The Effects of Multicultural Education on Doctoral Students’ Interaction with People of Diverse Backgrounds

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Abstract

Arabs and Muslims living in the US have experienced increase in discrimination and negative stereotyping after the tragic attacks of 9/11 as a result of misrepresentations made by mass media. Using the experiences of Arabs and Muslims in the US, the importance of multicultural education was discussed. This exploratory, mixed method study examined the effects of multicultural education on 11 doctoral students and how they perceive and/or interact with people of diverse backgrounds. A survey was used as the main data collection method. Results found that four participants in this study had not taken multicultural education courses in the past; of which two were education majors. The seven participants, who had taken multicultural education courses, felt that it positively affected their perceptions and relations with people of diverse backgrounds. Other factors that were found to influence how these doctoral students interact with and perceive people of diverse backgrounds were family, friends, neighbors, and their teachers.

Keywords: discrimination, diversity, multicultural education
The Effects of Multicultural Education on Doctoral Students

Statement of the Problem

Classrooms of the 21st century are comprised of students from all over the world, speaking different languages, having different traditions, practices, beliefs, and values (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; NCCREST, 2006). To enrich and create an equitable school and classroom environment, students’ diverse backgrounds must be accurately understood and promoted (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; NCCREST, 2006). This may be challenging, as educators need to implement pedagogical approaches that meet the needs of all students (NCCREST, 2006). United States demographics is reshaped by globalization making it imperative that students have a thorough understanding of world history and cultures of various countries. This requires lifelong learning to enable students to build relationships and business partnerships with people from all over the world. According to the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST, 2006), pedagogy that promotes diversity and inclusion is essential in facilitating and supporting the achievement of all students. Multicultural learning can enrich student learning by providing them with valuable knowledge regarding the similarities and distinct and unique values of people in the community. This can in turn create an equitable school, classroom, and community environment as well as prepare students for global relations. In the absence of educating diversity, stereotypes, discrimination, and biases about specific groups may become prevalent affecting a healthy psychological development of some students (Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, Wasik, Jenkins, Garcia, & McAdoo, 1996).

Currently, in the US people of different cultural backgrounds are experiencing hardships as a result of misconceptions or stereotypes against them. This paper uses the experiences of Arabs and Muslims in the US as an example in understanding how communities can be
negatively affected by misrepresentation and biases and the importance of multicultural education in clarifying and changing these negative perceptions.

Prior to and more so after the attacks on September 11, 2001, the media has negatively portrayed Arabs and Muslims living in the U.S. causing Americans to feel wariness and hostility towards them (Merskin, 2004). Arabs in the US have been stereotyped as “enemies of America” because of criminal actions committed by individuals (Wray-Lake, Syversten, & Flanagan 2008, p. 85). In addition, racial profiling and civil liberties affected the lives of many Arabs and Muslims living in the US. Laws were passed that targeted both Arab American and American Muslim communities making them subjects of surveillance, detention, and deportation (Wingfield, 2006). As a result of intense stereotyping and dehumanization, Arabs and Muslims have experienced discrimination, violence, oppression and misrecognition/nonrecognition (Abu El-Haj, 2006). The negative experiences of Arabs and Muslims and those who were perceived as Arab and/or Muslim is an example of what other groups living in the US may be facing as a result of misconceptions or inaccuracies regarding their cultural backgrounds. This leads one to think about the importance of multicultural education in understanding the truth about the beliefs and values of people from diverse backgrounds.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the effect of multicultural education courses on doctoral students’ attitudes towards or interactions with people of diverse backgrounds. Doctoral students are at the highest level of education and therefore are likely to have been exposed to multicultural education courses throughout their educational experiences, impacting how they deal with people of diverse backgrounds on a daily basis.

**Statement of the Problem**
Aldridge and Goldman (2007) stated that everyone has prejudices whether or not one can admit it. When people stereotype, they usually respond to others in a different way based on their perceptions related to ethnicity, which may be based on superficial characteristics (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). The negative experiences of Arabs and Muslims in the US provide an example that there may be a lack of accurate knowledge in regards to specific groups of people in our society. Some people depend on unreliable sources for information which can build negative perceptions of others as a result of misrepresentations. Experiences of Arabs and Muslims are discussed to show that negative perceptions can negatively impact people both psychologically and socially.

Reza (2011) studied the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the media (television, radio news, print news, and internet) and by the motion picture industry, educational institutions and government institutions in both the US and the United Kingdom. Following the events of 9/11, violent attacks took place on people across the country that appeared to fit the generic mold of Arab or Muslim (Ibish, 2003). The victims included a wide range of ethnic and religious groups; dead victims included people who were Christian, Muslim, and Hindu, of Arab, Pakistani, Sikh, and Indian descent (Ibish, 2003). As a result, people of Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities put flags in and out of their homes and businesses in hope that this sign of patriotism will protect them from harm. Sikh taxi drivers put signs informing people of their religious backgrounds and identifying themselves as neither Arab nor Muslim. Muslim women avoided going outside and some made the decision to take off their hijab so that their identity is concealed to the public (Ibish, 2003). The image of “enemies of America” caused perpetrators to act violently against entire groups of people for the actions of individuals (Wray-Lake, Syversten, & Flanagan, p. 85, 2008).
In an exploratory study of Arab Muslims by Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader (2008), all the participants reported having increase in feelings of fear and anxiety after the attacks on 9/11 as a result of intensified hate crimes. Safety (in the country, and in and out of their homes) was a major concern for all participants. This did not just pertain to safety from the American people but also in regards to institutionalized laws and policies against the Arab community. According to Young (1990), “Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life” (p. 53).

The development of cultural identity is another aspect society should consider when understanding the importance of multicultural education. Cultural identity is a multidimensional construct interplaying between religion, culture, ethnicity and national identities where one develops a sense of self as a member of one or more groups (Britto & Amer, 2007). This process of forming cultural identity emerges from the interaction between self and the environment (Erikson, 1968) and is especially critical in the development of adolescence because this is when youth often consolidate their cultural identities (Erikson, 1980). Cultural identity is an important aspect of social development in non-European immigrants (Phinney, 2003), and it has been linked to mental health and academic achievement in minority adolescence (Rayle & Myers, 2004). Oppendal, Roysamb and Sam (2004) found that positive development results when immigrants succeed at integrating one’s own culture and the culture of the receiving society. On the other hand, when immigrants’ identity is marginalized or there is disengagement from both cultures, psychological problems such as anxiety and depression can occur (Berry, 1997).

Identity formation of Arab Muslim youth in the United States is difficult because not only do they have to overcome various aspects of identity but they must also deal with ongoing
political and social context of being portrayed as a potential danger to those around them (Sirin & Fine, 2007).

This type of negativity towards Arab American immigrants has depicted them to be enemies of the United States and making it difficult for them to integrate their native culture and the American culture (Wray-Lake et. al). Issues that may impact the acculturation process and cause acculturative stress are racism, prejudice, discrimination and oppression based on race, ethnicity, religion, social class or gender (Coll et al., 1996). In addition, Oppedal and Roysamb (2004) indicated that immigrant youth might experience externalizing problems (conduct and substance abuse problems), as well as internalizing problems (anxiety and depression) when experiencing ongoing discrimination and exclusion. Supporting this idea, rebellious acts took place in France back in 2005, when suburban immigrant youth fought against police until a state of an emergency was declared. These violent acts were the result of long-term exposure to prejudice and separation (Bowen, 2006). Therefore, it is important to prevent youth from feeling alienated as it may trigger similar situations. Taylor (1992) explained the importance of acknowledging problems of “misrecognition” and “nonrecognition.” He wrote:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (p. 25)

Discrimination and other forms of racism can be detrimental in adolescence as they try to form their identities and are faced with acculturation stressors, which can have a negative impact on
The negative experiences of Arabs and Muslims and those who were perceived to be Arab or Muslim suggests that there is lack of knowledge in regards to people of diverse backgrounds. People have inaccurate perceptions of the cultural backgrounds of others and regard them as factual rather than investigating its validity or accuracy.

Democracy in America teaches “liberty and justice for all” yet discrimination and violence are still prevalent in today’s society. Experiences of hate crimes, discrimination, misrepresentation, and marginalization by mainstream society can mentally and socially affect the well being of entire groups of people. Negative portrayals of groups of people can also affect educators and can influence a teacher’s value system and in turn impact the relationship they have with their students and their families (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This paper suggests that through multicultural education, both educators and students can acquire accurate knowledge and understanding of people of diverse backgrounds and put aside any personal biases they may have. Multicultural learning can enrich student learning by providing them with valuable knowledge regarding the similarities and distinct and unique values of people in the community (NCCREST, 2006). This can create an equitable school, classroom and community environment as well as prepare students for global relations.

Limitations in Current Research

This study examined the effects of multicultural education courses on 13 first–year doctoral students at a private suburban university and their attitudes towards people of diverse cultural backgrounds. The participants of the study were a sample of convenience. They are enrolled in an Interdisciplinary Educational Studies program, who come from diverse educational backgrounds. The experiences of these doctoral students provide preliminary
information in regards to their involvement in multicultural education courses and learned abilities as to how they interact with a diverse population. However, the results of this research cannot be generalized; as the study is based on a small sample of doctoral students.

**Scope of the Study**

This exploratory study investigated the attitudes of one doctoral cohort, looking at the influence multicultural courses had on its members to positively interact with people of diverse backgrounds. Survey questions were to be completed within a two-week period, during the Spring 2013 semester. Student emails were used, but time did not allow for additional face-to-face interviews.

**Expected Contributions of This Study**

It is prevalent in our society that people of diverse backgrounds are misrepresented and misunderstood, causing people to discriminate and stereotype against other members of their society. This study explored the effects of multicultural education courses on ways doctoral students perceive and interact with people of diverse backgrounds. It is expected that doctoral students have been positively affected by taking multicultural courses throughout their educational experiences. The goal of this study was to promote the exposure of multicultural courses to students of all grade levels and across educational disciplines to enable them to better understand, interact and appreciate people of different cultural backgrounds.

**Overall Plan of This Paper**

The sections of this paper are as follows: Section 2 is the literature review; section 3 is the methodology; section 4 is the findings and data analysis; section 5 is the discussion and summary. In addition, there is a reference section and an appendix to support the documentation.

**Background of the Study**
Aldridge and Goldman (2007) defined multicultural education as a reform movement that is designed to restructure educational institutions in order to develop students’ skills and attitudes and be able to function effectively in a diverse world. Bennett (2003) explained multicultural education as “an approach to teaching and learning that is based upon democratic values and beliefs and that affirms cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world” (p.14). Gay (1994) elucidated that multicultural education is an educational reform movement, and a process intended to change the structure of educational organizations; this process helps all students to have an equal chance to achieve their academic success (Gay, 1994). Furthermore, Gay (1994) suggested that cultural diversity provides the direction for multicultural instruction and for selected policy reforms. Multicultural education calls for all aspects of education to always be examined, critiqued, and transformed in order to improve all students’ learning, regardless of their cultural background (Gorski, 2002). On the other hand, Nieto (1992) defined multicultural education as a process of comprehensive and basic education for all students. Multicultural instruction challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society (Nieto, 1992).

The Census Bureau explicitly clarified that there is an increase in the minority population every year, which resulted in the changes of the demographics of the United States (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). According to Pallas, Natriello, and McDill (1989), by the year of 2020, culturally and linguistically diverse student populations will include approximately half of the public school population in the U.S. (as cited in Cho & Decastro, 2005). Thus, the existence of various cultures requires the need to assure democracy among all ethnic groups (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). According to Gabelko and Michaelis (1981) and Lynch (1987), “the reduction-of-
prejudice dimension of multicultural education (ME) is geared toward helping students acquire more democratic values, behaviors, and attitudes” (as cited in Okoye-Johnson, 2011, p. 1252).

The focus on the value of multicultural education is essential because many pre-service teachers hold false beliefs, stereotypes and erroneous attitudes about diverse student populations (Vaughn 2005). Aldridge and Goldman (2007) identified some current misconceptions about multicultural education. For example, it is explained that multicultural education is “the study of cultures that are not American” (p. 25). Moreover, it is explained that people from the same nation or geographic region share the same culture. It is a false conception because “there are Spanish- speaking citizens from “Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Chile and their cultures and dialects are vastly different” (p. 167). Furthermore, people thought that families from the same culture share the same values and traditions. Aldridge and Goldman (2007) added that multicultural education doesn’t only include ethnic and racial issues; gender and socioeconomic diversity are also two important issues that should be included in multicultural education. It has been demonstrated that older students should learn about multicultural education, not young ones; this misconception is false. Lynch and Hanson (1998) found that “young children establish cultural understanding by the age of five and more easily adapt to and learn from new cultural patterns than adults” (as cited in Aldridge & Goldman, 2007, p. 168).

Gordon (2007) explicitly defined cultures by saying that they are “complex entities which shape not only people’s food preferences, customs, and holiday celebrations but also their values and beliefs” (p. 150). Moreover, she added that cultures include modes of students’ interaction with adults and their peers. It has been demonstrated that immigrants who adapt and adjust to life in the United States, they experience “profound transformations” that had a negative impact on abandoning their old cultural traditions and adapting new ones (Gordon, 2007, p. 150).
A study by Sirin and Fine (2007) examined how stereotypes affected cultural identity of Muslim American adolescents (majority Arab) and the effects of acculturation stress on their mental well-being. Researchers used multi-methods such as surveys, focus groups, and identity maps to examine how Muslim youth living in the US negotiate their identities post the 9/11 attacks. The participants in the study included 70 American Muslims (32 girls and 38 boys) between the ages of 12 and 18. The surveys measured acculturation, discrimination, and psychological effects such as fear and anxiety on Muslim youth. The focus groups included a sub-sample of the surveyed participants to give them an opportunity to better express themselves and reflect on their multi-cultural and psychological identities. In addition, through the identity maps participants illustrated how they incorporate their hyphenated (Muslim-American) selves. The study found that 84% of participants experienced at least one act of discrimination the previous year and caused them to have anxiety. Each group negotiated their identities differently; 61% had weak identities; 29% went back and forth between their Muslim and American identities; and 11% had conflicted identities. Muslim males perceived their American and Muslim identities as two separate entities unable to integrate both cultures, which seemed to result in more anger and frustration. On the other hand, female Muslims portrayed their American and Muslim identities as intertwined and complementary to one another. They take the best of what both worlds have to offer. In addition, the females had an empowered desire to educate others about their identities rather than accepting the stereotyped views that Muslim women are oppressed, whereas males struggled with maintaining their Muslim American identity. Focus group members felt they were constantly watched and under surveillance and a male member expressed how he felt visually “violated.” They constantly reiterated “Don’t judge
a book by its cover.” “Don’t judge us. We are not who you think we are,” “Ask us questions and find out!” (Siren & Fine, 2007, p. 160).

In the past, multicultural education was a term that considered differences (Bennett, 2003). The term “melting pot” represented as an American culture by combining the strengths of many cultures into something new and unique (Bennett, 2003). Nowadays, “cultural pluralism” has emerged as an alternative to the melting pot (Bennett, 2003). Maxim (2006) described cultural pluralism as how each individual in society contribute to an American whole. It is important to understand and accept the differences among all people. Banks (2001) profoundly explained that students’ ability to communicate and negotiate among diverse cultures enable them to become successful in a diverse world. Thus, the challenge for educators is to present an effective multicultural education in which all students can learn how to respect and accept diverse cultures (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007).

Ahmad and Szpara (2003) conducted non-directive, non-structured form interviews with male and female Muslim youth and their parents to understand ways they were affected by how people perceive them, and whether Muslim values positively or negatively affected their learning and socialization. Their goal was to understand the experiences and needs of Muslim children in public schools. The participants included two fathers, nine mothers, 12 boys and eight girls between the ages of 13 and 22 most of who attended or recently graduated from New York City public schools. Participants reported having the following experiences: Increase in discrimination, stereotypes of Islam and values of Muslims in their schools, that to some degree had affected them; students felt that their teachers and classmates could not distinguish the difference between Islam as a practice and the cultural differences of Muslims; students felt they needed to negotiate their identities as a result of the differences between Muslim values and the
American way of life; Muslim youth seemed to be aware of their religious and cultural identities and preferred to maintain them as they attend public schools; girls felt more pressured by their parents on issues of dress and modesty; and students felt that they are unrecognized by their peers and teachers due to the lack of knowledge there is regarding their religious and ethnic background. This becomes a problem due to the fact that religion plays a major role in the day-to-day lives of Muslim youth.

Other studies found that Arab Muslim students claim to feel left out and secluded by their school peers and overall school environment mainly because of misconceptions and discrimination regarding their culture (Ayish, 2003). Muslim girls wearing the hijab, making their religious identity obvious, felt the most vulnerable after the September 11 attacks (Ibish, 2003). Some females made the decision to remove the hijab in hopes of avoiding confrontations. In addition, the curricula being taught in school regarding the Muslim religion (Islam) has been characterized by perpetuating many stereotypes, omissions, and textbook inaccuracies (Douglas & Dunn, 2003). This may cause internal conflicts for students as well as create clashes at home because of the discrepancy in information provided at school and home (Britto, 2008).

Proponents of multicultural education (Banks, 1994; Bennett, 1990; Coelho, 1994; Davidman & Davidman, 1994; Gay, 1988; Grant, 1977; Nieto, 1992) explicitly explained the importance of incorporating multicultural education in the curriculum of schools in order to improve students’ academic achievement and enhance their racial attitudes as well (as cited in Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Banks (1994) shed light on five important dimensions of multicultural education which are: “content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure” (as cited in Okoye-Johnson, 2011, p. 1254). Gay (1988) focused on the importance of modifying “the structure,
procedure, substance, and values of education in order to reflect the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, social, and racial pluralism in the United States” (as cited in Okoye-Johnson, 2011).

Studies found that many new teachers have a lack of knowledge of the experiences, needs and resources of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Cho and Decastro, 2005). As a result, it is suggested that pre-service teachers complete a multicultural education course in order to be able to effectively work with culturally diverse students (Cho & Decastro, 2005). A qualitative study by Cho and Decastro (2005) was a comprehensive investigation that examined the effect of a multicultural education course on pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards working with diverse student populations. The 25 participants were selected from secondary education pre-service teachers who enrolled in a multicultural education course prior to their first student teaching assignment. The qualitative findings formed by the majority of the pre-service teachers indicated that their completion of a multicultural education class had a positive impact on changing their attitudes towards teaching diverse student populations. In addition, the findings showed that the participants’ completion of the course enabled them to increase their cultural knowledge, and appreciation of other cultures. The majority of the participants highlighted the fact that the multicultural education class positively changed their perceptions towards teaching minority students. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers reported that the multicultural education course helped them to gain “a better vision about multicultural setting in the classroom (p. 26). Upon completing the course, a few teachers still felt “ill equipped” for teaching diverse students due to “their limited cultural knowledge, teaching experience and exposure to issues of diversity” (p. 27).

Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, and Montoya (2006) stated that multicultural education has a positive effect in developing cultural awareness of self and others and increasing
understanding related to culturally competent practice. Kirmani and Laster (1999) stated that educators should be prepared to teach all students from diverse backgrounds (as cited in Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). Garibaldi (1992) explained that the discussion over the content of a multicultural teacher education curriculum is active and diverse within the profession. Gordon (2007) suggested that teachers should learn about their students’ cultures. Moreover, Aldridge and Goldman (2007) recommended that teachers need to familiarize themselves with each child’s culture in their classrooms. Lynch and Hanson (1998) emphasized the importance of having all educators use different teaching strategies that effectively reach all students from different cultures (as cited in Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). Thus, multicultural education courses should be embedded in teacher education programs in order to help pre-service teachers effectively interact with diverse students and improve their academic achievement (Keengwe, 2010).

Methodology

Research Design

This exploratory study used a mixed method research design to investigate the effects of multicultural courses in ways doctoral students interact with and perceive people of diverse backgrounds (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative questions were used to measure the degree to which students felt multicultural education affected their relationship with others of diverse backgrounds. The qualitative questions were designed to acquire personal experiences of doctoral students with people of different backgrounds. In addition, qualitative questions were used to increase knowledge by further exploring quantitative responses. The responses to the qualitative questions enabled the participants to reflect upon their experiences and provided their ideas and views on multicultural education.
Instrument

The instrument below included qualitative and quantitative questions.

1. Tell me about a negative experience with someone who was from a different culture background than you.
2. What were some of the critical factors that caused differences? (Language, dress, mannerisms, use of words in a way that was not considered respectful, etc.)
3. How did you work through your differences? What skills did you use that you had learned from your educational studies?
4. Tell me about a positive experience with someone who was from a different culture background than you.
5. What person has been the greatest influence to help you better listen to those from different cultural backgrounds?
6. To what degree do you feel multicultural courses better prepare you for the challenges in your workplace?
   very much somewhat a little not at all
7. How has a family member influenced how you perceive people from a particular group?
8. To what degree do you feel that multicultural education changed perceptions you have on people of diverse backgrounds?
   very much somewhat a little not at all

Variables

This study contained two independent variables and several dependent variables. One independent variable was multicultural education experiences; represented at the x-axis.
multicultural education experiences was used as the independent variable, the dependent variables included: The way doctoral students interact with or perceive people of diverse backgrounds; gender; age; and ethnic backgrounds which are represented at the y-axis. Another independent variable was the educational majors of the doctoral students, also represented at the x-axis. When the category of educational majors was used as the independent variable, multicultural education experiences was the dependent variable, represented by the y-axis.

**Hypothesis**

The more doctoral students are exposed to multicultural education experiences, the better they are able to interact with and perceive people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Sample**

All 11 participants in the study were first year doctoral students in a private university during the Spring 2013 semester. Cultural and educational backgrounds of the participants varied. Some of the participants’ undergraduate degrees differed from their graduate degrees. For example, one participant majored in psychology in undergraduate studies and majored in education in graduate school. Other participants majored in English literature, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL), math, statistics, music, leadership, nursing, civil engineering and marketing.

**Setting of the Study**

Upon requesting permission to get the individual email addresses of the participants, the participants provided their personal email addresses for use in implementing the study. All participants were emailed a questionnaire consisting of eight questions of which six were open-ended questions and two were items that were rated using a Likert scale. The participants were
given two weeks to complete the questionnaire. Eleven participants were emailed the questionnaires of which all participants responded.

**Data Collection Method**

Data for this study was acquired through the responses of eight questions given to 11 doctoral students using email. Upon getting permission from the participants to get their personal email addresses, the eight questions were emailed to them. The participants were given two weeks to respond to the questions and were provided an email address to submit their responses to. The questions consisted of six open-ended questions capturing the experiences of doctoral students with people from different backgrounds. In addition, two closed-ended questions were used to discover the degree to which doctoral students felt that multicultural education courses helped them interact with people of different backgrounds. The responses to the 2-item scale were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from very much (4) to not at all (1).

**Validity and Reliability**

Validity of the questions was never statistically proven. However, the researchers developed the questions based on the experiences of doctoral students with others of different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the items identify students’ educational backgrounds and the effects of multicultural education courses on their ability to interact with people of diverse backgrounds. The items in the questionnaire are based on theory researchers have been concerned with in regards to issues relating to multicultural education (Banks, 1994; Bennet, 1990; Nieto, 1992). The items in the questionnaire were developed using questions used in a study by Sharma (2005) to assess teacher perceptions concerning their preparation to teach culturally diverse students. The questions were modified to correspond to the topic of this study; this unfortunately negated test validity to some degree.
The responses to the questionnaire are reliable because if the questionnaire were given to the participants again in the future, they would respond the same way. The questions are asking for the experiences of doctoral students with multicultural education courses and its effect on their interaction with others. It is expected that the responses were true and accurate and would not change if asked on another occasion. The authenticity of the responses was confirmed upon asking the participants face-to-face if they were the ones to answer the questions.

**Coding and Confidentiality**

The participant’s names were changed using identifiable codes to maintain confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a code ranging from 001 to 011 and all responses were kept confidential. Each of the questionnaire items was also assigned a code ranging from 1 to 8. Also, each participant and question was coded for use in analysis. On a grid, the participants were coded at the y-axis and the questions were at the x-axis. Both the open-ended and close-ended questions were coded and categorized, allowing several issues to become prevalent.

**Limitations to available data**

The current study had several limitations. The development of the questionnaire was condensed to enable students to respond in a thorough and timely manner. Students were given two weeks to respond to the questions, which may have inconvenienced students’ busy schedules. Students’ work hours and other coursework may have interfered with students’ ability to answer questions thoroughly. Due to time constraints, face-to-face interviews were unable to be conducted which may have give students a better opportunity to express themselves and provided more authenticity to the responses. In addition, time constraints did not allow for pilot groups to be implemented in order to confirm validity of the questions.
Results

The results of the analysis are discussed in this section. Of the 11 participants studied, all 11 participants responded to the questionnaire and emailed their responses through their personal email. The participants were given 14 days to respond to the questionnaire. One participant did not meet the deadline to respond to the survey. However, late responses were still used for the research. The researchers resent the questionnaire to the participants in an email, reminding them to submit their responses before the deadline. One participant was reminded during class to respond to the questionnaire. Not all questions were answered by the individual respondents. By the end of three weeks, all the participants responded to the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Each question was analyzed separately, using a grid method. Qualitative questions were used to further understand the Likert scale questions. Statistical analysis was summarized in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 (see Appendix). The questionnaire contained two 4 point Likert scale questions asking the participants to rate the degree to which they felt multicultural education courses better prepared them for the challenges in the workforce; and the degree to which they felt multicultural education changed their perceptions of people of diverse backgrounds. The ratings were as follows: 4 stands for “very much”; 3 stands for “somewhat”; 2 stands for “a little”; and 1 stands for “not at all.”

Religion and Its Impact on Cultural Acceptance

Findings showed that 9 out of 11 participants had negative experiences with people of different backgrounds as a result of misconceptions and stereotypes people had of their religion or ethnicity. Two respondents reported that they had negative experiences due to the negative stereotyping of Muslim and Jewish people. Mason (2004) stated that Muslims are frequent
targets of negative stereotyping and are often abused physically and verbally because of their religion. One participant noted, “In 9th grade I was physically abused by a Hispanic girl who broke my pinkie finger because I was dressed differently; and that was during the holy month of Ramadan.” Another respondent reported that her boyfriend brought her flowers in high school and someone reacted by saying, “No one likes Jews [sic] anyway.” Thus, Raskoff (2012) stated that stereotypes are overgeneralizations made by people which are likely to be false assumptions.

Dalghres (2011) emphasized that racism and discrimination are existed throughout human history. The two participants in this study referred to misconceptions towards religious groups. For instance, one participant stated that people always stereotype Jews “as cheap and wear weird clothes.” Due to the misconceptions people have of Jewish people, the respondent further noted that she stopped telling people that she was Jewish. The participant asserted that she never had negative perceptions towards people of culturally diverse backgrounds. In contrast, the participant further explained that she is Jewish and her “husband's best friend is from a very strong Islamic family.” She stated that she has family members from different cultural backgrounds who are good resources in helping her gain cross-cultural understanding.

The other participant noted that there are differences between Muslims and other groups in terms of language, dress code and food. Tarman and Tarman (2011) stated, “People of different cultures will have different kinds of interaction styles, languages, and traditions” (p. 579). For instance, the respondent compared Muslims with another group saying:

They definitely spoke a different language – Spanish. They were dressed in tank tops and skinny jeans (something I will never wear in public), and they cursed a lot. Two of the three girls were eating pepperoni pizza which I am not allowed to have.

Ethnicity and Its Impact on Cultural Acceptance
Findings showed that five of the 11 participants shed light on racism and ethnicity and its impact on cultural acceptance. The five participants’ responses indicated that people hold stereotypes and biases against other racially and ethnically diverse populations. These respondents reported that the most critical factors that caused differences between themselves and other groups are: the color of skin, dress code, accent, and race. Maxim (2006) mentioned, “All races of people do not look the same, in terms of features and skin color” (as cited in Tarman & Tarman, 2011).

The same five participants had negative experiences that were related to racial discrimination. One participant reported that she had a negative experience because of her skin color; she noted, “Possible White Klan members chased us, forced us off the road and had shotgun [sic] at my family.” Another participant expressed her suffering from incorrect assumptions about African Americans by saying, “A white police officer who was on patrol in my neighborhood rang my bell to ask me whether I was the cleaning lady.” Maxim (2006) stated that many people tend to discriminate against other groups from different cultures, leading to misconceptions about members of groups, unfair treatment of people in those groups, and closed attitudes toward those differences (as cited in Tarman & Tarman, 2011). Another participant faced racial discrimination in a store; she said, “A little white girl walked up to me and said, ‘my mother told me what you are.’ And I asked, ‘What?’ and she responded, ‘a n---er’.” The participant reported that she intentionally refused to spell out the word. Another participant reported a negative experience that she faced at her job by saying, “Many of the Caribbean teachers made stereotypes [sic] comments about American teachers. For example, one teacher said, “American education is foolish, and the Caribbean children learn better.”
Figure 1 reflects participants’ responses on the effect of multicultural education courses and its importance and benefits on them. It is interesting to note how the participants responded differently to how multicultural education changed their perceptions on people of diverse backgrounds. Brown and Marchant (2002) suggested that the implementation of multicultural education enables educators “to examine their own values, knowledge, and teaching practices about diversity to avoid biased multicultural education” (as cited in Tarman & Tarman, 2011, p. 580). The results showed a noteworthy number of participants who reported they never took multicultural courses before; 36% of the participants reported they had never taken multicultural education courses. Figure 1 shows the responses to the 4-point Likert scale for Question 8. Each rating scale was assigned a number with one representing the lowest rate and four the highest rate. According to participants’ self-ratings, four (36%) of the participants chose a rating of 1; five (45%) of the respondents chose a rating of 3; and two (18%) participants chose a rating of 4.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Participants’ Majors and Their Perceptions on Multicultural Education

Figure 2 reflected the correlation between the participants’ majors and the degree to which they felt multicultural education courses changed their perceptions of people from diverse backgrounds. Nine of the participants were education majors, with specialties in Curriculum and Instruction, Teaching English as a Second Language, English Literature, Music Education, Childhood Education, Literacy Education, Math Education, and Educational Leadership. Of the nine participants with education majors, two (18%) chose a rating of 4; and four (36%) chose a rating of 3. The results showed that three (27%) of the respondents who were in teacher education programs, chose a rating of 1, reporting they never took multicultural education
courses in the past. Brown (2004) addressed the issue of cultural diversity courses and its role in preparing educators for teaching minority students in a multicultural environment”.

Two of the 11 participants majored in degree programs other than education. One (9%) chose a rating of 3; whereas the other didn’t respond to the question. She reported, “I have never had a multicultural class so I can’t respond.” Brown (2004) stated that there is a correlation “between the instructional methods used in stand-alone cultural diversity courses and changes in the cultural diversity awareness of students” (p. 335).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figure 3 reflected participants’ responses to Question 6 asking the participants to rate the degree to which they felt multicultural courses better prepared them for challenges in the workplace. Although Question 6 was a rating scale, some of the participants chose to explain their answers. Five of the 11 (45%) respondents chose a rating of 4; supporting the notion that multicultural education courses better prepared them for the challenges in the workplace. One participant reported, “One must be familiar with other cultures if he or she wishes to get along with coworkers.” Three of the 11 (27%) participants chose a rating of 3. Keengwe (2010) stated that multicultural education courses in many teacher education programs are necessary because they help prospective teachers gain cross-cultural understanding. However, statistical analysis showed that 27% of the participants felt that multicultural education courses did “a little” or did “not at all” prepare them for challenges in the workplace. One (9%) participant chose scale 2 indicating that multicultural courses did “a little” to prepare them for challenges in the workplace. One (9%) participant rated 1 indicating that multicultural courses did not prepare
them for challenges in the workplace saying, “it has to be voluntary not forced.” One (9%) participant responded by saying, “I don’t know”; the participant reported that she never had multicultural courses before.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Those Who Influence Participants Regarding Culturally-Diverse Populations

Ramsey (1987) stated that people with diverse backgrounds are influenced by the beliefs and behaviors of family members and teachers (as cited in Tarman & Tarman, 2011). Statistical analysis showed that nine (82%) participants felt that family members helped them respect and understand people of diverse populations. For example, one participant reported, “My mom always tells me to respect others so they can respect you.” Another participant noted, “My Greek grandmother on my mother’s side, always encouraged me to be accepting of all people from all cultural backgrounds.” A participant reported that his wife from Taiwan influenced him in understanding people of diverse backgrounds. He said, “Chinese cultures and American cultures can be quite different…” He continued, “My wife helped me not to misunderstand such cultural differences. Two (18%) participants reported that their teachers had the greatest influence in helping them understand people from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, one participant responded that the most influential person who helped in possessing cultural knowledge and understanding of culturally diverse populations was “my multicultural education professors.” Another respondent said “My parents and some influential teachers” influenced how he/she perceived people from a particular group.

Understanding and Respecting Culturally Diverse Populations
The majority of the participants mentioned that they had positive experiences that helped them develop cross-cultural understanding. Smith (2006) stated that social and cultural interaction between minority groups and established residents builds cross-cultural understanding that helps all community members comfortably interact with each other and broadens their appreciation for different cultures. In this study, five participants reported that their interaction with friends of diverse backgrounds enabled them to understand and respect others from different cultural backgrounds. One participant reported having a positive experience with a friend in high school, saying, “I think we both learned how to deal with our own differences to accept the world for what it was.” Another respondent noted:

One of my close friends who comes from a Catholic Italian family invited me over to her home and taught me how to make one of her family’s ethnic dishes. After we cooked, we served the food to her family. It was a wonderful experience for me to cook a meal from a different cultural background than my own.

A participant also stated that, “One positive experience stand [sic] out to me is being in the doctorate program where I get to work with people from other cultures; they are very supportive.” Another participant noted, “I was invited to a big feast day celebration and was made to feel completely at home even though our dietary choices, religion and cultures are very different.”

Eighteen percent of the participants reported that interacting with their neighbors enabled them to build relationships with people from different cultures. For example, one participant mentioned that her interaction with her neighbor since she was three years old helped her “…learn a lot about their culture.” Another respondent noted:
I remember when I just moved into my house eleven years ago; two Jewish neighbors came to introduce themselves, and brought us freshly baked cookies. They stayed for a while and gave us some updates about the neighborhood. We have been interacting since then.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Results**

The results of this study were mainly based on doctoral students’ self-reported data. Results of the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the participants had negative experiences based on negative stereotypes, prejudice and racial discrimination. Consequently, Banks (1994) and Bennett (1990) shed light on developing antiracist and prejudice-reduction themes in multicultural education in order to become knowledgeable about other cultures, reduce bias, develop respect skills, and become accepting of others. Based on the researchers’ analysis of the survey data, the researchers found that taking the multicultural education courses positively influenced many of doctoral students’ attitudes towards issues of diversity. Keengwe (2010) proposed “multicultural education promotes the freedom, abilities, and skills to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries to participants in other cultures and groups” (p.23).

The majority of participants, who were mostly education majors, agreed that multicultural education courses better prepared them to understand and respect others from diverse backgrounds. Banks (1993) suggested that multicultural education is an education of freedom in which its main goal is to help students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to actively participate in a democratic society. However, four doctoral students in this study did not take any multicultural education courses throughout their educational experiences with three participants being education majors. These finds showed that institutions should make
multicultural education courses available to all students and across educational disciplines. Keengwe (2010) noted that, “Many teacher education programs have tried to compensate for the lack of cultural diversity knowledge, skills, and experiences by incorporating stand-alone multicultural education courses in their programs” (p. 198).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has opened several issues that can be used for future investigations. There are several areas that need additional research. First, is to use a larger population of doctoral students to discover their exposure to multicultural education courses and to conduct face-to-face interviews, which was a limitation of this study. Current research on multicultural education is primarily on teachers or education majors. Little research is available on multicultural education courses for students of diverse educational backgrounds. Although correlational analysis in this study and other studies provided evidence that multicultural education can positively influence how educators interact with others of diverse backgrounds, empirical studies on the effects of multicultural education on students who are experiencing trouble in school due to issues of identity and discrimination is scarcely available. This study found that doctoral students were positively affected by family members, friends and neighbors and their interaction with and perception of people from diverse backgrounds, however, little research is available comparing whether multicultural coursework or other methods have a greater effect on ways people interact with other groups.

**Implications and Implementation**

Through the experiences of doctoral students, a demand for multicultural education is suggested to be implemented across educational levels and disciplines. Lynch and Hanson (1998) found that “young children establish cultural understanding by the age of five and more
easily adapt to and learn from new cultural patterns than adults” (as cited in Aldridge & Goldman, 2007, p. 168). Therefore, multicultural experiences should begin early in education and be maintained throughout students’ future educational experiences.

Like many other minority groups, Arabs and Muslims want to be positively recognized in a country so diverse however, they are faced with many challenges such as racism, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and misrepresentation about their culture and/or religion. School administrators and educators need to be aware of the impacts discrimination and stereotyping have on youths’ mental well being as well as school performance and/or problem behaviors. Before addressing these issues, educators and school administrators need an accurate understanding of their students and put aside any personal biases they may have towards a specific group. Aldridge and Goldman (2007) stated that everyone has prejudices whether or not one can admit it. Biases can influence a teacher’s value system and in turn impact the relationship they have with their students and their families (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The NCCREST (2006) brief recommended that educators learn about students’ cultural traditions, values, customs, and norms, in order to create a classroom environment that is culturally responsive to all students. Better understanding the religious and ethnic backgrounds of Arabs and Muslims may enable educators to ease psychological distress experienced by them and make them feel they are valued members of the society.

Douglas and Dunn (2003) stated that the curricula being taught in school regarding the Muslim religion (Islam) has been characterized by perpetuating many stereotypes, omissions, and textbook inaccuracies. This may cause internal conflicts for students as well as create clashes at home because of the discrepancy in information provided at school and home. The NCCREST (2006) added that institutions must ensure that curriculum, textbooks, and materials
are unbiased and provide accurate information about a specific group. Irvine (1992) who stated that when instructional tools are incompatible or marginalize students’ cultural backgrounds, it is likely that students experience a rejection toward school causing underachievement or dropping out (as cited in NCCREST, 2006).

In a study by Sirin and Fine (2007), Muslim American focus group members felt they were constantly watched and under surveillance and a male member expressed how he felt visually “violated”. They constantly reiterated “Don’t judge a book by its cover”, “Don’t judge us. We are not who you think we are”, and “Ask us questions and find out” (p. 160). Muslim youth yearn for the opportunity to educate the American public about their culture and the true meaning of Islam. Thus, it is important for Arab and Muslim students as well as other minority groups to have the opportunity to express their experiences by having dialogue with their peers and teachers about their cultural traditions, religious practices, as well as share their perspectives and experiences. The NCCREST (2006) stated that allowing students to think differently and experience familiar classroom instruction makes it likely for students to feel they are recognized and have a better chance of school success. Therefore, students need to be encouraged to deliberate, question, and take political action to revive democratic public life and give an alternative perspectives on issues that are affecting them. This may create a less hostile school and classroom environment.

Garibaldi (1992) outlined a series of general skills that effective educators should focus on during their preparation. For example, prospective teachers should plan and organize effective instructional situations in their culturally diverse classroom settings. Educators should learn how to encourage the cooperation of their students, families and communities (Garibaldi, 1992). It is explained that multicultural curricula are very broad programs of study that help
minority students “maintain harmonious relationships with their families and ethnic communities” (Gordon, 2007, p.150). Moreover, Gordon (2007) suggested that teachers should implement activities that help in providing parent involvement in their children’s education. Such activities help to facilitate learning about different cultures. Reaching out to immigrant communities is an important principle of multicultural education. For example, a child can work closely with family members on recording family history; this activity helps to promote children’s ethnic awareness (Gordon, 2007). The NCCREST (2006) brief recommended that teachers foster a positive interrelationship between students, their families, the community, and school. Teachers can do so by inviting parents and community members into the classroom to participate in the teaching-learning process. This home-school-community relationship can be beneficial to everyone as a result of mutual respect and value for the shared efforts of educating the student.

Gordon (2007) profoundly emphasized the importance of validating and celebrating students’ home cultures in order to foster minority students’ “sense of personal worth” and improve their pedagogical learning (p. 153). Aldridge and Goldman (2007) explained that curriculum in multicultural education should focus on the culture of different groups. It is essential to learn about ethnic holidays inside the classroom, such as decorating the classroom or tasting ethnic food (Gordon, 2007). In addition, multicultural games from other cultures are beneficial for all students. For example, The Multicultural Game Book and International Playtime are two volumes that described the games played by children all over the world (Gordon, 2007). Inevitably, Gordon (2007) reported that the more the students explore other cultures, the more they’ll get new insight about the world. Furthermore, the NCCREST (2006) suggested that teachers give students the opportunity to learn about people from diverse
backgrounds in order to relate positively with one another. This allows students to be culturally knowledgeable and capable when encountering people who are different.

It has been demonstrated that hearing a song or reading multicultural books are two effective sources that help students to learn about other cultures (Gordon, 2007). For instance, it is suggested that reading books about children’s experiences in Ramadan inside the classroom will enable children to be familiar with different cultural experiences (Gordon, 2007). Effective educators can use entering the text activity which is an important part of the multicultural curriculum; it helps students to practice imaginary interaction with other diverse cultures. Consequently, Gordon (2007) further acknowledged that educators can prepare all students to become more culturally competent citizens in a diverse society. Not only enhancing teaching and working with diverse students is important, but also multicultural competence improves the ability of faculty and higher education professionals to help students to be effective global citizens and workers (Goodman, 2013).

**Conclusion**

The present study provided findings from a mixed method, exploratory study focusing on doctoral students’ exposure to multicultural education courses and their ability to interact with and perceive people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Students at the doctoral level are at the peak in educational course work. It is likely that their involvement in multicultural education courses enabled them to deal and associate with people of diverse backgrounds as interact with them with respect and understanding. However, some of the participants reported they had never taken multicultural education courses. Although all participants had positive experiences interacting with people of diverse backgrounds, it is predicted that with multicultural coursework their perceptions and involvement with the diversity of people would have been even better. It
was interesting to find that the majority of the doctoral students were education majors who took multicultural education courses; however, there were two students with education backgrounds and two with non-education backgrounds who never took multicultural education courses.

Banks (1993) suggested that the goal of multicultural education is to develop an accurate understanding, attitudes, and skills to positively interact with a diverse and democratic society.
References


Appendix

Figure 1. Benefits of Multicultural Education Courses

- 45% Not At All
- 27% A Little
- 9% Somewhat
- 9% Very Much

*Figure 1.* Pie chart of the survey results. Respondents were asked the benefits and importance of multicultural courses on them.
Figure 2. Participants' Majors and Their Perceptions on Multicultural Education Courses

Figure 2. Participants were asked their majors and their perceptions on multicultural education courses.
Figure 3. The Effects of Multicultural Education Courses

Figure 3. Pie chart of the survey results. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they feel multicultural education courses better prepared them for challenges in the workplace.