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Teacher Education-An Uncertain Future: Accomodating for Cultural Variance in the World of

Tomorrow

David Blaiklock

George Mason University

The future of American teacher education is currently at a crossroads. Public schools are being populated by a culturally diverse student body while the majority of teachers continue to come from white, middle class backgrounds. Students need the ability to relate to classroom lessons in order to understand what is being taught. However, the majority of teachers are only able to provide instruction based upon their own cultural experiences. The differences in cultural backgrounds or cultural variance between teachers and students make it more challenging for minority students to learn.

During the next half century classrooms will become increasingly diverse. The United States Census Bureau projects that the population percentage of nonhispanic White people in America will decline by almost 20 percent over the next 50 years. The 20 percent decline means that in 2050 nonhispanic White people will comprise only 50 percent of the population. Over the same period, the population percentage of Hispanic people of any race will double to become almost 25 percent of the population. The population percentage of other minorities will also increase during that interval. While the population changes may not be evenly distributed across all ages the potential exists for half of the school age population to be a minority by 2050.

The increase in minority students makes it crucial to evaluate their performance in today's schools. In a 2005 publication on improving teacher quality the National Governor's Association (NGA) reported that African-American and Hispanic children typically perform four grade levels below their White peers and a little less than half of African-American and Hispanic children do not graduate from high school (See NGA report *Building a High-Quality Education Workforce: A Governor's Guide to Human Capital Development*). Education Week published similar findings in a 2004 article that reported a substantially lower percentage of minority

Comment [pme1]: This implies they aren't being evaluated now. Do you mean create multiple ways of evaluating students?

students with a proficient score on a fourth grade reading test than their White peers (See Education Week article *Achievement Gap*). Being that minorities may represent a larger portion of our population in the future, it is of the utmost importance to examine this issue and determine a course of action to improve the achievement of minority students.

Comment [pme2]: Isn't a portion of the issue whether the evaluations are valid?

It is important at this juncture to look at who is teaching students in U.S. schools. According to the United States Census Bureau report in 2000, approximately 78 percent of the teacher workforce is comprised of nonhispanic White people. Therefore, it is highly probable that minority students are receiving instruction from teachers who do not share their racial background and cultural heritage. As mentioned above, being from different cultural backgrounds may make it more challenging for students to contextualize the information that is being taught in a manner that has any meaning. Both the students and teacher may become frustrated by the cultural variance as the students do not understand the material about and the teacher does not understand why the students are not learning. The difficulty with cultural variance is not occurring as a result of anyone's fault but it does need to be corrected.

Comment [pme3]: Are you suggesting that a student only can be taught by someone of the same gender, race, and culture?

There is a gap in achievement between many White and many students who are either African-American or Hispanic. Currently, some minority students do not achieve to as high a level as their White peers. Cultural variance may account for part of this problem as minority students are not being provided lessons in a cultural context. The lack of cultural context may result in students not being able to make meaning of the material causing them to not be able to achieve at as high a rate as their peers who are able to relate to the material. The lower levels of achievement restrict educational opportunities for some minority students. Lower achieving minority students may either not be competitive in getting into college or may

not be able to attend college at all. Not attending college limits employment opportunities, which in turn has the strong potential for impacting earning potential. Given the increase in the percentage of minorities that will comprise the population over the next 50 years, the gap in achievement may have a dire effect on the nation's economy. The impact on earning power may make it difficult for the U.S. to compete in the global market. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that we focus on closing the gap in achievement to create more opportunities for minority students. If cultural variance is in fact contributing to the differences in achievement then a solution for cultural variance must be developed.

Comment [pme4]: Should everyone go to college?

Comment [pme5]: You have provided a bit more context than necessary to make the point. You could have said about the same thing in 1 page.

Why is it important to provide cultural context to lessons in school? The experiences a student has outside of school help develop the lens through which they look at the world. Student experiences help them make meaning of subsequent ones by giving them something to relate those experiences. For students from diverse cultural backgrounds, many of those experiences are going to be grounded in the beliefs and behaviors of those around them. If minority students can be taught in a way that allows them to make meaning of the lessons by connecting lessons to their own cultural experiences, the students are more likely to understand what is being taught.

A potential solution to the issue of cultural variance is to ensure that teachers are provided information on teaching students with different cultural backgrounds as part of their teacher preparation programs. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), an accrediting body for teacher preparation programs, addresses the issue of cultural diversity in one of their standards. The standard focuses on the importance of recognizing diversity in the public schools and how to focus the curriculum on different cultural perspectives.

The standard also emphasizes the importance of having field experiences in diverse school settings as part of the teacher preparation process (See NCATE's *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions*). Therefore, teacher preparation programs that are accredited by NCATE should be providing instruction on educating minorities as part of their curriculum. Graduates from NCATE programs should be able to adapt the curriculum based on the cultural backgrounds of their students. The adaptation would help teachers convey lessons in a manner that provided context for their students. The context would allow them to make meaning of what was being taught for a better understanding. The implementation of this standard is a step in the right direction for resolving the issue of cultural variance that is present in our schools today. The next step would be to mainstream NCATE's practice to other teacher preparation programs. Eventually, it would be beneficial to develop policies that mandated all teacher preparation programs to provide instruction on adapting instruction for cultural variance.

Comment [pme6]: The cultural diversity standard has been in place for 20 years or more. If the standard is a tool to leverage policy, why haven't we seen the changes you suggest?

One thing worth noting is a second problem that preparing teachers for working with students from different cultures may help solve. Students from low income schools with most of the population being minorities tend to attract the least qualified teachers. When they are able to attract a good teacher, the retention is poor as the teacher tends to leave for a better opportunity. Providing teachers with instruction on how to adapt the curriculum to provide cultural context may make the low income schools a better working environment. If the teachers are able to help the students make meaning of the lessons and achieve at a higher rate, then they will have a higher level of job satisfaction and may be more likely to stay at that school. The students in these schools will benefit from the retention as they will be able to receive instruction from qualified veteran teachers as opposed to those who are less educated and experienced.

Comment [pme7]: You don't need this paragraph, it distracts from the main argument.

As classrooms become more diverse teachers who have received preparation in adapting the curriculum to the culture of their students will thrive. Their students will have a better understanding of the material and will be more likely to achieve at a higher rate. It is imperative that we begin helping teachers with overcoming cultural variance as soon as possible. Otherwise the future may not hold as promising a result.

Becareful of letting your argument lead to the conclusion that every student should have a teacher of the same sex, race, ethnic/cultural background as him or her. It is one logical (although unworkable) conclusion of the problem you present. 19 points