# Teacher Efficacy and Practice in Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners:  How Do Partnerships Support Teachers?

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This study examined elementary teacher beliefs and reported practices in meeting the needs of diverse learners in one school district served by university partnerships.  Elementary classroom teachers surveyed (139) reported (a) how their practice is shaped by student needs, (b) use of instructional strategies with diverse students, (c) feelings of self-efficacy when meeting needs of students, and (d) beliefs about differentiating instruction.  Results indicated that teachers impacted directly by partnerships beginning in pre-service years were more likely to take the needs of students into account when planning instruction, use a variety of strategies to differentiate instruction, and feel that they influenced their students' learning.

Classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse as evidenced by recent reports (Sapon-Shevin, 2000/2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education reports that the number of children who speak a language other than English at home has more than doubled in the last 20 years (2011). If this development continues, it is expected that students who speak a language other than English or who identify themselves with an ethnic group other than white will constitute a numerical majority of K-12 student in the year 2035 (Sapon-Shevin, 2000/2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In addition to cultural and linguistic differences, students enrolled in special education have increased 30 percent in the last 10 years (www.ideadata.org).

Given the rapid increase in students with diverse needs, how do universities prepare and support pre-service and in-service teachers as they strive to meet the needs of their students?  In this study one mid-south university was looking at whether the partnerships they developed with neighboring school districts had an impact on teacher practices and efficacy in meeting the needs of students. The study sought to answer the question, "What are the beliefs and practices in meeting the needs of diverse learners of elementary teachers in one school district served by the university partnerships?"

## Literature Review

The landscape of the classroom is changing. Over the last ten years, information from the IDEA Data Accountability Center (www.ideadata.org) indicates the number of U.S. students with disabilities enrolled in special education programs has risen 30%. Three out of every four of these students spend part or all of their school day in general education classrooms. Despite this

increase in learners with special learning needs as well as the increase in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, there is little evidence to suggest that most teachers are adjusting their instruction in ways that would support a full range of students (Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, 1995; Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, & Slavin, 1993; Westberg & Daoust, 2003).

*Teacher Efficacy*

Teacher efficacy is the teacher's confidence in his/her ability to promote student learning (Bandura, 1977; Hoy, 2000). Bandura (1977) cited that there are three primary influences on efficacy, mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion. Mastery experience is an experience in which the teacher has seen that his/her performance has been successful. Vicarious experience is when a teacher has seen someone else model a skill that has resulted in success. Finally, social persuasion is when a teacher has been given a "pep talk" from a supervisor or colleague that encourages her/him to try a new skill or strategy in the classroom. Some of the most powerful influences on the development of teacher efficacy early in a teacher's career are mastery experiences during student teaching and the induction year (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001). Encouraging partnerships, such as mentoring, can provide opportunities for vicarious experiences as well as social persuasion that may contribute to a boost in self-efficacy which in turn may lead to someone initiating a task, attempting a new strategy, or trying hard enough to succeed (Bandura, 1982).

*Partnerships*

Partnerships, as defined by this study, have their naissance in the work of the Holmes Partnership. The Holmes Partnership began in response to some disturbing trends cited in the Nation at Risk (1983) reform climate. Trends such as (a) several of the nation's strongest universities had eliminated their schools of education; (b) these same universities believed that schools of education could be entrusted to universities of lesser rank; and (c) many felt that education schools had not lived up to their potential, nor would they in the future (Holmes Group, 1986). The Holmes Partnership was formed as a collaborative partnership between public schools and universities whose goal was to improve the quality of teacher education. The Holmes Partnership posited that when practicing teachers, teacher candidates, and university faculty work together through the provision of high quality, field-based educational experiences public education is improved through the sharing of resources and enhancement of teacher preparation (Holmes Group, 1995).

To further define partnerships for this study, we define it as collaborative partnerships designed to achieve clearly defined, mutually agreed upon goals. Collaborative partnerships exist between the university in this study and one school district in the mid-south since 1992. This partnership moved beyond formal university/ school partnerships, such as the student teaching experience, to include informal partnership where university faculty are welcome in the schools both as visitors, researchers, and providers of information on new teaching strategies and research-based instructional models.

Most universities and teacher colleges offer preparation on meeting the needs of diverse learners to both pre-service and in-service teachers. Professional development on meeting the needs of students of other cultures and those with a primary language other than English for pre-service teachers and for teachers already licensed in a standard area comprises the curriculum for an endorsement in English as a second language. Professional development for pre-service teachers and for teachers already licensed in a standard area on meeting the needs of students with disabilities comprises a curriculum for a license in special education.

However, in the mid-south, one school district provides professional development for such credentialing through a variety of formal and informal partnerships. One partnership provided a statewide, in-service ESL professional development program where the school faculty were trained and coached in the use of research-based strategies used specifically for the culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Through the university and school district partnership, pre-service educators were provided school-based field experiences. Through informal partnerships with the school personnel, university faculty were provided information used to revise course assignment content and alignment as teacher duties and school curriculum underwent changes. The university also sponsored symposia (literacy, autism, and ESL) and in-service training to the school district personnel. Teachers use these professional development activities to expand their professional skill repertoire and meet the professional development standards required for license renewal. It is through these partnerships that schools and teacher education programs can support the basic tenets of the Holmes Partnership (Holmes Group, 1995).

## Methodology

In this study, the researchers looked at the beliefs and reported practice in meeting the needs of diverse learners of elementary teachers in one school district served by university partnerships in one mid-south community.

### Participants

This quantitative study involved 139 teachers from eight elementary schools purposefully selected from one school district in the mid-south. Of the teachers surveyed, 59% of them graduated from the university where the partnership programs were offered. The school district serves students from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. The district in which the school was selected has a total of 18,810 students in 26 schools. There are 9,428 elementary, 2,908 middle school students, 2,763 junior high students, and 3,711 high school students. The ethnic breakdown for the school district is as follows: 43% White; 43% Hispanic; 8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 3% African American; 2% Asian, and <1% Native American/Native Alaskan. Students identified Limited-English-Proficiency make up 43% of the district population, whereas 38% are general education, 10% in the gifted and talented program, and 9% in the district's special education program. The district serves 12,039 students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch program, which is approximately 64% of the district population.

### Data Collection

The Elementary Teacher Survey used in this study was a modification of a survey previously used in a nationwide sample of middle school teachers (Moon et al., 1995), along with a modification of the short form of the teacher self-efficacy scale (Hoy & Spero, 2005). The survey was developed to reflect the beliefs and practices of elementary teachers in relation to serving their student population. Practices and conditions investigated included beliefs about how students learn, arrangement of students for learning, cooperative learning, acknowledging and dealing with student differences, and curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. The survey offered statements that were rated on a Likert-type scale with anchors from strongly believe to do not believe at all or reflects my everyday practice to never a part of my classroom (Figure 1).

Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants were informed that all information would be kept confidential and that the results would only be reported in statistical form so as not to identify any individual responses.

**Figure 1.**
**Example question from the Elementary Teacher Survey**

For question 1, we ask you to RATE each item according to the degree to which the needs of the group influence your instructional planning and practice.  In rating each item please use the following scale:

• No Influence=1
• Rarely Influences=2
• Somewhat Influences=3
• Strongly Influences=4
• Dominates=5

1.   How much of your instructional practice is shaped by the academic needs of each of the following groups?

|  | no influence | rarely influences | some influence | strong influence | dominates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a.  Culturally diverse learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b.  Remedial learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c.  ELL/Bilingual learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d.  Advanced/gifted learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e.  Learners with disabilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f.   Average learners | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| g.  Consideration of the whole class as a single unit | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

### Data Analysis

The investigators utilized quantitative methods to analyze data from the administered Elementary Teacher Surveys. Standard data cleaning procedures were used to prepare all data for analyses. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS to ascertain prevalent practices and teacher efficacy regarding instructional practices as they relate to meeting the needs of diverse learners.

### Findings

Teachers in this study related information having to do with their beliefs and practices in serving the needs of diverse students. Specifically, information was collected about (a) how much their instructional practice is shaped by student needs, (b) the reported use of instructional strategies with diverse students, (c) feelings of self-efficacy when meeting the needs of students, and (d) beliefs about differentiating instruction.

*Student influence on instructional practice*

The teachers were asked to rate how much their own instructional practice is shaped by the academic needs of culturally diverse, limited English proficiency, learners with disabilities, and advanced/gifted students (Figure 2). The teachers used the scale no influence, rarely influence, some influence, strong influence, and dominates to rate the influence on their practice.

All of the student groups were reported to have some influence on teachers' instructional practices, with bilingual and culturally diverse learners having the strongest influence (81% and 76% respectively). The student group with the least influence on instructional practice was reported to be advanced/gifted learners (47%).

varied instructional materials twice a week or more. Conversely, interest centers and learning contracts were reported to be used twice a year or less.

**Figure 2.**
**Percent of graduates and non-graduates of the partnership university surveyed noting strong influence to dominate their instructional practice decisions.**
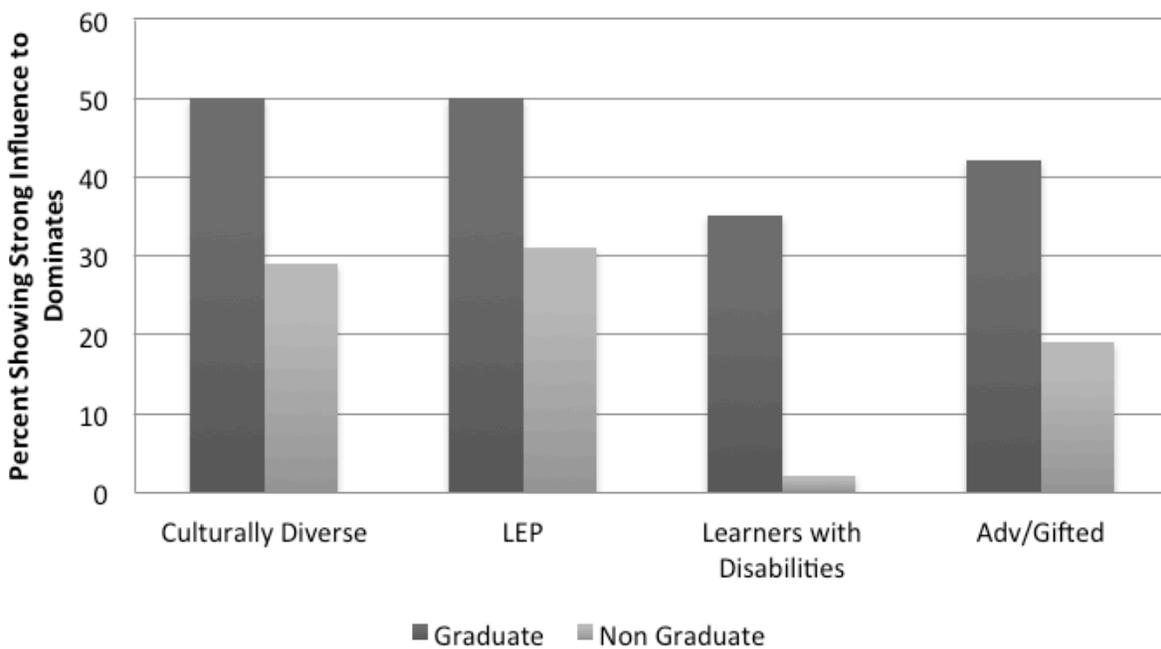


*Reported use of instructional strategies*

Teachers were asked how often certain instructional activities were used in their classrooms with English language learners (ELLs) and learners with disabilities (LD). With ELL, graphic organizers, pre-assessment, and cooperative learning strategies were reported to be used twice a week or more. Conversely, independent study, flexible grouping based on interest on learning style and interests were reported to be used twice a year or less. With LD, teachers reported to use graphic organizers and

*Feelings of self-efficacy*

When asked to indicate their opinion about their self-efficacy in the classroom, the majority of all teachers surveyed believed that they can do a great deal to help their students value learning (67%) and help students believe they can do well in school work (70%).

Data revealed 63% of partnership university graduates reported being able to have a great deal of ability to implement alternative strategies in their classroom.

*Feelings about differentiating instruction*

When asked about how teachers felt about differentiation, a majority of all teachers reported that planning for differentiation was worth the effort, and that the ability levels of students should be taken into consideration when grading. Most of the teachers surveyed (86%) agreed that in a differentiated room, students are more likely to be actively engaged.

## Implications and Next Steps

The current study affirmed the value and importance of partnerships between teaching institutions and school districts. The data analysis indicates that teachers served by the university partnerships were more likely to take the needs of students into account when planning instruction, use a variety of strategies to differentiate instruction, and feel that they had an influence on their students' learning. The use of partnerships to provide extended professional development both during pre-service and in-service years provides teachers with the vicarious and mastery experiences needed to affirm efficacy in meeting the needs of diverse students. These findings support the original Holmes Partnership goals and have important implications for the use of partnerships in teacher education programs in the future.

Partnerships should encourage high quality professional preparation (Holmes Group, 1990). The survey demonstrated that teachers served by university partnerships were more likely to differentiate tasks for students according to their needs, and had more feelings of confidence that their efforts made a difference. In one question, teachers were asked "How much can you assist families in their helping their children do well in school?" Teachers were asked to select from the categories, nothing, very little, some influence, quite a bit, or a great deal. Teachers who were graduates from the university where partnerships were in place were two times more likely to

answer "quite a bit" or "a great deal" as compared to teachers who were graduates from other institutions.

In addition, the Holmes Partnership promotes simultaneous renewal, meaning that universities, schools, and professional organizations should work together to educate teachers. Through work with the university programs of special education and English as a second language, we found evidence of educators feeling confident about meeting the needs of diverse students. In particular, teachers who were graduates from the university were more likely to use a variety of instructional strategies twice a week or more. Universities need to continue to provide training both in pre-service and in-service service settings to actively work on equity, diversity, and cultural competence in the education profession.

Future research will need to continue to explore the impact of partnerships on teacher efficacy and practice in meeting the needs of diverse students. Further examination of this relationship through focused interviews and classroom observation may reveal just which partnerships are most effective and how it would serve the needs of teachers in the future. It is through this research that teacher education programs can continue to meet the needs of their educators and the students they serve.

Our future calls upon 21st Century teachers and partnerships can help support teachers by (a) providing experiential learning in the context of where they teach and who they teach, (b) promoting vicarious and mastery learning experiences as well as the time and money for these to take place, (c) seeking ways to impact teacher effectiveness and efficacy, especially in the early years, and (d) continually assessing teacher needs. Though this study has been a snapshot on one university's partnership with a school district, it can reveal a picture that is both challenging and promising. The picture is challenging in that partnerships must have parity

on both sides, schools and universities must be willing to both give and take when it comes to meeting the needs of their educators and students. A promising picture, as in the case of this study, when it was revealed that through partnerships, we are truly greater than the sum of our parts.

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