

# Factors Influencing Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs about Student Achievement

## Evaluation of a Pre-Service Teacher Diversity Awareness Program

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As the influx of immigrants into the United States has risen over recent years (Kohut & Suro, 2006; Massey, 2007), and with this trend expected to continue, the cultural, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic composition of U.S. society is becoming increasingly diverse (Milner, et al., 2003; Wallace, 2000). Accordingly, the face of the American student is also more diverse. But, as the student body is becoming more heterogeneous, with only slightly over half of public school enrollment consisting of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), the racial/ethnic composition of teachers remains much less diverse (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

As they begin their teaching careers, many new teachers have never attended school with, or lived in neighborhoods with, people of color (Larke, 1990; Milner, 2003). About 84% of the nation's teachers are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and are often from middle-class backgrounds (Parameswaran, 2007), while only a little more than half of U.S. public school students are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The expanding student-teacher cultural mismatch leads to cultural and ethnic ignorance that is particularly dangerous in the increasingly diverse classroom climate in the U.S. today. In essence, culturally and ethnically ignorant and incompetent teachers lack skills necessary to acknowledge and to deal effectively with a culturally, racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse body of students (Milner, 2003).

Miscommunication, false expectations, and hidden biases in the classroom due to this lack of skills may unintentionally encourage discrimination and inequity

in the education process. In particular, students from backgrounds and ethnic groups unlike those of their teachers face negative stereotypes and prejudices that their White counterparts do not encounter (Gamoran, 2001; Mayer, 2002; Rist, 1970). In all, the expanding disparity between teacher and student cultural and social background yields hidden problems for many students (Parameswaran, 2007; Weddington & Rhine, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to examine the effectiveness of a diversity training program designed to sensitize pre-service teachers to the expected diversity of their future students. Diversity training programs have been implemented with the intent of diminishing the problems of cultural biases in teachers, but few programs have been systematically studied to determine whether they are actually accomplishing their goals.

Using a unique sample of pre-service teachers, this study finds a lack of association between completing a diversity training program and reports of cultural biases regarding student background characteristics' influence on their learning. This lack of an association is discussed in the context of a variety of efforts by teacher education programs to prepare future teachers to adjust to, to accommodate, and to effectively teach, the increasingly diverse student population they are likely to encounter as teachers.

In particular, the diversity training program under examination here is compared and contrasted with various strands of multicultural teacher education (MTE) programs, placing this program within a typology of MTE. This gives way to suggestions for improvement of this program to more adequately prepare pre-service teachers for the challenge of teaching to a diverse classroom, as well as to adopt a more critical view of teaching to and for, not simply being aware of differences among, a diverse classroom.

### Diversity Training

The striking cultural disparity between teachers and many students has been acknowledged as a persistent, dangerous problem, and efforts have been made to buffer against its effects. Among the most common strategies to accommodate the growing diversity of the U.S. student body and the discordant culture of most teachers is the implementation of teacher diversity training programs in schools of education.

Stemming from the principle that education, awareness, and sensitivity are crucial in eliminating discrimination, an increasing emphasis of teacher training has been to promote equity and justice in the classroom, leading to equal opportunities in subsequent institutions (Delpit, 2006).

### Culture

One key concept included in diversity awareness training programs is "culture." A significant lack of understanding or consensus of what "culture" actually means, how to teach pre-service educators about it, and the ways in which such concepts should be addressed in the classroom are potential culprits explaining the ineffectiveness of many diversity training programs in schools of education (Castagno, 2009; Gorski, 2009b; Heard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

A popular function of the notion of "culture" has been to serve as a proxy for race, as if racial groups were primarily defined not demographically, but by a unified imputed culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). The concept of culture has been arbitrarily and conveniently used as an excuse as to why some students cannot achieve success in the classroom, as well as for explaining students' behaviors that teachers are not able to understand (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Like race, the elusive concept of "culture" is often used to explain deviance from

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mainstream norms or characteristics, as if the dominant group does not have an actual “culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This reflects the overdetermination of the use of the concept.

This blanket use of the concept of culture to explain disparities in classroom performance among students is based on the same logic as Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty thesis” (1959), which blames their self-perpetuating “culture,” or lifestyle, for the lower socio-economic status and disadvantaged conditions among the poor. This neglects the social conditions of poverty that help to produce the particular set of circumstances with which the poor are faced and which work to ensure that some people are forced into various positions and circumstances, thus functioning to reinforce and exacerbate class inequalities (Kerbo, 2009; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

In this sense, cultural explanations of differential student academic achievement overlook discrimination, structural impediments, and other elements that combine to create disparities that appear consistently among minority children, in particular, and that are explained away under the guise of “culture.” This “blaming the victim” mentality effectively detracts responsibility from incompetent or prejudiced teachers and places it on the child’s “culture,” as if the cultural practices, beliefs, and understandings deem the child unable to learn and to perform to the standard on mainstream, middle-class, White children (Kerbo, 2009).

### **Multiculturalism**

This above analysis of the improper treatment of “culture” raises the seemingly more difficult task of defining and approaching “multiculturalism.” This term is becoming ever more popular in education, and multicultural curricula, methods, and ideology are found in more and more schools at all levels. Since “culture” poses varying meanings for different people, and because there is a vast assortment of definitions and criterion for culture, it follows that “multiculturalism” is subject to the same discrepancies in understanding and usage.

Although it has taken diverse forms throughout its existence (McCarthy, 1995), *multiculturalism* is increasingly advocated as a “progressive” effort to address and accommodate the growing diversity within schools (McLaren, 2007). Some view it as a tool for improving the experiences of multicultural students by assimilating them into the dominant school and national culture, while others perceive it to

be a mechanism to teach awareness and acceptance of multicultural students to those of the dominant group.

In effect, such programs acknowledge the differences among social groups, so as to open our eyes to voices, achievements, and practices typically excluded from mainstream culture and discourse. Examples of such curricula and activities are learning to count in Spanish, and the celebration of Black History Month, which typically involves arguably superficial practices like having students perform skits about famous Black Americans and displaying posters of well-known Blacks, such as Oprah (Lewis, 2007).

Still others believe it can combat the White privilege and neo-liberal focus embedded within U.S. education by broadening the focus of teaching (Gorski, 2009b; Rezai-Rashti, 1995).

Through multicultural curriculum, we learn the relative importance of certain groups and their achievements or customs in relation to the dominant group, which usually reinforces the superiority and privilege of Whites, especially men. But, the majority of multicultural agendas have failed, to say the least, to meet their advertised standards and aims, as they frequently increase inequities in education experiences and outcomes among students, and exacerbate prejudices and stereotypes by ignoring notions of difference and of dominance (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Crichlow, Goodwin, Shakes, & Swartz, 1990).

As Crichlow et al. (1990) insist, some less-critical forms of multiculturalism do nothing to negate or to supplant the grip of Eurocentrism on the construction of knowledge. In essence, depoliticized multiculturalism has typically reified and rigidified the borders of power, privilege, and domination that it was supposedly intended to dismantle (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) point out that in negotiating and expressing cultural differences and promoting cultural awareness, multiculturalism, like all pedagogy, involves questions of who narrates, for what audience, for what purpose, and in which ways.

The emphasis which some forms of multiculturalism places on culture over social stratification leaves social inequality uncontested, thereby reifying, fragmenting, and homogenizing culture. In its current practice, softer forms of multiculturalism do very little to challenge students’ understandings of culture and race, but actually defend the status quo (Banks, 2004; Lewis, 2007).

Although possibly unintentionally, the common celebration of, and desensitization towards culturally different others also accentuates the existing social and political hierarchies among groups by focusing on difference (Gorski, 2009a). This process reinforces the “us/them” mentality, while it fails to challenge the hierarchical arrangement within which some individuals and groups are systematically subordinated. Practices that accentuate the “other,” such as wearing sombreros, breaking a pinata, and eating tacos during a celebration of diversity on *Cinco de Mayo*, express distinctions among groups, allowing for easier distinctions between dominant and the minority/exceptional groups, without demanding real change (Gorski, 2009a).

Therefore, Aronowitz and Giroux stress (1993) that we cannot fall into the trap of romanticizing the efforts and achievements of non-Whites, thereby exaggerating their Otherness. There lies a huge need, if equality is to be achieved, for educators to reexamine the politics of multiculturalism as part of a larger effort to understand how issues concerning national identity, international relations, culture, race, ethnicity, and other identities can be reconstructed in order for the dominant groups to acknowledge and examine their own privilege.

Since some types of multiculturalism actually promote inequality while simultaneously recognizing agency in others, many view it as a superficial attempt to bridge the gap between cultures to engender a beneficial and open school and learning environment for all involved. But in practice, it creates an automatic and inherent concession of division, which, in turn, reinforces inequalities associated with membership within various groups (Lewis, 2007). Due to such inadequacies and inequalities of multicultural approaches in education, attempts to create more than simply *awareness* of cultural differences seem necessary, especially given evidence of the effectiveness of diversity awareness programs such as the one we evaluate below.

### **Failure(s) of Diversity Training**

Although a majority of education schools offer their pre-service teachers some type of diversity awareness training, there remains a significant need for cultural competence and awareness among teachers (Batchelder, 2008; Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003; Weddington & Rhine, 2006). The common methods of diversity training are

insufficient and/or ineffective in creating tolerance and cultural awareness.

Pre-service teachers often do not receive the training necessary to be able to create equitable learning environments for individuals across cultural backgrounds and they remain culturally incompetent as they enter the classrooms to teach (Gorski, 2009b; Milner et al., 2003). This is in part because of the homogeneity, privilege, and background of the teachers and administrators instructing and creating this training. Most are unaware, for example, of the extent to which White privilege is embedded within traditional educational curriculum, teaching methods, and testing materials. Further, they typically lack an understanding of how institutional racism has permeated the U.S. education system (Gorski, 2009b; Weddington & Rhine, 2006).

### **The Need to Evaluate Diversity Training Programs**

Effective teacher training programs in education schools are certainly necessary if social justice is to be achieved for all students (Gorski, 2009b; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Wallace, 2000), yet evaluation of diversity training programs has been lacking or unsubstantial (Gorski, 2009b; Milner, et al., 2003).

Consequently, this research evaluates the effectiveness of a Southern, mid-sized education school's diversity training program. The study has been undertaken and completed by a select group of its students as part of their coursework as pre-service teachers. This project examines the differences in attitudes, expectations, and biases of students according to student race, class, and other family/background factors by contrasting pre-service teaching students who received cultural sensitivity and diversity training seminars and those who did not.

This analysis also investigates the potential influence of several pre-service teacher characteristics, such as race, gender, and social class background, on their attitudes and expectations of students.

## **Methodology**

### **Data**

We are examining the effectiveness of a specific diversity program at a specific Southern, mid-sized university that consisted of weekly diversity seminars over the course of two semesters. Among the expressed goals of this training program were the enrichment of the student's own life, the provision of appropriate tools to also expose their families to such issues,

and the introduction of multiculturalism into the students' future schools and communities as a comprehensive approach to promote equity and to celebrate diversity. These objectives were to be achieved through various activities.

The fall syllabus for the program indicates a generalized focus equality of achievement in the classroom, with a listed course objective being to "Identify possible barriers to academic success and devise a plan to reduce these barriers." This seems related to, though not necessarily a defining feature of, multicultural teacher education.

The program's spring semester training devotes more explicit and focused attention to actual diversity training and to issues surrounding diversity in the classroom. As outlined in the spring syllabus, "Through observations, experiences, readings and attendance at lectures and invited presentations, students will gain an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity and related needs within school settings."

Two sets of pre-service senior education students were surveyed as part of this research project: senior-level teaching fellows and traditional seniors. The teaching fellows completed the diversity training program, whereas the traditional seniors did not. All students were contacted and surveyed during required education courses in 2008. A total of 281 students were contacted; 153 completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 54%. Due to missing values on variables of interest, the final total sample size for this analysis was 133.

### **Measures**

The dependent variable, the extent to which pre-service teachers perceive that students' background characteristics are influential on their learning, was created by constructing an additive index of six Likert-scale items. These six items were a subset of 16 items used to address in-service teachers' beliefs about teaching and student achievement. Exploratory factor analysis yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue above 1 where the items were substantively connected. These six items were:

- ◆ A child's race is an indicator of his or her academic capabilities.
- ◆ Minority children typically have a tougher time learning than white children.
- ◆ Children of a higher social class will probably get better grades than other children.

◆ Poorer children usually have a harder time learning.

◆ Children whose parents completed college are more likely to complete college than other children.

◆ The way a child is raised affects his or her achievement in school.

Responses ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree and were coded such that higher values reflected greater agreement with the importance of background characteristics on student learning.

The independent variable in this research, whether the respondent had completed the diversity training program, was included as a dummy variable (1=yes). Among the students surveyed, only the teaching fellows had completed the diversity training program.

Control variables include mainly demographic characteristics. Sex and race were included as dummy variables, with males and White respondents as the reference groups. Age was also included as a dummy variable, with respondents aged 21 or younger as the reference group. To measure respondents' social class background, we controlled for their fathers' education level (included as a dummy variable, where father does not have a college degree as the reference group).

### **Analysis**

As the dependent variable was constructed as a continuous measure, we utilized OLS regression as our analytic technique. Thus, our results can be interpreted as the amount of change in the extent to which pre-service teachers perceive that students' background characteristics are influential on their learning. Results can be interpreted as the amount of change in the extent to which participants perceive that students' background characteristics are influential on their learning for each one-unit increase in the specific predictor (net of the effects of all other predictors).

## **Results**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the sample of pre-service teachers included in this study. Almost one-fourth of the total sample was comprised of the senior teaching fellows who had completed the diversity training.

Table 2 presents the regression analysis predicting the extent to which respondents perceived that student background characteristics are influential on their learning. The analysis shows that very few

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of the measures included were significantly associated with the outcome.

Most notably, there was not a significant association between completing the diversity training program and responses regarding the possible influence of students' background characteristics on their learning. Women were less likely to report that they believed that students' background characteristics were influential on their learning. As compared with respondents whose fathers had a high school education or less, those whose fathers had a college or graduate degree were more likely to report that they believed that students' background characteristics were influential on their learning.

### Discussion

This article has examined whether there is an association between the completion of a diversity training program and responses regarding the potential influence of students' background characteristics on their learning. Critical readers may question whether any influence was simply a function of participation in the teaching fellows program, which incorporated the diversity training program into their curriculum. However, the lack of any association between completion of the training program and beliefs regarding the influence of student background charac-

teristics implies that neither the training program nor the teaching fellows program significantly changed beliefs about student learning, at least as measured here.

Ideally, diversity programs encourage pre-service teachers to reflect upon and to question their assumptions, biases, and thinking about teaching, learning, and cultural and other differences, which should result in the adoption of broader value systems among these students (Batchelder, 2008; Giroux, 1989; Heard, 1999; McLaren, 2007; Milner, 2003; Wallace, 2000). In this regard, this particular diversity program is arguably ineffective.

### Multicultural Teacher Education

The program under evaluation here is focused on diversity awareness as a core concept. Teacher education that is multicultural differs, theoretically, from diversity awareness training, and it has the potential to provide more than an appreciation for, or desensitization to, issues of diversity within the classroom. A lack of deeper discussion and investigation of issues of diversity and power that contribute to differential experiences, expectations, and outcomes for students of various social groups might be alleviated by a more critical type of training.

This deficiency is reflected in the evaluation of the diversity training under

discussion here, so we now turn to an analysis of the approach this program utilizes in comparison with various forms of multicultural teacher education (MTE). The intention is to illuminate where this diversity training is lacking, is inadequate, and is inappropriate as a means to effect justice and equity within classrooms.

### A Framework for Evaluating MTE Programs

Gorski (2009b) offers a typology for analyzing MTE programs. He outlines five approaches to diversity teacher training, each of which falls into one of three main types: Conservative, Liberal, and Critical MTE. He describes the Conservative approach as "teaching the 'other,'" which focuses on teaching specific minority groups and in emphasizing the assimilation of these groups into mainstream U.S. culture. The Liberal MTE programs use either a "teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance" or a "teaching with multicultural competence" approach. The former method attempts to celebrate and to tolerate diversity among pre-service teachers. The latter intends to produce multicultural competence and relevance in instruction and pedagogy.

Finally, Gorski describes a Critical approach to MTE, which many assert is the only variation of MTE which has potential to attempt any meaningful sociopolitical change that could promote equity in education (Batchelder, 2008; Gorski, 2009b; McLaren, 1997; Weddington & Rhine, 2006). According to this typology, Critical MTE can take one of two slants. The "teaching in sociopolitical context" approach utilizes critical theories as well as liberatory and social justice education to incite to engage teachers in a critical investigation of the systemic influences of power, injustice, oppression, dominance, and inequity that extends from within the classroom to federal policies.

This type of MTE falls within the "teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice" approach, which also includes postcolonial theory. In addition to the objectives of the "teaching in sociopolitical context" method, this technique intends to create teachers who are agents of social change by emphasizing strategies for engaging in counter-hegemonic teaching and social activism (Gorski, 2009b).

### Describing the Examined Training Program Using Gorski's Typology

In terms of Gorski's (2009b) typology, the teacher diversity training evaluated

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics for All Variables in the Analysis

Variable	Mean*
Extent to which respondents believe student background characteristics are influential to their learning	2.34 (.42)
Received training (1 = Yes)	.23
Respondent sex (1 = Female)	.78
Respondent race (1 = Non-White)	.11
Respondent age 21 or younger (1 = Yes)	.29
Respondent's father's education level (1 = college or graduate degree)	.68

Note: N=133. \* For categorical measures, the mean equals the proportion of the sample in the particular group. (Standard Deviation)

**Table 2**  
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for Analysis Predicting the Extent to Which Respondents Believe Students' Background Characteristics are Influential on their Learning

Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Received Training (1 = Yes)	.018 (.167)
Respondent Sex (1 = Female)	-.170* (.091)
Respondent Race (1 = Non-white)	.109 (.121)
Respondent Age 21 or Younger (1 = Yes)	-.016 (.156)
Respondent's Father's Education Level (1 = College or Graduate Degree)	.152* (.080)
Constant	2.569*
Adjusted R2	.04

\* p < .05, one-tailed tests. N = 133

here is most consistent with a liberal approach, as it emphasizes celebration and an arguable superficial inclusion of diverse, or minority, groups and peoples. Given the non-critical framework for teaching multiculturalism as described in the syllabi, as well as the relatively conservative and celebratory approach characteristic of the diversity training materials provided by the education school, the ineffectiveness of the investigated MTE program on the pre-service students' attitudes is not surprising.

For example, one of the supplemental materials given to students is a 16-page booklet that outlines numerous tools for teaching and practicing cultural and social tolerance, which are namely intended to engender equity and to celebrate diversity. Among the suggestions in this booklet are to shop at an ethnic store, to tour museums, to research one's own heritage, to give someone a multicultural toy, to take the family to an ethnic restaurant, and to invite bilingual students to give morning greetings and announcements on the public address system in their native language.

### Other Empirical Findings from This Analysis

The main focus of this research—the evaluation of a diversity training program on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward the possible influence student background characteristics would have on their learning—yields straightforward results. As noted above, there is no association between the completion of the training program and the pre-service teachers' attitudes.

Nevertheless, two personal characteristics are associated with respondents' attitudes regarding the influence of background characteristics on student learning: respondent sex and social class. Women were less likely to report that background characteristics would likely influence student learning, while those from higher social class backgrounds were more likely to report that background characteristics would likely influence student learning.

There are at least two possible explanations for these findings. First, the pre-service teachers who held privileged social locations, specifically men and individuals from higher social class backgrounds, were so influenced by their education that they were more likely than those not in privileged positions to believe that social location of students influences their learning. This would be an important finding, as it would be a new insight into the influence of teacher training programs broadly.

The recognition among privileged pre-service teachers that not all students have equal opportunity to learn and that student social structural position vis-à-vis race and class influences their learning would be a welcome advance in teacher training.

An alternative explanation, and the more likely of the two, is that women and pre-service teachers from lower class backgrounds (as measured by father's education) are less likely to believe that student social structural position influences their learning. These students are in teacher training programs in a major university; they achieved academic success despite their background characteristics. As such, it would not be surprising for them to be less likely to acknowledge the potential ways a student's structural position could impact their learning.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal of this research and other research like it is to determine the best teacher training methods that can result in higher quality of education for, and impartial treatment of, all students, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic class, or any other ascribed characteristics. These research findings are intended to aid in the development of classroom programs and procedures to eliminate possible bias-related self-fulfilling prophecies in schools and social institutions.

By placing the examined teacher diversity training program into Gorski's typology (2009b), we can see where it fails to facilitate real structural changes. Far from a critical MTE method, this training is somewhat celebratory and has a tokenizing slant, characteristic of the conservative and liberal MTE types. It does nothing in the way of the real sociopolitical reconstruction necessary to counter the institutionalized and systemic hegemonic structures infused in U.S. public education (Gorski, 2009b; McLaren, 1997).

Our results clearly show that the MTE program had no effect on pre-service teachers' attitudes, implying that it did not incite them to question, and therefore to revolutionize the ways in which they perceive and teach about the increasingly diverse world around them. It should be noted that due to the relatively small sample size of this study, this research should serve only as a preliminary step in the overall program evaluation process.

Future research focusing on the evaluation and development of teacher bias prevention and elimination programs should

be conducted in larger teacher training programs, with more participants.

However, according to other research, this particular diversity training program is not alone in its failures. Although many schools of education offer some form of MTE to at least a portion of their pre-service teachers, most teachers know little about what multicultural education actually is and they are even less sure about how to implement it in their classrooms (Gorski, 2009b; Heard, 1999). This is problematic, since many teachers often begin their careers unconsciously teaching in non-democratic ways (Heard, 1999).

Some teachers believe that only racially and ethnically diverse classrooms require the use of MTE and an acknowledgement of difference (Heard, 1999). This suggests that MTE would serve only as a service to the minority students, which neglects the fact that racism, classism, and sexism are at least partially perpetuated by those in the majority. Many teachers fail to recognize that bigotry and cultural ignorance are hugely influential parts of the life experiences of all of us in the U.S., as well as in the broader global community (Gorski, 2009b; Heard, 1999).

A critical approach to MTE would incorporate sensitivity and tolerance most commonly characteristic of traditional MTE programs, but would also frame multicultural education as a political movement with an emphasis on social justice. A critical examination of power relations and structures of privilege are crucial for a comprehensive reform of U.S. public education (Gorski, 2009b; McLaren, 1997). It is not until this framework supplants currently superficial or limited MTE methods that the process for eliminating educational and other social inequities can be truly achieved.

### Note

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