

# **White, rural preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching newcomer English language learners in a multicultural education course**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how white preservice teachers constructed and changed their views on teaching newcomer English language learners (ELLs) in a multicultural education course offered at a rural university in the Northeast region of the U.S. Drawing upon an action research approach, this study examined 18 white preservice teachers' experiences of learning diversity in a required sophomore-level multicultural education course, and traced their changed perceptions of teaching newcomer ELLs. The study results indicated that the preservice teachers entered the multicultural education course with ignorance and fear of newcomer ELLs at the beginning, and then developed more positive, tolerant views toward the group while conducting course work over the course of the semester. At the completion of the course a majority of the preservice teachers still believed the newcomer ELLs as a problematic, deficient group and hoped to avoid teaching them while a large number of them wanted to receive more training on and experiences with teaching ELLs in a way to gain marketable skills and better employment opportunities in a competitive job market in the teacher profession.

## **Background**

New immigrant English language learners (ELLs) compose a burgeoning student population in U.S. schools. One in four children in the U.S. is either a first-generation

immigrant or has immigrant parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). It is widely recognized that the demographic gap between students and teachers is large and growing. As of 2010, slightly more than 50 percent of student enrollment in U.S. public schools was White (54%) while only slightly under half were students of color. One out of seven students spoke a language other than English at home (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Forty one percent of teachers nationwide reported having had ELLs in their classrooms (Cruz & Thornton, 2013). Given the trend, the enrollment of Hispanic students is expected to grow fast by 33%, and Asian students by 20% between 2011 and 2022. In order to respond to the recurrent changes of the student population and to support academic achievements for newcomer ELLs, teachers should be prepared develop knowledge, skills, and values/attitudes to promote culturally responsive teaching and to addresses the complex needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Brown, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Unfortunately, a majority of school teachers, who are predominantly white, have been poorly equipped to teach newcomer ELLs (Sleeter, 2001; Cruz & Thornton, 2009). Studies published for the past decades have shown that white preservice teachers tend to have a lack of tolerance for different cultural groups, deficit views regarding students of color, resistance to accepting white privilege, and reluctance to engage in discussions on structural inequalities (Castro, 2010; Gorski, 2012; Rong & Preissle, 2009). Only 17 percent of teacher education programs required a course focused on issues related to ELLs to its preservice teachers, resulting in a lack of willingness and preparedness to teach the population (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). Research indicated that inadequately trained teachers have contributed to new immigrant students' academic failure, disengagement from learning, and resentment toward their teachers and public schooling (Choi, 2013; Salinas, 2006; Sleeter, 2008).

What seems hopeful is that today's preservice teachers, compared to older

generations born before the early 1980s, have more opportunities of interacting with culturally diverse others through various means such as travel and online social networking services, and tend to present greater acceptance of and appreciation for cultural diversity (Castro, 2010). However, critical scholars have warned that mere participation in sporadic intercultural communications or “been there, done that” type of shallow multicultural experiences without critical reflection does not necessarily challenge, rather may reinforce one’s stereotypical views on diversity (Brown, 2004; Sleeter, 2008). In the meantime, there are too few data to know if and how well preservice teachers in a stand-alone course or a short term program learn to teach newcomer ELLs (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Sleeter, 2008).

Despite the growing concerns regarding teacher preparation for diversity and teaching ELLs in urban settings, little attention has been paid to educating teacher candidates in rural settings (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). As an increasing number of newcomer ELLs has been entering rural schools and diversifying their demographic texture, teachers in rural areas are “being asked to teach in ways they were not taught in their schools, to learners who are often unfamiliar to them, in classroom contexts that are outside their experiential realm” (Sobel & Taylor, 2005, p.83). Hence rural teacher education programs are faced with a significant challenge and responsibility to prepare their teacher candidates to be effective with all learners (Kritzer & Ziebarth-Bovill, 2012).

Addressing the need for more scholarly and practical attention to the preparation of rural teachers for diversity, this study explored white preservice teachers’ learning experiences of teaching diversity in a required multicultural education course offered at a regional university in a rural area of the U.S. Focusing on the teacher candidates’ perceptions of teaching (for) newcomer ELLs, this study investigated if and how the preservice teachers who had limited experiences and exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity shaped their views on teaching the “unfamiliar” group of students.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-method case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Adopting an action research approach (Tomal, 2003), this study describes 18 white preservice teachers' learning experiences, specifically how the preservice teachers shaped their views on teaching new immigrant ELLs, in a required multicultural education course.

## **Context**

The state where the university was located had the highest percentage of whites of any region, approximately 95 percent of the total population as of 2010. Communities surrounding the school had traditionally been exclusively whites, predominantly English descent, lacking ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Established as a public institution of higher education in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the university had been well-reputed for its quality teacher education program in its surrounding regions. As a fast growing number of Somali immigrants and ELLs from East Asia started moving to the state and showed more visible presence in its public schools, teacher education program of the university was faced with new challenges of preparing its teacher candidates to teach diversity and to serve new immigrant youth having limited English proficiency.

Teacher candidates in the elementary (K-8) certification program of the teacher education program were required to take introductory education courses in their first year and to be enrolled in a sixteen-week practicum block in their sophomore year. The block program in a cohort model with peer groups of 20 required students to complete extensive field work in public school classrooms while taking foundation courses in education. *Diversity and Social Justice Education K-8* was one of the core courses that the teacher candidates in the block must take. I, a researcher and a teacher educator, had taught the diversity course since

Fall 2012. From my previous two years of experiences of teaching the diversity course, I noticed that teaching ELLs had been considered as the most timely, important, and resonating topic to a majority of its students. In this article, therefore, I decided to take a deeper look into how they constructed their perceptions on new immigrants and teaching ELLs throughout the course.

Participants of this study were 18 preservice teachers who took the multicultural education course while in the block in the Spring 2014 semester. All participants were white in their early 20s who were from predominantly small rural communities surrounding the university. More than half of the participants were first-generation college students having working class family backgrounds. Most of the participants had had minimal direct experience with cultural diversity. Only a few of them traveled out of the U.S. previously and were able to speak foreign languages on a basic level. Based on an action research approach, my primary motivation for this self-study is to provide more culturally meaningful and resonant multicultural education course to the group of white, rural preservice teachers who had limited understandings of cultural and linguistic diversity, thus preparing them to better serve the ever increasingly diverse students in rural schools.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Sources of data include surveys, interviews, participant observation, and artifacts. As a course instructor, I participated in all the class sessions that were offered throughout the semester and observed how the participants experienced the course and what they did or did not learn. Reflective journals and field notes were taken after each class session. Surveys were conducted at the beginning and end of the semester. Pre-survey consisting of multiple-choice questions and Likert scale items were asked to examine what multicultural experiences the participants brought into the course and what beliefs/attitudes they had

regarding diversity, newcomer ELLs in particular. Post-survey was conducted to see if, how, and why their beliefs/attitudes toward the group had changed or challenged after completion of the course. Exit interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to have in-depth conversations about their learning experiences in the multicultural education course as well as the practicum block in general, thus drawing on more nuanced interpretations of their views. Artifacts such as handouts, worksheets, and student work samples were also collected.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data sources. Line-by-line inductive coding (Bodgan & Biklen 2007) and a constant comparative method (Strauss & Cobin, 1994) were utilized to identify themes and categories of qualitative data sources (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In the process of inductive coding, every passage of the data was read and labeled with appropriate codes. The similarities and differences of fragments of codes within and between each participant's data sources were then compared for the development of patterns and themes in the data.

## **Findings**

### **At the Beginning: Indifference, Ignorance, Negativity, and Fear**

A majority of the preservice teachers entered the multicultural education course with a limited range of experiences with cultural diversity. During the first class meeting at the beginning of the semester, all 18 preservice teachers introduced themselves as not being diverse, like Jessica stating "I am not diverse, at all (laugh)." Lisa described herself as "a pretty isolated person when it comes to diversity in the community, which is something I[*she*] can't help." She reportedly went to "a small school, where everybody was Caucasian, and like everybody in the neighborhoods are Caucasian, mostly...so the whole ideas about diversity out of nowhere basically...was quite challenge." While sharing what cross-cultural experiences and/or sociocultural memberships they had had before coming to the class, most

of them mentioned a couple of international exchange students during high school that they barely knew of, or distant relatives who were overseas adoptees within their family. Bonny recalled her own experiences of cultural diversity as follows: “Well...diversity...well, we had one Chinese exchange student in my high school. Not sure whether that counts though.” On average, the preservice teachers reportedly had had two or three ‘moderately close’ friends who have different ethnoracial backgrounds from themselves.

The preservice teachers came to the multicultural education course with an array of questions and/or doubts about diversity. Data from an informal survey on ‘5 questions you have about diversity’ being conducted during the first week of class, showed that a majority of the preservice teachers wondered what diversity means. Bonny asked “What exactly is diversity? What exactly does it mean to be diverse because really couldn’t we all be diverse in our own way?” Five out of 18 participants demonstrated negative views on teaching for/about diversity. Interestingly, they all worried about a chance of “too much diversity in classroom” that can be overpowering and consequently disrupt the mainstream students’ academic achievement. Molly questioned “Why is there now all of a sudden a big push for diversity?” which later became her trademark statement throughout the semester.

Teaching new immigrants and/or ELLs was not on the radar screen of the participants. A majority of the preservice teachers seemed to be apathetic or ignorant about newcomer ELLs while displaying a series of misinformation and misconceptions about the group. They fell into silence when there was an opportunity to share and discuss what biases they had about new immigrants, students of color, and ELLs during the second class meeting. Some of them mentioned typical prejudices and stereotypes associated with newcomer ELLs in society at large, not necessary their own, for example, “They are often accused of being illegal” and “They need special treatment.”

Yet, the conversation did not last long. Many of the teacher candidates argued that it

was difficult for them to participate in such conversation because (a) they had limited experiences with those groups, and (b) they were afraid of being judged by peers and course instructors regarding what they said. Bonny, a 21 year-old female student from a small rural area that had been exclusively white, revealed her discomfort with such conversation and explained her position as follows:

It is hard when you don't encounter diversity much in your life...Like sometimes it is hard to put myself in their shoes...Because I wasn't exposed to a lot of diversity it is hard to sit here and be like well this is what I would do with ELL. You know what I mean? I am not anywhere near that situation.

Rob, a 19 year-old male out-of-state transfer student who was from a relatively affluent, suburban area, refused to be part of the discussion by arguing as follows: "I don't know. People say they are like illegal and don't pay tax or whatever, but I don't know them, and...so I don't have an opinion. I don't know." Linda was the only one who frankly disclosed her beliefs regarding ELLs. She argued that "If you don't speak English, you shouldn't live in America." When being asked why, she continued speaking "We all speak English, and I think people are threatened by it. By people speak other languages." No one responded to the statement, and the conversation ended.

Meanwhile, teacher candidates displayed fear of teaching ELLs in classroom. The most frequently cited descriptors of teaching ELLs by the preservice teachers were "scary" and "crazy." Molly worried that "I don't know what I can do if I have a bunch of kids who don't understand what I am saying a word. That is so scary." Believing "English is the hardest language to learn," Linda reportedly had a hard time to picture herself in a multilingual classroom since "that must be really crazy."

Data from a pre-survey on multicultural attitude/awareness conducted at the very beginning of the semester indicated the teacher candidates' stereotypes of newcomer ELLs

and misperceptions on teaching the population. Notably, 11 out of 18 participants, though at varying degrees, perceived that beginning ELLs should be taught by the method of total immersion in English. Like Julia who wrote “I have heard this is a good technique,” six of them held a strong support of the immersion method. The other five believed that the immersion approach must be necessary and effective while it can be overwhelming or make ELLs stressed out so that teachers should be careful to adopt the approach. Their relatively neutral perceptions on the total immersion method seemed to grow out of ethnocentrism or deficit-oriented views of ELLs rather than affirmative views. Jessica argued “You might want to ease them into the English language since it is the hardest language to learn.” Similarly Sarah wrote “Maybe they should start slow so they don’t get confused.” Only four participants out of 18 emphasized that bilingualism needs to be respected. Oprah explained that “It is very important they still relate to their own self and use their ethnic/culture backgrounds as a way to help them go further.”

When it comes to the issue of special accommodations for ELLs in classroom, over 80 percent of the preservice teachers believed that such educational support should be provided for ELLs. However the rationales for the belief were diverse, sometimes conflicting. Nine participants explained that equal opportunities for academic success should be provided to all learners. The rest six revealed that such accommodations might be disruptive to the mainstream students’ learning, but could not be neglected.

### **In the Middle: Surprises, Appreciation, Empathy, but Color-blindness Maintained**

Over the course of the semester, the preservice teachers reportedly reconstructed, changed, challenged, and revisited their previous perceptions toward newcomer ELLs. This section discusses the teacher candidate’s (un)changed and (re)constructed views on newcomer ELLs and what course materials and instructional methods were influential to

shape their views.

*Sociocultural Identity Development* essay seemed to provide a meaningful educative moment to the preservice teachers to reconsider their negative views on immigrants and to develop empathy for their sociocultural situations and economic hardships. The essay assignment asked the preservice teachers to write autobiographies or family cultural histories in ways to assist them to identify assumptions, beliefs, and values they hold, as well as cultural contexts in which they had grown up that impacted their understandings of teaching and learning. A majority of the preservice teachers described how their ethnic group came to the U.S. and what hardships and unfair treatments they had to deal with. Nick who introduced himself as “a combination of Greek and Irish ethnicities which is rare”, discussed that

My ethnic groups suffered discrimination and intolerance in America. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish were often stereotyped as alcoholics and labeled as “pagans” because of the misinterpretation of their culture and beliefs... Those one law in particular damaged the Greeks opportunities and that was the Immigration Act of 1924 which restricted the Greeks to the lowest immigration quota than any other European country... All the ethnic groups that I associate myself with have suffered from discrimination at one point or another in history.

By conducting a mini research on the story of his ethnic groups, Nick learned that “Everyone comes from somewhere in the world...and they always find a way to cope and survive despite the hardships when change is presented,” and decided to respect “their own set of perspectives and beliefs” they “have developed during the hardships.”

Veronica shared a story of her multiethnic family. Her “first impressionable experience with race came with two new members” of her family, her stepmother Jane who “emigrated from the Philippines and spoke fluently in English and Tagalog,” and her daughter Susan, “who introduced a whole new diet and social calendar” to Veronica’s family.

Having multiple chances to socialize with Jane and her Filipino immigrant friends, Veronica felt sympathetic when she heard that “they all came from different parts of the islands,” and “difficult stories about how they came to America, found work, and learned English.” She was particularly surprised when “many of them beat me[her] in knowledge of U.S. history that they studied to become citizens.” Although being able to learn Filipino immigrants’ culture, and appreciating their advanced knowledge in the U.S. history and efforts to adjust, Veronica “never felt more like a minority” while hanging out with them, and became empathetic toward “how my stepmom and other immigrants must have felt coming into” the town she lived, a place “where so much of its population is of European descent.”

Many preservice teachers in the course admitted that the *Sociocultural Identity Development* narrative was “a good start” that helped themselves look back into their familial history of immigration. “It made me think about how someone could classify me...we are all immigrants in one way or another, which means that the better we understand our own diversity, the better we can understand the diversity of someone else,” Rob said.

Data showed that reading *A Different Mirror for Young People: A History of Multicultural America* by Ronald Takaki (2012) was one of the most eye-opening learning and unlearning experiences to many of the participants. It is a young adult version of the notable book of multicultural history of the U.S. Preservice teachers in the course were asked to read the book, lead a seminar in group on an assigned chapter from it, and write a reflection paper about the whole book. Reading and discussing the book, a majority of the preservice teachers shared that they were able to learn, hence appreciate the contributions of immigrants to nation building throughout history which most of them were “never taught while in school.” The following quote from her book reflection paper well represents how Linda felt while reading the book.

I feel so ignorant just because that’s how I grew up in [the state], little to know

diversity and unaccepting of people that are from foreign countries. Like, in the book, Takaki said how people always asking, “Where are you from?” “You speak English so well” in America...things like that [even though he is an American citizen]...[before taking this class] I was like, If you don’t speak English, you shouldn’t live in America...And then now I am like “wait”

Some participants like Manny confessed that the book was “hard to believe.” The following quote from her during an exit interview at the end of the semester demonstrates her and others’ struggle to accept the difficult history of immigrants and racism they had to undergo:

I just don’t think that personally the racial thing [exists]...but [after reading the book] I had to believe that is what happened... So that is something that I have a hard time accepting because I don’t, not a lot of it happens here. I’m sure it does but I am pretty blind to it. So it is kind of something that I struggled with.

Consequently most of the preservice teachers in the course pointed out that the book served as a powerful tool for them to revisit history education they had received throughout K-12 schooling, more specifically how immigrants were portrayed, what contribution they provided to nation building, and why their stories were silenced in social studies textbooks. The following interview quote well captures the feelings of frustration and embarrassment that Bonny had after reading the book:

I found Takaki’s book to be extremely eye-opening...I felt like I wasn’t taught about any of that stuff when I was in school and so to hear from another perspective and to see, you know how other races or cultures felt. So like wow we were not nice and we are raised to feel like we should be proud of, you know, coming here and doing what we did. But I don’t feel that way.

Although studies on the history of immigration played a significant role in changing and reconstructing preservice teachers’ perceptions on immigrants in the past, such change

was not always led to their tolerance and appreciation of immigrants in contemporary context. During sessions on new immigrants and ELLs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was evident that preservice teachers still held multiple biases and misinformation about immigrants, ELLs, and immigration. As a warm-up activity, *True/False Quiz on Immigration*, a set of quiz introduced in a well-reputed book on social justice education *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* by Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) which is designed to help learners rethink what they already know, highlighting areas of misinformation, and lack of knowledge about immigrants and their contributions to the U.S., was administered.

The quiz result demonstrated that approximately 95 percent of the preservice teachers understood that the number of immigrant is growing fast, marking the highest number in U.S. history, and that one out of four students in U.S. public schools are foreign-born. Ninety four percent admitted that immigrants were filling labor shortages in essential segments of the society. However, approximately 80 percent did not know that undocumented immigrants pay over \$300 million in federal taxes. Over half of them were surprised at the fact that the proportion of immigrants with bachelors or postgraduate degrees is higher than the proportion of the native labor force.

By discussing the academic achievement of immigrants and their contribution to the U.S. economy, the preservice teachers reportedly understood that ELLs may have much academic potential although they may not be able to successfully express what they know. During a class discussion, a couple of preservice teachers mentioned that all teachers, including themselves, should maintain high expectations to all learners. Mia revealed that by having such conversations on misconceptions toward immigrants, she challenged her previous deficit view of newcomer students.

Despite the preservice teachers' self-report of their changed views on and heightened acceptance and appreciation of immigrants, colorblindness still seemed retained in some of

their perceptions. Charlie while explaining he wished to treat all learners equally regardless of their color, ethnicity, and learning abilities in his future classroom, revealed that “I won’t see the color of my students. I don’t care what color they are or where they are from...Most of key aspects of oneself has very little to do with their racial and ethnic background.” Rob who often denied white privilege and openly disagreed with affirmative action, believed that he is an accepting, “colorblind person” because he “is a 50% Irish...the Irish had to deal with lots of hate and prejudice upon arrival,” thus he “could never be a racist person or turn my [his] head on a certain group.” Both preservice teachers seemed unaware of the meaning of colorblindness, rather interpreted the concept in positive ways, similar to “equality for all” kind of a message, even though there had been multiple opportunities of learning and discussing the politics of colorblindness over the course of the semester.

### **At the End: Still Scary, yet Could be a Good Market**

A majority of the preservice teachers perceived that they were able to have multiple chances to reconceptualize what diversity means and what it means to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students in classroom. Over 90 percent of the preservice teachers shared that they were able to understand diversity in a broader sense and developed positive attitudes and tolerance toward the groups they did not feel a sense of belonging or empathy previously. Sarah, who “never thought of diversity in these various ways, mentioned that she indeed experienced difficulties of learning about immigrants and ELLs. “It kind of overwhelmed me at first. Because oh my god everybody in my classroom is going to be different. How am I going to deal with that?...So I was like oh my god this is going to be really hard.” After completing the course, Sarah was thinking about teaching overseas after graduation or hoping to find a position in a linguistically diverse area as she felt she herself developed self-confidence to be able to go into diverse classrooms and being able to better understand ELLs.

Meanwhile more than a half of participants confessed that till the end of the semester, it was challenging for them to have open and “honest” conversations about immigration and ELLs. Julia frankly mentioned that she felt sometimes in-class discussion and small conversations about diversity quite superficial. She complained that “Sometimes students do not express their opinion in certain ways because they don’t want to offend anyone. Or at the same time they don’t want to be judged by any comments that they make.” Linda was one who sought to have “real, and in-depth conversations” about diversity. When there was a chance to share biases regarding Hispanic immigrants in-class, Linda attempted to openly discuss what prejudices she had and where they came from. However, according to her observation, she was the only one who spoke and sounded offensive while no one else spoke much. She wished the whole class could have been more open about their own perceptions on diversity without a fear of being judged so that they could have more meaningful conversations.

A large portion of preservice teachers’ negative perceptions and misinformation about newcomer ELLs was still prevalent and remained unchanged after completion of the course. Despite some positive changes throughout a semester-long coursework on a wide range of topics on newcomer ELLs, a majority of the preservice teachers still perceived immigrant ELLs as an unfamiliar and distant group of people, thus feeling fear teaching the seemingly “scary,” “challenging” group of learners.

During exit interviews conducted at the end of the semester, six participants revealed that they would like to go back to where there were originally from and are willing to teach in small communities after graduation. Fear of teaching and interacting with ELLs seemed still prevalent in their perceptions. Believing that “Teaching diversity depends a lot on what students have in classroom because you have to be sensitive, aware of what you’re delivering to the class,” Lisa hoped to teach at a “smaller school, more intimate class sizes...those tend

to have less diversity.” In addition, she discussed that “special education types and stuffs”, rather teaching ELLs, are more relevant to the areas where she would like to find a teaching position although “all diversity really is interesting though” to her. Similarly, it was difficult for Manny to picture herself teaching in an urban school. Teaching ELLs, “like having a classroom with four or five very diverse students” had been what she worried about. Imagining “If I would go to southern areas there are different languages down there, it’s crazy. They speak so many different languages in school,” Manny felt unprepared to serve the ELL’s needs.

The rest 12 teacher candidates wished to find more professional training opportunities on teaching ELLs and to seek out teaching positions in culturally diverse urban communities. Yet, the reasons behind the wishes were varying. As a result of the multicultural education course, four of the participants sought to stretch their comfort zone, and became more interested in teaching ELLs in more culturally and linguistically diverse environment or international student teaching. Mia who likes to travel and often revealed her interest in teaching overseas, hopefully South American countries as she speaks Spanish thought at basic level, throughout the semester, shared her plan to learn more about “how to implement multicultural education in my[her] classroom” since she “would definitely need that.

Although teaching culturally and ethnically diverse ELLs in urban context is not their best interest, some preservice teachers did consider it as a possible option in case they are unable to find a teaching position in rural areas. During an exit interview, Odele confessed that she used to have “no reason to go to teach down there [urban area],” thus she “did not to have training like that [teaching ELLs]” which is “not useful to me[her].” After taking the course, however, she reportedly changed her mind and was “now thinking of working on such thing” as she learned that “it [training in teaching ELLs] was popular” among her peers, but “only if I[she] couldn’t get a job elsewhere.” Manni had a similar plan. Even though she

“feels more comfortable staying in a small area with less kids with less diversity,” she expected “Well, but basically where I[she] get[s] a job is where I[she] will go.”

To many of the preservice teachers in the course, ELLs seemed a “scary group” of learners that they hoped to avoid if they could, but at the same time were being considered as a potential market for their future teaching job. Molly understood that “diversity is definitely growing,” and “that’s like something I[she] have[has] to work on” in order to make herself a more marketable candidate in today’s competitive teaching profession even though she still wanted to go back to her hometown if there would be any teaching position she could fill in. Alice openly shared why she would like to pursue further training in teaching ELLs as follows:

I just like looking at from a job point of view I feel like it's like almost like a handicap on my resume because we're becoming so diverse and in like America we are expanding so I want to be able to say just like yeah I have trained in this or I have received some sort of knowledge.

### **Discussions and Implications**

Teachers’ views and expectations of students directly impact student learning, and unless they are challenged during the preparation period, these views are unlikely to change. This study investigated how white, rural preservice teachers shaped their perspectives of newcomer ELLs throughout a semester-long multicultural teacher education course at a regional university.

Existing literature on multicultural education for preservice teachers warned that stand-alone cultural diversity course should not be a quick fix solution of the teacher candidates’ stereotypical perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse others (Banks, 2001; Brown, 2004; Sleeter, 2008). Brown (2004) explained that white teacher education

students, especially those who had limited cross-cultural experiences, tended to enter multicultural education courses in various stages of resistance, demonstrate some positive changes and acceptive dispositions at varying degrees, yet remain locked in at their entry point. White teacher candidates who are from small rural areas with limited exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity in this study indicated a similar pattern of learning progression. They entered the multicultural education course with ignorance and fear with negative biases toward newcomer ELLs. They seemed to develop a deepened understanding of other cultures and appreciation of the contributions of newcomers to the U.S. through various means of academic interventions. However, it was not surprising, but disappointing to note that the preservice teachers still perceived ELLs as a difficult group to teach, thus wanted to avoid them if possible. Their resistance or hesitance to participate in conversations regarding diversity, immigration, and ELLs were also noticed. Their self-recognition of ignorance of and lack of experience with immigrants seemed to cause feelings of guilt and shame. Meanwhile a large number of preservice teachers in this study viewed the ELL population as a potential market and desired to receive more training on teaching ELLs to make themselves more marketable teacher candidates. To them, teaching ELLs seemed “a good skill to have.”

Critical multicultural educators have warned the assault of neo-liberalism and corporatocracy on multicultural education (Gorski, 2012; Sleeter, 2008, 2013). In the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, education at large has been viewed as a tool of profit making, and also a resource for competition and private gains under corporatocracy while the ethos of democratic education and teaching/learning for social justice were squeezed out. It seems evident that a large number of preservice teachers in this study perceived ELLs as a resourceful group for their competitive teacher candidacy and a potentially “profit-generating commodity” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 18). Training in teaching ELLs or having a certificate in

related areas were viewed as credentials that can provide more employment opportunities in a competitive job market of teaching profession. Such tendency seems worrisome, even dangerous, given the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy and democratic education in teacher education under the politics of accountability.

This study calls for further research on multicultural teacher education programs focusing on the complexities of how preservice teachers shape their views on diversity and what specific challenges and contradictions during their process of learning. Ways to promote critical reflections and long-term program commitment to unlearning stereotypes and developing multicultural teaching competencies that are necessary for white teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for teaching in diverse settings should be explored further.

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