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## The Perceptions of Culturally Diverse Graduate Students on Multicultural Education: Implication for Inclusion and Diversity Awareness in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Multicultural education improves educators' understanding of the complexities of different cultures and the inherent intersectionality of race, gender, class, and exceptionality to liberate students from oppressive structures within society. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the perceptions of educational leadership graduate students regarding multicultural education and transformative leadership through the lens of critical pedagogy. During this qualitative case study, the researchers used course materials, including discussion and responses, book reviews, and presentations, to answer these research questions: What factors drove the graduate students to want to seek out further experiences for them or their students with multicultural education? What did the participants perceive as potential barriers to influencing educational reform? In what ways did the perceptions of the graduate students regarding multicultural education change over the course of a semester? Three themes emerged from the analysis, the illusion of inclusivity, cultural awareness, and the disconnection between theory and practice. This research could impact current and potential future educational leaders and provides information that would benefit school districts, teachers, and students.

**Keywords:** *Critical pedagogy, democratic society, diversity, multicultural education.*

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### Introduction

According to Shields (2010), "schools are sites of cultural politics" that can work against the perpetuation of "inequalities inherent" in social constructs or continue the status quo (p. 569). To transform education to meet the demands of the former educational leaders must consider ways to increase students' critical capacity to identify and challenge dominant societal structures (Freire & Ara, 1998). The critical nature and progressive ideals define multicultural education (Aydin, 2013; Banks, 2004). Furthermore, multicultural education is about reform; therefore, it is about transformation.

Transformative leadership serves as a critical approach that focuses on social reform as the core for both personal and collective achievement. Moreover, critical pedagogy forces us to consider how social structure influences student achievement. Students become aware of their access to opportunities as they experience their education, which is meant to create a "multi-level playing field" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2001, p. 8). Social justice is about leveling the playing field, which is why critical pedagogy is so essential (Woofter, 2019). It is imperative that educational leaders reflect on their ideas regarding equity pedagogy and social justice to improve the educational experience of students.

Moreover, critical pedagogy forces us to consider how social structure influences student achievement. This consideration gets to the heart of what it means to teach multicultural citizenship. Educational leaders have an opportunity to illuminate collective struggles and uncover systems that protect hegemonic structures, which create barriers that keep people from accessing the full potential of a society (Rubin, 2018; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2001). This illumination requires a purposeful look at the economic and political environment to dismantle patriarchal and authoritarian structures. Educators can learn about asymmetric power relations to increase their capacity and affect

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student understanding about the systemic structures that oppress them to unravel those structures (Rasmussen & Bayer, 2014).

According to Banks and Banks (2019), multicultural education can work to improve educators' understanding of the complexities of different cultures and the inherent intersectionality of race, gender, class, and exceptionality to liberate students from oppressive structures within society. Additionally, multicultural education is a process of unveiling how certain groups are excluded from full access to the benefits that a society shares. Aydin and Tonbuloglu (2014) described multicultural education as an "alternative to the 'assimilation' mentality in that it recognizes the existence of different cultures in a country," thereby giving space for different people to flourish in the same society (p. 31). Therefore, the perceptions of aspiring educational leaders regarding multicultural education are an integral part of reforming education to help students identify and discuss issues related to equity and inclusion (Banks, 2005).

Several studies have discussed graduate student perceptions related to multicultural education and its administration to students as a means to analyze equity, diversity, and social justice critically (Aydin & Tonbuloglu, 2014; Banks, 2015; Lee et al., 2017). The cohort immersed in the graduate student experience at a university in the Southeast area of the United States offers a unique opportunity to study how perceptions regarding multicultural education can change over time. As with many regions in the United States, student populations have become increasingly diverse (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Banks (2004) explains that the intent of multicultural education is to reform educational institutions to provide educational experiences that are equitable to all students. Accordingly, teachers, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers would benefit from this study of educational leadership students and faculty to consider ways to empower educators to become transformative leaders. In addition, scant studies exist on graduate students' perceptions of multicultural education in southwest Florida. In this vein, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of educational leadership graduate students regarding multicultural education and transformative leadership through the lens of critical pedagogy.

### Literature Review

While the demographics of schools in the United States have rapidly changed to include students from various racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, the curriculum has not changed to reflect the diversity in the school populations (Aydin, 2012; Banks & Banks, 2004; Bartolome, 2004; Cooper et al., 2010; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016). The change in demographics has not brought any significant updates in policies or requirements for teacher preparation. Nationally, many states do not require a specific course in multicultural education as part of teacher accreditation standards (Taylor et al., 2016). As a result, many teachers feel ill-prepared to teach diverse students in their classrooms.

Additionally, many students do not share the same demographic profile as their teachers (Bartolome, 2004; Cooper et al., 2010; Holm & Zilliacus, 2009). Research shows that most teachers are White, and the literature on pre-service teachers illuminates that many of those teachers do not feel prepared to teach in schools with diverse populations. Teachers often lack experiences and the formal training to teach multicultural education.

Incorporating multicultural education into the national curriculum offers many benefits. One positive is that multicultural education is a vehicle for school and social change (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ortloff, 2011), and multicultural education benefits all students, not just those from diverse backgrounds. Because multicultural education can be described as a process rather than an end-point, such education should be integrated into the curriculum (Koch et al., 2018). Often, schools focus on teaching surface culture sporadically throughout the school year, but this does not give students the opportunity to apply concepts learned in other contexts. One purpose of multicultural education is to help empower students to become thoughtful citizens who are knowledgeable and able to interact with a diverse democratic society (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009; Koch et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Tonbuloglu et al., 2016). Again, this benefits all students and prepares them to be successful in an interconnected democratic society.

However, multicultural education can only happen if there is a change in attitudes, perceptions, and school culture (Banks, 2004). As previously stated, multicultural education currently primarily focuses on traditions and surface-level culture rather than promoting social justice or bringing racism or inequities to light (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Holm & Zilliacus, 2009). These initiatives present an illusion of multicultural learning; however, they lack the crucial aspects of multicultural education, including reflecting on social inequities or issues with social justice.

Many studies conducted were of pre-service teachers and their perceptions of potential future jobs in diverse settings. However, little research has examined doctoral students (Ames et al., 2018; Gardner, 2009; Norton, 2011). A literature review demonstrates that very few studies have examined graduate students in an educational leadership doctoral program and their perceptions as future educational leaders of multicultural education. Clearly, there needs to be more incorporation of multicultural education in teacher preparation programs, support from educational leaders in teaching multiculturalism, collaboration, and reflections from teachers and leaders regarding their perceptions and preparedness.

*Feeling Unprepared to Teach Multicultural Education*

Teachers take few multicultural education courses and typically feel unprepared to teach in a culturally diverse context (Castro, 2010; Halpern & Aydin, 2020; Holm & Zilliacus, 2009; Taylor et al., 2016). Teachers feel that they lack the skills to identify pertinent concepts or how to implement multicultural education. These deficiencies are partly due to teachers having limited knowledge of who they are as racial beings. They have not had an opportunity to reflect on their position to be a change agent in teaching multicultural education. To combat this issue, universities and colleges must reconceptualize teacher education in a multicultural educational context that includes culturally responsive perspectives and practices (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Drape et al., 2019; Eskici & Çayak, 2018; Yuan, 2017). Teachers and future educational leaders should have opportunities to reflect upon their previous experiences or lack of experiences. There should be coursework that encourages discussion among colleagues to help each grow in their practice.

Shulman (2016) described how he and his colleagues developed a discussion group where the author and the other White colleagues voluntarily met to discuss race. After a while, several group members shared their feelings that they were unprepared to talk about it with their students. One colleague even questioned her ability to tackle this issue by asking, "How am I supposed to bring it up in class when I'm still struggling with my White privilege?" (Shulman, 2016, p. 74). Her question is a valid one and is one shared by many teachers across the country.

The issue is not that teachers or educational leaders do not see the value in multicultural education. On the contrary, many teachers have positive opinions about multicultural education. Still, they do not consider themselves competent to teach multicultural education and do not include multicultural education into their lesson planning (Kahraman, 2017). Teachers hesitate to put themselves in multicultural environments and have difficulty turning their knowledge into behavior. The same is true with educational leaders; if they have not had any positive experiences with multicultural education, it will be challenging for them to put multicultural education into practice as a leader.

*Collaboration in Support of Multicultural Education*

Another avenue to learn about multicultural education and potentially incorporate it more into education worldwide is collaboration. Collaboration is beneficial for all parties and builds rapport between colleagues. One such example of this can be seen in a recent study conducted regarding doctoral students in a counseling program, which found that students who were further along in their training felt more multiculturally competent (Koch et al., 2018). These students self-reported higher ratings of cultural awareness and knowledge, which indicates that if teachers or graduate students were offered more opportunities to learn about multicultural education, they would feel more prepared to teach it or incorporate it into their school culture.

Additionally, in a study of graduate students and their perceptions of diversity within a college of agriculture, Drape et al. (2019) explained how institutions could make a difference in increasing multicultural competencies among students by influencing graduate students' course-taking behaviors and ensure that they are exposed to peers and content, which helps them understand what it means to live in a diverse society. Findings from this study revealed that graduate students perceived their multicultural competency to be much higher after they were required to collaborate with others and to reflect on their experiences.

When dealing specifically with a unique population comprised of educational leadership doctoral students, one study examined the academic identity of students. While engaging in collaboration with other academics, the students developed an identity (Tupling & Outhwaite, 2017). This collaboration often yields a transformation in the identity of the educational leadership doctoral student. This program is unique because it is usually geared towards working professionals but exposes them to academics in their fields of interest. Working alongside faculty can be a great way to give teachers and future leaders experiences with multiculturalism. Yuan (2017) posited that collaboration between faculty and teacher candidates would help prospective teachers acquire culturally responsive teaching skills.

In Risner and Kumar's (2016) qualitative study, the researchers aimed to determine how a virtual graduate course connecting campuses across America, Africa, Europe, and Asia affected the students' perceptions of global connectedness. The Globally Networked Learning Environments (GNLEs) encouraged learner-to-learner interactions, which increased social knowledge construction and exposure to multiple perspectives. The graduate students reported they learned more from interactions with diverse groups.

*Critical Pedagogy*

The intent of multicultural education is to transform education to create equitable structures in society (Banks, 2004); therefore, it is imperative to understand the perceptions of future educational leaders regarding its critical aspects. Accordingly, critical pedagogy is the appropriate theoretical framework for this current study because critical pedagogy is related to social justice and critical perspectives (Gerdin et al., 2018). Furthermore, critical pedagogy allows students to question their assumptions and reflect on biases, which is integral for reconstructing knowledge regarding oppressive societal structures (Wong, 2014). Working with students to illuminate how their communities are excluded

from the benefits of society is overwhelming and challenging work; hence, it is useful to understand the ways educational leaders can be supported to become empowered to enhance their practice (Kim & Pollard, 2017; Neto, 2021). Flynn (2017) explored the long-term effects of critical pedagogy on students' ability to recognize privilege and racism. The study concluded that students expressed a desire to engage in more activities and discussions regarding multicultural education at school. Moreover, students felt positive effects from exposure to critical pedagogy that allowed them to increase their awareness of institutional racism and comfort discussing race. In summation, critical pedagogy and multicultural education are useful tools for bringing cultural awareness to students.

#### *Transformative Leadership to Promote Multicultural Education*

To create opportunities to promote multicultural education, someone needs to be an ally, an advocate, a cultural broker, or a change-agent (Bartolome, 2004; Jenkins, 2016). This process starts with a top-down approach, and multicultural education will be as only as successful as the commitment to it by the school administrators (Aydin, 2013; Damgaci & Aydin, 2018). Multicultural education cannot be successful unless a leader is willing and able to make the systematic changes necessary to implement multicultural education. One way to do that is to have transformative leaders supporting this change. Transformative leadership is an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dichotomy of individual accountability and social responsibility (Shields, 2010).

Leaders are in a unique position of power, and those leaders should use their power to initiate social change. Jenkins (2016) describes a portrait by Gilbert Young titled, "he ain't heavy," where a man reaches down over the wall for another man's hand. This imagery portrays a man in a position of power and privilege, and he uses this power and privilege to reach back and help others. Rather than moving on after climbing the wall, he instead reaches over the wall of opportunity and uses his skills to help someone in a position of weakness. Transformative leaders embody this characteristic and employ a myriad of strategies to put equity and justice at the heart of education.

#### *Background Affects Outlook*

Teachers who have experienced oppression or discrimination or had cross-cultural interactions embraced concepts of multiculturalism, whereas those who resist multiculturalism may simply lack cross-cultural experiences (Bartolome, 2004; Castro, 2010). Educational experiences, along with life experiences, will affect how a teacher or leader addresses diversity or multiculturalism.

Shields (2010) conducted a study in which two principals were selected to identify transformative leadership practices. The two principals had similar experiences with impoverished and unstable childhoods. These two principals attributed their outlooks and values towards diversity and equity to their upbringing and experiences as children. Personally experiencing or witnessing someone else's subordination can leave a permanent impression on educators (Bartolome, 2004). In this case, these two principals both had experienced how schools were not equal starting places for many students, and they used that to place equity and diversity at the forefront of their school missions. They both incorporated multicultural education in their schools to prepare students to become democratic citizens.

#### *Colorblind Approach*

While there are many ways teachers and leaders can successfully incorporate multiculturalism into schools, there are also a few roadblocks (Aydin, 2013). One of these is that many educators are unwilling to acknowledge differences in race and how race affects educational opportunities. Many teachers and administrators adopt a colorblind approach to teaching, which denies the significance of race in educational opportunities (Castro, 2010; Shulman, 2016; Solomon et al., 2005; Tibulac, 2014). A colorblind attitude ignores how specific populations have been marginalized, which affects the way they experience school. Many believe that teaching about oppression, racism, and injustice will only point out negatives and not benefit anyone. This attitude is harmful to all because it inaccurately identifies schools as providing an equal opportunity for all. Research has shown that there are gross inequities in funding for certain areas such that it is nearly impossible for students to receive an equal education. This attitude is similar to the attitude that oppressed populations should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This metaphor places onus on oppressed populations and leads to systematic assumptions about specific populations.

### **Methodology**

The methodology component of a study provides researchers with the tools necessary to study complex phenomena within their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Qualitative case studies allow researchers to describe and study a phenomenon in context while using a vast array of data sources (Yin, 2017). This qualitative case study describes the perceptions of doctoral students in an educational leadership program regarding multicultural education. Additionally, the study examines how transformative leadership can impact putting multicultural education into practice. Several quantitative studies have been conducted primarily with the use of surveys or questionnaires to assess pre-service

teachers' perceptions of multicultural education; however, there is a gap within the literature regarding qualitative studies that examine the perceptions of graduate students towards multicultural education.

### *Research Goal*

This qualitative case study analyzed how the perceptions of graduate students evolve over the course of a semester regarding multicultural education. The overall research question was: What are the perceptions of graduate students regarding multicultural education? Three specific questions included: What factors drove the graduate students to want to seek out further experiences for them or their students with multicultural education? What did the participants perceive as potential barriers to influencing educational reform? In what ways did the perceptions of the graduate students regarding multicultural education change over the course of a semester?

### *Sampling*

After careful consideration of qualitative methodologies, describing the perceptions of doctoral students enrolled within a Diversity and Global Studies course regarding multicultural education would be best accomplished as an interpretive task using case study methodology and its related techniques. This approach fits and facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context while using various data sources. Ensuring that the perception is not exclusively explored through one narrow lens, but rather a variety of lenses allows for multiple facets of a phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Using this lens, the researchers seek a greater understanding of how the perceptions of doctoral students enrolled within a Diversity and Global Studies course can change over the semester as it relates to multicultural education within the higher education realm.

Van Manen (1990) established the relevance of a focus on a learning experience and participants' perceptions. Beyond exploring participants' perceptions, a case study is an appropriate methodology because it allows a researcher to expound upon and integrate the underlying interpretive framework of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy allows students to question their assumptions and reflect on biases, which is integral for reconstructing knowledge regarding oppressive societal structures (Wong, 2014). Critical pedagogy is also related to social justice and critical perspectives (Gerdin et al., 2018). Critical pedagogy allows educators to work with students to illuminate how their communities are excluded from the benefits of society and is difficult and overwhelming work; hence, it is useful to understand the ways educational leaders can be supported to become empowered to enhance their practices (Kim & Pollard, 2017).

This study had ten participants, including two males and eight females. All participants are enrolled in a doctoral program at a university in the Southeast region of the United States. For the purpose of this study, the ten individuals were all enrolled in fall 2020 in a multicultural education course entitled, Diversity and Global Studies in education and were selected for this study.

Purposeful sampling was used for this study because the researchers worked to "intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). It is also convenience sampling because the complete cohort was enrolled in the same course. The study's main goal was to look at how the perceptions of doctoral students regarding multicultural education changed over time. Additionally, it aimed to look at how transformative leadership affects the implementation of multicultural education. Hence, purposeful sampling is the best method to ensure that the people selected will provide data that reflects their perceptions and allows for the emergence of relevant themes to enhance the data within this area of doctoral student perceptions of multicultural education.

The researchers followed all IRB protocols associated with ethical considerations of participants at all times during the process of this study. Yardley (2000) outlined four broad principles for assessing characteristics of quality qualitative research 1) sensitivity to context, 2) commitment and rigor, 3) transparency and coherence, and 4) impact and importance. The researchers showed sensitivity to context by being nonjudgmental during the analysis process while maintaining a neutral setting. A trusting rapport between the participants and the researchers was created by ensuring that the agreement explained their rights and privacy, and confidentiality during the entire research and analysis process. Students were informed in the course syllabus and registration that their discussions and replies, book reviews, chapter presentations, and the researchers' observations and field notes posted and presented would be utilized in the study. However, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2014).

The researchers treated individual data in a valued and respectful manner by removing all names from book reviews and discussion posts/replies, reading to understand the essences of the participants' voice, removing all our personal biases and opinions, and finally ensuring that all information was secured, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting. Throughout each step in the research process, the researchers correlated themes that emerged during the analysis of the discussion posts/replies, the book reviews, and the chapter presentation through cross-correlation between all three sources and follow-up questioning. The researchers established a high degree of commitment and rigor through attentiveness to understanding and relaying the participants' voice and the true essence of the examined perception. Yardley (2000) states that it is essential to "employ 'triangulation' of data collection or analysis to achieve a rounded,

multi-layered understanding of the research topic" (p. 222). Through careful writing of the report, the researchers created transparency and coherence by presenting clear, rich, and thick participant voices in the narrative.

All ten participants were members of Cohort 7 and are currently within their last year of coursework before taking comprehensive qualifying exams. Among the participants, there were three higher education staff members, two administrators, two teachers, one district employee, one school psychologist, and one juvenile probation officer. The demographics within the participants were one African American Male and one Caucasian male and seven Caucasian females, and one African American and Caucasian (biracial) female. Participants' ages ranged from 27 years old to 54 years old. All participants were monolingual and from the middle-class socio-economic status.

The following descriptions of the participants were taken from the initial discussion posts that asked them to describe where they were in their doctoral journey and their career or research goals. They were also asked to include their experiences with multicultural education. Furthermore, they were asked what they wanted to learn from this class concerning those goals. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Sean is a juvenile probation officer who plans to use her advanced degree to research and implement changes for "delinquent" youth experiencing the criminal justice system. She explains that her multicultural education experience is varied and influenced by the diverse youth with whom she has worked as they come from all kinds of backgrounds. She explained that although she likes "to think that I have impacted many children's lives. However, they have instead impacted mine."

Pam is an assistant principal. Before that, she worked as a fifth-grade science teacher and as Dean of Students for K-8 students; she has also worked at a Title I school. She explains that the life event that influenced her identity was attaining her associate degree. Her goals are related to improving children's lives and increasing access to opportunities as a change agent. She garners inspiration from working with students. Her ideas regarding diversity, globalization, and multicultural education are that everyone has something unique and "positive to bring to the conversation" and that we should learn from others.

Jack is a principal at a K-8 school and writes about his experience growing up "in a devout Christian home," which fostered a sense of "goodwill to all mankind." He follows up this sentiment with a story about his family as they traveled through Florida when the family experienced harassment at the hands of three white men who "started shouting racial slurs" at them. He recalls that one man brandished a combat knife. He marvels at how his father handled the situation and "held the peace." They made it safely to their destination, and he remembers questioning "whether my family's peaceful response signified weakness." He wonders if he would respond the same way today if he were in his father's position. He also discusses his experience with diversity. He tells a story about accepting additional responsibilities as a teacher when he took on the role of character education coordinator. He thought it would benefit the students to engage in a World Culture Night event. The evening provided food and entertainment to showcase the languages and cultures represented at the school. He admits that the experiences "may be considered surface"; but states that they helped students to appreciate each other.

Larry is a district coordinator of fine arts for K-12. He explains that the life event that influenced his self-perception was being diagnosed at 11 months old with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Larry feels this added to his drive, "grit, and resilience" during his childhood, which is why he believes that he consciously chooses to take on challenging tasks. As far as experiences related to diversity, globalization, and multicultural education, Larry admits that he was "fairly limited" as he grew up in a mainly white upper-middle-class community in Massachusetts. Larry shares that he had a cousin who was the only African American graduate of their small high school for nearly 30 years. Larry felt that his cousin's experiences with "latent racism" and "finding a cultural identity" has informed him tremendously.

Alexis is an ESE department head and 8th-grade case manager at a middle school. The experiences Alexis describes related to diversity, globalization, and multicultural education was getting her ESOL certification and about ten courses she took within multicultural education. Alexis explains that the life event that influenced her identity was beginning her doctorate at 23; it provided her with confirmation regarding her educational and professional abilities. Alexis also talks about how is Jamaican "(yes, Jamaicans can be white)," and her husband is Cuban and Puerto Rican. Hence, she has learned Spanish. At this moment, she explains that she did not consider herself bilingual however it is a "life goal."

Carol is serving as the Assistant Director in the Center for Academic Achievement at a university. Carol currently oversees academic coaching, supplemental instruction programs, and the Step Ahead program. Carol also serves as an adjunct instructor for freshman development courses. Carol said that she has many life events that have shaped her identity. However, the one experience that stood out to her and "shaped" her identity was meeting her grandmother at seven. She commented that Carol's mother should tell people that Carol and her sisters were Puerto Rican instead of being mixed African American and White. Carol says that she felt "cursed" because, throughout her life, everyone thought she was Puerto Rican and that she does not speak English. Carol describes that she understands first-hand how assuming an individual's "background or heritage" can impact their identity as a whole.

Susie was an intervention support specialist at an elementary school, and this is her 13th year within the district. Susie's life event that has helped shape her identity was moving from Massachusetts to Florida at 17. Susie says that

moving from her small hometown to Southwest Florida was an “eye-opening experience” regarding exposure to different cultures/experiences. Susie states she had limited exposure to multiculturalism and could not recall taking any course within her degree programs. However, much like a fellow classmate named Betsy, it took Susie moving to Florida from Massachusetts to realize that she had not “been exposed to diversity much.”

Betsy is a 6th-grade science teacher with aspirations of working to impact “equity and social justice.” Betsy feels that it is vital to think about issues influence students outside of the classroom and school setting. Hence, she stated that her ideas about social justice “stem from systemic issues.” Her passion is to have an impact on educational policies and improve the lives of students and families. Betsy states that it was hard to pinpoint a specific event that shaped her identity. However, she felt that the elements of her childhood influenced her self-perception. She is a first-generation American as her parents emigrated from Europe. Betsy notes that her childhood was splendid, and she was privileged to grow up “among the trees.” She later realized that she was sheltered and how the “dawn of the Internet changed everything.” She ends with a sentiment regarding her move from Massachusetts to Florida as a complete “culture shock.” This led to her understanding that she had not experienced diversity much at all. Therefore, her work as a teacher has provided her with opportunities to work with diverse students and to see things beyond her town back home.

Tina is the Director of Community Outreach for a foundation, a local non-profit that strives to improve the community with hands-on E-STEM learning. Before her current position, she worked in higher education for more than ten years, and she plans to return to student affairs. Tina studied abroad during a semester when she was an undergrad, and the experience shaped her perception and expanded the world. She feels this “broadened her understanding of culture” and helped her “value and embrace differences.” This experience also allowed her to understand others from an appreciative standpoint and examine her own culture in a more meaningful manner. Tina also had the opportunity to participate in a course with a large number of international students, which was “enriching and elevated” her learning.

Helen is a school psychologist who has been in the district for 18 years and has been a school psychologist for 20 years. Helen states that she could not ever identify one specific life event that shaped her identity; however, if she were required to choose one, it would be becoming a mother, especially having two girls. As for experiences related to diversity, globalization, and multicultural education, most of her career has been spent in Title 1 schools in which she has worked with a variety of students from many diverse backgrounds. Helen states that “cultural diversity can be referred to as having different cultures and respecting each other’s differences.” She feels as though we are all different and come with unique qualities.

#### *Data Collection Process*

Following the qualitative research tradition, the researchers used multiple data sources (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). “Each data source is one piece of the ‘puzzle,’ with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon. This convergence adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554). To fully explore and understand the extent to which the perceptions of doctoral candidates had changed in a semester, the researchers collected and analyzed discussion posts and replies, student book reviews, student presentations of a chapter in a multicultural book, and used follow-up questions for necessary clarification.

The researchers analyzed discussion posts and replies that were posted during the seven weeks of the course. Each week, the participants would read 6-10 articles on various multicultural education topics and answer the posed questions with a minimum of 1,000-word original post and respond to two classmates in a response containing a minimum of 300 words. The researchers compiled all posts into a Google document, replaced names with pseudonyms, and analyzed individually for themes. After the initial analysis was conducted, all themes were explored and cross-referenced with each member of the research team.

Additionally, the researchers used book reviews. The students were tasked with selecting and reading a book from a provided list related to multicultural education and global studies. Students then developed a book review and reflective paper on the critical issues that the book addresses, particularly 4-5 major issues related to diversity, multiculturalism, and/or global issues. Students were also required to discuss the author’s point of view and provide individualized analysis based on knowledge obtained through the course text and additional readings. During the course, the participants presented their book reviews, and they were uploaded electronically for all to view. The researchers then compiled all book reviews into a Google document, removed names, and analyzed for themes. After the initial analysis was conducted, all themes were explored and cross-referenced with each member of the research team.

The final data source the researchers utilized was the chapter presentations. The students were asked to read and summarize a chapter from one of the course’s required texts: *Citizen Education and Global Migration* by James Banks. The students had the flexibility in selecting the chapter they were interested in examining more in-depth. Each week one participant created a 10–15-minute presentation to share with the class. Within the presentation, the students were required to capture the chapter’s main ideas and present them in a well-developed fashion to cover the chapter in

its entirety. At the end of each presentation, the participants were responsible for posing a question to their classmates. The question needed to be open-ended to promote discussion. The researchers listened to class presentations of each chapter and took field notes, then compiled all reports into a google document, removed names, and analyzed for themes. After the initial analysis was conducted, all themes were explored and cross-referenced with each member of the research team.

### *Analyzing of Data*

For this qualitative case study, the researchers used the data analysis spiral method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The spiral method begins with data collection and with the researchers managing and organizing the data securely. The researchers then read and documented emerging ideas, describe and classify codes into themes, develop and assess interpretations, represent and visualize the data, and finally report the finding based on this process.

After listening to each presentation, the researchers personally typed all field notes regarding each presentation and stored all electronic copies in a password protected file within a google drive. All students were informed that their discussion posts/replies, book reviews, and chapter presentations were being analyzed for this case study through a statement within the course syllabus. The researchers then compiled all discussion posts/replies into a Google document to prepare the data for analysis. This process was repeated with the book reviews and chapter presentations. However, during this time, notes about the presentations typed up by each researcher were also utilized.

Once all of the data had been organized and compiled into a Google document, the researchers then began by using iterative reading and content analysis, reading through each post, book review, and PowerPoint chapter presentation a minimum of five times with at least a day between each reading. On day one, the posts/replies, book reports, and chapter presentations were read from start to finish. On days two, three, and four, the researchers reread the posts/replies, book reviews, and chapter presentations from start to finish while underlining and highlighting key significant phrases, such as “besides agreeing that change is needed, what can educators actually do to ensure that they are inspiring cultural democracy,” “working towards a genuinely inclusive national citizenship,” and “ideological awareness.” On day five, the entire set of data was reread, then the researchers compiled a written list of significant statements.

The second step of the data analysis process was horizontalization, which Creswell and Poth (2018) defines as listing “every significant statement relevant to the topic and giving it equal value” (p. 314). This horizontalization or treating each statement with equal value and removing any repeated statements is essential within this data analysis step. After compiling the list of significant statements, the researchers were then able to organize the significant statements into broader units, also known as themes. The researchers began to create a picture of the doctoral students' perceptions from the themes emerging from iterative readings and content analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One concern associated with the analysis phase is that each data source would be treated individually, and the findings reported separately, which does not embody the purpose of the case study. To combat this concern, the researchers analyzed independently and came together afterward to ensure that the data converged to understand the overall case, not the various parts of the case, or the contributing factors that influence the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Using the constant comparison method (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003) thick descriptions of the participants' perceptions were developed by triangulating and interpreting the students' discussion posts/replies, book reviews, and chapter presentations and verifying within the follow up questioning and the researchers' observation field notes. Triangulation of data sources is a crucial strategy and supports the principle in case study research that the phenomena be considered and studied from numerous perspectives. The compilation and evaluation of this data enrich data quality based on the principles of idea convergence and the endorsement of findings (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989). The researchers read all the data line by line, writing analytical memos of the data, and crystalizing the emergent themes and patterns by relying on multiple sources and experiences during the data collection process.

## **Findings**

The following themes emerged based on data collection and analysis: *the illusion of inclusivity*; *cultural awareness*; and *the disconnection between theory and practice*. The quotations and commentary below were taken from the written work of the students (book reviews and chapter presentations), and the observations made by researchers, and online discussion posts.

### *Theme one: The Illusion of Inclusivity*

*The illusion of inclusivity* emerged as a theme from the discussion posts and the book chapter presentations due to the recurring idea regarding the “melting pot” versus a “tossed salad” as a way to describe how people mix within a larger society. Several book chapter presentations detailed how many countries struggle with the importance of assimilation versus nationalism. Pam, Jack, Susie, and Helen all detailed the struggles countries have experienced concerning emphasizing national values while also celebrating the diversity of the minority populations. There was extensive discussion regarding which term was the most appropriate for the lived experience of people in this country. Helen



mentioned the melting pot as part of “a history of multiculturalism originally manifested” to describe immigrants coming to America. Later in the semester, Helen mentioned this concept again in her presentation of a book chapter highlighting how “Norway and the United Kingdom emphasize national values and the assimilation of minorities.” To others in the group, this phrase was troublesome because there is an assumption of a loss of culture as someone assimilates to the culturally dominant aspects of a society. Some participants felt that the term “tossed salad” was more inclusive because the connotations allow members of the society to maintain their cultural roots and still be part of a larger culturally diverse society.

Alexis explained the importance of recognizing individuality and said, “if we genuinely want to improve, we need to be more than surface deep because we are looking at a global concern.” Alexis also touched upon this within her book review on *I am Malala: A Girl who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* by Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb, and supported the idea of global concern by stating, “Malala wrote this book to heighten awareness, educate, shed light on a global issue, and provide a platform for the voiceless; this book not only accomplished these goals but captivates the hearts of reads also.” During a book chapter presentation, Susie described the concept of political literacy that includes having students learn more than just surface facts, generalizations, or assumptions and having students get involved in solving political problems. The idea that educators do not do enough to promote diving “deeper into the issues” allows for the illusion of inclusivity to perpetuate in educational settings.

Betsy discussed the idea of “cultural capital” and started the conversation regarding “White privilege.” This term is used to describe how those who belong to the dominant culture benefit from membership in ways that those outside that culture do not. Along this same vein, members of the group discussed how those who are privileged do not concern themselves with meritocracy “as it serves their interests.” She described how “White privilege is a really tricky thing for people to see. Sometimes people are overtly racist and other times they do not really understand how oppression works”. Susie highlighted the importance of “using privilege to help others” and further explained that they must “start with acknowledging that one has privilege” to use their privilege. Meanwhile, Betsy further described how there is no neutral position and wrote, “whichever side we are on, whether it be the privileged or not, we are all part of the system, and our actions either work to reinforce oppression or not. I like the idea of using our privilege to help others.” Finally, Larry highlighted the idea that acceptance is necessary when discussing inclusivity and said, “The “balance” that nearly all the authors covered as a prerequisite is one that can only be found if a collective recognition of the problem is admitted to by the people.”

Furthermore, Carol offered more insight into privilege and described it like “an elephant which represented a society of people who go through their human life, unaware of the trouble in our world that seems to be getting worse” with the understanding “that privilege may be the foundation by providing opportunities to others while promoting discrimination that is not privileged, creating separation that can last for generations.” Additionally, Tina wrote about her realization regarding privilege and said, “until recently it was not abundantly clear to me how much privilege I possessed. Until the thought is in the forefront, you live without realizing all of the afforded opportunities you have”.

Jack described his experience as an African American student who did well in school and explained how members of his “own ethnic background would revere my commitment to excellence as if it was only a white thing. Somehow, they bought into a societal stereotype that suggested smartness was out of reach for the black student.” This serves as an example of how students are expected to feel included within any group, but even those of a similar cultural background can make them feel like they do not belong.

### *Theme two: Cultural Awareness*

*Cultural awareness* emerged as a theme through the online discussion posts and the chapter presentations as the participants discussed problems with a lack of cultural awareness as well as the benefits of a more culturally aware society. Most book chapters included beginning slides with basic information about countries and their demographics, demonstrating that many participants had little awareness of cultures other than those familiar to them. In a book chapter presentation, Jack asked the participants if they thought that there was a concern with egocentrism or if schools have begun to inculcate in students through a culture of competition and self-interest. Pam wrote about how “we all have something different and positive to bring to the conversation, and we as people need to learn from each other.” She further explained the importance of educators extending “beyond that of their culture ... to experience real multicultural education.” Tina echoed this growth and said, “I have learned personally that growth occurs outside of my comfort zone, by confronting difficult situations head-on, increasing self-awareness, and by openly discussing my feelings.”

Betsy expressed ideas regarding how “knowledge reflects the social, cultural, and power positions within society, and without acknowledging the subjectivity of knowledge, we further the status quo.” Tina added to this idea and explained that “we are not able to undo the wrongdoings from our history, but we can change how those topics are taught to our youth. How history is taught directly impacts our future.”

Jack supported Betsy’s and Tina’s ideas regarding cultural awareness within his book review on *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning: Classroom Practices for Student Success* (2nd ed.) by Hollie Sharroky,

stating that “Hollie (2018) places significance on including students' cultural and linguistic experiences in all facets of learning through addressing culture and language in five key areas: classroom management, academic literacy, academic vocabulary, academic language, and learning environment. The goal of his book is to promote a culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment that validates and affirms students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds through a shift in mindset and a change in skillset.”

The idea of knowledge construction segued nicely into who should be involved in curating cultural awareness. Larry explained

that multicultural education needs to be a mainstay of how we develop curriculum frameworks, develop school policies and procedures, and open dialogues. We also need to be keenly aware of involving members of as many groups as possible to move the social needle forward. Schools would do well to look at their own policies and social constructs that may inhibit groups of diverse backgrounds from moving forward in the ways of the school.

This sentiment was echoed further by Pam when she talked about teacher and parent involvement and added,

I have difficulty getting teachers involved in my SAC meetings. I think their involvement is important because they are working alongside parents and getting to know them. This helps to educate teachers on where the students come from and opens their eyes to the diversity of their students.

Pam's sentiments from her discussion post were similar to Susie's book chapter presentation, where she reiterated that schools should not just teach about politics but should allow the students to have experiences within their community and be involved in solving political problems with community stakeholders. Betsy also mentioned the importance of parent involvement to promote cultural awareness and said, “the best outcomes always come from the relationships that I have built with the parents to help the students. Parents respond really well to understanding and care.” Thereby bringing parents into the cultural sphere and taking the time to learn about each other. She further added that “while this is a small scale idea it can be translated to larger initiatives to welcome and involve more parents. I think educators sometimes mistake barriers to involvement with apathy”.

### *Theme three: The Disconnection between Theory and Practice*

*The disconnection between theory and practice* emerged through the discussion posts primarily regarding leadership and teacher preparation programs, but it also appeared in some book chapter presentations. Carol posted that teacher preparation is one of the challenges in educating students for citizenship. Pam discussed an obstacle that some programs faced regarding exposure to diverse students and wrote,

if the middle-class white teachers are attending teacher preparation programs within their area, they are more than likely attending these programs with people of similar backgrounds. Teacher preparation programs often require future teachers to go out into their local community and complete observation and internship hours. These hours are being completed in the community in which the future teacher lives. The idea of experiencing multicultural education beyond the textbook is not a reality.

Furthermore, Larry said, “I am ... in favor of a collective teacher education program that exposes young teachers to a variety of opinions about diverse topics that further thought and provides the same diverse solutions to the complicated problems.” Adding to this sentiment, he explained the problem of representation. He wrote, “the conundrum of the teaching population representing largely white, middle-class females remains a major issue ... leaders need to be strategic in recruiting great educators that represent minority ... populations to adequately serve the students in our classrooms.” Susie supported Larry's ideas regarding teacher preparation and offered a suggestion within her book review on *Across a Hundred Mountains: A Novel* by Reyna Grande, stating that “Educators might use this as a book study with their colleagues, and universities might use it with their teacher preparation courses in areas with high migratory rates.”

Betsy discussed how authentic experiences could empower students and said, “educators have to show that they are in the fight with their students ... that goes beyond celebrating Black History Month and engages students in authentic experiences so they can understand how they can change the world.” Betsy's sentiments were similar to the idea of political literacy that Susie discussed in her book chapter presentation. She discussed how students should learn about politics and be involved in real-world problem-solving opportunities within their community. Betsy further added that “teachers have an opportunity to illuminate collective struggles and uncover systems that protect hegemonic structures, which create barriers that keep people from accessing the full potential of a society.” Tina brought up the responsibility of educators “for preparing students to participate in our globalized society, but to also exist in the diverse classrooms they are a part of now.” Helen furthered this theme by explaining that:

The work of educators who are seeking to engineer a sense of social responsibility among privileged students is not to encourage students to discard their privilege. Instead, we should be generating an energy and excitement for them to use their privilege to create lasting and sustainable change.

Throughout the book chapter presentations, the participants were to select a question for the group to discuss. Many questions asked the participants if it was feasible to incorporate multicultural education or human rights curricula into schools. Sean posed the question if it was possible to approach citizenship education effectively while also keeping education authentic. Alexis asked the group to ponder the impact of a human rights curriculum within the United States and globally.

Participants also expressed concern regarding leadership and policy that could push multicultural education into practice more meaningfully. Jack discussed the importance of “policy vocabularies” and wrote,

Given the state of our current society and the many protests around racial injustice, the vocabulary of social justice should be part of the overall educational focus of schools. School leaders must help today’s generation make meaning of the issues that surround injustice in America.

Alexis wrote about social justice, leadership, and policy as well and said, “we need to address equity within policy if we want to grow influential social justice leaders within our educational leadership programs.” In another discussion post, she discussed the importance of studying policy in other countries to learn from and said:

We have to look inward and see that comparative education is regarding the betterment of our society rather than the patronizing imposition of our own policies and practice on other societies. If we study foreign educational systems extensively and sympathetically, we can realize how many things within our own educational system need prompt and searching change.

Furthermore, the concept of representative leadership was showcased by Tina when she said, “By not changing leadership to include underrepresented populations, we are quieting their voices and declaring at a higher level than they still don’t have a place at the table. We need to make changes at a higher level.” Finally, the concept of transformative leadership was mentioned in this context when Alexis wrote,

Transformative leadership has the power to be, as its name says, “transformative.” However, within our educational system and higher education settings, there are so many restrictions and rules. This limits and puts restraints on the transformative abilities. So, while transformative leadership can be so impactful and “transformative” there is a constant weight of restrictive leadership due to continual guidelines being established.

It appeared that there was a consensus that educators need support and guidance from those within the hierarchy to move forward effectively within the realm of multicultural education. It also seemed that to create educational experiences that promote multicultural education, educators would be pushing against the expected norms and, in turn, may be met by restrictive forces.

### **Discussion**

Three themes emerged from this study that addressed the main research question based on data collection and analysis. They were 1) the illusion of inclusivity (Copeland & Tarver, 2020), 2) cultural awareness (Chun & Evans, 2016; Porto & Byram, 2015), and 3) disconnection between theory and practice (Larson & Archambault, 2019; Samuels et al., 2017). These themes also supported the three sub-questions: What were the factors that drove the graduate students to want to seek out further experiences for them or their students with multicultural education? What did the participants perceive as potential barriers to influencing educational reform? In what ways did the perceptions of the graduate students regarding multicultural education change over the course of a semester?

Although the literature review included numerous studies on how teachers feel that multiculturalism is critical, many teachers still feel ill-prepared to address diversity issues within their classrooms (Castro, 2010; Holm & Zilliacus, 2009; Taylor et al., 2016; Veliz & Hossein, 2020). A scarcity of studies exists with participants who have many years of experience in education, who aim to be educational leaders, or who already are in leadership positions within education. Therefore, one goal of this study was to add to the literature on the impact of educational leaders on multicultural education.

The critical pedagogy framework was apparent in the themes. The illusion of inclusivity was related to the ways the graduate students reflected on their own assumptions about what it means to be truly inclusive. The students participated in activities that were meant to help them think about their assumptions, which is a major tenet of critical pedagogy. Moreover, there was evidence that the participants had experienced moments of cognitive dissonance that forced them to think about the systems that cause inequalities. Regarding the theme related to theory and practice, the participants realized that there were barriers to implementing changes in systems related to multicultural education. Research has shown the importance of multicultural education and its myriad of benefits to students globally (Alanay & Aydin, 2016; Beckett & Kobayashi, 2020). Several barriers to implementing a multicultural education curriculum include but are not limited to the illusion of inclusivity within schools, a lack of cultural awareness among students and staff, and the disconnect between theory and practice.

### Conclusion

Throughout this study, the researchers explored and described the perceptions of a group of doctoral students towards multicultural education. This study specifically explored the ideas and attitudes towards multicultural education over a semester while engaging in coursework related to multiculturalism. The research team also looked into aspects that they felt hindered implementing a curriculum geared towards global citizenship. The overall research question that guided the study was: What are the perceptions of graduate students regarding multicultural education?

This study provides insights into the perceptions of current and future educational leaders towards the importance and realistic implementation of a multicultural education curriculum. Participants discussed the importance of celebrating diversity and acknowledged that it is difficult to do so within schools' constraints today. Additionally, participants identified that students and teachers lack cultural awareness, which holds them back from investigating or implementing any multicultural education curriculum. Finally, the participants illuminated a disconnect between the idea of multicultural education and putting that idea into practice. Further research should be conducted to dig deeper into these challenges, look more in-depth at the disconnect, and determine if it is a global issue. Learning more from current and potential future educational leaders would provide information that would benefit school districts, teachers, and students.

### Recommendations

Research shows that many pre-service teachers feel uncomfortable or ill-prepared to teach a diverse group of students or implement a multicultural education curriculum. While this study yielded new themes and provided information regarding the perceptions of graduate students in an educational leadership program towards the implementation of multicultural education, future research should be conducted in this area on a larger scale with surveys and focus groups. Action research projects could be conducted to determine strategies and systems that could be put into place to support teachers and schools in implementing a multicultural education curriculum.

### Limitations

As researchers within the sample, bracketing personal biases to ensure reliability and thoroughness was essential. The researchers were deeply involved in the project due to their expertise and research interests within multicultural education. The first three authors were all doctoral students participating in the same program under study while also working as a participant-observer, writing field notes about the weekly in-class discussions, book reviews, and chapter presentations while analyzing the data drawn from the students' coursework. The fourth author, a professor of the multicultural education course, was responsible for designing the course discussions, book reviews, and coursework, scoring the submitted assignments and responding to students with copious feedback, and analyzing the data.

In the analysis stage, the reliability of the findings or "dependability" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556) of the data can be upheld by having multiple researchers independently code a dataset and then meet a consensus on the emerging codes and categories (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Within this case study, the co-authors analyzed the data to minimize biases and later discussed and compared identified themes to ensure the study's reliability and trustworthiness.

It is essential to have researchers who are immersed within the context of multicultural education to evaluate and analytically dissect the learning process that participants experience. While being actively involved within the research, active participants have a unique perspective that can help understand presented perceptions and uncover essential themes. Strategies commonly integrated within a qualitative case study to establish credibility include reflection or the maintenance of field notes and peer examination of the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The researchers' participation in the course and their vested interests in multicultural education allows for important perceptions to be considered and analyzed by viewing detailed field notes. The researchers were able to take full advantage of their position in the field to generate extensiveness of comprehension and depth of understanding.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Doucette: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript. Sheplak: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript. Sanabria: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript. Aydin: Admin, technical or material support, supervision, final approval.

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