing videotapes such as the 1985 PBS series, "Eyes on the Prize" followed by analyses and reflection (Ladson-Billings, 1993; Lauderdale & Deaton, 1993); reviewing multicultural children's literature (Galda, Diehl, & Ware, 1993; Gallagher, 1992); and developing and/or discussing case studies about racial issues (Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, 1994). Lee (1992) encourages educators to be culturally responsive by challenging their own prejudicial thinking, seeking to understand cultural diversity, integrating the accomplishments of diverse cultures into existing

curriculum, and involving culturally diverse parents and community resources in schools.

According to Grant (1989), it is the teacher's role to eliminate the injustices and inequalities encountered by students of color. Anderson (1992) charges that multicultural education should act as an injected virus that inoculates students against the debilitating consequences of a limited, monocultural curriculum, and that furthermore, it should strengthen their values, vision, and resolve as they actively pursue values associated with diversity and equity. Teacher education students must develop an awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of their future diverse student population and culturally pluralistic society. Otherwise, realization of the "Dream," as described by Martin Luther King, Jr. will continue to be just a dream while discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, and inequality are perpetuated in our nation's schools. Dealing with diversity need not cause teachers major anxiety, however. It can be viewed as an opportunity to reflect and analyze their personal and professional growth. The changes that result can have far-reaching implications for our culturally pluralistic society.

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