

The Impact of Field Placement Sites on Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Teaching Diverse Students

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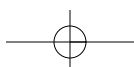
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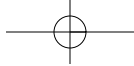
ABSTRACT: The continued discrepancies in educational outcomes and learning conditions found among our nation's schools serving low-income students and students of color call for teacher educators to seriously consider what factors lead to culturally responsive policies and practices. This article summarizes a comparative study of 96 middle school and high school preservice teachers participating in an intensive 200-hour field experience within three school–university partnerships (two urban and one suburban). An analysis of simple effects shows that when compared to peers placed in schools mostly serving White middle-class students, preservice teachers working in urban schools mostly serving low-income students of color became more culturally responsive over the course of the semester. This finding suggests that whenever possible, schools of education should strengthen their commitment to establishing teacher preparation partnerships with high-need schools.

Even with increased numbers of professional development schools (PDSs) across the country, teacher education programs are still being intensely scrutinized. The achievement gap between White middle-class students and their low-income peers of color continues to widen (Harris & Herrington, 2006), and this disparity leads many critics to believe that teachers are not well prepared to meet the challenges of today's diverse student population. In addition, rising attrition rates among teachers in high-need schools (i.e., those serving large numbers of low-income culturally diverse students and having high mobility rates) flame the criticism aimed at teacher preparation (Latham & Vogt, 2007; Wilkins & Clift, 2007). In a review of literature on working

with diverse students, Hollins and Torres-Guzman (2005) found that many researchers have suggested that teacher candidates would greatly benefit from early and intensive field experiences in diverse settings. But are all diverse settings equally beneficial to preservice teachers? What types of life and educational experiences help young teachers be successful in high-need schools?

In addition to developing their knowledge, pedagogical skills, motivational techniques, and management, teachers must develop a set of beliefs that support all learners. Indeed, the development of beliefs and expectations holds a prominent place in conversations among teacher educators and mentor teachers (Banks et al., 2005; Garmon, 2005).





This discussion sometimes comes in more general conversations about teacher dispositions (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, values, and other character traits), but educators clearly understand that effective teaching is more than the acquisition of knowledge and pedagogical skills (E. Brown, 2004; Eberly, Rand, & O'Conner, 2007; Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008). More than 2 decades ago, researchers found that beliefs play a mediating role between what a person knows to do and what he or she actually does and that one's beliefs—especially, those central to one's belief system—are highly resistant to change (Bandura, 1982; Pajares, 1992). New teachers often identify negative working conditions (social climate; staff and faculty attitudes, beliefs, and morale) as their reason for leaving the profession (Graziano, 2005), but their resistance to change has challenged many teacher educators to investigate the types of situations and experiences that prompt the development of beliefs that lead to more culturally responsive practices (K. A. Brown, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Garmon, 2005). In this article, we explore whether different field placement settings might differentially influence preservice teachers' beliefs regarding effective instructional practices for diverse students. The findings are instructive, especially for PDS team members who establish the guiding principles, create the curriculum and anchor activities, and select school sites.

Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers

Preservice teachers who are seeking secondary certification at our university in south Texas begin their professional development sequence in the College of Education as juniors. Many of these secondary preservice teachers do not have significant field experiences until their senior year. However, unlike many traditional teacher preparation programs across the country, ours provides students with an intensive field experience in a partnership school the semester before their final student teaching as-

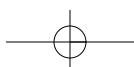
signment. During this semester, teacher candidates enroll in a 6-hour course entitled "Planning, Teaching, Assessment, and Technology," and they visit a partner school every Tuesday and Thursday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. throughout the semester. By the end of the term, our preservice teachers have participated in more than 200 hours of direct experience in the classroom and other school-based activities. For example, when preservice teachers are on-site during the school day, they teach lessons that they have prepared; they work with small groups under the direction of their clinical teacher; they tutor students who need special assistance; and they develop a mentoring relationship with a student whom the administration has determined to need special attention. In addition, preservice teachers often return in the evenings, on their own time, to participate in other school events, such as open houses, family nights, and sporting events. A full-time professor is on-site at each partner school to teach the content of the course and to supervise students during their clinical experiences. As such, this study takes place within the context of this intensive field experience.

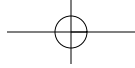
Method

Participants

During the 2006–2007 academic year, 96 preservice teachers seeking secondary-level certification (Grades 4–8, Grades 8–12, and all-level special education) voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. The mean age of the participants was 26 years. The sample reflected the ethnic composition of the south Texas region, with 55% identifying as Anglo and 37% as Hispanic. More than half the participants were female (60%), and the majority identified English as their first spoken language (94%).

Furthermore, 45% of the sample indicated that at least one parent completed college, thus making the majority of this sample first-generation college graduates (55%). When asked about the size of the high schools that they attended, 40% indicated having graduat-





ing classes comprising fewer than 300 students; 39%, classes with 300–500 students; and 20%, classes with greater than 500 students. Finally, 59% of the sample indicated growing up in a home with strong religious beliefs and practices.

Instruments

The participants were administered three surveys. The Cross-Cultural Life Experiences Checklist (Ward & Pohan, 2006) collects demographic information, as well as the participants' life and educational experiences—language, race, ethnicity, size and demographics of the town/city in which one grew up, participation in cross-cultural volunteer work (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, Peace Corps, faith-based service projects, study abroad). Participants were simply asked to check those experiences that applied to their life experiences (see appendix).

In addition to completing the Cross-Cultural Life Experiences Checklist, participants were asked to complete a 15-item Personal Beliefs About Diversity Scale and a 25-item Professional Beliefs About Diversity Scale (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Personal beliefs are related to the context of one's daily life and were measured by items such as "It is a good idea for interracial couples to have/raise children." Professional beliefs are related to the context of life in schools and classrooms and were measured by items such as "Large numbers of students of color are improperly placed in special education by school personnel." These tests follow a Likert-type scale and ask participants to circle the number that best describes their beliefs regarding each item (5 = *strongly agree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*). Some items on each scale are negatively worded, to avoid a response set. These instruments have undergone rigorous development and validation studies and have proven to be psychometrically sound (cf. K. A. Brown, 2004; Pohan & Aguilar, 2001). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the pre- and posttest measures of the personal beliefs scale were .74 and .79, respectively; for the professional beliefs scale,

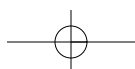
.68 and .78. All coefficients attest to the internal consistency of the scale scores. Beyond these psychometric instruments, journal entries were submitted by participants throughout the semester-long course. These student reflections serve as a window into their developing/changing personal and professional beliefs regarding teaching diverse students.

Procedures

After receiving approval from the university's institutional review board, we hired a graduate assistant to administer surveys and enter data. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Those participating each used a personal code so that pre- and posttest measures could be matched—for example, HAC3 (the first three letters of mother's maiden name and the number of siblings in the family). After signing a consent form, participants were administered all three surveys during the 1st week of the semester. The personal and professional beliefs scales were again administered during the final week of the semester.

Data Analysis

Before any analyses were run, negatively worded items were reverse-coded, and a total scale score was calculated for each individual on the personal and professional beliefs scales. A series of descriptive statistics were used to identify the characteristics of this group. To investigate whether the field placement setting would differentially influence participants' beliefs about diversity, individual total scale scores on the personal and professional beliefs scales were grouped according to field setting, before independent *t* test analyses and additional multivariate tests were run. In addition, a number of correlation analyses were conducted to investigate the relationship between beliefs scores and variables from the Cross-Cultural Life Experiences Checklist (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity). Journal entries were analyzed to identify any recurring themes regarding diverse students and teaching in high-need schools.



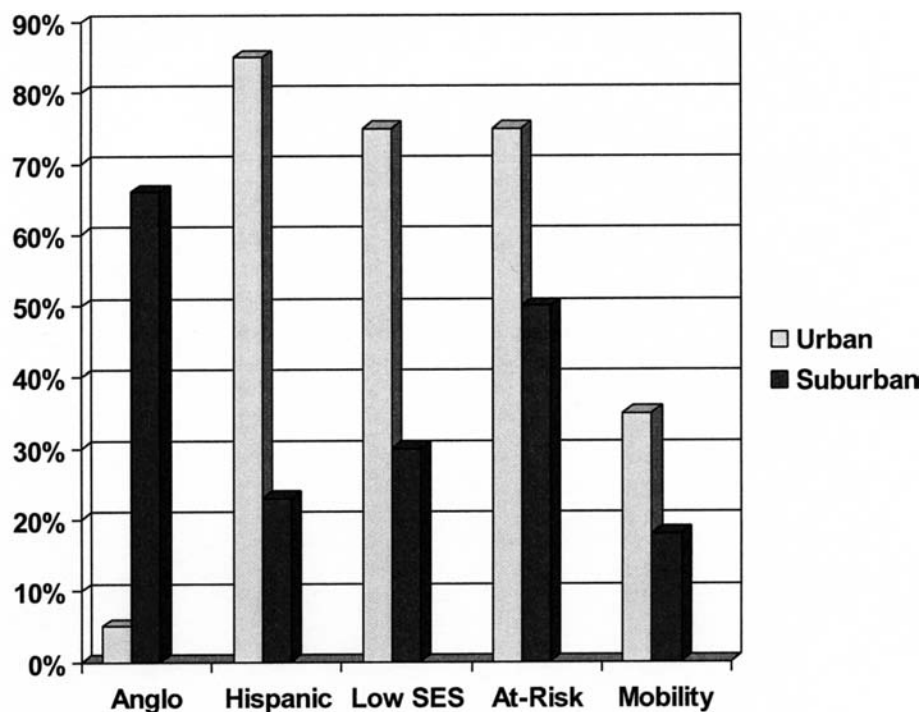
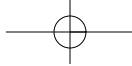


Figure 1. Demographic comparisons of the urban (high-need) and suburban high school sites

Note. Data were taken from the Texas Education Agency's 2005–2006 AEIS Reports

Findings

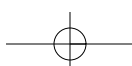
Based on the recommendations of the American Educational Research Association's Panel on Research in Teacher Education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005), our study addressed the following questions: What types of cross-cultural life and educational experiences might positively influence preservice teachers' beliefs about working with diverse student populations? Would distinctly different placement settings differentially influence preservice teachers' beliefs about diversity in personal and professional contexts?

Figure 1 summarizes the demographic differences found at the high school PDS sites, and Figure 2 summarizes the demographic differences between the middle school PDS sites. Notice that the student population at both the urban high school and the middle school is predominately Hispanic (84% and 85%, respectively), low socioeconomic status (73% and 89%), and at risk for school failure (72% and 65%). In comparison to the urban PDS

sites, the suburban high school and middle school sites have student populations that are predominately Anglo (66% and 63%); furthermore, the student population has fewer students of low socioeconomic status (< 40% for each), and fewer are classified as being at risk (50% and 37%). The major findings of our study are summarized in the following sections.

Finding 1

In an effort to identify the types of cross-cultural life experiences that might positively influence preservice teachers' beliefs about effectively working with a diverse student population, we investigated several independent variables (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity), as well as characteristics about participants' early life experiences (e.g., size of graduating high school class, whether home was strongly religious, if one or both parents graduated from college). Of the cross-cultural life experiences investigated, none were found to be statistically related to personal or professional



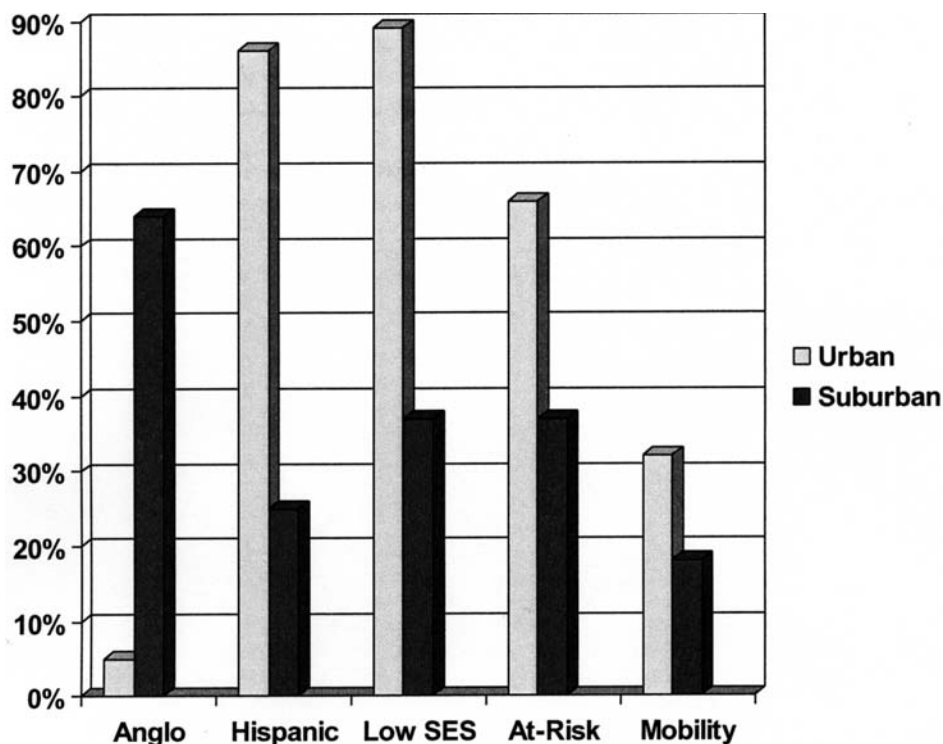


Figure 2. Demographic comparisons of the urban (high-need) and suburban middle school sites

Note. Data were taken from the Texas Education Agency's 2005–2006 AEIS Reports

beliefs about diversity (all $p > .05$). Given previous multicultural research (Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005; Pohan & Aguilar, 2001), this finding is surprising and warrants further investigation. More needs to be done to identify or develop reliable and valid instruments for gathering demographic information about cross-cultural life experiences. Indeed, if we can link types of life experiences to a more open belief system or create a prototype of successful teachers in high-need schools, then schools of education and PDS partners might be better positioned to refine programs aimed at developing culturally competent teachers.

Finding 2

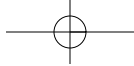
When it comes to influencing one's personal beliefs, repeated-measures analysis of variance showed no statistically significant group differences on pre- and posttest measures of personal beliefs about diversity, regardless of the field experience setting ($p = .58$). In addition,

there were neither time effects ($p = .57$) nor Group \times Time interaction effects ($p = .95$) related to changes in personal beliefs among preservice teachers. In both sites, mean difference effect sizes, as computed by Cohen's d , showed small effects (.08 and .05 for the high- and low-need sites, respectively). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the preservice teachers' personal belief changes.

This finding is not surprising when considering that personal beliefs are highly resistant to change. Previous research suggests that one course, workshop, or semester does not generally comprise enough time to significantly change beliefs that are central to one's belief system (Eberly et al., 2007; Pohan,

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation for Personal Belief Scores

School Site	Pretest		Posttest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Urban	57.82	6.82	58.17	8.08
Suburban	58.67	8.04	59.09	10.40



1994). In an effort to better understand if or how these experiences might influence personal beliefs, we analyzed participants' journal entries collected throughout the semester, as well as their final course reflections. Two critical themes emerged among those working in the high-need schools—namely, understandings and awarenesses.

The first theme sheds light on how the experiences affected one's personal beliefs about diverse students.

Theme 1: Students attending high-need schools do care about learning and want to succeed.

This experience changed some of my perceptions. I realize that many of them [high school students] have had obstacles placed in their way, but that they still have a desire to learn. It was interesting to see the extremes in ability, but it reassured me that everyone can benefit from instruction. I now realize that these students work hard and have a desire to succeed.

I learned that students really do want to learn, but you must make it fun, interesting and relevant in order for them to actually pay attention and learn. We must take the different backgrounds, beliefs, and values of the students into consideration when we teach.

What we have come to believe is that although personal beliefs are unlikely to significantly change over the course of one semester, we can create opportunities that cause preservice teachers to analyze, evaluate, and judge the basis for their personal beliefs. Indeed, although we did not see statistically significant changes in personal beliefs, as measured by the Personal Beliefs About Diversity Scale, reflections suggest that the experiences across the semester did indeed influence participants' personal beliefs about students in high-need schools. Therefore, when it comes to psychometric measures of beliefs, we might, for example, be content with a shift from a *strongly agree* or *strongly disagree* position to one of *un- sure* or simply *agree* or *disagree*. It is quite pos-

sible that even the slightest movement, though not statistically significant, reflects a meaningful shift in one's thinking (e.g., less rigid, closed, or dogmatic).

Finding 3

Although we found no statistically significant group differences on pre- and posttest measures of professional beliefs about diversity ($p = .60$), we did find that preservice teachers' scores significantly increased ($p < .001$) from pre- to posttest (i.e., time effect). In addition, the Group \times Time interaction was statistically significant ($p < .05$). Analysis of simple effects revealed that when compared to their peers placed in a school serving mostly White middle-class students, preservice teachers working in a high-need school serving mostly low-income students of color became more culturally responsive over the course of the semester. Pre- to posttest mean difference effect size for the urban site was .65, whereas it was only .18 for the suburban site. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the preservice teachers' professional belief changes.

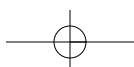
An analysis of students' reflective journals suggests that placing preservice teachers in high-need, hard-to-staff school sites was a contributing factor that positively influenced their professional belief change over time. We now present the second of the two themes along with sample student comments.

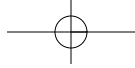
Theme 2: Students have multiple challenges and represent multiple readiness levels.

I learned that students do have what it takes, however they may lack the motivation to express themselves. This experience showed me how students are affected by

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviation for Professional Belief Scores

School Site	Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD
Urban	92.96	8.84	96.93	8.58
Suburban	93.47	7.02	94.71	9.94





what happens around them and how you have to help them through their school years by giving support and advice.

This experience has made me a more humble person. I really care about all of these students and hope that they will be successful in life. I respect them so much because, unlike most of us, these students have not been given everything. It has made me work harder because I have had opportunity after opportunity given to me.

No two students are the same. Each student had different strengths and weaknesses, differences in their home and family life, different friends and backgrounds. But, one thing that they ALL had in common was the willingness to TRY. Not all succeeded the first time around, but the desire to want to learn is something I saw in every student there. Watching students juggle family and home issues, but still show the effort and determination it takes to learn is something I viewed on a daily basis. It opened my eyes and gave me the opportunity to experience a learning environment that was very challenging and intimidating at times, but yet, absolutely the most rewarding.

Conclusion

This study suggests that these high-need school sites provided our students with an opportunity to develop awareness, understanding, and dispositions in a supportive environment with mentors who are themselves quite diverse. When one compares the faculty and staff at both settings, one clearly sees that the high-need urban schools are demographically different from the low-need suburban schools. For example, at the urban high school, 56% of the staff is minority, compared to 20% at the suburban high school; furthermore, the faculty is 49% Anglo and 44% Hispanic at the urban school, compared to 81% and 18% at the suburban school, respectively. The middle schools are demographically different as well. At the urban school, 61% of the staff is minority, compared to 25% at the suburban middle

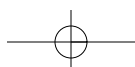
school. As for the faculty, 44% is Anglo and 46% is Hispanic, compared to 83% and 13% at the suburban school.

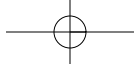
Because of the university's long-standing partnership with all the schools in this study, we know that the staff and faculty at all settings are committed to the preparation and mentoring of preservice teachers. However, the high-need schools provide our students with an opportunity to work among people with life experiences and worldviews different from their own. Over the course of the semester, our preservice teachers working in high-need schools likely found themselves in situations that caused them to confront biases, misconceptions, and inequities—more so than their peers in low-need schools.

With the help of supportive mentors and models of good teaching, these students became more culturally responsive than their peers; that is, they changed their beliefs about school policies and practices as they related to working with diverse students. As a result, we believe that much thought should be devoted to the selection of field placement sites. A positive environment, including high morale among faculty, can positively influence preservice teachers' beliefs and behaviors; likewise, a negative environment with low faculty morale can cultivate preservice teachers' negative beliefs and reinforce their personal biases.

With high teacher attrition rates in many high-need, low-performing schools (Latham & Vogt, 2007; Wilkins & Clift, 2007), it seems that not all preservice teachers who successfully complete a teacher certification program are adequately prepared to handle the differing social, economic, and political realities affecting their students. Darling-Hammond (2006) reminds us that "we have learned a great deal about how to create stronger, more effective teacher education programs" and notes that strong programs reflect the following three components:

- tight coherence and integration among courses and between course work and clinical work in schools;
- extensive and intensely supervised clinical work integrated with course work





using pedagogies that link theory and practice; and

- closer, proactive relationships with schools that serve diverse learners effectively and develop and model good teaching. (p. i)

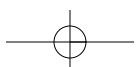
In addition to providing prospective teachers with experiences in diverse settings, we must work harder to identify the specific contextual variables that will lead to successful teaching in high-need multicultural schools. For example, faculty at our own institution have worked closely to address Darling-Hammond's first point, about tight coherence and integration, by identifying topics, themes, and teacher certification standards central to each course within the program. Although one can never control all the variables that might influence instructional and programmatic effectiveness in schools, the preservice teachers at both sites received similar instruction pertaining to culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, because the course was delivered within a school–university partnership, all participants in this study received “extensive and intensely supervised clinical work that links theory and practice” (p. i).

Given student comments and the results of the belief surveys, we believe that preservice teachers who are placed in high-need, high-poverty multicultural schools have experiences different from those of their peers in other, less challenging and diverse settings. Over the course of the semester, these differing experiences challenged many of our preservice teachers' beliefs about students attending high-need schools and so resulted in their deeper understanding about diversity in the context of professional policies and practices. The life experiences of the student body and community surrounding the high-need sites are often quite different from those of our teacher candidates. Just driving through the community to reach one's field placement site can present preservice teachers with different social, political, and economic realities affecting their students, families, and education in general. Furthermore, we believe that the fac-

ulty and administration at both high-need sites played a key role in creating a climate that was conducive to the personal and professional growth of our preservice teachers. Given Graziano's (2005) findings regarding the impact of a negative work environment on teacher attrition, we believe that those involved in selecting field placement sites should look seriously at the overall environment where preservice teachers will be completing field experiences.

Future Research

Greater understanding of the types of experiences and settings that positively influence preservice teachers and their beliefs about diversity and working in high-need schools will promote the preparation of teachers who are better equipped to close the achievement gap present in our public schools. This preliminary study confirms what many other “less rigorous” studies (Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005) have noted about the importance of site and field placement selection. We believe that to more fully understand the differential impact of field placement settings, teacher educators must continue to identify, analyze, and describe the types of experiences that students are having at their sites (i.e., classroom teaching, extracurricular events, course delivery methods, and emphases, as well as mentoring opportunities). In addition, we believe that it would be advantageous to extend Knoblauch and Hoy's (2008) research and investigate whether various field placements sites differentially influence preservice teachers' self-efficacy (i.e., beliefs about one's ability to carry out a particular task) in regard to teaching in high-need schools or extremely challenging situations. Still further, teacher educators may want to look more seriously at other dispositions that are consistent among successful teachers in high-need schools—empathy, flexibility, respect for students, sense of humor, patience, self-care, collegiality, and a high level of energy, to name a few (Eberly et al., 2007).





Appendix: Cross-Cultural Life Experience Checklist

Personal Code _____

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: F M
3. What is your first spoken language?

4. Which description best describes your background? (circle the most appropriate)

Black / African

Asian

Hispanic/Latino

American Indian

European/Anglo

Mixed—Please describe: (e.g., 50% Black & 50% Anglo):

_____ % _____

_____ % _____

_____ % _____

5. Which best describes the town/city in which you grew up during your **elementary school years**? (circle the most appropriate):

population < 40,000

population 40,000–100,000

population 100,000–300,000

population > 300,000

6. How many students were in your **high school graduating class**? (circle the most appropriate):

0–50

51–100

101–300

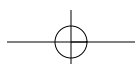
301–500

over 500

Directions: Check (✓) any of the following items that describe your life experiences.

- _____ 7. I have studied a foreign language for two or more years.
- _____ 8. I speak, read and/or write in more than one language.
- _____ 9. I grew up in a home with very strong religious beliefs and practices.

- _____ 10. At least one of my parents **completed** college.
- _____ 11. Most of my K-12 educational experiences were in schools serving a racially or ethnically diverse student population (25% or more minority).
- _____ 12. I have been the minority in at least one school I attended for more than four months.
- _____ 13. I have (or have had) at least one close friend, family member, teacher or colleague of a different *race, ethnicity, or nationality* than my own.
- _____ 14. I have (or have had) at least one close friend, family member, teacher or colleague of a different *sexual orientation* than my own.
- _____ 15. I have (or have had) at least one close friend, family member, teacher or colleague with a mental, emotional or physical disability.
- _____ 16. I have (or have had) at least one close friend, family member, teacher or colleague with a significantly different socioeconomic background than my own.
- _____ 17. I have (or have had) at least one close friend, family member, teacher or colleague of a significantly different religion/religious orientation than my own.
- _____ 18. I have (or have had) at least one close relationship with a person that is in the process of learning to speak English.
- _____ 19. I grew up in a racially or ethnically mixed neighborhood.
- _____ 20. As an adult, I have lived in a racially or ethnically mixed neighborhood for six months or longer.
- _____ 21. I have lived in a foreign country for four months or longer.
- _____ 22. I have participated in a *national or international program* (e.g., study abroad, Peace Corps, church-based service project, Habitat for Humanity, culture-language school, etc.).





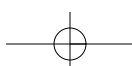
- _____ 23. I have relied upon my second language as my primary means of communication for major events or extended periods of time.
- _____ 24. I regularly view international TV broadcasting networks/channels (e.g., British Broadcasting Corporation/BBC, Spanish Television, etc.).

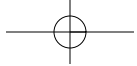
On the back of this sheet, please list any other *cross-cultural experiences* you have had that may have influenced your current beliefs and/or attitudes about diversity and diverse others. You may also use this space to share any other insights into what has shaped your current beliefs about diversity. **SUP**

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