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# The Impact of a Culturally Responsive School Environment on Pre-service Teachers' Willingness to Teach in the School

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Delois Maxwell, *Coppin State College*

*In a climate that acknowledges the need for teacher educators to prepare new teachers for culturally diverse student bodies, the study examines the extent to which selected features of an urban school environment affect a preservice teacher's willingness to teach in the school. A survey was administered to 48 preservice teachers after they completed a 7-week student teaching experience in a large urban school district. The survey sample was drawn from a northeastern university which enrolls 90% Caucasian education students. The study pursues the following research questions: does race/ethnicity, gender, program level, school location and major relate to the preservice teachers' willingness to teach in the urban school? What school environment factors have the strongest association with preservice teachers' willingness to teach in the school? Is preservice teachers' willingness to teach in a school related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school environment? Survey results show that willingness to teach in the school is moderate and positively related to preservice teachers' perception that the school climate is culturally responsive. However these perceptions concerning willingness and responsive climate do not appear to hold for the relationship between willingness and culturally responsive teaching. Interpreting these results, the author raises additional questions for research regarding preservice teachers' understanding of cultural diversity as well as their perception of the need for culturally responsive teaching.*

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## Introduction

Rapidly changing demographics of the nation's student population leave little choice for teacher educators in the matter of program and curricular change (Morey and Kitano 1997). The inclusion of a multicultural education in teacher training programs is driven by the recognition that teachers entering the profession must begin with a new commitment and ability to serve a diverse student population (Dilworth; Bennett; Deering and Stanutz). Although the terminology varies, the literature is rich in studies and discourse that examine issues relating to multicultural education and teaching for cultural diversity. Much of the research examines pre-service teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and teaching behavior in schools or field experiences, while others focus on developing multicultural education theory (Boyle-Baise and Washburn). Kea and Bacon's research describes a partnership that was designed to promote student teachers' reflective experiences in multicultural school settings, while Peterson, Cross, Johnson, and Howell, examined the impact of diversity issues on perceptions of pre-service teachers in an educational foundations course. In a review of 1990's

research that addresses urban teacher preparation, Weis noted, "A significant development in the decade was the shift in thinking about whether prospective teachers should be screened for admission to programs of teacher preparation on the basis of their attitudes about teaching a culturally diverse student population"(395).

As teacher educators struggle to prepare teachers for culturally diverse schools and as researchers explore the topic from a variety of perspectives, issues emerge that need to be considered. How do pre-service teachers feel about cultural diversity in teaching? Do we know enough about its effect on their perceptions of teaching? For example, do teachers understand what it actually means to teach for cultural diversity? Given the current demands on teachers, do pre-service teachers believe the issue of cultural diversity

in teaching is just another "thorn in their sides"? Is cultural diversity really important to the novice teacher struggling to survive the first year or two? What effect would it have on a novice teacher's propensity to stay in teaching? Would a pre-service teacher know a culturally responsive school if he saw it in operation? Would a culturally responsive school make a difference in a pre-service teacher's decision to teach at the school?

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## Culturally Responsive Education

What is culturally responsive education? How does it look in actual practice at the school? Neito suggests that schools should reflect an understanding and acceptance of all students having talents and strengths that can enhance their education. Culturally responsive schools are caring communities, “places where teachers and students care about and support each other, actively participate in and contribute to activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging and identification, and have a shared sense of purpose and common values” (Lewis, Schaps and Watson). The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory’s *Strategic Teaching and Reading Project Guidebook*

*The curriculum content is inclusive, meaning it reflects the cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity of society and the world. Instructional and assessment practices build on the students’ prior knowledge, culture, and language. Classroom practices stimulate students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and examine cultural biases and assumptions. Schoolwide beliefs and practices foster understanding and respect for cultural diversity and celebrate the contributions of diverse groups. School programs and instructional practices draw from and integrate community and family language and culture, and help families and communities to support the students’ academic success (1995).*

Teaching at the culturally responsive school reflects appreciation and accommodation of cultural similarities and differences. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg developed a comprehensive model of culturally responsive teaching that crosses disciplines and cultures to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity. It accommodates the dynamic mix of race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion and family that contributes to every student’s cultural identity. Other researchers suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy is developmentally appropriate and reflects a commitment to learn from and about children, building on the strengths and experiences that children bring to school (Delpit; Ladson-Billings)

### Teacher Willingness to Teach in the Urban School

Large urban schools tend to be less attractive to new teachers for a variety of reasons. Some prefer the more affluent suburban schools with more resources and enticing beginning salaries. The social and cultural climate of the suburban school may also appeal to the average teacher who is white, female and approximately 44 years old. Other teacher and school factors may also play important roles in a teacher’s

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decision to stay or enter an urban or non-urban school setting. Leadership behavior, teacher-student relationship, and instructional issues, for example might influence the tenured teacher, regardless of grade level taught to leave the school – whether urban or nonurban. There are some teachers who may choose not to teach in large urban school districts, believing the challenge is too great for their cultural integrity and pedagogical ability.

### **Purpose of the Study**

**T**his study examined the extent to which selected features of the urban school environment impact pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school. A second aim of the study was to determine if perceptions of a culturally responsive school environment is important to pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school. The study was framed around the following research questions:

Does race/ethnicity, gender, program level, school location, and major relate to the of pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the urban school?

What school environment factors have the strongest association with pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school?

Is pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in a school related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate?

### **Assumptions of the Study**

**T**he research was grounded in the assumption that if a culturally responsive school climate is important to pre-service teachers, it might also influence their decision to teach in the school. Answers to these questions might inform educators who struggle with planning teacher class assignments, and those engaged in restructuring academic programs for inclusion or mainstreaming.

### **Methodology**

#### *The Data*

**T**he data for this study consists of responses to a survey administered to 48 pre-service teachers after completing a 7-week student teaching experience in a large urban school district. The pre-service teachers were majoring in early childhood, elementary, and



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secondary teacher education program at a Northeastern University enrolling approximately 14,000 students, with about ninety percent Caucasian. There are approximately sixty faculty members in the teacher education program, which graduates the largest pool of teachers in the surrounding tri-county area.

### ***The Data Context***

Student teaching occurred during the final semester of the senior year in two 7-week periods. Upon completing each 7-week internship student teachers were required to complete surveys about the teacher education program and University Supervisor. In order to engage in a multicultural teaching experience, interns were required to student teach in the local urban school district for at least one 7-week period. Administrators in the school district indicated an interest in knowing pre-service teachers' perceptions of the school. To address this request the school climate survey was added after the second 7 weeks of student teaching.

### ***Measures***

The school climate survey consisted of 95 Likert-scale items grouped under 6 domains or themes, and one open-ended statement. The domains included: *a) teacher-student relationship, b) leadership behavior, c) student engagement in learning, c) parent engagement in the school, d) staff governance of the school, e) school climate, and f) willingness to teach in the school.* Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 6-point Likert scale. An open-ended item asked respondents to "Please give your opinion of the school." The questionnaire design was based on the NASSP School Climate Survey, which collects and measures data about perceptions on teacher-student relationships, security and maintenance, administration, student academic orientation, student behavioral values, guidance, student-peer relationships, parent and community-school relationships, instructional management, and student activities (Lunenburg and Ornstein 1991).

### ***Variables in the Study***

Pre-service teachers' perceptions of student teacher relationships, leadership behavior, student engagement in learning, and student ability are the independent variables in the study. The dependent variable is willingness to teach in the school. It measures the extent to which pre-service teachers agree that they are willing to teach in the school in which they engaged in student teaching.

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### *Data Analysis*

All items used in the study were recoded from a Likert response scale to a dichotomous scale. Responses of 1-3 were recoded to “1” and labeled “disagree” and 4-6 responses coded as “2” and assigned an “agree”. An Alpha reliability coefficient for each composite variable was calculated to determine the reliability of composite variables. Bivariate analysis was used to assess the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables and examine the questions addressed in the study.

### *Results*

The research questions examined the extent to which pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in a school is related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate, and determined if race/ethnicity, gender, program level, and major also related to the propensity to teach at their school. To explore the importance of a culturally responsive school environment, another aim of the research was to examine the extent to which other factors in the school environment related to pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school.

### *Teacher Characteristics and Willingness to Teach in the Urban School*

None of the background variables were statistically related to teachers' willingness to teach in the school as noted in Table 1.

**Table 1. Bivariate Analysis – Teacher Characteristics and Willingness to Teach in the School**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Program Level</b>
Willingness to Teach in the School	.13	-.04	.16	-2.3

Table 2 presents the extent to which pre-service teachers in the study were willing to teach in the schools in which they completed their second 7-week internship. While one-third of the group indicated a willingness to do so, it also appears that almost 68 percent of these interns were not willing to teach in their school. Respondents' level of agreement on all other variables in the study is presented in Table 4.

**Table 2. Pre service Teacher's Level of Agreement on Willingness to Teach in the School**

	Frequency	Percent
Disagree	32	66.7
Agree	16	33.3
Total	48	100.00

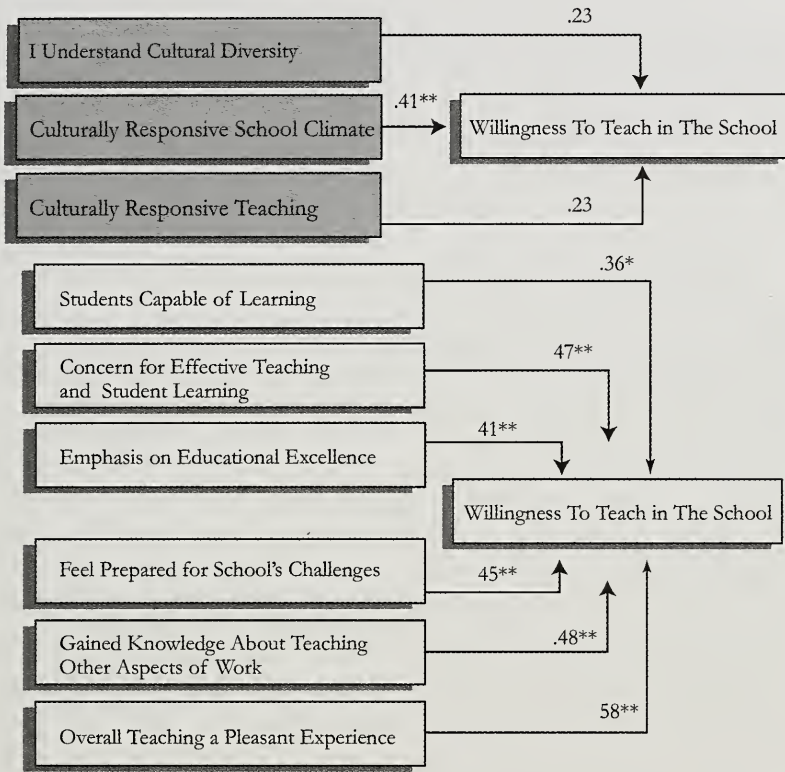
Note in Table 2 that one third (33.3 percent) of the interns indicate they would teach in the school, while 70 percent said they feel prepared to meet the challenges at the school. Yet 50 percent (Table 3) would not teach at the school because they are not comfortable in the setting, and did not feel that the student teaching experience was pleasant and enriching.



**Table 3.**  
**Pre Service Teachers' Level of Agreement on Selected School Environment**

Factors	Frequency	Percent
My school emphasizes education excellence		
1. Disagree	16	33.3
2. Agree	32	66.7
Total	48	100.0
I feel prepared to meet challenges at my school		
1. Disagree	14	29.2
2. Agree	34	70.8
Total	48	100.0
I understand cultural diversity		
1. Disagree	13	27.1
2. Agree	35	67.7
Total	48	100.0
My school has a culturally responsive climate		
1. Disagree	16	33.3
2. Agree	32	67.7
Total	48	100.0
Teachers at my school engaged in culturally responsive teaching		
1. Disagree	13	27.1
2. Agree	35	72.9
Total	48	100.0
Students at my school are capable of learning		
1. Disagree	21	43.8
2. Agree	27	56.2
Total	48	100.0
My school is concerned about effective teaching and learning		
1. Disagree	18	37.5
2. Agree	30	62.5
Total	48	100.0
I gained knowledge on how teaching relates to other aspects of work		
1. Disagree	19	39.6
2. Agree	29	60.4
Total	48	100.0
Overall my student teaching experience was pleasant		
1. Disagree	23	47.9
2. Agree	25	52.1
Total	48	100.0
I would not teach because the setting is not comfortable to me		
1. Disagree	24	50
2. Agree	24	50
Total	48	100.0
There is little need to address issues of cultural diversity at the school		
1. Disagree	27	56.3
2. Agree	21	43.7
Total	48	100.0

Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the bivariate relationships in the study.



Shaded box represents culturally responsive school climate factors

\* Significant at 0.05 alpha level

\*\* Significant at 0.01 alpha level

Bivariate Analysis statistics suggests that pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school is not strongly related ( $r = .23$ ) to their understanding of cultural diversity. About 72 percent of them indicate they understand the school's approach to cultural diversity, which also has a moderately strong and positive ( $r = .58$ ) association with their perceptions of culturally responsive teaching. While their willingness to teach in the school is moderate and positively related to their perception that the school climate is culturally responsive ( $r = .41$ ), these perceptions do not appear to hold with regard to culturally responsive teaching ( $r = .23$ ). One explanation for this may be that one half of them do not feel there is a need to address cultural diversity in the school. Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the bivariate relationships in the study.

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## **Willingness to Teach in the School & Non-culturally Responsive School Environment Factors**

As noted in Figure 1 there appears to be a slightly stronger relationship between these teachers' willingness to teach in the school and factors in the school environment that may not be related to cultural diversity. However, teachers who are willing to teach in the school may have found it to be pleasant and enriching as there is a moderately strong and positive relationship between these factors ( $r .58$ ).

### **Discussion & Implications for Further Research**

Although the interns' willingness to teach in the school was moderately related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate, more than one half of them would not teach in the schools where they had engaged in student teaching. They understand the school's approach to addressing cultural diversity and multicultural education, and that understanding has a strong relationship to their belief that teaching in the school is culturally responsive, yet these factors do not appear to have a strong association with their willingness to teach in the school. It is difficult to explain this relationship while at the same time a culturally responsive school environment is related to their willingness to teach in the school. These mixed results suggest a need to re-examine these issues. For example, it is important to have a better understanding of how pre-service teachers define the cultural diversity concept.

The lack of significant correlations between respondents' background variables and the willingness to teach again may be due to a lack of variance on these factors. Almost 80 percent of the sample is comprised of white student teachers, only 6 are male, and 33 are elementary education majors. Although there is almost the same number of undergraduate as graduates in the sample, program level was not significantly related to the dependent variable. It is possible that another variable, namely SES, might have a difference effect on the questions addressed in this study. This is an issue for further research. Finally, additional analysis should be done to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in this study and the responses of those pre-service teachers who said they were willing to teach in the school again. The results of such a study might provide more answers to the questions addressed in this study.

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The results of this study may indicate a need for further development of questions that guide qualitative ethnographic research and large-scale analysis of factors associated with teacher recruitment and retention in large urban school districts, and other schools systems with culturally diverse student populations. Policy and programming issues relating to the continuing professional development of teachers who teach culturally diverse students is important to educators in these schools. Knowledge of the perceptions pre-service teachers hold regarding the school environment in which they student teach may provide critical clues to administrators and teacher educators as they plan for appropriate placement opportunities. Finally, a diverse school environment is fast becoming a reality in many of the nation's schools. To make decisions that will have substantive effect, educators, researchers, and policymakers need information about the climate and culture of these schools. Views of pre-service teachers – who have little to lose by responding candidly – may provide the best insight on what actually takes place in a culturally responsive school.

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