Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions towards Multicultural Education & Teaching of Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Learners

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Introduction

The trend of increasing diversity in United States classrooms continues to grow, especially in urban schools where there is an increasing population of immigrants and other minority students in grades K-12. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, by the year 2040, White non-Hispanics will make up less than half of the school-aged population. In 2010, the Hispanic population was projected to account for 43% of United States population growth.

A recent National Center for Education Statistics (2010) report reveals that students of color, described as Latina/o, African American, and Asian, are now the majority of students in K-12 public schools in the United States (Maxwell, 2014). It is evident that K-12 schools in the U.S. are becoming increasingly diverse with culturally, linguistically and underrepresented diverse learners.

The issue of diversity in U.S. K-12 schools requires significant training and experiences for preservice teachers to recognize the importance of students' socio-cultural, religious values, and the influence their cultural background have in their quest to succeed in their educational endeavors.

The southeastern United States is no exception, as this region has several communities that can be described as the New Latino Diaspora [NLD] (Durand, Massey,

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& Capoferro, 2005). An NLD is defined as a geographical area of the United States where Latinas/os have traditionally not settled (Murillo & Villenas, 1997). The city of Dalton and Whitfield County, Georgia, are powerful examples of an NLD area.

Trevizo (2010) noted that "[T]wenty years ago, public schools in Whitfield County, Georgia had just three non-English-speaking students. Currently, there are more than 1,700, or about 1 in every 6 students" (para. 1). Moreover, there are 16,604 Latina/o students in Whitfield County. Between 1990 and 2000, Whitfield County, Georgia experienced a 694% increase in its Latina/o population and an 81% increase between 2000 and 2011. Whitfield County currently has a Latina/o population of 33,387, which is 32% of the county's population. This county's percentage far surpasses Georgia's overall Latina/o population percentage of 9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that, between 1979 and 2008, the number of school-aged children (children ages 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 10.9 million (NCES, 2009). NCES (2010) also reports that during 2007-2008, about 58% of public school teachers of grades 9 through 12 were females with 83.5% defined as belonging to the "White" race/ethnicity category, while Hispanics constituted 6.6% and Black 6.9% of the teacher population.

The implications of the difference between the number of students with diverse backgrounds and the number of diverse teachers available to meet the needs of these students demands new calls for research to explore the attitude, knowledge, and perceptions of pre-service teachers about culturally, linguistically, and underrepresented minority students. Rhoads (1995) contends that the ever-increasing diversity that students bring to classrooms produces mass confusion

about how to teach, what to teach, and best instructional strategies to adopt to teach.

The city of Dalton, Georgia, is a prime example of the changing demographics in schools. Currently, Latinas/os are 48% of this city's population or 15,891 of its 33,128 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Moreover, 69% of Dalton public school students are Latina/o (personal communication, Caroline Woodason). However, most teachers in Dalton's public schools are White with a mono-cultural background and little experience in teaching culturally, linguistically, and underrepresented diverse learners.

According to Wortham, Mortimer, and Allard (2009), longtime residents in NLD towns in the northeastern United States "often described Mexicans as unsuccessful in school and as unlikely to improve themselves through education" (p. 3), while recognizing them as model minorities in other realms, such as civic-mindedness and work ethic. Limited research has been conducted about pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards teaching culturally, linguistically, and underrepresented minority students, especially regarding pre-service teachers from mono-cultural backgrounds.

Our study provides significant information to teacher educators, policy makers, curriculum and development planners, and future teachers about the need to reform teacher training and multicultural education to make it an integral part of teaching and learning at all levels of education. Hopefully, reforms will create an awareness and special attention to culture as well as the realization that every student grows up in a specific culture.

This study also provides teachers, pre-service teachers, and researchers in the field of education information about preparing pre-service teachers and other post-secondary students about the issue of culture and how it can influence student's background context, which influences their response to learning in what can best be

referred to as *surviving the school experience*.

Multicultural understandings are fundamental to the education of all children, not only children from minority backgrounds but also those from White middle-class families as well. An assumption we hold is that multicultural education is basic. It is an integral part of the curriculum, not separate. In our own university classrooms, we have found that when conversations surrounding the rights and treatment of minorities in schools today enter our course discussions that many of our pre-service teachers' emotions and deep-seated beliefs cause them to question themselves.

We hope that as we open the doors to multicultural thinking, we are creating new roles for ourselves in the classroom. Our goal is to step down from the podium and engage ourselves with our students in hopes to empower them to think and construct their own meaning from the world around them.

Consistent with the above, there is still a dearth of knowledge with regards to pre-service teachers' perceptions towards multicultural education in the teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. The purpose of our study was to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions towards multicultural education and teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in a NLD area in northwestern Georgia with the goal of valuing diversity and/or difference by using the Diversity Orientations Survey instrument.

Review of Relevant Literature

Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (2000) defined multicultural education as adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy with trained instructors facilitating it. In a similar way, Nieto (1996) contends that multicultural education is "antiracist education" which is "a process important for all students" (p. 307). The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) described multicultural education as a "philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents, such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations" (National Association of Multicultural Education, 2011).

Banks (2005) outlined five core dimensions of multicultural education:

(1) content integration, that is, infusing the curriculum with material from diverse groups, (e.g., new authors, new historical material);

(2) knowledge construction, comprising of an awareness of and focus on the way that cultural frames shape the identification and interpretation of educational content (e.g., understanding that the "westward migration" was only "west" for one social group);

(3) prejudice reduction to mean the extent to which the teachers and administrators in a school actively work to reduce prejudice and stereotyping by students in the school, such as through the inclusion of an explicitly antiracist curriculum;

(4) equity pedagogy that is reference to pedagogies designed specifically to increase the academic achievement of lower performing students and to create greater equity between students; and

(5) empowering school culture to mean, altering school structures and processes to be more empowering for all students, with particular attention to eliminating institutionalized racism in school practices.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the past four decades has established standards that require teacher education programs to incorporate multicultural perspectives and cultural diversity (NCATE, 2008). To meet these standards, as well as standards set for teacher certification, each state, including Washington, D.C, showcases a diversity-related requirement in some manner (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010).

However, Akiba et al. (2010) further state that only three states require a specific course in multicultural education and cultural diversity as part of their standards for teacher accreditation. Many challenges exist for creating and designing appropriate multicultural understanding and teaching of students in K-12 schools. It is evident that there is lack of multicultural preparation and awareness along with the isolation of teachers among their own ethnic groups. This is further exacerbated by professional preparation that too often excludes direct meaningful interaction with different cultures in the U.S. (Cannella & Reiff, 1994).

Several colleges of education in the U.S. are utilizing different methods to promote multicultural education as well as to develop culturally competent teachers (Akiba, et al., 2010) with a stand-alone course serving as one solution. Sleeter (2001) states that a single course of multi-

culturalism and cultural sensitivity objectives will not solve the problem nor promote multicultural education among pre-service teachers. However, other research studies confirm that a single course of multicultural education for preservice teachers can accomplish the objectives, create positive awareness, and provide increased teachings concerning the quality of instruction and positive relationships between the teacher educator and the pre-service teachers (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005).

According to Blanchett (2006), most teachers continue to enter public school classrooms unprepared "to effectively teach African American and other students of color" (p. 27); they begin teaching with limited knowledge of who they are as racial beings outside of their own background and lack the skills to identify, implement, or assess culturally responsive learning strategies (Bell, 2002; Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Cross, 2005; Juárez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008).

Public-school students are increasingly from backgrounds identified as culturally, linguistically, ethnically, religiously, economically, and otherwise socially diverse (Douglas Horsford; 2011; Juarez & Hayes, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; O'Connor, 2006). However, the teaching force in the U.S. remains predominantly White, female, and monolingual (English) (National Summit on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). This disparity has far-reaching implications and presents yet another unprecedented challenge for today's public schools.

The diversity of student populations served by public education systems is already having an adverse affect on overall student achievement and is forcing more and more educators to question their own beliefs and prejudices. The need for all teachers to be prepared to effectively teach all students can hardly be understated; it is now a demographic imperative (Banks, 2002).

To successfully teach all students, not just those who most closely reflect U.S. society's previously White mainstream, teachers must have the knowledge, disposition, and skills to effectively implement and assess a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Despite increasing ethnic diversity in the United States, many educators do not seem to understand that multicultural education is the broader understanding, involvement, and appreciation of more than two cultures. This study will help fill the gap of knowledge regarding preservice teachers' knowledge and

attitude towards multicultural education and teaching of linguistically and cultural diverse students.

Study Purpose

As teacher educators in a teacher education preparation program where the majority of the preservice teachers are White who teach a predominately non-White student body in culturally segregated schooling structures, we felt that this disparity warranted our considered exploration. In order to take culturally responsive teaching seriously in our specific situation, we needed to seriously examine the demographic landscape of attitudes and beliefs of our teacher candidates in our education program, particularly since this racial composition is unlikely to change in the near future.

We experienced, as teacher evaluators of preservice teachers, the discord between student teachers and K-12 students primarily due to cultural and linguistic differences that emanates from lack of cultural awareness or knowledge on the part of preservice teachers. It was surprising to experience and, to a greater extent, acknowledge their lack of cultural understandings because most of them had prior experience in multicultural education courses.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the degree to which elementary and secondary pre-service teachers enrolled in a postsecondary institution located in a New Latina/o Diaspora area in northwestern Georgia understand, appreciate, and /or embrace diversity-related issues, such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, second language learning, and immigration status, especially related to their Latina/o students.

Blue Ridge College (BRC) is an undergraduate degree institution where 65% of the students are the first in their families to attend college. Additionally, BRC is an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with a 21% Latina/o student population. According to 2010 Census Bureau data, the city in which BRC is located is 50% Latina/o of which a majority are of Mexican-origin. Furthermore, 69.3 of this city's public school students are Latina/o with a majority being Mexican-origin.

Methods

Participants

The purpose of the study was to examine preservice teachers' perceptions towards multicultural education and teach-

ing of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Participants in the study were education majors in early childhood and secondary education with an age range of 18 to 36. Participants included $n=23$ (29%) male and $n=57$ (71%) females. Additionally, 85% of the participants self-reported as White followed by 13% Hispanics, and 3% as other race (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographic information). All participants were full-time college students who had completed at least one semester of teacher education courses in the school of education at BRC.

Data Collection

All education major students were invited to participate in this study through verbal and email invitations. The first email was sent to pre-service teachers enrolled in Area F (major-related courses required before admission to the School of Education) and Blocks I-IV in the Early Childhood Education and Secondary Education programs. Three reminder messages were sent via email to all prospective participants inviting them to complete the survey.

The survey was open from October 1 through October 15, 2014. Of the 100 potential participants, 80 completed the survey, which was a modified version of the Diversity Orientations Survey. The survey's responses were based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating strongly disagree to 5 indicating strongly agree.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 and EXCEL software to identify participants' age group, level of education, program of study, and knowledge and awareness about multicultural education as teacher educators

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine preservice teachers' perceptions towards multicultural education and teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in a NLD area in northwestern Georgia value diversity and/or difference using the Diversity Orientations Survey

Table 1
Gender of Participants

Gender	n	Percentage (%)
Male	23	29%
Female	57	71%
Total $N=80$		

instrument. Table 1 displays gender of students. As seen in Table 1, there were more female students (71%) than male students (29%).

Table 2 presents race/ethnicity of students enrolled in the BRC teacher education preparation, which reveals that there were more White students (85%), followed by Hispanics (13%), and other (3%). The above data will help to authenticate the value of multicultural education perspectives among preservice teachers, because most of the student population is White.

According to Lee and Dallman (2008), teachers at all levels enter their profession with preconceived notions about diversity issues such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, language, and socio-economic status. Several research studies indicate that many of the perceptions held by preservice teachers on student success are often influenced by preservice teachers' lack of cultural knowledge and by their own ethnic heritage (Middleton, 2002).

Classrooms are filled with different cultures and perspectives, making it a necessity for teachers to be trained and acknowledge the essence of diversity in the classroom. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), 64% of public school students are White, 17% are African American, 14% are Hispanic, 4% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% are Indian Alaskan native.

As Sleeter (2001) points out, "Education in many communities of color as well as poor-White communities is in a state of crisis" (p. 94). By the year 2020, one third of the student population will be non-White, and almost one-fourth will live in economic poverty (Carnignan, Sanders, & Pourdarrod, 2005). It is imperative to acknowledge the relevance of preservice teachers recognizing the diversity of K-12 classrooms. Ladson-Billings (2000) suggested there is an imminent need to prepare teachers for a culturally-relevant pedagogy in order to teach culturally diverse student populations (Ambe, 2006; Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2000).

This assertion is supported by Ambe (2006), who stated, "Culturally relevant

Table 2
Race/Ethnicity of Participants

Race/Ethnicity	n	Percentage (%)
White	68	85%
Hispanic	10	13%
Other	2	3%
Total $N=80$		

pedagogy is founded on the premise that rather than being considered deficits, students' cultural backgrounds can be used to serve and enhance their learning" (p. 692). Teacher education programs continue to face challenges of establishing effective multicultural education curricula that addresses educational, social, and economic equity for preservice teachers (Banks, 2004).

As displayed in Table 3, a large percentage of BRC preservice teachers (44%) agreed it was important to explore cultures other than their own. Based on these data, we could speculate that these students are interested in other cultures because of their previously acquired knowledge from a multicultural education course. We contend this is a surprising finding because data published by the United States Department of Education (2007) reports that 86% of all elementary and secondary teachers are White. The majority of these teachers will enter classrooms with student populations with whom they share limited cultural knowledge or intercultural experiences. This discontinuity between the cultures of the teachers and the students will continue to be a critical issue for teacher certification programs.

The data also indicate a significant number of students (49%) had no perceived problem working with people of different cultures. The data show that students are aware of the need as teachers to recognize and tolerate other cultures, especially as teachers at the K-12 schools. It could be deduced from the data that students are on the path to be culturally-competent teachers, as they do not object to core principles of multicultural education and diversity in school even though the percentage of students agreeing to it was quite low.

Table 3 further reveals that some of the students strongly agreed that they understand the challenges and frustrations that immigrant or minority students in K-12 schools experience because of their cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds. This finding confirms that student teachers acknowledge the challenges of minority students in schools, such as linguistic, financial, parent support, lack of resources, and other challenges that they go through in order to be achieve equitable academic success.

It is interesting to note that on the issue of language and diversity in the classroom, the percentages were largely evenly distributed. We expected students to be aware of the significance of bilingualism in students who speak other languages

other than English at school. However, the results from the data reveal inconsistent perceptions. For example, the data indicate that 32% disagree that speaking other languages does not bother them, followed by 22% who strongly disagree, while 20% agree, followed by 20% been neutral, 4% strongly agree, and 3% as other. As stated beforehand, many teacher education programs do not prepare students for the diversity that they experience once they join the ranks of full-time teachers.

Consequently, when students do not learn from the way we teach, we assume that the problem is with the child. According to Delpit (2006), educators assume that, when children do not respond to this one-model-fits-all approach, they cannot learn (p. 223).

It is expected that most teacher-education students will recognize there is the need for additional resources for K-12 teachers to teach, expand and or meet the needs of students in exceptional education programs (special needs). However, findings from the data reveal an even percentage of responses from preservice teachers. For example only 10% of the students strongly agreed that additional resources were needed followed by 32% as agree; 34% neutral and 16% strongly disagree.

Many questions remain about why pre-service teachers will not concede to the importance of the need for additional resources in teaching special needs students in K-12 schools. This finding supports Gay's (2002) assertion that teacher education programs are obligated to address the needs of children typically marginalized by a dominant Eurocentric society (Gay, 2002). She further (2002) contends that teachers' beliefs and values influence their theory and practice and have a direct impact on their overall expectations for student learning and student achievement. This could be due to the fact that they might not have taken any course in special education in their program or have taken a limited number of courses or have less knowledge regarding the need to recognize the education of students with special needs.

Ambe (2006) reiterates that "one of the reasons why schools have not successfully met the literacy needs of students of diverse cultural backgrounds is due to a mismatch between the home culture of students and that of the school "(p. 691). This mismatch is often referred to as cultural discontinuity.

In a related result, a significant number of students (47% strongly agreed, 38% agree) reported that additional resources

must be provided to help in the educational development and adjustments of English language learners or students in K-12 schools. Findings from the data indicate that most of the students agreed to fund additional resources to schools because they became aware of the need to help English language learners via courses they have taken in English As a Second Language (ESOL).

This is referenced by the fact that several researchers have reported that preservice teachers' cultural awareness has been changed by a course and/or seminar in multicultural education (Brown, 2004; Milner, Flowers, & Moore, 2003). It was not surprising from the data that students holistically agreed (47% strongly agreed, and 37% agreed as against 1% and 0% for disagree) on the inclusion of multicultural education in the school curriculum.

This is a great accomplishment because for pre-service teachers in a predominantly majority institution with less exposure to diversity to acknowledge the importance of multicultural education in the school. It could be that they become aware of the importance of multicultural education from their culture and education class or ESOL classes or instructors or the college has been doing a good job of disseminate information about multicultural education inclusion for schools.

Implications for Teacher Education

Future teachers must be able to create equitable learning environments for diverse student populations (Bennet, 1995). Unfortunately, teacher education often fails to encourage candidates to expand their vision of culturally responsive pedagogy beyond academic material. If the future vision of public education includes insuring that all students experience instruction from a culturally responsive teacher, then the responsibility for accomplishing that goal lies squarely on the shoulders of teacher education that produce the teachers of the future.

It must be a clear and important goal for teacher education that their programs produce *culturally competent* teachers. According to Singh (1996), a culturally competent person as one who has knowledge and skills that enable him or her to appreciate, value, and celebrate similarities and differences within, between, and among culturally diverse groups of people. Teacher Educators must facilitate the process of achieving cultural competent preservice teachers.

Table 3
Data from Survey

Surey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Other (%)
Interested in exploring cultures different from my own	29	44	13	5	4	5
Have enough experience with cultures different from my own	0	14	39	41	5	1
Believe that some cultures and ethnic groups are better than others	1	11	15	28	42	3
Comfortable around people whose cultural background is different from mine	27	49	16	6	0	1
Bothers me when I hear people talking in a language I cannot understand	4	20	20	32	22	3
Members of all racial and ethnic groups make valuable contributions to society	53	27	14	3	1	3
Important for people to examine possible personal prejudices	43	44	8	4	1	0
In the United States, given equal intelligence and ability every individual has equal access to success	18	22	15	32	11	3
With appropriate resources, people with intellectual disabilities can be as successful as people without disabilities	33	44	11	10	1	0
It is acceptable to tell racial or ethnic jokes	1	5	25	27	41	1
In the United States, members of racial and ethnic groups have equal opportunities to be successful	14	29	16	32	9	0
In the United States, women have equal opportunities to be as successful as men	11	27	20	33	9	0
It is important to be sensitive to issues related to sexual orientation	30	44	18	5	3	0
A teacher's role should be limited to promoting only middle class values and mainstream culture	1	6	9	35	48	0
I consider particular attitudes or behaviors of children be a direct consequence of cultural or ethnic differences	5	39	20	30	4	1
I feel I can understand the point of view of a child who comes from a culture different than my own	9	51	29	9	1	1
Additional school resources are appropriately expended in meeting the needs of students with special needs	10	32	34	16	5	3
Values and attitudes learned in minority cultures keep children from making progress in school	6	19	27	34	11	3
Multicultural education should be an important part of a school curriculum	47	37	13	3	0	1
Teaching about various world religions should be a part of the public school curriculum	32	30	16	10	10	1
Students from economically disadvantaged families should be expected to achieve as well as those from more advantaged families	28	39	24	8	1	
I am comfortable teaching in culturally diverse classrooms with students who share different value systems	33	48	15	4	0	0
Students without documentation should be excluded from receiving public education	4	10	20	20	44	1
Additional resources should be provided to help meet the needs of English Language learners.	47	38	10	1	3	1

Total *N*=80

If the ethical responsibility of teacher education is to prepare preservice teachers who can work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds, then multicultural education must be broadened to include cultural understandings of all persons. For example, Martins (2008) argues that "the awareness of one's own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes is a first step to be able to positively interact and learn from others. In this process lies the essence of intercultural learning" (p. 203).

In addition, there must be the need to go beyond the lack of multicultural ingredients in the curriculum, policy and structure issues within schools and how school personnel, specifically teachers, interact with students and with each other (see also Banks & Banks, 2000; Lee, 1995; Nieto, 2000).

It is important to note that the attempt to change mono-cultural institutions into multicultural democratic communities is treating cultural diversity as a subject matter and not attempting to reform the ways of thinking and doing in the society (Rhodes, 1995). The purpose of multicultural education based on the objective of this study is to identify factors from pre-service teachers and how to transform educational institutions and organizational structures to reflect diverse cultures and perspectives.

Diversity does not mean divisiveness. We believe that we can avoid the segregation that strengthens group identity to the exclusion of others as we work to bread down the stereotyped thinking that comes from fear and leads to prejudice. Such understanding begins with awareness of self and leads to recognizing the needs of others.

Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine preservice teachers' perceptions towards multicultural education and teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in a NLD area in northwestern Georgia value diversity and/or difference using the Diversity Orientations Survey instrument. According to Nieto (2004), the increase in ethnic diversity has caused many educators to recognize the need to expand their knowledge of multicultural education in the public schools.

The success or failure of multicultural education depends upon the effective preparation of teachers and administrators. These teachers must be competent in the courses they teach if their students are to be academically successful (Ogbu,

1992). The study shows that preservice teachers are keenly aware of the challenges immigrant and other minority students especially linguistically and culturally diverse students face in K-12 schools. Results indicate that preservice teachers have the willingness to study and to be aware of multicultural awareness for them to operate and teach with less difficulty in the teaching learning process.

Overall, preservice teachers showed significant understanding about the need to incorporate multicultural education and benefits to be gained from the concepts of multicultural perspectives as future teacher educators considering the increasing growth of diversity in the U.S. Preservice teachers' knowledge and awareness of multicultural education varies depending on the background as well as cultural ties they have had before entering college.

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