

## Chapter 4

# Cultural Experiences of Early Childhood Teachers and the Relationship to Self-Reported Multicultural Teaching Competencies

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### ABSTRACT

*Various studies around multicultural education have looked at ways to identify the multicultural teaching competencies teachers need to teach diverse learners. Many of these studies have closely focused on teacher's perceptions, sensitiveness and behavior. However, there are limited studies regarding how teacher's cultural experiences are associated with multicultural teaching competencies. This chapter looked at the cultural experiences of early childhood teachers and how those relate to the teacher's multicultural teaching competencies. Fifty-seven early childhood teachers were investigated that were recruited from a state early childhood education conference by completing The Wayson's multicultural teaching scale. Positive correlations were identified suggesting a possible link between teacher's cultural experiences and their multicultural teaching competencies.*

### INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the demographic landscape of America has changed tremendously and will continue to do so. The percentage of racial/ethnic minorities continues to increase. According to the 2018 population estimates, about 42% of the American population will be minority. Hispanics will be nearly one-fourth of the U.S. population. Blacks, Asians, and American Indians together will make up close to one-fourth of the population (Population Reference Bureau, 2018). It is projected that out of the 50.7 million students who were enrolled in public schools prekindergarten to 12 grade, 26.6 million of them

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were non-white. The percentage of students who are Hispanic, Asian, and two or more races are also projected to increase. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

There is continual pressure and emphasis on teachers to understand how to work with these diverse groups of cultures. For example for most teacher education programs to be accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Education Preparation, they must demonstrate that they have included an element or course on multicultural education into their education program as one of the standard requirements (Council for Accreditation of Education Preparation, 2018). In this similar tone, other multicultural scholars have continued to argue from the past that teachers need to be knowledgeable and develop skills for working with students from different backgrounds (Banks & Banks, 2004; Brown, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Dilworth, 1992; Irvine, 2003). The challenge has always been how this can be possible. Various education programs approach this differently. Many colleges have tried to meet these needs by including multicultural education courses in their training programs. We have seen a tremendous increase of such courses across many teacher training colleges in the U.S. However the question still lingers as to whether teachers have the multicultural teaching competency skills to work with the diverse learners. What really impacts teacher's knowledge of working with children from diverse backgrounds?

Thus promoting the development of multicultural competence continues to be a focus and a critical issue in teacher training programs/teacher education and K-12 schools as U.S. classrooms continue to be more and more diverse (Vracar, 2015). According to the US Department of Education report (2016) white students will represent 46 percent of public school students in 2024. Hispanic public school students will represent 29 percent of total enrollment in 2024 and Asian/ Pacific Islander students are projected to represent 6 percent of total enrollment in 2024. Black students are projected to be 15 percent of all public school students in 2024.

Many school districts across the nation continue to look at ways of employing teachers who are culturally competent that can successfully educate students with different backgrounds from their own. The challenge is that the elementary and secondary school teacher workforce in the United States is not as racially diverse as the population at large or the students. In the 2011 –12 school year 82 percent of public school teachers were white. In comparison, 51 percent of all 2012 elementary and secondary public students were white. In contrast, only 16 percent of students were black, and 7 percent of public teachers were black. Likewise, while 24 percent of students were Hispanic, 8 percent of teachers were Hispanic. In addition, K – 12 educators were less likely to be black or Hispanic than early learning educators (particularly those teaching in Head Start or teaching without a bachelor's degree) (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The National Association for Education NEA (2015) recognizes that American classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and that cultural competence is a key factor in empowering teachers to be effective in teaching and managing students from different cultures. NEA, defines cultural competence as having an awareness of one's own cultural identity, knowledge of views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. Culturally competent teachers should have the ability to understand the within-group differences that make each student unique, while celebrating the between-group variations that make our country a tapestry. It is this understanding that informs and expands their teaching practices in the culturally competent educator's classroom. A competent teacher is one who values diversity, is culturally self-aware, has an understanding of dynamics of differences, is knowledgeable of students culture, and is also able to institutionalize cultural knowledge so as to assess the cultural competency of their schools and take the steps necessary to provide training and knowledge to better serve their students and community (Irish, C, 2012)

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