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## Students' Perception of Embedding Cultural Diversity Content into Early Childhood Courses

### About the Author(s)

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### Keywords

diversity, early childhood, student perception

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## STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF EMBEDDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONTENT INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD COURSES

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### Abstract

This study examines the incorporation of specific content framed with a diversity and equity lens into two existing early childhood courses. The purpose was to investigate how embedding diversity and equity content impacted student perceptions and supported their cultural competence. Pre- and post-survey results (N = 50) show student awareness of biases and beliefs were positively influenced. Implications are examined related to course content and activities that could enhance students' competencies and understanding to work with colleagues, children and families in diverse, inclusive settings.

### Introduction

According to the U.S Census Bureau, more than twenty million children under the age of five years old are living in the United States. Of those twenty million children, 50.2 percent are from minority group or children of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Furthermore, over one-third of students in public schools come from African, Asian, Hispanic and Native American backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In order to meet the needs of all children and families, culturally competent educators are required and in high demand to address the cultural gap between students and their teachers.

Cultural competence can support an educator's ability to build relationships with students and their families, providing a foundation for positive academic performance (Lynch & Hanson, 2011). In addition, understanding our own culture aids in interaction with individuals from varying cultural backgrounds. This understanding helps educators see others more clearly and shape practices in ways that will help students be more successful (Obegi & Ritblatt, 2005). Educators who are highly successful in the classroom generally possess cultural competence that entails "mastering complex awareness's and sensitivities, various bodies of knowledge, and a set of skills that taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching" (Diller & Moule, 2005, p. 11). By integrating diversity and equity topics into courses, students are able to self-reflect and become more culturally aware and competent.

Given the diverse nature of the United States, there is a need for an increased focus on the value of an undergraduate degree and its ability to prepare future educators for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are encountering rapid demographic shifting in a society full of innovations and challenges. To be equipped to confidently face their careers, core competencies related to diversity and working with others include demonstrating global awareness, varied written and verbal communication capacities, critical thinking, and collaborative participation. Discourse centers on the importance of course content and cultivated skills in future educators. Therefore, the purpose of this study focused on looking more closely at how to increase the preparation skills needed to work in 21<sup>st</sup>-century careers and enhance their

cultural competence, cultural awareness and cultural humility in two existing early childhood courses for various child-focused majors and minors.

### **Bias and the Classroom**

Biases are attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understandings and actions in a given situation and have been shown to be activated unconsciously, involuntarily, and without one's control (Dovidio et al., 2009). Children are especially prone to bias tendencies due to their sensitivity to racial cues. They may hold the idea that people who are different from themselves (in reference to phenotypes) are also different in other ways (Kowalski & Lo, 2001). Moreover, educators have been deemed one of the most influential factors in children's lives, and play a major part in their development (Ginsburg, Hyson & Woods, 2014). Relatedly, educators have been known to favor specific groups or individual students by differentially granting privileges or applying discipline standards; differences are often attributed to a student's characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, or cultural background. Although most educators unconsciously engage in a biased behavior, it results in an extremely negative impact on their students (Kowalski & Lo, 2016). Hence, the importance of instilling cultural competency and cultural awareness in future educators through embedding diversity and equity content within their curriculum.

### **Cultural Competence**

Cultural competence is having the capability to learn about varying cultural norms of others, and also entails having self-awareness of one's own identity. It is the aptitude to respect and understand not only one's own culture but that of others. Having this understanding leads to educators being able to interact with their students more effectively (Gilbert, Goode & Dunne, 2007). Components of cultural competence include cultural humility and cultural awareness. Cultural humility goes further than the concept of cultural competence by encouraging individuals to acknowledge their own biases. It is the willingness to evaluate oneself, as well as understanding one's limitations, and making efforts to fill those knowledge gaps and address thought limitations. Cultural awareness entails having the ability to look outside oneself to become more aware of different cultures, values, and beliefs (Landsman & Lewis, 2012).

The globalization of our country has made it important for educators to be more self-aware of discriminatory practices, culture, and bias, in addition to, the examination of their personal beliefs and differing cultural expectations, as this can influence efficiency (Kuh, LeeKeenan, Given & Beneke, 2016). Thus, promoting cultural competence in future educators is essential. Embedding diversity and equity content into undergraduate degrees is one way in which cultural competence can be a continuous priority (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011).

## Method

### Measures and Procedures

After programmatic review of early childhood/birth through kindergarten program courses, faculty determined more diversity, equity, and anti-bias content necessary. At the time, students did not take specific courses including this content. Therefore, one solution was to embed content in courses by considering what aspects most closely align with each course. Two different courses were chosen and instructors engaged in the following steps: (a) reviewed course syllabi and objectives, (b) reviewed books and articles focused on foundational knowledge students would need to be able to view the courses with a diversity, equity, and anti-bias lens, (c) selected four shared readings for foundational knowledge, and (d) chose additional content more closely related to each course such as videos, guest speakers, course discussion topics, and reflection papers related to anti-bias education and diversity in early care and education. This comprehensive method assisted with having consistency across both courses and supporting the students to understand diverse perspectives.

### Participants

Students enrolled in two early childhood courses [Introduction to Early Intervention (3150) and Infant Toddler Curriculum (3321)] at a North Carolina university completed pre- and post-surveys and were invited to have their surveys included in this study. Of those invited, fifty-one sophomores, juniors, and seniors agreed to participate (See Appendix A). The students' were ages 19 to 27, from several different racial and ethnic groups, and were 96% female.

### Questionnaire

Pre- and post-survey research design was utilized to assess students' cultural awareness and competence. The self-developed pre- and post-questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) and contained 29 items in both pre-survey and post-survey. The average mean scores represent the level of cultural awareness, with higher scores representing a higher level of competency. Overall, both questionnaires were comprised of four sections, including (a) Pedagogy, (b) Beliefs About/Awareness of Culture, Identity, and Self (Beliefs and Awareness), (c) Diversity Respect and Awareness/ Inclusion/ Resisting Prejudice (Respect and Inclusion), and (d) Personal Growth & Competencies. This study revealed that internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was strong at .86 for the pre-survey and .95 for post-survey.

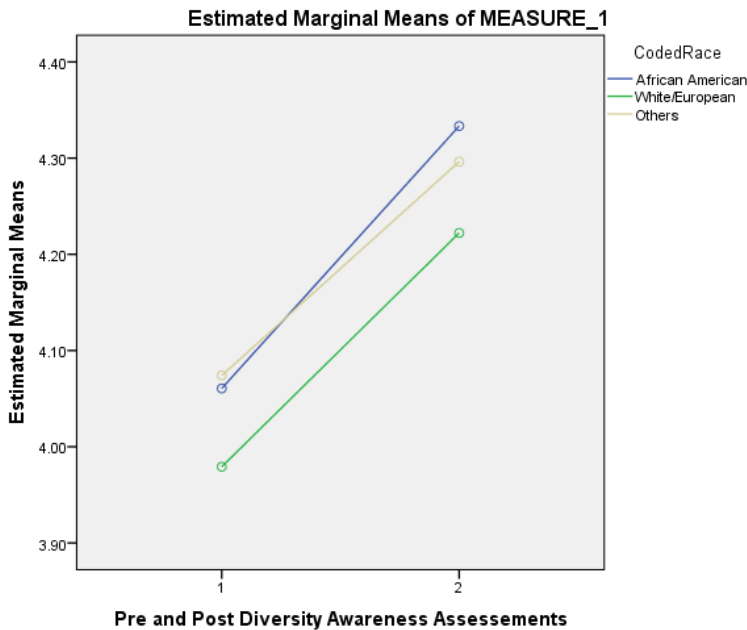
### Data Measurement and Analysis

Descriptive analysis and ANOVAs with repeated measures were utilized to explore the following research questions: (1) is there a change in students' overall diversity awareness mean scores before and after participation in one of the two existing courses; (2) is there a change in students' mean scores in pedagogy, beliefs and awareness, respect and inclusion, and personal growth & competencies sections; (3) " is there a difference in students' mean scores while compared across three ethnic groups (African American, European American, and others) ?"

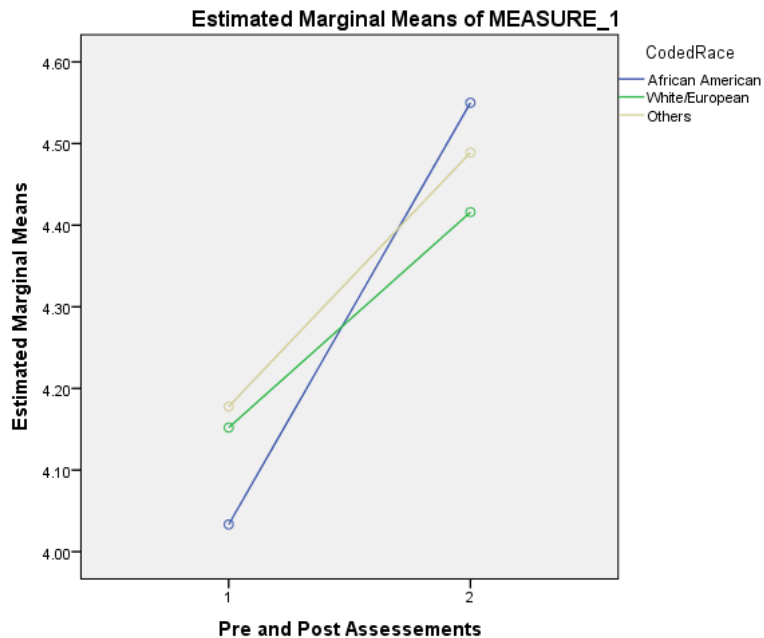
### Results and Conclusion

The diversity content embedded into the two existing courses had a statistically significant effect on overall students' diversity cultural awareness and competence, Wilks' Lambda =.73,  $F(1, 49) = 18.217$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$ . More specifically, the results showed a statistically significant effect on pedagogy, Wilks' Lambda =.79,  $F(1, 49) = 12.75$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .21$ ., beliefs and awareness, Wilks' Lambda =.70,  $F(1, 44) = 18.85$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ ., respect and inclusion, Wilks' Lambda =.76,  $F(1, 43) = 13.426$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .24$ ., and also personal growth & competencies, Wilks' Lambda =.70,  $F(1, 46) = 19.85$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ .

There were no statistically significant interaction effects of ethnicity on pre- and post-beliefs and awareness mean scores, Wilks' Lambda = .99,  $F(2, 41) = 18.217$ ,  $p = .96$ .  $\eta^2 = .002$  or respect and inclusion mean scores, Wilks' Lambda = .96,  $F(2, 43) = 0.89$ ,  $p = .42$ .  $\eta^2 = .04$ , although differences were evident. European American students demonstrated the lowest pre-mean scores for beliefs and awareness compared to other groups (e.g., African American students), while African American students showed the lowest pre-mean scores in personal growth & competencies. In both areas (beliefs and awareness and personal growth & competencies), African American students showed the highest growth rate from their pre- to post-scores (See Figures 1 & 2).



**Figure 1.** *Pre and Post of Race Self-Awareness by Ethnicity*



**Figure 2.** *Pre and Post of Personal Growth Self-Awareness by Ethnicity*

### Conclusion and Discussion

Based on preliminary analysis, additional equity and diversity content can have a positive impact on student biases and beliefs, possibly leading to having a more open mindset overall. More specifically, readings, course discussion, videos, and guest speakers can significantly impact students in all areas measured but may have differential outcomes based on pedagogy and student ethnicity. Further analysis could reveal specific areas instructors can target to increase student competencies.

Universities are challenged to prepare students to embody 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills and to work with a wide range of children and families. Instructors can answer this challenge by assisting students with understanding themselves more deeply, so they can learn more about the children and families they work with and can be more thoughtful in their interactions and relationships, especially in human service fields. This study provides a framework for instructors to apply to their own courses and cultivate students who are striving to be more culturally competent and engage in more thoughtful and sensitive interactions.

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**Appendix A****Table 1. Participant Demographics (N=50 students)**

<b>Category/ Variable</b>	<b>Number (Percentage)</b>	
	3150 (N = 33)	3321 (N = 17)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	32 (97%)	17 (100%)
Male	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
European American	17 (51.5%)	12 (70.6%)
African American	11 (33.3%)	2 (11.8%)
Asian	2 (6.1%)	0 (0%)
Hispanic/Latino	1 (3%)	1 (5.9%)
Other	1 (3%)	2 (11.8%)
Two or more races	1 (3%)	2 (11.8%)
<b>Age Range</b>		
19-21	25 (75.8%)	15 (88.2%)
22-24	7 (24.1%)	2 (11.8%)
25-27	1 (0.1%)	0 (0%)
<b>Academic Level</b>		
Sophomore	3 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
Junior	16 (48.5%)	14 (82.4%)
Senior	14 (42.4%)	3 (17.6%)
<b>Student Status</b>		
Full-time	32 (97%)	17 (100%)
Part-time	1 (3%)	0 (0%)

Table 2. *Means and Standard Deviations of Diversity Awareness.*

Diversity Awareness	African American (n = 13 )		White/ European (n = 29 )		Others (n = 8)		Overall	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Pedagogy</b>								
Pre-pedagogy	4.15	0.49	4.17	0.32	4.06	0.47	4.13	0.40
Post-pedagogy	4.52	0.47	4.38	0.50	4.48	0.46	4.45	0.49
<b>Beliefs and Awareness</b>								
Pre-awareness	3.97	0.32	3.96	0.33	4.06	0.36	<b>4.03</b>	0.37
Post-awareness	4.27	0.36	4.19	0.38	4.23	0.29	4.24	0.43
<b>Respect and Inclusion</b>								
Pre-respect and inclusion	4.19	0.46	4.25	0.36	4.26	0.40	4.24	0.38
Post- respect and inclusion	4.58	0.39	4.50	0.42	4.43	0.43	4.48	0.42
<b>Personal growth</b>								
Pre-personal growth	4.02	0.37	4.19	0.35	4.20	0.30	4.13	0.40
Post-personal growth	4.50	0.41	4.40	0.46	4.48	0.54	4.47	0.43