

Urban Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions towards Teaching African-American Students and Underserved Populations

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ABSTRACT

Urban school districts hire teachers to educate our culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Of these teachers hired, few have encountered or embraced a framework or pedagogy consistent with culturally responsive education. This quantitative study is an overview of urban pre-service teachers' attitudes towards African American students and underserved populations. More specifically, a study was conducted utilizing the Cultural Awareness and Beliefs Inventory (CABI) instrument to measure urban pre-service teachers' cultural awareness and beliefs of teaching in diverse urban environments. The findings show significance in pre-service teachers' attitudes or perceptions towards referring African American students to special education and involving underserved students' parents in the education of their children.

Keywords: urban education, urban teachers, diversity, multiculturalism

Carter G. Woodson's (1933/2008) inquiry of whether white teachers honed the tools to successfully teach African American students remains an unprecedented phenomenon in multicultural classrooms today. Woodson contends, "there is no particular body of facts that Negro teachers can impart to children of their own race that may not be just as easily presented by persons of another race if only they have the same attitude as a Negro teacher" (p. 28). Urban school districts hire teachers to educate our culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Of these teachers hired, few have encountered or embraced a multicultural framework or pedagogy consistent with culturally responsive education (Gay, 2002). In fact, many teacher education programs are resistant in teaching race or racism in their courses (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Without the assumption that race matters, teachers (in-service and preservice) are doomed to subject students to a "debilitating pedagogy" (Nieto, 1996, p. 7). This debilitating pedagogy adds to the already existing divisive educational experiences of minority students.

All teachers play a vital role in educating students. For some teachers, the failure to recognize cultural differences that exists within classrooms leads to a sense of colorblindness that perpetuates and furthers the supremacy of privilege based upon race (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Sleeter (2001) reports that white teacher candidates are unprepared to teach in diverse

urban environments, and teacher education programs have not made dramatic progressions towards extensive training of culturally diverse students. The role of teacher education programs must shift towards training pre-service teachers to address cultural diversity within their classrooms to teach *all* students and not just those who do not threaten or have a problematic disposition against white racial domination. In such, Rychly and Graves (2012) argues by providing pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage and immerse in field work and clinical practice involving diverse student groups (school and community), they will experience behavioral norms of the non-dominant culture (Nieto, 2004).

According to Larke and Larke (2009, p. 2), “39 states require teacher education programs to prepare teachers to meet the needs of culturally, linguistically, ethnically, economically diverse (CLEED) classrooms.” Despite the increase of students of colors in our classrooms, the factors of race, ethnicity, and gender remains a social phenomenon. In reality, the majority of our teachers are white; whereas, the majority of our students are of color (Dilg, 2003). Unfortunately, the percentage of teachers of color in our classrooms is diminishing. Within the last ten years, in regards to the racial make-up of our nation’s teachers, no dramatic change has occurred (Kunjufu, 2002).

The U.S. population is projected to grow from 310 million to 439 million between 2010 and 2050 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Within this projected group, minorities will become the numerical majority of the population under 18 years in 2018 (Ortman, 2013). Of this minority, the African American (Black) population will increase by 29% (Nieto, 1996). One would conclude that such projected growth in the U.S. population would provide impetus for integrating and preparing teachers who can “reflect multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and representations of students and families from diverse backgrounds” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008, p. 36).

In spite of these given statistics, race and cultural identity influence how teachers respond to students and how students engage in the classroom environment. Thus, it is a major factor in students’ perceptions of themselves in the dynamics of the educational environment. This should not be surprising, as some may conclude that schools are considered color-blind institutions of learning (Blaisdell, 2009). That is, educational settings are not required to address racial or economic/poverty inequities. Such ideology perpetuates discriminatory practices within schools, i.e., disproportionate amount of student referrals of African American students to special education.

Students of color are held to a standardized Eurocentric curriculum in which their culture and identity are negated. James Banks (as cited in Gay, 2000, p. ix), a noted expert in the field of multicultural education, wrote that “within the last three decades, a group of insightful and committed scholars and researchers including Kathryn Au, Roland Tharp, A. Wade Boykin, Sonia Nieto, Lisa Delpit, Jacqueline Irvine, and Gloria Ladson-Billings” are credited for the theory of culturally responsive curriculum. This theory addresses the need for “students’ culture and language reflected in the curriculum” (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2008, p. 3). Students’ sociocultural experiences and backgrounds are assets to the teacher in such that “teachers of all backgrounds should develop the skills to teach diverse students effectively” (Nieto, 2003, p. 6).

As educators, we have a personal responsibility to critique and analyze key flaws in our assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender and disability to achieve equity for the students that we serve. Delpit (1995) posits five premises of teacher power or culture of power over students in the classroom. Delpit (as cited in Valencia, 2010) contends:

(1) issues of power are enacted in the classroom; (2) There are codes or rules for participating in power – culture of power; (3) the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power; (4) If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier; and (5) Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 4)

Delpit (1995) argues that students must learn through contextualization or “within the content of meaningful communicative endeavors;” whereas, the teacher has the “expert knowledge” and students are “helped to acknowledge their own ‘expertness’ as well” (p. 45). Through the analysis of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about culturally and linguistically diverse students, we can better understand the complexities of preservice teachers’ perceptions and dispositions on students’ racial and cultural identity in the classroom.

Rationale

The theoretical prospective of the deficit model perspective establishes the central nature of serving underserved populations. The deficit model in this regard, is a “law of parsimony... a type of cognition that is relatively simple and efficient form of attributing the cause of human behavior” (Valencia, 2010, p. xvi). Scholars view one particular variant of the deficit model as the cultural difference framework (Valencia, 2010; Baratz & Baratz, 1970; Labov, 1970; Valentine, 1971). This particular framework asserts that deficits among children are based primarily upon differences and a “discontinuity between home and school culture... that leads to learning problems with particularly culturally diverse students” (Valencia, 2010, p. 3).

Methodology

Purpose Statement

This article provides attention to preservice teachers’ cultural awareness and beliefs towards students of color or culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly African-American students in urban city schools. As well, this study furthers the discourse in activism on sociocultural issues that affect our urban communities by raising a critical consciousness from a deficit perspective (regarding teacher’s beliefs of teaching African American students). The research questions for this study include:

1. What are pre-service teachers’ beliefs of African American students?
2. What are pre-service teachers’ beliefs of students representing underserved populations?
3. Are there significant differences in pre-service teachers’ beliefs of African American students and students representing underserved populations, collectively?

Respondents

All attendees of a public comprehensive university in southwest Tennessee, the participants for this study included sixty-eight pre-service teachers who were enrolled in classes in Education, and who had complete responses to the instrument concerning teaching diverse student populations described below. As shown in Table 1, these 68 participants were predominantly female (64.7%) and White (69.1%), but somewhat more equally distributed in terms of their years of teaching, categorized as “less than one year” (52.9%) or “more than one year” (47.1%). A majority of the participants were seeking secondary licensure (72.1%).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	24	35.3
Female	44	64.7
Race/Ethnicity		
White	47	69.1
African-American	14	20.6
Hispanic	1	1.5
Asian	6	8.8
Years of Teaching		
Less than 1 Year	36	52.9
More than 1 year	32	47.1
Teacher Licensure		
Pre-K – Middle Grades	19	27.9
Secondary Grades	49	72.1

Instrument

The Cultural Awareness and Beliefs Inventory (CABI) developed Webb-Johnson & Carter (2005) proved to be a valuable resource in measuring urban teachers’ cultural awareness and beliefs (Robert-Walters, 2007). The eight items on teacher beliefs constituting the questionnaire were derived from the general and overall CABI instrument. Five of the eight items was associated with teacher beliefs toward African American students; whereas, three of the eight items depicted teachers beliefs concerning students representing underserved populations. With respect to each of the items, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point, Likert-type scale, where a value of “1” meant “strong disagreement,”

a value of “2” meant “disagreement,” a value of “3” meant agreement and a value of “4” meant “strong agreement”. A Demographic Background Information Questionnaire included at the end of the scale indicated students’ gender, ethnicity, and educational program.

Data Collection

Along with four questions concerning the respondents’ demographic characteristics, the items were mounted in the online survey program Survey Monkey and a link to the questionnaire was shared with instructors in graduate methods courses. The instructors of these courses in turn issued the link to their students in order for them to complete the survey online. Students were given three weeks to respond to the instrument and were issued one reminder to increase the participation level.

Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The data was analyzed descriptively and statistically. Means and standard deviations were calculated for Likert-scaled items. T-tests were conducted to identify significant differences in the eight teacher belief statement means. Three research questions guided the study. They were:

Research Question 1: *What are pre-service teachers’ beliefs towards African American students?*

Table 2 provides the overall results for the sample based on teacher beliefs concerning African American students (AAs). Most participants indicated a non-stereotypical view of African American students. As shown in Table 2, with respect to items 3 and 4, approximately 80% or more of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statements that “I believe African Americans are not as eager to excel in school as White students” (79.4%) and “I believe African American students do not bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers” (92.5%). However, when confronted with a statement suggesting that teachers have experienced difficulty in getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students, about 49.3% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed and about more than a half strongly agreed or agreed (50.8%).

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Items Concerning Teacher Beliefs of AAs and Underserved Populations in a General Education Setting: All Respondents

Item	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. I believe African American students consider performing well in school as “acting White.”	15	22.1	35	51.5	13	19.1	5	7.4
2. I believe African American students have more behavior problems than other students.	14	20.6	37	54.4	16	23.5	1	1.5
3. I believe African Americans are not as eager to excel in school as White students.	14	20.6	40	58.8	11	16.2	3	4.4
4. I believe African American students do not bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers.	28	41.8	34	50.7	4	6.0	1	1.5
5. I believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in our school.	2	3.0	11	16.7	52	78.8	1	1.5
6. I believe I would prefer to work with students and parents whose cultures are similar to mine.	14	20.0	34	51.5	18	27.3	0	0.0
7. I believe I have experienced difficulty in getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students.	5	7.5	28	41.8	30	44.8	4	6.0
8. I believe students from certain ethnic groups appear lazy when it comes to academic engagement.	15	22.1	42	61.8	11	16.2	0	0.0

Research Question 2: *What are pre-service teachers' beliefs concerning students representing underserved populations?*

With respect to teacher beliefs concerning students representing underserved populations, Table 2 indicates a significant majority of the participants seemed to be negatively biased when asked whether teachers believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in their school, more than 80% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed, and about 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Alternatively, over 80% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that they “believe students from certain ethnic groups appear lazy when it comes to academic engagement” (83.9%).

Research Question 3: *Are there significant differences in pre-service teachers' beliefs towards African American students and students representing underserved populations, collectively?*

As shown in Table 3, the third research question focuses on pre-service teachers' beliefs towards African American students and students representing underserved populations. The means for each teacher belief statement were calculated and ranged from 3.33 to 2.21. Results indicate that the highest means involved the following questions: “I believe African American students do not bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers,” (M=3.33, SD=.660), and “I believe students from certain ethnic groups appear lazy when it comes to academic engagement,” (M=3.06, SD=.620).

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations Computed for Teacher Beliefs towards AA Students and Students of Underserved Populations

Teacher Beliefs	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I believe African American students consider performing well in school as “acting White.”	2.88	.838
2. I believe African American students have more behavior problems than other students.	2.94	.710
3. I believe African Americans are not as eager to excel in school as White students.	2.96	.742
4. I believe African American students do not bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers.	3.33	.660
5. I believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in our school.	2.21	.512
6. I believe I would prefer to work with students and parents whose cultures are similar to mine.	2.94	.699
7. I believe I have experienced difficulty in getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students.	2.51	.726
8. I believe students from certain ethnic groups appear lazy when it comes to academic engagement.	3.06	.620

Results for the t-test ($\alpha=.05$), as indicated in Table 4, show that the mean differences for each question was statistically significant between pre-service teachers’ beliefs towards African American students and beliefs towards underserving populations. The most significant differences in responses involved the following survey questions: “I believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in our school” (MD=2.12), and “I believe I have experienced difficulty in getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students” (MD=2.50).

Table 4

Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Beliefs of AA Students and Underserved Populations

Belief Statement	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Difference	95% CI for Mean Difference
1. I believe African American students consider performing well in school as “acting White.”	28.361	67	.000*	2.88	2.68, 3.09
2. I believe African American students have more behavior problems than other students.	34.165	67	.000*	2.94	2.77, 3.11
3. I believe African Americans are not as eager to excel in school as White students.	32.859	67	.000*	2.95	2.78, 3.14
4. I believe African American students do not bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers.	42.259	66	.000*	3.32	3.17, 3.49
5. I believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in our school.	35.110	65	.000*	2.12	2.09, 2.34
6. I believe I would prefer to work with students and parents whose cultures are similar to mine.	34.164	65	.000*	2.93	2.77, 3.11
7. I believe I have experienced difficulty in getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students.	28.287	66	.000*	2.50	2.33, 2.68
8. I believe students from certain ethnic groups appear lazy when it comes to academic engagement.	40.676	67	.000*	3.05	2.91, 3.21

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

This research examined pre-service teachers’ beliefs towards African American students

and students of underserved populations. An analysis of data gathered suggested that pre-service teachers have a positive viewpoint towards African American's and underserved student populations. However, with respect to pre-service teachers' beliefs towards AAs, many participants concerns were regarding getting families from African American communities involved in the education of their students. An overwhelming number of participants believed that African American students bring as many strengths to the classroom as their White peers, thus positive attitudes held among pre-service teachers will yield higher academic performance among AAs. In regards to teacher beliefs towards underserved populations, a large majority of participants believe students that are referred to special education usually qualify for special education services in their school. Of the total enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools in 2011, African American students make up approximately 15.6%, and Hispanics make up approximately 23.7% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b). Thus, African American students and Hispanic students make up 39.3% of student enrollment with a combined dropout rate of 20.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). Further, of the 13% of public school students receiving special education services, African Americans make up 15% of this population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Historically, African American students are referred to special education programs at disproportionately higher rates, particularly with African American males (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Essex, 2005). Lastly, there was statistical significance of all mean statements between teacher beliefs of African American students and students of underserved populations.

Conclusion

While teachers in this study, majority white, believe they have a positive culturally responsive perspective on teaching African American students and underserved populations, two themes emerged: communication with African American parents from low socio economic status and a problem of disproportionality or overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs.

As Nieto (1996) indicates, when teachers interact with parents and students of diverse ethnic backgrounds: "Who does the accommodating?" (p. 334). In case studies performed on parental involvement, researcher Nieto found that "few of them [parents] volunteer their time in school, go to meetings, or even visit the school on consistent basis" (p. 339). Based upon the findings of Nieto's research, teachers believe that African American parents are not involved in their children's education (Natesan, Webb-Hasan, Carter, & Walter, 2011) and attribute to academic failure; however, this deficit view is limited and an alternative explanation is needed. The author notes that parental involvement is not a hallmark for academic success, and involvement in traditional parental school activities "does not mean that parents were [sic] uninvolved with their children's education, but rather they were not involved in typically expected ways" (Nieto, 1996, p. 232). Nieto suggests an expansion to the term parental involvement. The first is to evaluate parental involvement in school and home activities. Home activities include *consistent communication, high expectations, pride, understanding, and enthusiasm for their children's school experiences* (p. 340). Second, the term parental involvement for many of the families in the case studies meant a source of *motivating force, strength and resilience* (p. 339). Third, the term parental involvement involves *monitoring...they have expectations that their children will complete their work* (p. 340). Fourth, parental involvement for these families mean *continued use of their native language and continued*

reliance on the families' cultural values (p. 340). Finally, parental involvement does not necessarily focus on grades but on *high expectations of their children... as a measure of their children's effort* (p. 340). The overall goal is teachers developing social skills and interpersonal communication with families of diverse ethnic groups that extend beyond the rudiments of academics. Grant and Gibson (2011) state in order for teachers to become successful with African American students, they must *gain cultural knowledge, connect culture to their classroom practice and reject deficit views* (p. 25).

In 1986, Kunjufu (as cited in Palmer, 2010) emphasized that African American males represent a disproportionate amount of students in special education programs. According to Palmer (2010), researchers indicate that African American students considered as behavioral problems are identified at a higher risk than their counterparts (Moran, 2003, McMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocain (1996). One such perspective of Gilbert and Gay, 1985 (as cited in Codrington and Fairchild, 2012) suggests that African American students are displaced into special education classes because the regular classroom does not meet their needs. Therefore, the teacher's perceptions of his or her students have a direct influence upon his or her students' expectations of themselves in the classroom. Hence, teacher's perceptions directly impact the academic success and performance of students.

One particular approach important to the findings in this study regards exceptional or culturally different students. Sleeter and Grant (1988) describe *Teaching the Exceptional and the Culturally Different* as an approach to teaching exceptional students within a mainstream environment or general education environment. The main goal is to "remediate deficiencies or build bridges between the student and the school" (Sleeter & Grant, p. 35). By utilizing a *Teaching the Exceptional and the Culturally Different* approach, teachers "teach traditional school knowledge more effectively by building on knowledge and skills students bring with them" (Sleeter & Grant, p. 43). Bode (2009) echoes this thought by adding, "the goal... is to equip students with the academic skills, concepts, and values to function in American society's institutions and culture" (par. 9). This concept involves teaching pre-service teachers how to differentiate instruction in their classrooms for diverse student populations.

A second approach important to findings in this study includes Sleeter & Grant's (1988) description of *Human Relations* as "directed toward helping students communicate with, accept, and get along with people who are different from themselves" (p. 77). The authors further explain that "this approach is aimed at the affective level: at attitudes and feelings people have about self and others" (p. 77). Bode (2009) explains that the *Human Relations* approach "consists of developing positive relationships among diverse groups and individuals to fight stereotyping and promote unity... reducing prejudice and hostility" (par. 10).

Such pedagogical approaches validate that there is a need for a counter hegemony, "an alternative public sphere that is clearly guided by emancipatory interests" (Giroux & McLaren, 1987, as cited in Darder, 2012, p. 91). Darder (2012) indicates that:

Through uniting their critical reflections of practice with theory, teachers come to discover the manner in which distorted views of power can inform classroom practices that perpetuate conditions of inequalities and alienate students of color. (p. 111)

Hence, pedagogical practices must be "radically democratic" (Giroux, 1988, as cited in Darder, 2012, p. 113). Darder (2012) explains that teachers "must counter social inequalities and exclusions...within schools [to] influence the educational outcomes of working-class bicultural

[minority] students” (p. 113). Further, Darder elaborates that:

If public schools are to effectively meet the educational needs of bicultural students, then they must work in collaboration with bicultural educators, students, parents, and communities. (p. 124)

Although this study was limited to preservice teachers of one mid-south university and anonymity was assured, perceptions differ based upon experience with diverse student populations and classroom experience. The results of this study indicate that these preservice teachers believe in a culturally responsive classroom; however, preservice teachers’ responses indicate that they lack in thinking and teaching as a multicultural teacher. Despite such limitations, this study prompts teacher education programs to consider implementing courses on biculturalism and blended courses of biculturalism/special education and field experience. This curriculum shift provides preservice teachers with the theoretical background and the field experience to conduct inquiry based research on underserved populations and culturally responsive teaching and learning within the classroom. Rather than operating in the urban classroom with a deficit framework in their first year of teaching, preservice teachers hone the competence to “deal with multiple aspects of achievement (academic, social, psychological, emotional, etc.)” (Gay, 2000b, p. xiii).

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