# Career-Changers' Multicultural Attitudes

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## Abstract
Teacher preparation courses are venues for learning about diversity because they enable conversation between people who might not otherwise interact. A case study of 57 career-changers enrolled across six sections of a diversity course is comprised of course activities, reflection prompts, and practical suggestions. Findings indicate feelings of conflict about understanding students' backgrounds as well as feelings of inadequacy related to pedagogy.

## Introduction
Those preparing to teach will work in settings with increasingly diverse students (Kena, et al., 2015). Most often, teachers have a demographic profile different from their students (Berchini, 2015). Boser (2014) reports that teacher diversity has not kept pace with the growing diversity of students, and similarly, Ingersoll, Merrill, and Stuckey (2014) indicate that "Teaching remains a primarily white workforce and that a gap continues to persist between the percentage of minority students and the percentage of minority teachers in the U.S. school system" (p. 17). Adding further complexity to the profile of novice teachers is the influx of more alternative route career-changers, who tend to teach in the nations' more diverse schools (Feistritzer, 2011; Tamir, 2009).

It is essential for all teachers, including career-changers, preparing to enter such classrooms to have an understanding of what being a culturally relevant educator—one who can utilize the rich, varied backgrounds of the students as resources for community building and learning—means (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Additionally, teachers need to know what types of strategies and practices work best when differentiating for their varied learners' needs (Santamaria, 2009). Teachers and teacher educators who prepare them must explore and continually push practices to embrace diversity and counter racism (Gay, 2015).

This qualitative case study explores career-changers' reflections on multicultural education to better understand what practices around diversity education are effective with this population. Participants were 57 career-changers, meaning they came to their Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program to become K-12 teachers having earned degrees and/or worked in fields other than classroom teaching. Data were regular course activities during a required masters-level diversity class.

## Multicultural Education
Banks (2008) argues that multicultural education is a reform movement where issues of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and social class are elements which should be instrumental in the education of its citizens. In this same vein, Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz, and Aberasturi-Apraiz (2015) state, "What must be taught in schools no longer fits within a profession that can be learned at university, where teachers work in idealized schools that are secure, controlled and predictable, with (linguistically,
ethnically or geographically) homogenous groups of students" (p. 68). This necessitates teacher preparation programs attending to diversity in coursework.

Cochran-Smith and Power (2010) call for preparation of teachers who can effectively work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. This trend is seen in the literature as student diversity in terms of cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, as well the range of ability displayed in the classroom has increased faster than the diversity of the teaching population (Boser, 2014; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). Simply attending to diversity is

not enough.  Sleeter (2001) outlines specific challenges in changing attitudes and beliefs for preservice teachers learning about culturally relevant pedagogy.  Sleeter's findings show that candidates had limitations in their cross-cultural background experiences, discrimination and racism perspectives, understanding of multicultural education, as well as an overreliance on colorblindness and ambivalence about their abilities to teach African American children.  Further, Sleeter describes how schools of education tend to either increase the number of new teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds or develop the attitudes and multicultural knowledge base of predominately white preservice teachers. One way they do the latter is through coursework covering topics within multicultural education.

**Career Changers**
Careers are no longer defined as multiple decade commitments with field-specific internal growth trajectories.  Rather, as Crow, Levine, and Nager (1990) indicate, people are likely to hold different jobs and shift careers throughout life.  This broader context has impacted the demographics of those coming into teaching.  Peske et al. (2001) report that many new entrants see teaching as a tentative experience to be extended or left once personal satisfaction is determined.   As a result, many career-changers have entered teaching and are the focus of descriptive and empirical literature.

The positive work qualities that career-changers bring with them from previous work experiences are frequently reported (e.g., Kember, 2008; Williams & Forgasz, 2009).  Specifically, lower absenteeism, a positive work ethic, high productivity, and patience were qualities reported by Bird (1992).  Motivation, life experience, and stability were qualities reported by Newman (1995), and maturity and commitment were reported by Morton, Williams, and Brindley (2006).  Leadership is a quality reported by King (2009).

Not all literature reports strictly positive findings.  Boyd and colleagues (2011) examined data assessing impact of career changers on student test scores and retention in teaching and found little discernible difference between career-switchers and other teachers.  Fry and Anderson's (2011) study of four rural novice career-changers indicated that while participants reported greater maturity and confidence because of their previous non-educational careers, two of them were evaluated as being more effective and having adapted more successfully than the other two.  Reporting the two ends of the spectrum conveyed in the literature about how second and first career teachers adapt to the novice role, Mayotte's (2003) case study of four career changers probed specifically into how the teacher participants recognized and adapted their competencies from their prior careers into their philosophies and pedagogy.

**Methodology**
Qualitative methods were employed (Merriam, 2014).  Participants' experiences as novice career-changers, who were teaching full-time while simultaneously taking MAT coursework, provided a unique case to examine.  Candidates were teaching in diverse settings, which provided an immediate application setting for linking beliefs and practices.  The research question was, What are novice teachers' reflections on their multicultural attitudes?

Guided by overarching theoretical tenets informing multicultural education (Banks, 2008) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), the methodology and analytic framework are based specifically on the work of Villegas and Lucas (2002).  They outline a curriculum for developing culturally responsive teachers that is a useful schema for what teachers need to know and be able to do.  They write,

> Culturally responsive teachers (a) are socio-culturally conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. (p. 20)

*Data Collection and Analysis*

Six sections of a diversity course, taught by four instructors, were taught over the course of a year, and data were gathered as part of regular course activities. Villegas and Lucas (2002) posit that prospective teachers "need to engage in autobiographical exploration, reflection, and critical self-analysis to develop that sense" (p. 22). To this end, participants wrote 3 reflections, which prompted them to write about: (1) when they became aware of people's differences; (2) what the term "multicultural education" means to them; (3) their feelings of preparedness to teach students of diverse backgrounds.

Using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), analysis of the reflections was used to identify themes. Responses were coded using line-by-line analysis, and each reflection prompt was coded separately. Emergent codes from the first reflection were used in analysis of the second prompt, and the combined codes from reflections one and two were used to analyze the third. Lastly, codes from language in the Villegas and Lucas (2002) framework were used to analyze all three reflections.

**Results and Discussion**

*Becoming Aware of Differences*

Analyses of reflection prompt one revealed three themes: (a) initial awareness occurred in school, (b) most experiences centered on race/ethnicity, but gender and SES were also common while religion was not, (c) families either told child to ignore the issue or had open conversations. One participant shared, "I think I was in 5th or 6th grade and I overheard someone say that I wouldn't understand something because I was white…That was the first time I felt uncomfortable and really noticed." Another student said, "When I asked my teacher, why my friend Eric was called 'Black' when his skin looked more like chocolate, she got very angry with me. When I asked my mom about this she smiled and explained to me that was a sensitive subject."

The fact that the salient experiences for these career-changers mainly happened in schools underscores the necessity of preparing teachers to understand, facilitate, and directly address the topic with their students. Ignoring differences, particularly racial and ethnic ones, allows disingenuous feelings to fester. Students are aware of differences, and when teachers ignore these, either silently or explicitly, they are sending messages to students about what is or is not valued about diversity.

*Defining Multicultural Education*

Analyses of reflection prompt two indicated 4 themes: (a) curriculum and style of teaching to benefit all children; (b) recognizing and celebrating differences; (c) politically correct education term; (d) need for more inclusive multicultural infrastructure in schools. One participant expressed, "Another thing I have come to realize about multicultural education is that it means more than simply educating or giving opportunity for all cultures to be educated." Another said, "Multicultural education means to me, simply, having a well-rounded educational experience. We can't be well-rounded if we explore only ourselves, and we certainly can't be well-rounded if we explore only others." A third shared this explanation of multicultural education, "By never hesitating to exude a spirit of 'both and,' multicultural educators teach students that all students' traditions, experiences, and stories have an essential place in our increasingly cosmopolitan world."

Novice career-changers' reflections highlight varied viewpoints. Some responses show a formal, class-like writing quality with reference to class lectures and readings. Responses referencing the political correctness of "multicultural education" reveal an honest perspective which should be embraced and probed. The "political correctness" idea is one many might hold but not express. Hearing viewpoints and discussing them are what brings about learning and perspective changes.

*Feeling Equipped to Teach Diverse Students*

The third reflection prompt elicited themes of (a) feelings of inadequacy regarding content knowledge; (b) feelings of conflict about understanding students' backgrounds; (c) being a respectful teacher; (d) feelings of inadequacy regarding pedagogy. An illustrative response is, "I am privileged in that I have parents who speak Russian, Arabic, and Spanish in my room. I was able to…purchase children's books such as Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? in English, Spanish, Russian and Arabic, ensuring that my students are able to hear the same text read in multiple different languages, exposing them to languages from different cultures showing them that while there are differences between cultures, artifacts can be altered and then transmitted from culture to culture." Another shared, "I'm still having a really difficult time though building cultural diversity into my lessons. It's also tough to motivate those students whose cultures do not value education. I'm working on it, but it's all a little too much to do." Another indicated, "I feel better equipped to teach students of diverse background after taking the [diversity] class. I have a multiple strategies list to help provide for basic differentiation of learning styles."

Responses from novice career-changers about how well-equipped they feel to tackle teaching diverse students, shows variance of understanding and openness. The indications of feeling inadequate were profound and point to need for further formal learning experiences about diversity and specific culturally relevant practices. The fact that most of the participants were teaching as full-time teachers of record meant that they had an immediate need for application of particular strategies. Knowing to use resources reflective of the language and cultural differences in the classroom shows how some participants learned applicable aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy. Other comments, like the one showing a tension about motivating students from cultures which don't value education reveals a disconnect between the teacher and the students. By articulating that there are cultures that do not value education, the teacher has set up a scenario for students not doing well that takes onus of responsibility away from the teacher and student and places it outside the school onto the whole "culture". It is these very beliefs that teachers hold which are so important to examine critically and teach explicitly about. What is missing from the reflective writing is the ability to respond to the beliefs right away. Yet, having these quotes and findings from this study invites future discussion.

**Implications**

As two teacher educators, who are committed to preparing novice teachers to work effectively with all children, we have struggled with how to best approach the teaching and learning of diversity. While we come to the struggle from different personal and professional perspectives, we have become increasingly concerned with the complacency around preparation for diversity and cultural relevance. We note that there is a prevalence of required diversity training and classes. Yet, we are forced to face the fact that racial challenges permeate society. We believe courses are excellent venues for facilitating uncomfortable conversations and learning opportunities. Courses bring together people around a common curriculum who might not otherwise interact. Courses are fruitful places for mindsets to change through thoughtfully facilitated discussions.

The participants' unique profile as alternative certification route, career-changers, can inform how we screen and prepare such novices coming into the profession. It is interesting to consider the challenge inherent in mandating coursework on diversity aimed at influencing practices based on deeply embedded assumptions. Exploring beliefs and their changes over time through reflection provides a window into these assumptions and whether or not they are being connected with current or potential culturally relevant practices with K-12 students. Teachers, who understand students and have fundamentally, positive beliefs about who they are, are the kinds of professionals who should be working in our public schools. As teacher educators, it is incumbent upon us to provide learning experiences for our novices to help prepare them for the complexities they will encounter.

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