

**Respond to Diversity: Graduate Minority Students' Perceptions on
Their Learning Experiences in an American University**

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Abstract

The increasing population of minority students in higher education in the United States makes it relevant to focus on the issue of how to improve current educational philosophies, instruction and curriculum design, investment, and organization to meet the needs of minority students. A “teaching gap” between minority students’ learning needs and pedagogical responses to these needs exists in American postsecondary education. This qualitative research study addressed this knowledge gap by using five semi-structured interviews with five graduate education major minority students to examine their learning and the teaching practice of faculty in a specific university in the United States. The results of this study indicated that situating teaching and learning in a cultural context and improved faculty multicultural awareness were important to improve minority students’ learning experiences and academic outcomes.

Keywords: multicultural education; culturally responsive teaching; teacher education; minority student learning; higher education.

Introduction

Minority students have been struggling to experience educational equity and excellence in U.S. society and the educational system, in particular, to receive equal access to qualified educational resources and academic achievements as their White counterparts do (Banks, 2004). The increasing population of minority students in higher education in the United States makes it relevant to focus on how to improve current educational philosophies, instruction and curriculum design, investment, and organization to meet the need of minority students.

Because of the increasing diversity in students' cultural and racial backgrounds, research on minority students' learning and achievement has increased over the past years (Schofield, 2004). However, much of it leaves open the question of the causal direction of empirical links found among minority students' racial and cultural backgrounds, their academic performance and achievement, and reforms of educational policies and practices in the American educational system (Schofield, 2004). A "teaching gap" between minority students' learning experiences – curriculum, pedagogy, interactions, and teachers' pedagogical responses to them, exists in American higher education. This teaching gap plays an influential role in enhancing or reducing the likelihood of an achievement gap in higher education for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Tomorrow's teachers and university faculty will need to be well prepared to effectively and appropriately deal with issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and language. The higher education systems, including teacher preparation programs, need to be more responsive to the needs of this growing segment of the student population (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A more specific set of issues and possibilities in terms of teaching practices for multicultural students needs to be explored in more detail in higher education settings. Inequitable educational practices have been documented extensively in K-12 educational settings. But this source of the achievement gap has been less fully investigated in postsecondary learning environments (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As students from various minority backgrounds encounter curriculum that may not be framed in ways that resonate with them, pedagogy that is insensitive to their cultural backgrounds and assumptions, faculty attitudes and expectations that reflect destructive stereotypes, or other aspects of the learning environment, they may not perform up to their potential, thereby continuing a systematic disparity in performance between them and their white counterparts.

Literature Review

Four bodies of research and theory inform this study, each offering different components to the research. These are: teaching attitudes, positive interactions, culturally responsive pedagogy, and content integration, and are depicted visually in Figure 1.

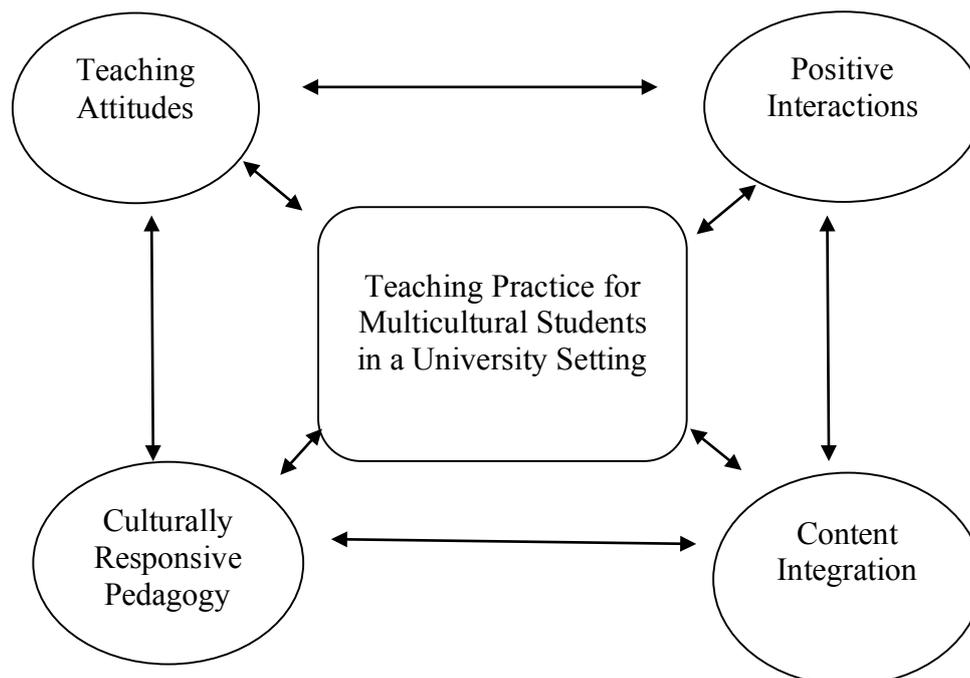


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Some academic research and teacher preparation programs, in general, have viewed students of color as genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient (Delpit, 1995). Issues of teaching attitudes towards minority students are enacted in postsecondary academic environments, in teaching practice and curriculum design in particular. Previous scholarship on “racial and ethnic studies of minority students’ achievement and attainment in U.S. higher education” evoke the reconsideration of the causes of variability in educational gaps among linguistically diverse students and their White counterparts. An important factor which results in minority students’ comparatively lower academic achievements is destructive teaching attitudes and stereotyped expectations towards students’ cultural and racial backgrounds. Scholarship on these negative teaching attitudes and expectations are grounded in critical race theory.

Effective learning requires active peer interactions and positive interactions between students and teachers. The culturally and linguistically diverse university classroom is at risk of developing inequities on the basis of difference in student status and teachers’ position of authority (Cohen & Lotan, 2004). For example, minority students arrive with varied educational experiences and English proficiencies; this situation leads to variation in their academic skills, performances and differences in academic success. Many teachers in university settings are distressed to observe that newcomers and some minority students are virtual non participants in class discussions and activities (Cohen & Lotan, 2004), as many minority students have a hard time voicing their opinions and maximizing learning outcomes.

Allport (1954) suggests that the support of authorities and positive equal-status relationships and interactions among students of all ethnic and racial groups are vital to producing academic achievement. This finding has implications for increasing positive classroom interactions. Teachers are important authority figures, who can facilitate positive interactions among minority students and their White peers by using cooperative learning and alternative grouping strategies (Schofield, 2004). Teachers can also promote linguistic and cultural pluralism in the

academic learning environment for encouraging minority students' identity development and learning processes.

Content integration deals with the extent to which teachers use examples, materials, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline (Banks, 2004). Gay (2004) extends the notion of systematic change in teaching content and materials by identifying significant ways of embedding culturally relevant components in curriculum and learning materials. These include designing curricula that develop understanding of ethnic groups' cultures, histories, and contributions; teachers becoming multicultural in their attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors; and using action strategies for combating racism and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

In addition to recognizing that minority students bring rich funds of knowledge to their higher education learning experiences, faculty in university settings can do much to modify their approaches to instruction. Educational equity and excellence for students from all ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds in the United States are unattainable without the incorporation of cultural and racial pluralism in all aspects of the educational system. Educational practice, as Gay (2004) argues, plays a key role in reducing institutional racism and achievement gaps, as well as rebuilding minority students' self-esteem, identities and learning engagements. Culturally responsive pedagogy exists when teachers use cultural heritage and background experience to facilitate students' academic achievement (Gay, 2010; Banks, 2004). Addressing culturally responsive pedagogy also contributes to mutual understandings between minority students and teachers, valuing diverse cultural and racial heritages, and enabling diverse students to realize their potentials.

Methodology

The research was a short-term, qualitative study, which incorporated five semi-structured interviews in a specific university setting. The research followed a "basic" interpretive design (Merriam, 2009), which sought to understand the interaction of individuals with the culture of the academic learning environment and university context in which they lived and studied. It is a particularly appropriate way to pursue how minority students interpret their learning experiences, how they see racial and cultural impact on academic instruction and peer interactions, what factors benefit their learning, and what issues exclude them from effective learning and academic achievement.

Due to the research emphasis, the setting of this research was the University of Washington. Participants from the College of Education were chosen due to the rich diversity of students and faculty from different cultural and racial backgrounds within the teacher preparation and education programs at the University of Washington. The five participants were College of Education master and doctorate degree minority students. Five interviews provided opportunities for the voices of research participants to be heard, cultural and racial identities to be valued, and multiple needs to be fulfilled. Participants enrolled in the College of Education graduate program were selected according to their multicultural and linguistic backgrounds (English was not the native language), in order to demonstrate how racial and cultural factors contribute to their learning processes and outcomes.

A demographic summary of the participants is presented in Table 1. Due to the confidentiality agreements with research participants, all the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Demographic summary of study participants

Name	Nationality	Age	First Language	Gender	Program	Previous Academic Studies	Grade Level
Sunny	South Korea	31	Korean	Female	Curriculum & Instruction	South Korea	2 nd year doctorate student
Ken	Chile	29	Spanish	Male	Teacher Education	Chile	3 rd year doctorate student
Peter	Thailand	28	Thai	Male	Educational Psychology	Thailand & U.S.	2 nd year doctorate student
Amy	Hong Kong	30	Cantonese	Female	Teacher Education	Hong Kong & U.S.	2 nd year master student
Mary	Mainland China	25	Mandarin	Female	Curriculum & Instruction	Mainland China	2 nd year master student

Discussion

Four major findings resulted from this study. The first finding was the misinterpretation of minority students' learning styles and cultural knowledge between faculty and students. The second finding was a lack of culturally diverse representation and responsiveness in learning materials and teaching practice. The third finding was the cross-cultural self in interactions. The fourth finding was a disparity in teacher preparation and practice in higher education.

Personality or Culture: Misinterpretation of Minority Students' Learning Styles and Cultural Knowledge between Faculty and Students

All five research participants indicated that they experienced a gap between their personal and cultural knowledge and mainstream academic knowledge. The concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal experiences in their home, family, and community cultures constitute personal and cultural knowledge (Banks, 1996), which could be challenged by mainstream White dominant academic knowledge. Four of the five research participants' learning styles, communication styles, and in-class performance styles were deeply influenced by Asian-oriented cultural heritages and educational backgrounds. Instead of actively participating in class discussions, frequently speaking out their ideas in front of the whole class, questioning and challenging professor and classmates' opinions, and taking on leading roles in group assignments, Asian students were used to listening, memorizing, and following directions and requirements. As Sunny mentioned:

During the past 29 years of studying in Korea, I was educated and trained to be obedient and submissive to my professors' instructions and requirements. In my home culture and school culture, students are required to listen to and memorize every word from textbooks and their professors. I am so used to accepting and memorizing everything from my professor, and it is my learning style and it is also my culture. It is in my blood and so hard to change even now I'm starting my doctoral program in America.

The cultural differences between students and faculties lead to cultural discontinuity in the U.S. higher educational environment. Failing to realize this may result in the cultural clash and limiting minority students' academic development. Minority students' cultural heritage and personal experiences not only construct their identity but also influence their learning, communicating, and academic performing styles in U.S. classrooms. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) indicated that minority students will experience academic difficulties in the school because of the ways that cultural knowledge within their home and cultural community conflicts with academic knowledge, norms, and expectations in mainstream classrooms. In higher education, especially in graduate programs, the population of enrolled minority students is scarce in comparison with their White counterparts. These demographic differences and related cultural mismatches can lead to minority students being misrepresented for their whole ethnic group based on the misreading of their in-class performance.

This issue of misrepresentation can reinforce negative teaching attitudes and practices toward minority students, which could create a cultural deficit model. As Mary stated: "I realize that some of my professors may be aware that Chinese students' learning styles and in class performance patterns are grounded in traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes being polite and listening rather than speaking out. So they will assume every Chinese student follow this pattern and they will no longer have high expectations for my Chinese classmates and me. They won't expect us to play a leader role in group projects and I can feel the "expectation distance" from professors between me and my White American classmates."

Peter was frustrated about being perceived as a silent Asian student. He said, "Some professors categorized me as a quiet student based on my Asian appearance and their previous culturally stereotyped assumptions towards Asian students' behaviors in class. It hurts sometimes. Although Asian students may have generally quiet personalities, but that cannot fully represent every student and every Asian culture."

Misinterpretations of minority students' learning and performance styles illustrate a disconnection between teachers' and students' personal and cultural knowledge. Mainstream academic knowledge is more consistent with the cultural experiences of White middle-class students than those of most other ethnic groups, so it is important for faculty to understand and include the personal and cultural knowledge of minority students when designing the curriculum, teaching strategies and assignments for today's multicultural classrooms (Banks, 1996). Moreover, it is equally important for university faculty to obtain knowledge about cultural and racial diversity to reduce culturally mismatched teaching attitudes and practices in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms.

Content or Context: Lacking Culturally Diverse Representation and Responsiveness In Learning Materials and Teaching Practice

All five research participants indicated that they encountered learning materials and assignments that were not culturally relevant and responsive. The missing voices from their cultural backgrounds and racial heritages created a cultural vacuum for them in the university. Ken indicated that he had a very hard time reading textbooks and often learning materials in several classes that did not relate to his culture or contain international perspectives. He stated, "In one teaching pedagogy class, I found that my perspectives and knowledge were constructed and limited in Western, or American focused-context. I wanted to hear international voices and learned more cases from my cultural backgrounds so that I could obtain professional

knowledge and be able to practice it when I return to my home country. But I seldom read materials or textbooks that reflect cultural diversity or are relevant to my home culture.”

The absence of cultural responsiveness and relevance in learning materials not only impacts minority students’ construction of ethnic identity and cultural belongingness, but also shapes their access to academic opportunities, involvements and achievements. Amy shared how cultural mismatch affected her learning process and outcomes in her graduate program. She said:

If learning materials and assignments are totally constructed on American culture or history, that will create an invisible cultural barrier for me to approach the content knowledge and engage in discussions. For example, in my first quarter of the graduate program, we were assigned to discuss Jim Crow case and its historical influences on educational policy. Being a cultural outsider, I was not so familiar with the American educational system and policies. It was hard to join in my American classmates’ discussions. All those names, cases, laws became simple English words, which didn’t make sense to me.

Content knowledge, curriculum, and teaching materials in higher education settings may exclude and marginalized minority students. Most of the students interviewed claimed that their cultural knowledge and heritage were not validated or well presented in textbooks, curriculum and other learning materials used in university classes. When separated from cultural context, content knowledge can be obstacles that minimize the learning processes and outcomes of minority students. Dilg (2003) noted that it is important for teachers to realize the ways in which minority students’ cultural backgrounds and educational experiences affect how they understand and respond to learning materials and assignments. Faculty and students in teacher education programs need to learn how to reduce cultural distance for minority students. Dilg (2003) also indicated that students may connect deeply with a work based on connections they perceive between learning material and their own cultures, or reject it on the basis of its lack of “cultural fit” (p. 47).

Amy suggested incorporating culture to learning materials and teaching practices as she explained that, “If I can feel connections and reflections between my home culture and subject matter content, I will learn better and with more confidence and active engagement.” The connection between learning materials, subject content, teaching practice and students’ cultural backgrounds need to exist, so that a “safe cultural space” (Dilg, 2003, p. 48) can be created to reduce gaps between minority students and their academic learning materials, practices, and environments.

Misplaced Cross-Cultural Self in Interactions

The students interviewed shared feelings of being isolated from their instructors and American peers by language, academic talk, structured diversity, cultural preference, and classroom climate. Students who are not English native speakers indicated that their English proficiencies and non-native pronunciation separated them from their American counterparts and university faculty. Mary recalled that: “English can be a form of segregation which singles me out because of my Chinese accent. Language itself can create significant challenges or biases. For example, some of my instructors may misread my academic abilities and interaction patterns as a result of the differences in styles of language uses and proficiencies.”

Another problem related to language is “academic talk” in classrooms. As Dilg (2003) explained, language can define, divide, embarrass, exclude, isolate, or draw together minority students, faculty and their White American peers at school. Furthermore, the cultural meanings behind the language used also makes a difference in minority students’ learning processes and interactions with instructors. Peter provided an example of this when he first heard the expression, “the elephant in the room” in his class. All the American students immediately understood and responded appropriately. Peter added, “So I have to pretend I understand, in order to show I am listening and engaging. But this happens a lot in my studies. Instructors’ styles of questioning and other academic instructions and talks may not always make sense to me because they are not just about English language; it’s more about culture behind the language.” Many students interviewed said they frequently encountered academic jargon that blocked their responses and understandings. This culturally embedded language barrier can mislead university faculty in their assumptions about minority students’ interaction patterns, academic performance, and learning outcomes.

Structured diversity in graduate level classes at the research site presented another challenge for the interviewed students. According to Bennett (2004), structured diversity means the racial and ethnic diverse students and faculty representation in a particular institutional setting. The perception of racial and cultural diversity may increase or reduce cultural prejudices and tensions among students and faculties. All five students interviewed indicated that they expected to see more colleagues, classmates and faculty who “look like us”, and thus secure their sense of cultural belonging, as well as building a safe and culturally familiar academic environment. This feeling was similarly conveyed by Peter, Ken, Mary and Amy. As Amy stated, “If the university’s faculty team could have more faculties of color, or from my cultural background, I will be more comfortable, because they speak my language and could understand me, as well as be able to provide culturally responsive teaching practice and companionship to support my academic development and ethnic identity construction.”

A House United or Divided: A Disparity in Teacher Preparation and Practice in Higher Education

The students who participated in this study recognized that misconceptions existed. They noted that teacher education programs and university faculty were lacking multicultural courses and materials needed to educate in culturally responsive ways. This absence of culturally responsive content and contexts overweighed the subject content knowledge, or “professional skill” training. It caused a problem easily identified by the five research participants as: Some professors are experts in their scholarly fields, but they are not very good at transmitting their academic knowledge and content knowledge to culturally diverse students.

Ken, as a third year doctoral student in teacher education, expressed his concern regarding lack of multicultural content and training in his program as follows:

Many teacher education students or professors may not have had the multicultural learning experiences which are necessary to break the conservative assumptions underlying teacher education at mainly higher education institutions. Lacking sufficient training in terms of culturally responsive teaching or multicultural education, prospective faculties may not be aware of the importance of cultural diversity, racial differences and their impacts on minority students’ learning processes and identity constructions. This institutionalized traditional teacher education model will negatively reinforce inequitable teaching practices for culturally diverse students.

Mary and Sunny also addressed missing cross-cultural or multicultural education context and content in teacher education and faculty preparation. As Mary indicated:

As prospective teachers or university professors, we are educated by what our professors know about education and instruction, and we will teach our future students in the way we are trained in the institution. If our instructors are lacking awareness and systematic training of culturally responsive teaching, how can their teaching practices become culturally responsive? And we are rarely seeing faculty preparation or training about teaching in a multicultural context. The university or higher education institutions are deeply impacted by the taken-for-granted belief that professors are experts and they can teach effectively. But this may not always work as well as they expect.

The students interviewed agreed with Goodwin (1997) that attitudes and practices and the lack of progress in the area of prompting multicultural teacher education should be re-examined. They also felt that inequitable teacher preparation in higher education is closely associated with their inequitable teaching practices that, in turn, expand gaps in the academic achievement of cultural and racial minority and majority classmates. Thus, systematic improvement in teacher preparation and faculty teaching practices are needed to address these concerns.

Conclusion

This research indicates a teacher preparation-teaching practice gap in U.S. higher education, especially among university faculties with increasing numbers of ethnic minority students in class. Teaching effectiveness in graduate level classes is traditionally defined by professional content knowledge, instead of the equal concern for faculty attitudes, curriculum design, teaching practice, and interaction with multicultural students. These missing components result in inequitable teaching practice and broaden academic achievement gaps between ethnic minority students and their White peers. This situation provokes the need for a re-conceptualization of teacher education in a multicultural educational context to include culturally responsive perspectives and practices in higher education. Through exploring the lack of multicultural concerns in teacher education and teaching practice in one university college of education, this study proposes the following suggestions for raising prospective teachers and university faculty's awareness of teaching for diversity.

Diversify Teaching Materials and Situate Teaching Practice in Diverse Cultural Contexts

Diverse students' personal and cultural knowledge and experiences are not addressed sufficiently and positioned adequately in the mainstream academic environment. The cultural, racial, linguistic, and knowledge diversity in this university's academic environment calls for faculties to reduce the discontinuity between what minority students experience and how they have been educated in their home cultural and educational contexts, and what they experience in university classrooms and how. In order to achieve academic success, minority students need to study in an academic environment that facilitates their cultural identity and competence development, when they encounter positive and culturally aware teaching attitudes, and action; receive real-life connections and cultural relevance from learning materials and curricula; and experience alternative and culturally responsive pedagogy and interactions with their faculties and classmates.

Rethink How to Prepare Faculties for Diversity, and Increase Diverse Representation among Faculties

An important mission of teacher education is improving teacher candidates' professional content knowledge and teaching strategies, as well as promoting educational excellence and equity. One of the major aims of teacher education should be to assist teachers to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to become thoughtful and approachable for every student in the multicultural academic environment. To achieve this goal, appropriate and comprehensive training to foster positive teaching attitudes towards diversity and the deconstruction of teaching stereotypes and biases is needed. This present study supports this suggestion especially academic teaching for university level teacher education programs to foster positive attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Moreover, increasing the diversity of university professors can benefit and strengthen teacher awareness of multicultural issues, and can reduce the sense of cultural isolation among teacher candidates of color, and cultural insensitivity among White candidates.

Preparing Culturally Responsive Faculty and Adding Cultural Components in Teaching Practice

Adding cultural components in teacher training and promoting faculty cultural competence to better serve culturally diverse students are crucial steps toward improving university teaching practice. It is essential for teacher education programs to present teaching as an intellectual and cultural activity, as well as to develop productive perspectives about the interactions among race, culture, class, and schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2000). Teacher education programs need to modify content to support collaboration between faculty and teacher candidates in acquiring culturally responsive teaching skills for practice in schools.

This research study offers a perspective on making prospective teachers and university faculty aware of engaging more effectively with the diverse student populations. This study also advocates increasing culturally diverse components in teacher education beyond only mainstream culture and knowledge-focused content to multicultural perspectives and experiences to maximize efforts to improve the quality of teacher education programs, teaching practice, and student performance in higher education. This study takes a step towards creating a pathway to establishing campus climates and academic environments of teacher education programs where “students of every cultural and racial background feel welcome and are encouraged to reach their highest potential, as well as receive academic achievements” (Bennett, 2004, p. 864).

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