



## Building the Case for Culturally Responsive Teaching in Physical Education: Using High School Students' Perceptions Toward Multiethnic Groups

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Recent census data indicates student populations are changing drastically. It is essential to inform educators on the benefits of culturally responsive teaching with their students. Educators must be open to learning about their students and modifying their teaching to increase students academic success. Physical education offers a unique environment for students to be engaged with each other in a variety of learning opportunities. This study investigated high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale. Participants included 140 high school male and female students ages 14-18 years. Students voluntarily completed the 27-item 5-point Likert type questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were computed to determine differences in responses. Results indicated some students are open to learning about other cultures which is the first step in reducing prejudices and stereotypes. For educators, culturally responsive teaching provides opportunity to raise awareness and breakdown racial barriers within their school.

*Keywords:* culturally responsive teaching, physical education, teacher education, multicultural education

Students entering educational institutions in the 21st century are experiencing an evolving composition of increasing numbers of ethnic minorities across the United States. The most current 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data indicated that racial and ethnic minorities accounted for roughly 85% of the nation's population growth over the past decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In California, educators have known for years that student populations are changing drastically. Over the years the educational literature has attempted to prepare current and incoming educators of this fact.

Wyman (1993) stated that an educational approach that recognizes and responds to the needs and traditions of culturally diverse students is labeled "multicultural" or "multiethnic education." This concept has become critical to teacher education programs and our current educators. Theoretically, instructional approaches

that integrate multicultural concepts within the physical education setting can strengthen inter-racial and extra-racial bonds along with increasing sensitivity levels between student groups (Sutliff & Perry, 2000).

Respecting the demographic shift toward an increased multiethnic population encourages a greater awareness toward the sensitivity levels between all persons. Teacher education is attempting to address this by providing teacher training programs that produce culturally sensitive teachers who are able to meet the needs of students from all cultures and ethnicities. Currently, in California the courses in Single Subject Credential Programs are required to meet SB 2042 (2002) which necessitates an infusion of competencies that will prepare teacher candidates to teach English Language Learners (ELL) from diverse cultures and first languages other than English. To support this mandate, teacher

education programs typically offer one course in multicultural education while infusing ELL strategies throughout the teacher education program.

Teachers may be the answer to helping students learn to work and accept each other as Jibaja-Rusth, Kingery, Holcomb, Buckner, and Pruitt (1994) suggested over 17 years ago that increasing the interaction between teachers and students of color requires a high degree of multicultural sensitivity in order for teachers to fully address cultural subtleties in the classroom. Torry and Ashy (1995) ascertained that all students are able to achieve their full potential for academic, social, and vocational success only when teachers are culturally sensitive. This concept can be taken one step further by asking if this idea also includes cultural sensitivity between students, especially with respect to the cooperative learning approach that many educators are embracing. According to Posnick-Goodwin (2006), helping students to get to know students from other backgrounds is critical for all schools, and educators should pave the way. Learning about others, becoming sensitive to the challenges and feelings of others, and learning to work with people are essential skills all students need to learn.

One movement towards improving the process of learning about multiculturalism and developing more effective teachers through changes in teacher education programs has emerged. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is just one approach towards infusing multiculturalism and teacher education (Gay, 2010). It is common for the terms culturally relevant teaching and CRT to be used interchangeably (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). It has been suggested that institutions responsible for teacher education rethink their current curriculum to include increased education on CRT (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005; Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Gay (2010) discussed the importance of implementing the six specific qualities: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory that define CRT and have these qualities incorporated within the teacher education program. Villegas and Lucas (2002) warned that the traditional approach of just adding an additional course to the existing teacher education curriculums may not have sustainable effects unless the entire teacher education curriculum adopts the ideas of developing culturally responsive teachers and have the content infused within every course of the curriculum.

Researchers have investigated sensitivity levels that have transcended many academic and instructional groups. Larke (1990) investigated levels of sensitivity between preservice teachers through the utilization of the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory. The investigation utilized a 28-item agree/disagree questionnaire that ascertained a respondent attitude regarding (1) general cultural awareness, (2) the culturally diverse family, (3) cross-cultural communication, (4)

assessment, and (5) the multicultural environment. The results indicated that respondents had hesitations associated to interacting and working with multiethnic students and their parents. Larke (1990) suggested the preservice teachers discomfort should be addressed by offering increased opportunities to raise cultural sensitivity.

Additionally, Torrey and Ashy (1995) investigated the impact of culture on preservice physical education teacher's through the Multicultural Self-Report Inventory. The instrument measured respondent's values toward implementing multicultural concepts during instruction. The 72 preservice physical education teachers (87% Caucasian) who served as subjects had no prior student teaching or academic training in multicultural education. The instrument was divided into categories with questions addressing the following issues: (1) personal beliefs about culture, (2) beliefs about interacting with other cultures, and (3) beliefs about the importance of culture in teaching. The results suggested that respondents did not possess strong beliefs about culture and did not see how a student's cultural background would alter their future instructional approach.

With a strong effort of training preservice teachers underway, the focus must also include educating the current teachers about CRT and the impact it can have not only in their classes and school community but most importantly in society. Current teachers may need to become familiarized with the details of CRT. Gay (2010) defines CRT as a pedagogy that distinguishes the different cultural backgrounds and traits of all students regardless of ethnic differences along with modifications of teaching methods to address the diversity within the class setting. Furthermore, teachers must develop the skills to adjust their teaching for multicultural settings (Scherff & Spector, 2011). The theory around culturally responsive teaching embraces a large amount of knowledge about multicultural education and ways of assisting culturally diverse students in succeeding in education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Along the same lines of CRT, cultural relevant teaching was defined by Ladson-Billings in 1994, "as an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (as cited in Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 62). Whichever term is used the same message is clear, there is an important need to educate teachers on ways of modifying their teaching methods to benefit their students learning.

The literature on CRT that has focused on teaching African-American students has provided critical aspects of teaching that educators should try and embrace with their students. Howard (2001) conducted a qualitative study on 17 elementary students' perspectives of their teachers. Students were selected from four different urban schools. The results of his study found that

Table 1  
*Ethnicities for Males and Females*

Grade	Age (years)	Caucasian males/females	African American	Asian American	Hispanic	Native American	Other	Total
9 <sup>th</sup>	14	36/10	1/0	3/2	7/3	3/3	1/2	71
	15	21/7	1/0	2/0	2/3	2/0	-	38
10 <sup>th</sup>	15	3/6	-	0/1	2/3	0/1	3/1	20
	16	5/2	-	-	1/0	-	-	8
	17	0/1	-	-	1/0	-	-	2
	18	-	-	-	1/0	-	-	1

students' were very aware of their teachers sense of responsibility of helping them become successful in academic achievement. The students' reported feeling that their teachers expressed a genuine concern for them at school by building a caring environment and establishing a community-like atmosphere through the engagement of dynamic and stimulating classroom experiences. These positive experiences provided students' a safe learning environment where they felt they could be successful. It was further validated when teachers took a genuine caring approach to their students learning and at the same time were willing to modify their teaching styles to meet their students needs a true sense of CRT was evident. Howard (2001) indicated that the results of his study can easily carry over to other ethnic groups. He concluded that teachers should listen to their students and what they have to say about their teachers, the school environment, and other factors that impact their learning.

Thus, as researchers continue to build a foundation for the best method to provide both preservice and current teachers a wide view of multicultural education, cultural sensitivity, and CRT (Haberman & Post, 1990; Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994; Phuntsog, 1995; Torry & Ashy, 1995) it becomes paramount that additional insight must also be derived from students. The current literature identifies a need to continue investigating students' voices by listening to their stories and feelings of learning in multicultural environments and with others who are different from them. There is a research gap in the physical education environment in regards to CRT especially at the high school level. The purpose of this study was to determine high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups within a physical education setting using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale (Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994). It should be noted that the physical education setting was used due to the uniqueness of the environment where students for the most part are not sitting behind desks and where their cultural differences might be displayed on a larger scale due to the context and content. In physical education

students' are generally put into groups where they must work together, problem-solve, and perform in front of others. Thus, students' may develop different attitudes of working with multiethnic groups in physical education then in other academic areas in high school curriculum. It is hoped that when teachers develop an awareness of their students they will be able to provide the best learning environment for academic success.

#### **Methods**

##### **Participants and Setting**

Participants included 140 high school students from one urban public school in Central California whose ages ranged from 14 to 18 years (Table 1). There were significantly more males N=95 (68%) than females N=45 (32%) participants. Most students were Caucasian (65%) with a smaller population representing African Americans (1.5%), Asian Americans (5.8%), Hispanics (16.1%), Native Americans (6.5%), and "other" (5.1 %). There were three 9th grade (average class size 31-37 students) classes and one 10th grade class (class size was 31) used. Most participants (95%) lived in an urban setting. Specific details about the school include 34% of the students were classified as English Learners, 78% as socially disadvantaged, and an overall school API score of 676. The graduation rate was 88.1% for all students.

##### **Instrument**

The questionnaire was a 27-item 5-point Likert type questionnaire containing the original 21 questions from the Multicultural Sensitivity Scale (MSS) created by Jibaja-Rusth et al. (1994) plus an additional six questions that were developed by the researchers to specifically address the physical education setting. The MSS is a validated and reliable instrument (Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994). Permission was sought from the authors of the Multicultural Sensitivity Scale prior to administering the survey to modify the survey by adding additional questions and changing the original scale from a 6-point Likert scale to a 5-point Likert scale as well as reversing the order. After receiving permission from the authors, face validity was established for the modified MSS

Table 2  
*Multicultural Sensitivity Scale*

*Rating Scale:* (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) undecided, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree

Question	Mean	SD
1. I have a tendency to trust students of my ethnic group more than I trust those of other ethnic groups.	3.48	1.26
2. I feel very uncomfortable in the presence of members of ethnic groups other than my own.	3.99	1.14
3. When I observe the hardships of some children, I understand why they are not proud of their ethnic identity.	3.34	1.08
4. Individuals should be deeply sensitive to the thoughts others have of them.	3.35	1.25
5. It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you.	4.28	1.16
6. Each ethnic group should strive to become more Americanized rather than maintaining the characteristics of their ethnic group.	3.75	1.22
7. I feel most secure when I am in the presence of members of my ethnic group.	3.25	1.25
8. I feel less comfortable when I socialize with persons outside my ethnic group.	3.80	1.08
9. I feel threatened by members of other ethnic groups.	4.15	1.00
10. When I understand the environment from which many children of ethnic minority backgrounds come from, I understand why they do not have pride in their ethnic identities.	3.38	1.04
11. The ethnic group that students belong to frequently determines how I respond to them interpersonally.	3.59	1.07
12. When I am offended by an ethnic minority, I generalize the behavior to other members of that group.	3.74	1.05
13. In order to be accepted by persons of other ethnic groups, I frequently find myself altering my behavior.	3.63	1.11
14. I have discovered that it is better to avoid associating with people who think differently than me.	3.78	1.09

15.	I naturally respond more favorably to students of my ethnic group.	3.45	1.13
16.	Multicultural issues are a community issue.	2.67	1.19
17.	I prefer working with students with whom I can identify ethnically.	3.49	1.12
18.	I have not been able to overcome my feelings of uneasiness when I see a group of people from a particular ethnic group together.	3.75	1.03
19.	I feel tense and uptight when I have to work closely with students who are of a different ethnic group than my own.	4.02	1.01
20.	I would feel more relaxed if I could work with students of my own ethnic group.	3.64	1.07
21.	I do not enjoy associating with persons of other ethnic groups.	4.09	1.05
22.	I classify people on the basis of obvious ethnic characteristics.	3.81	1.03
23.	Including multicultural education in physical education is important.	2.85	1.20
24.	Multicultural education is a school issue.	2.83	1.14
25.	I believe that students with certain ethnic backgrounds are more successful in certain sports than other students.	2.84	1.21
26.	I would like to learn games and activities that are from other ethnic origins.	2.47	1.08
27.	I have been a victim of ethnic prejudice.	3.60	1.26

including the rating scale and additional six questions by having two professors, one representing physical education and the other education review the modified instrument. Although the original MSS had only been administered to adults, it was deemed appropriate for high school age participants by the original authors. The rating scale consisted of strongly agree (1), agree (2), undecided (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5). Questions 22-26 were the added questions to the MSS for use with this study.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

All participants and parents completed the University Institutional Review Board approved consent forms. Consent was granted to use high school students by the school site principal. One condition stipulated by the principal was to indicate to the students that participation was strictly voluntary. Additionally, each participant's responses remained anonymous.

The questionnaire was administered during the student's Physical Education class. No time limit was given to complete the questionnaire. Participants were

instructed not to discuss the survey with others and to turn it in face down to ensure confidentiality. All participants completed the survey within 20 minutes. Means and standard deviations were computed on each of the demographic questions and for each of the 27 questions.

#### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups within a physical education setting using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale in an attempt to provide educators with a tool that might provide additional insight and greater awareness of their students. The means and standard deviations are listed for each question (see Table 2).

After rank-ordering each question, many of the responses were in the neutral zone. However, four questions provided the perspective that students' were not bothered by being around or working with other ethnic groups. Examples of this include the disagreement for questions 5, 9, 19, and 21 which all have a common theme of the need to avoid encounters, feel threatened,

feel tense and uptight, and not enjoying working or associating with other ethnic groups. Specifically, question 5, "It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you," question 9, "I feel threatened by members of other ethnic groups," question 19, "I feel tense and uptight when I have to work closely with students who are a different ethnic group than my own," and question 21, "I do not enjoy associating with persons of other ethnic groups." These results indicated students openness to learning about other cultures. The strongest neutral response occurred on question 7, "I feel most secure when I am in the presence of members of my ethnic group." This was the only question that produced a high response rate for both "disagree" and "agree." This might demonstrate that students don't have a string feeling one way or another involved with their own ethnic groups. The results of this question illustrate the importance of providing students opportunities to work with multiethnic groups and demonstrate the benefits of working with each other.

There were six questions (2, 8, 12, 14, 18, and 21) that resulted in students reporting that they tended to disagree. These six questions addressed students perceptions of feeling uncomfortable, socializing, generalizing behavior, avoiding people who think differently, uneasiness, and classifying people based on ethnicities different than their own. Although the results may indicate that many students were either neutral or disagreed with these specific questions, it demonstrates that there was not a strong agreement of their feelings of working in multiethnic groups.

Questions 23-27 were added for this survey. It was also found that most students agreed with question 26, "I would like to learn games and activities that are from other ethnic origins", which shows an openness towards trying more non-traditional sports and learning about other cultures. Agreement with question 16, "Multicultural issues are a community issue" and question 24, "Multicultural issues are a school issue," demonstrated that students feel it is important that both schools and the community address race and cultural issues.

Agreement on question 25, "I believe that students with certain ethnic backgrounds are more successful in certain sports than other students" is both interesting and disturbing, as this indicates students are stereotyping players in certain sports. For this reason, students may be missing out on opportunities to participate in a sport in which they could excel. Since stereotyping is a form of prejudice, these feelings have the potential to grow into larger cultural insensitivity issues. However, the responses may indicate students' willingness to record what they think is the "morally correct" answer.

It is interesting to note that even though question 5 and question 14 are similar, the different wording elicited different responses from the students. The overall

mean of responses for question 5, "It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you," was 4.28. Yet, question 14, "I have discovered that it is better to avoid associating with people different from me," evoked a lower mean at 3.78. Although both means lie on the right side of the scale, difference in responses may be a reflection of the more politically correct phrasing in question 5 versus the "real life experience" phrasing in question 14. The differing responses may also indicate a tendency to not "practice-what-you-preach" type of philosophy when it comes to encounters with students who are ethnically different than themselves.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study demonstrated that high school students displayed a variety of perceptions about multicultural education and sensitivity levels of interacting with each other in physical education class. Many of the responses confirmed that high school age students may not have strong beliefs one way or another when it comes to interacting with cultures other than theirs. This could prove to be a vital age to help shape their future behavior to learn the benefits of working and interacting collectively with students from other ethnicities. The results from this study indicated that some students are open to learning about other cultures, which is one of the first steps in reducing prejudices and stereotypes (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991). Yet, this doesn't just happen. These are concepts that need to be taught, discussed, and emphasized. Students need to learn how to work together with trust and acceptance. Students need to be able to demonstrate their eagerness to work with students from other cultures rather than simply verbalizing their willingness. When teachers have an awareness of their students feelings then they should strive to provide an environment that encompasses the six specific qualities (Gay, 2000): validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory that define CRT. When CRT is implemented on a daily basis it may provide students with the skills and opportunities necessary to work together in the classroom or gymnasium. Since the physical education environment offers unique opportunities for students to collaborate and problem-solve in a physical setting as opposed to a traditional classroom setting it may prove to be a prime target to address multicultural education and working with each other.

There are two major factors that physical education teachers can employ to embrace the idea of breaking down the multicultural issues. The first factor deals with the teacher's behavior and taking on the role of a leader as is needed in CRT. This involves strengthening their teaching skills, becoming knowledgeable on instructional practices related to CRT, and having effective management strategies that involve both individual circumstances and large group settings. Teachers need to be aware of the many different cultures

in the classes and adapt their teaching to all groups. For example, many Hispanic students prefer to work in small cooperative groups whereas many Asian students prefer to work alone (Nieto & Bode, 2012). The teacher must find the balance of how to effectively teach all students. This further demonstrates the need for teachers to have a strong awareness of who their students are in their classes and their feelings of working with different ethnicities.

The second factor involves implementing cultural diverse activities throughout the curriculum that are designed to provide students with a diverse environment that conforms to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) 2009 instructional practices guidelines. Many times teachers implement a variety of multicultural dances and refer to this process as implementing a multicultural curriculum. Clemens and Metzler Rady (2012) have provided many ideas for not only introducing dances from other cultures but also physical activity games and fitness activities that represent a variety of different cultures. It is important that the teacher doesn't just teach the activities but provides closure questions that allow students the opportunity to process their experiences. Teachers need to listen to what their students are encountering and have the confidence to discuss the uniqueness of their experiences. Teachers need to offer continuous opportunities that involve students working in random groups, trust building activities, and cooperative games. Specific examples include activities that encourage problem-solving and collaboration such as orienteering, developing offensive/defensive strategies for modified game play, creating games from other cultures, and assisting each other with setting realist goals for lifetime physical activity.

Gay (2010) and Howard (2001) stated that teachers must demonstrate a genuine care for their students along with a motivating learning environment in the hope of producing academic success. In physical education, this means the teachers should be creating a cooperative instead of competitive curriculum that might break down students preconceived thoughts of working with each other in a multiethnic setting. This may also help students assuming that students from other ethnic backgrounds may exhibit a more natural athletic ability than their own ethnic culture. This concept was a concern with question 25 in the results. Some students may not even try different sports or activities if they think others will be better than themselves due to cultural differences.

A strong step forward of addressing multiculturalism when paring the responses from the questionnaire, specifically from questions 16 and 24, that indicated students do tend to agree and feel that multicultural issues are both the community and school issues along with practical applications of implementing an on-going program of culturally diverse activities. When teachers implement culturally diverse activities

they will be offering opportunities for the students to learn games and activities from other ethnic origins as they indicated they wanted to on question 26. Implementing a curriculum that has a foundation in cultural diverse activities and experiences should address most of the responses from the questionnaire. Students will be provided a vast array of hands-on opportunities to engage and learn about each other and about activities.

As previously indicated, preservice teachers are now required to take one class that addresses multicultural issues and pedagogies when working with students from different ethnicities in their classes. However prior to this mandate, Torrey and Ashy (1995) found that preservice teachers in physical education who had no prior training in multicultural education did not possess strong beliefs about culture or nor did they see how a student's cultural background would have an impact on their instructional approach. Along this line of research Larke (1990) found that preservice teachers had hesitations of interacting and working with multiethnic students. Technically, the preservice teachers from these studies may be current teachers who need to enhance their knowledge of working with multiethnic groups and learn current pedagogies that address their students needs. This demonstrates the need to inform and educate current teachers on the benefits of CRT.

### **Conclusion**

This study used high school students responses on the modified MSS questionnaire to identify their perceptions on multiethnic issues and situations. When teachers are aware of the attitudes and perceptions of the students in their classes, they can have a better understanding of how to be a leader and help the students learn about each other.

Nieto and Bode (2012) defined multicultural education as inclusive. They also discussed that multicultural education is about all people and for all people regardless of their ethnicity or other differences. Creating a culturally sensitive program may seem like an overwhelming task. Phuntsog (1995) suggested addressing practicing teachers' perceptions to identify what competencies are crucial for promoting this type of learning. Gay (2002) indicated that teacher education programs must engage future educators in discussions of CRT to increase the awareness of strategies that will impact student learning and the likelihood of responsible citizens in society. Although this may be the most common solution, another very competent resource are the students. If given the chance, students can use their experiences to change multiculturalism from a way of recognizing minorities to a way of viewing society as a whole (Garcia & Pugh, 1992). The necessity for physical education teachers to engage in a consistent practice of implementing culturally diverse physical activities should prove one way to assist students and teachers in learning about different ethnic origins.

This study further builds the case for teachers to embrace the idea of developing an awareness and genuine concern about their students which will assist them in implementing CRT into their physical education classes. The results support the idea that content and context of physical education may be one of the best places to focus on implementing CRT. The benefits of CRT can provide both the teachers and the students a unique learning environment that builds community and can increase academic success. These results demonstrated that students do not always feel threatened or uncomfortable working with others of different ethnicities as sometimes society assumes. With the increasing diversity in our schools teachers must attempt to provide environments where students do not feel threatened or uncomfortable learning amongst students of different ethnicities. Again, teachers need to be open to listening to what their students are saying and feeling. The ultimate outcome of breaking down the cultural barriers may be producing a society that works together in future endeavors.

#### Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of this study. The results may have been more powerful using complex statistics such as ANOVAs rather than just descriptive statistics. Another limitation was using the 5-point Likert scale instead of a 4-point Likert scale which would elicit students in deciding on either agreeing or disagreeing for each statement thus staying out of the neutral response. However, it should be noted that it is important that students may not have feelings one way or another in working in multiethnic groups. Also, using only one school and one content area may have limited the findings.

The results of this study barely touches the existing gap in research on CRT in physical education. Future research should include an investigation of students' sensitivity levels that are broadened across different content areas and grade levels in the same school. It would be valuable to establish any patterns of students reacting differently in different courses based on the content being presented and then discovering ways to address them. An additional area of focus would include a longitudinal study following the students' from the middle school level of education through high school and see if the results change due to the implementation of a culturally diverse curriculum.

Another area for future research would be a pre-post study design using the MSS. This would involve gathering data using the MSS at the beginning of the school year with several classes and teachers in physical education. Then provide the teachers with the results of the MSS so they can identify the specific needs of their students' and implement a culturally sensitive curriculum while focusing on CRT throughout the school year. Subsequently, administering the MSS at the end of the school year to measure any changes in students'

perceptions. It would also be advantageous to collect data on specific CRT strategies implemented by the teachers.

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**Article Citation**

Patterson, D. (2012). Building the case for culturally responsive teaching in physical education: Using high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups. *Current Issues in Education, 15*(3). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/876>

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**Current Issues in Education**

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Manuscript received: 12/09/2011  
Revisions received: 08/03/2012  
Accepted: 09/24/2012



## **Current Issues in Education**

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Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University  
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

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Volume 15, Number 3

September 28, 2012

ISSN 1099-839X

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