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Cultural Diversity Professional Development for Teachers: A Research Brief

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY

professional development
for **TEACHERS**



a research brief



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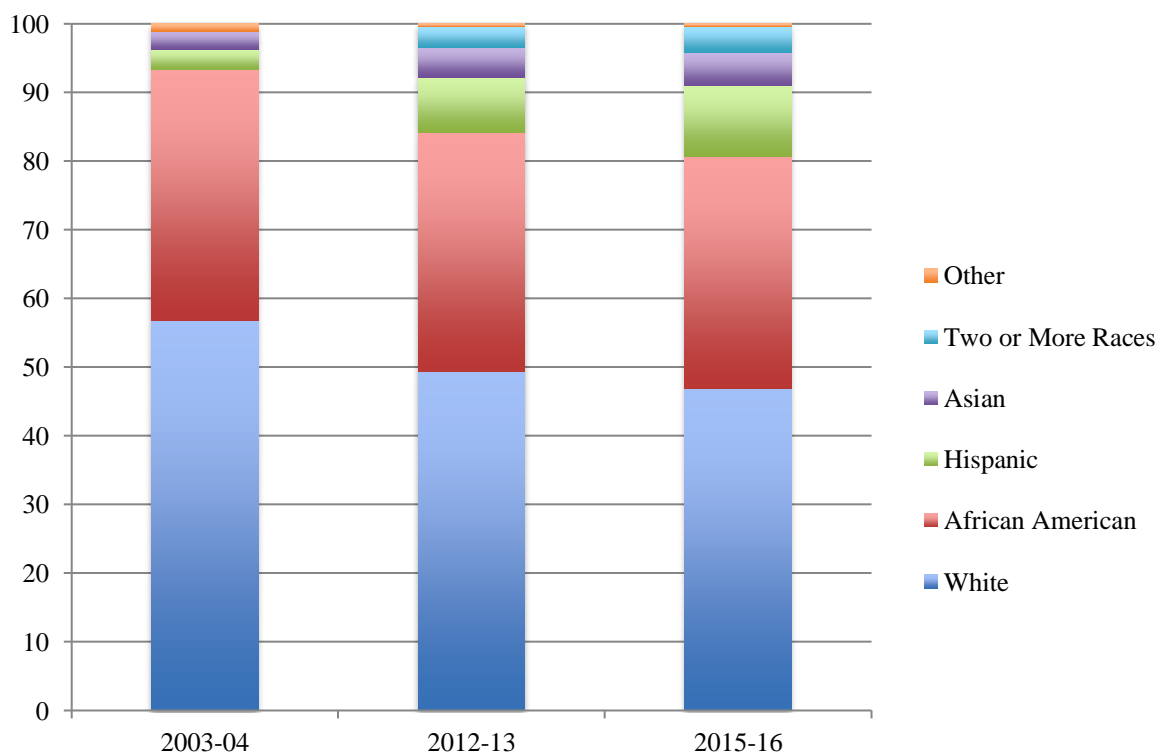
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CULTURAL DIVERSITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT for TEACHERS

a research brief by Samantha Hope, M.T. and David Naff, M.A.
Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium
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Many regions of the United States have experienced rapid shifts in the racial and ethnic makeup of the population over the past decade. As a result, many of the nation's schools have undergone significant changes in student demographics. This includes growth in the numbers of Asian, Hispanic, and multi-racial students.¹ Regionally, enrollment data reflect this demographic change (figure 1). It is also worth noting that these demographic changes are more dramatic in some schools and communities than others. Aggregate data for the region shows the largest growth in the population of Hispanic students, which increased from 2.98% of the population in the 2003-04 school year to 10.23% in the 2015-16 school year. This demographic shift has increased the cultural and language diversity of our schools.

Figure 1. *Percent of Total Students Enrolled in Public Schools in the MERC Region by Race/Ethnicity⁴*



However, through this demographic shift, the teacher workforce has remained fairly consistent, with the majority of public school teachers being white females.² This has created a situation

where there is growing cultural and language gap between the student body and those who teach them.³

Why does this matter?

The increase in the diversity of our schools creates both opportunities and challenges. The challenges include structuring and access to curriculum and assessments that meet the needs of a more diverse student body, as well the promotion of school cultures and classrooms that support tolerance and understanding across difference. One of the central strategies for addressing these challenges must involve providing support to teachers and school staff to work in schools characterized by more diversity. One of the primary concerns with the changing demographics in schools is the possibility of a culture gap developing between teachers and students.⁸ Teachers may view students through the lens they have developed throughout their personal schooling experience. This lens may not accurately reflect an understanding of cultural differences.⁹ To effectively provide instruction to a diverse group of learners and make connections with the students and their families, teachers need to understand cultural differences and the rich backgrounds the students bring with them. Teachers must be culturally responsive practitioners, understanding the lens through which students see the world.¹⁰ They must also be capable of working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and incorporating various pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of all learners.¹¹ Teachers must receive on the job training to successfully teach in diverse school settings and become reflective about potential biases they may bring into the classroom, and which could become barriers to student and school success.

How is this problem currently being addressed?

Efforts to develop the ability of teachers to work in culturally diverse schools take many forms. This includes expanding the diversity of the teacher workforce, the curriculum of teacher preparation programs, and professional development training for in-service teachers.

Diversifying the Teacher Workforce

The United States Department of Education recently reported that it is “dedicated to increasing the diversity of our educator workforce, recognizing that teachers and leaders of color will play a critical role in ensuring equity in our education system.”⁵ Many minority educators enter the profession through alternative routes to teacher certification rather than traditional teacher preparation programs. However the number of minorities enrolled in teacher preparation programs at institutes of higher learning is increasing. In the 2013-14 academic year, Virginia was one of six states with the greatest enrollment of African Americans in teacher preparation programs.⁵ To continue to increase enrollment of minorities in teacher preparation programs, which will develop a more diverse teaching staff, colleges and universities can actively recruit

minority high school students.⁶ Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education provides one example of an institute of higher learning dedicated to recruiting diverse students and preparing them to teach in area school divisions.⁷

Pre-service Preparation and University Faculty Professional Development

Some teacher preparation programs are attempting to address pre-service teachers' own cultural understandings. These training programs include strategies for self-reflection,¹² which can uncover biases, and cultural immersion programs.⁹ To effectively teach pre-service teachers about cultural diversity, university faculty need to receive training on the topic as well. An examination of cultural diversity professional development provided to university faculty can inform K-12 teacher professional development. In a study conducted at a university in California, researchers found that providing cultural diversity professional development for faculty members, designed by faculty members based upon their needs, increased understanding of diversity and the ability to incorporate it in the pre-service teaching curriculum.¹³ Researchers noted that an important element of this professional development was the in-person interaction of participants. Through this format, they were able to engage in dialogue about diversity. Encouraging conversations among teachers can have a large impact on developing their understanding of cultural differences and knowing how to approach students and their families.¹⁴

Through Standards

Teaching standards often include information about the need for reaching all learners, including culturally and linguistically diverse ones. In an analysis of standards for teachers, researchers found that standards were very broad and vague in addressing the need for knowledge about diversity.¹¹ The standards did not address specific pedagogical strategies that could be used to help diverse learners achieve academically.

In-service Professional Development

Another strategy involves individual school systems providing professional development to teachers to build an understanding of the changing diversity within the schools and effective strategies for teaching in these contexts. Some of the programs being implemented are designed at the school or division level, while others have been created by outside companies.

One way cultural diversity is being addressed in schools is through the use of culturally responsive teaching practices. In an article addressing this approach, the authors explain, "To ensure the academic achievement of diverse learners in urban, rural, and suburban communities across the United States, institutions of higher education and school districts must provide a rigorous continuum of ongoing PD to support beginning and experienced teachers in their understanding and implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices."¹⁵ Culturally responsive teaching incorporates students' rich cultural heritage into learning experiences, which can have positive academic outcomes. However, researchers explain that the ongoing

professional development required to effectively teach in this manner is often lacking.¹⁵ There are also numerous online tools and trainings available to teachers and schools to improve cultural diversity understanding.¹⁶

Discussion and Persisting Questions

Research indicates the importance of providing teachers with training to increase their understanding of cultural diversity so that they may meet the needs of all students. Researchers have found that many educators view diverse learners as having deficits, and express a need for professional development programs to rectify these perspectives.¹⁷ However, there are no explicit instructions as to how to best accomplish this. Several options for professional development programs exist, and states and districts must evaluate the needs of their teachers to ensure implementation of a professional development program that will meet those needs. Involving teachers in the planning stages of these efforts could be beneficial. This provides them opportunities to engage in discourse throughout the process, effectively increasing their understanding of cultural diversity. Next steps on the topic of cultural diversity professional development for teachers could seek to answer one of the following questions:

1. What specific needs and concerns do teachers and school leaders in the Richmond Metro Area have regarding the increasing cultural diversity in schools? What implications might exist for the elementary, middle, and high school levels?
2. What programs currently exist? What evidence of impact on teachers and students do these programs have?
3. How do teaching standards in the state and nation address cultural diversity? Should these standards be modified?
4. How can MERC support the creation, implementation, and evaluation of a professional development program on the topic of cultural diversity?
5. How can MERC support the compilation and distribution of research-based best practices for meeting the instructional needs of culturally diverse learners?

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