

**ASSESSING TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT DIVERSITY IN PERSONAL AND
PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS**

Cristina M. Cardona

University of Alicante, Spain

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association,

Montréal, Canada, April 11-15, 2005

Abstract

Beliefs and perceptions about diversity of a sample of 75 regular education teachers in Spain were investigated to (1) analyze and contrast their views in personal and professional contexts, and (2) ascertain if these beliefs vary according to teaching experience. The “Personal and Professional Beliefs about Diversity Scale” survey instruments were selected, adapted, piloted, and administered to two groups of student teachers enrolled in a postgraduate program. Of the distributed questionnaires, 89% were collected and coded. Results show that teachers' beliefs about diversity differ depending on personal and professional situations, and that these differences are larger for inexperienced teachers. Findings provide support and guidance to design and develop more sensitive educational programs on diversity in Spain.

Introduction

Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations have been found to guide and direct teachers' responses toward various students (Good, & Brophy, 1987; Grant, 1985; Pajares, 1992). Research reveals (Richardson, 1996; Sparapany et al., 1995) that teachers hold beliefs about students based on race/ethnicity, language, social class, gender, religion, ability/disability, and other differences that lead teachers to differential expectations and treatment of their students. If schools are to better serve the needs and interests of a growing diverse student population, then low teachers' expectations, negative stereotypes, biases prejudices, and cultural misconceptions must be identified, challenged, and reconstructed (Pohan, & Aguilar, 2001).

Many of the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes toward differences are reflections of culture (Matsumoto (2000). Culture both *unites* and *divides* people and exerts a power role in determining human social behavior. Values and beliefs are strongly influenced by culture. Because culture is generally taken for granted, people rarely consider alternatives to what they usually think and do. *Values* are cultural ideals about what is considered moral and immoral, good and bad, or proper and improper. Since values offer viewpoints about ideal goals and behavior, they serve as standards for social life. Values also serve as criteria for assessing our own behavior as well that of others. *Beliefs* are more specific than values, they are ideas and attitudes shared by a culture about what is considered true or false. An example of a value is "democracy is good." An example of belief associated with this value is "nations with democratic governments offer a better quality of life to citizens than nations with authoritarian governments." (Lindsey, & Beach, 2004).

In small, traditional, relatively isolated societies, agreements on values may be close to universal, but in societies that experience ongoing and rapid social change agreement is more difficult to achieve. In Spain, for example, recent shifts in school population (INE, 2004) have

caused concerns to educators, and discussion about the ways to *better educate* students from diverse backgrounds and/or educational needs. Over the last decades, the cultural, racial/ethnic, and linguistic diversity of students and adult populations have increased substantially due to change in migration patterns and to variations in birth rates. Now immigrant students in undergraduate programs represent near a 6 percent of the total school population and it has been estimated that for the year 2010 foreign school population will double. This trend can be found all around Spain, where in only five years the number of immigrant students has increased fivefold (from 80,687 in year 2000 to 389,726 in year 2005) (MEC, 2005). Additionally, the growing compromise toward the inclusion of *all* students in spite of their differences required by public laws (LOCE, 2002; LOGSE, 1990;) underscored the need to pay attention to the diverse educational needs of these populations.

Teachers' reactions to the education of high heterogeneous groups of students have not been favorable. Resistance to face the challenges of diversity is common (Cardona, Reig, & Ribera, 2000; Harry, 2005). Teachers frequently express concern about their lack of training to teach in a multicultural sensitive way, and also about the scarcity of resources and time to work in collaboration with others (Olson et al., 1997; Villa et al., 1996; Villegas, 1991). Teacher educators being aware of these problems and barriers have long been asking the question: How do we best help future and current teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would result in *culturally responsive teaching*? To date, our understanding of this issue remains limited, while differences pertaining to the developmental needs of children remain invisible.

In attempting to remediate this situation, a growing number of scholars (Vayda, 1994) have re-oriented the study of diversity towards more complex and *multidimensional* analyses that are implicit in the construction of differences. One of these is the two-dimensional approach to assessing beliefs proposed by Pohan, & Aguilar (2001). Based on the notion that there might be

situations in which one's personal beliefs about a given issue could be in direct conflict with his/her beliefs in a professional context, they suggest that the distinction between personal and professional contexts/situations could help understand the behavior of teachers. For example, according to Pohan, & Aguilar (2001, p. 160), "in a personal context, an educator might believe that bilingualism is an asset in today's increasingly diverse and global society. Within a professional context (e.g., schooling), however, this same educator might reject the notion of public monies being spent on bilingual education." Thus, to better understand teacher behavior and sometimes resistance to face the challenges created by high heterogeneous groups of students, it is critical to measure and assess beliefs on diversity in both contexts.

Consistent with this argument, several researchers have found that teachers often reinterpret their values and beliefs in the light of what they believe to be true about differences (Cardona, Florian, & Rouse, in press; Magde, 2001). Logically, these sometimes create obvious contradictions. In some cases, contradictions in values are so obvious that public debate is open. Often this debate revolves around moral dilemmas created by such contradictions. For example, people generally disdain and/or refuse to use public expressions about the superiority of certain groups, especially regarding race or ethnicity (Crandall, 2002). However, many are uncomfortable with programs that mandate equal opportunity for people of color, such as affirmative action. Ethnocentrism is a fact of group life, and one that can translate into feelings of superiority, both between and within cultures.

As the value of maintaining *cultural identity* in a diverse society is rapidly increasing, and has the potential to produce *social tension*, educators and teachers have an important role to play. In this paper, we discuss the complex issue of diversity being face by educators today. The study uses two methodologies to examine teachers' beliefs. In study 1, a survey was administered to examine teachers' normative beliefs in personal and professional contexts and

also as a function of teaching experience. In study 2, teachers were interviewed to gain comprehension about the arguments in support of their views through discussion group format. In short, the following research questions guided the study: (1) do teachers' beliefs about diversity differ depending on personal and professional contexts? and (2) do personal and professional teachers' beliefs on diversity vary according to teaching experience?

Method

Participants

General education teachers from near 30 schools representative of different geographical regions in the province of Alicante, Spain, were surveyed ($N = 75$). The survey instruments were administered to two groups of teachers enrolled in a postgraduate program in Educational Psychology doing the *Practicum* in a mid-size southeastern university of Spain, during the first semester of the last academic school year. Of the 67 respondents (89% response rate), $n = 47$ (70%) were female; and $n = 20$ (30%), males. The age of the respondents fell between ranges of 21-56 ($M = 28$; $DT = 7.67$). Forty-six per cent ($n = 31$) had previous teaching experience (equal numbers (50%) in public and private schools), while $n = 36$ (54%) did not have experience in teaching. Experienced teachers taught in kindergarten (41%), elementary (36%), and secondary school (23%) and had at least 5 years of school experience ($M = 7.88$; $DT = 5.35$). These distributions are roughly equivalent to those in Spain as a whole (MEC, 2005).

Instrumentation

To answer the above research questions, the "Personal Beliefs about Diversity Scale" and the "Professional Beliefs about Diversity Scale" (Pohan, & Aguilar, 2001) survey instruments were selected. The instruments were adapted and piloted with a sample of postgraduate students in an

independent study conducted a year before this one. Thirty-one items from the original instruments were used to design the adapted version which contained a total of 28 items. Fourteen items comprised the “Personal Scale”; and the remaining 14, the “Professional Scale”. The scales in both Spanish versions exhibited fair internal consistency reliability ($\alpha > .80$).

Procedure

All students that were present on the day of data collection took place were invited to participate in the study after being assured that their responses would be confidential. Students were asked to complete the measures described above as well as a questionnaire concerning demographic information. The scales had been translated from English into Spanish using a back translation system to ensure equivalence of items and piloted with another similar sample. For the translation, two individuals who were proficient in reading and writing English and Spanish were identified. The English version was presented to the first individual and asked him to translate the items into Spanish. Once the task was completed, the translated items were presented to the second individual to retranslate the items into English. The scales took about 30 minutes to be completed.

Group discussion followed the administration of the scales a couple of weeks later. There were two sessions that lasted for two hours; one with preservice teachers and another with inservice teachers. During these sessions, the researcher presented the results obtained from both scales item by item, probing teachers to elicit arguments in support of the findings. These sessions were audio-taped and recorded to facilitate analyses.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed following three steps. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were calculated for each item; additionally, *t* test for

related samples were run to identify possible differences between teachers' personal and professional beliefs about diversity. Second, group differences in beliefs as a function of teaching experience were compared; so that, *t* tests for independent samples were conducted (item by item) in both scales separately. Third, patterns of arguments in both samples were identified and compared through content analysis of group discussion sessions.

Results

Do teachers' beliefs about diversity differ depending on their personal and professional points of view?

Ratings of teachers are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Overall, the three statements of *personal* beliefs in which there were more agreement were (see Table 1): Item 1, 'People should develop meaningful friendships with others from different racial/ethnic/social groups' (97%); item 14, 'It is not a good idea to invest more money in the education of disabled people' (97%); and item 2, 'It doesn't matter that my child would attend the same class than others from different cultures/backgrounds' (94%). On the other hand, the three lowest statements were: Item 7, 'Many woman in our society continue to be discriminated because males still dominate most of the major social systems' (51%); item 3, 'Immigrants should learn the language (second official language) of the community in which they live' (54%); and item 9, 'Same-sex couples should not be allowed to raise and educate children' (56%).

The three statements of *professional* beliefs in which there were more agreement were (see Table 2): Item 3, 'Students and teachers would benefit from having a basic understanding of diverse cultures' (95%); item 14, 'Students with physical, cognitive and sensorial limitations should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible' (94%); and item 4, 'Teachers should be trained to work with students from diverse cultures' (94%). On the contrary, the three lowest statements were: Item 12, 'There should be more woman in administrative positions in

education' (43%); item 10, 'Religious diversity should be more considered in all public schools' (55%); and item 11, 'I would not allow an Islamic student to wear her head covered in the classroom' (65%).

Table 1

Survey of Teachers' Personal Beliefs about Diversity

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	% Agree
1. People should develop meaningful friendships with others from different racial/ethnic/social groups.	4.64	0.67	97
2. It doesn't matter that my child would attend the same class than others from different cultures/backgrounds.	4.68	0.59	94
3. Immigrants should learn the vernacular language (second official language) of the community in which they live.	3.15	1.35	54
4. Immigration is leading to the deterioration of the country.	4.06	1.14	79
5. It doesn't matter to rent any of my properties to immigrant people.	3.81	1.05	65
6. Society should pay more attention to religious beliefs.	4.06	0.89	81
7. Many women in society continue being discriminated because males still dominate most of the major social systems.	3.18	1.18	51
8. In general, men make better leaders than women.	4.58	0.89	87
9. Same-sex couples should not be allowed to raise and educate children.	3.55	1.18	56
10. Society should not become more accepting of gay/lesbian lifestyles.	4.55	0.88	92
11. It is a good idea for people to develop meaningful friendships with others having a different sexual orientation.	4.01	0.86	78
12. People with disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities) are less effective as leaders than people without disabilities.	4.45	0.78	91
13. Making all public facilities accessible to the disabled is simply too costly.	3.76	1.29	69
14. It is not a good idea to invest more money in the education of disabled people.	4.78	0.73	97

Table 2**Survey of Teachers' Professional Beliefs about Diversity**

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	% Agree
1. There is nothing wrong with students with diverse characteristics and from different racial/ethnic/social backgrounds attending inclusive schools/classrooms.	4.45	0.76	93
2. Historically, education has been monocultural, reflecting only one reality biased toward the dominant culture.	4.31	0.68	91
3. Students and teachers would benefit from having a basic understanding of diverse cultures.	4.54	0.70	95
4. Teachers should be trained to work with students from diverse cultures.	4.57	0.76	94
5. Teachers should teach contents from the cultures represented in the classroom.	3.85	1.08	70
6. Multicultural education is less important than reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer literacy.	4.15	1.06	80
7. I don't think it is especially important that textbooks include contents from other cultures.	4.36	0.93	89
8. Students should not be allowed in schools to speak a language other than the one from their community.	4.58	0.86	94
9. Students from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds usually have fewer educational opportunities than their middle-class peers.	3.88	1.02	78
10. Religious diversity should be more considered in all public schools.	3.42	1.14	55
11. I would not allow an Islamic student to wear her head covered in the classroom.	4.04	1.12	65
12. There should be more women in administrative positions in education.	3.42	1.06	43
13. Gays and lesbians should not be allowed to teach in public schools.	4.69	0.72	91
14. Students with physical, cognitive and sensorial limitations should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible.	4.72	0.57	94

All together, the answer to the question: Do teachers' beliefs about diversity differ depending on personal and professional contexts/situations? is yes. Total subscale means and standard deviations for personal and professional beliefs were 56.19 ($SD = 5.67$) and 58.85 ($SD = 5.67$), respectively, being those differences statistically significant at 1% alpha level ($t = -$

3.595; $p < .01$), and suggesting that for the respondents *professional* beliefs about diversity were *stronger* than personal beliefs.

Do personal and professional teachers' beliefs about diversity vary according to teaching experience?

The t tests for independent samples indicated that teachers' *without teaching experience* were *more open to diversity* ($t = -3.466$; $p < .01$) than teachers with school experience.

Differences were found in personal beliefs, item 2: 'It doesn't matter to rent any of my properties to immigrant people' ($t = -2.419$; $p < .05$) (inexperienced students agreed; experienced disagreed).

School psychology students differed also on item 14 of the Professional Subscale: 'Students with physical, cognitive and sensorial limitations should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible' ($t = -1.834$; $p < .10$) (inexperienced students agreed; experienced disagreed).

Conclusion and Educational Implications

The present research attempted to investigate whether teachers' beliefs about diversity differed depending on their personal and professional context/point of view, and also as a function of their teaching experience. The study provides evidence that teachers' beliefs toward diversity varied according to their personal and professional views and/or situations.

Respondents were more likely to agree with issues of diversity at a *professional level* than at a personal level. Also, in some of these issues (e.g., renting a property to immigrant people, or students with disabilities should be placed in the regular classroom whenever possible), the beliefs of inexperienced and experienced teachers varied significantly favoring inexperienced educators.

Information obtained from this research may be used to guide the development of more sensitive and comprehensive teachers training programs on diversity in Spain. In addition to that, responses in each item could also be used (a) to identify preservice and inservice teachers' developmental needs in the areas of individual and group differences, as well as in multicultural education; and (b) to address specific issues such as ignorance, resistance, or closeness to some dimensions or aspects of difference. A better understanding about diversity could provide guidance in the development and design of educational and professional programs intended to prepare more culturally responsive schools and teachers in Spain, particularly, if research on teaching is to be at the service of equity and social justice (Tilstone, Florian, & Rose, 1998).

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