APPLICABILITY OF THE PLANNED BEHAVIOR THEORY TO ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TOWARD TEACHING CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSES: THE ROLE OF SELF-IDENTITY

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Summary.—The present study was designed to examine the predictive utility of planned behavior theory to the multicultural education domain. One hundred and forty-eight students in early childhood studies (146 women, 2 men; M age = 21.8 yr., SD = 2.6) were asked to complete a questionnaire based on planned behavior theory to measure attitudes toward teaching multicultural classes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-identity. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that the planned behavior model components explained 52.5% of the students’ intentions. Addition of self-identity increased the amount of variance accounted for by the model (57.3%). It was concluded that researchers may have increased confidence when applying the planned behavior theoretical framework to study prospective educators’ attitudes, and that self-identity seems to represent a useful explanatory variable.

Recent research evidence suggests that the population of immigrants in North American and European countries continues to increase (Norberg, 2000; Mavrommatis & Tsitselikis, 2004; Lim & A’ Ole-Boune, 2005). As a result, class heterogeneity in schools is changing, posing additional demands on teachers. Teachers should be adequately trained to face this new challenge. However, several authors have raised concerns about the preparedness of teachers to teach students from various cultural backgrounds (Lim & A’ Ole-Boune, 2005). Teachers’ attitudes toward teaching culturally diverse classes represent an important aspect which should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing prospective educators’ curricula (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2002).

As far as the Greek educational system is concerned, teachers in public schools are hired by the Ministry of Education and are assigned to classrooms, according to the current educational needs. There is evidence showing that the number of children from immigrant families attending Greek kindergarten classes has increased the past two decades (Mavrommatis &

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Tsitelikis, 2004). Therefore, it is quite possible that teachers will come across culturally diverse children attending mainstream classes. Given that Greek teachers are not allowed to select the schools where they will teach, the importance of proper training and preparedness to meet the needs of culturally diverse classrooms is clear.

A fruitful theoretical framework for the study of attitudes is planned behavior theory (Ajzen, 1991). This theory claims that human behavior can be best predicted by examining an individual’s intention to perform the behavior in question. Their intention is in turn formulated by the following conceptually independent factors: (a) attitude toward performing the behavior; (b) subjective norms, that is, perceptions of the social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior; and (c) perceived behavioral control, which reflects the individual’s perceptions about the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior.

Several authors suggest that additional variables may be needed in planned behavior theory. Presumably, these variables would significantly increase the amount of variance accounted for in relation to the person’s intention or behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Conner & Armitage, 1998). Self-identity, that is, how individuals describe themselves using large scale social categories (e.g., I am a smoker, exerciser), represents a possible additional variable for the model. It has been argued that self-identity may contribute to the prediction of behavior or intentions independently of attitudes (Charrng, Pillain, & Callero, 1988; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). Generally, it is expected that the more salient a person’s self-identity, the greater the likelihood that this person will behave in accordance with that identity. Indeed, prior research has consistently shown that self-identity enhanced the predictive utility of the planned behavior model (Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999; Moan, Risc, & Andersen, 2003).

Self-identity may be especially useful in predicting repeated behaviors (Charrng, et al., 1988; Theodorakis, Bagiatis, & Goudal, 1995; Bebetsos, Papaoannou, & Theodorakis, 2003; Pierro, Mannetti, & Livi, 2003). Teaching can be considered a repeated behavior, and therefore the addition of self-identity to planned behavior theory can attain better prediction and understanding of human behavior in that field (Charrng, et al., 1988; Theodorakis, et al., 1995).

Although planned behavior theory has been tested in a wide variety of domains, e.g., maintaining a low fat diet, donating blood, recycling, adhering to exercise, decreasing smoking, volunteering, and using condoms, limited research evidence exists about its usefulness in the present multicultural education context. The purpose of the present study was to examine the predictive power of the planned behavior theory for students’ attitudes toward teaching culturally diverse classes. It was hypothesized that variables of planned behavior theory, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, would predict a considerable amount of variance of students’ intentions to teaching culturally diverse classes. In addition, the role of an external to the model variable, self-identity, was also tested. Based on past research it was hypothesized that inclusion of self-identity in the planned behavior model would significantly increase its predictive utility.

**Method**

**Participants**

A convenience sample comprised of 148 students of early childhood education voluntarily participated in the study. Participants were recruited from the Department of Pre-school Education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Only two of them were men. The prevalence of women is a common phenomenon in Greek early childhood departments. Their age ranged from 20 to 35 years (M=21.8, SD=2.6). Participants did not have previous practical experience in working with children and families from various cultural backgrounds.

**Questionnaire**

Participants were asked to complete a self-reported questionnaire which assessed attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-identity. This questionnaire has been previously applied to measure intentions to teach individuals with disabilities (Theodorakis, et al., 1993), to smoke, and to exercise (Bebetsos, et al., 2003), and to volunteer at major sport events (Tsiglis, Kouvelios, Grammatikopoulos, & Theodorakis, 2006). More specifically, attitudes were assessed by the question “For me teaching multicultural classes is . . . .” Responses were rated on six bipolar adjectives (good–bad, interesting–not interesting, tiring–easy, attractive–unattractive, pleasant–unpleasant, useful–of no use; α = .76). Subjective norms were assessed using two direct indications of perceived social pressure (e.g., “If I teach multicultural classes, most people who are important to me would . . . .”) Responses were given on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1: Approve to 7: Disapprove. Each of these scores was multiplied by a response on motivation to comply. “Generally speaking, how much do you want to do what most people who are important to you think you should do?” Responses were given on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree (α = .86). Perceived behavioral control was measured by the mean score on the responses to three different items, e.g., “For me to teach multicultural classes is . . . .” A 7-point scale was used, with anchors 1: Easy to 7: Difficult (α = .68). Three items were used to assess self-identity (e.g., “Generally, I am the type who is going to teach multicultural classes,” α = .90). Responses were rated on a 7-point scale, with anchors 1: Strongly agree to 7: Strongly
disagree. Finally, behavioral intention was estimated by the mean score on the responses to three different items: “I intend/I am determined/I will try to teach multicultural classes.” Responses to the first item ranged from 1: Very unlikely to 7: Very likely and 1: Definitely no to 7: Definitely yes for the other two items ($\alpha = .82$).

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were administered to undergraduate students in early childhood education who voluntarily participated in the study. Anonymity was ensured and no extra credit was given for participation. During the study, one of the investigators was present to respond to any questions posed by the participants.

**Results**

Correlation analysis showed that attitudes were significantly associated with perceived behavioral control ($r = .45$), self-identity ($r = .49$), and intentions ($r = .59$). A weak relationship was noticed between subjective norms and self-identity ($r = .19$) and between subjective norms and intentions ($r = .17$). Finally, self-identity was positively correlated with perceived behavioral control ($r = .71$) and intentions ($r = .67$).

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to predict intentions to teach multicultural classes from attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-identity. In the first step of the analysis, the planned behavior model variables were simultaneously entered. Results showed that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control together accounted for 52.5% of the intention variance ($F_{3,11} = 52.59, p < .001$). In the second step, self-identity was introduced to the model. Its addition significantly increased the predictability of the model to 57.3% ($R^2_{change} = .048, F_{1,10} = 15.95, p < .001$). The standardized regression coefficients derived from the final step were $-.32$ ($p < .001$) for attitudes, $-.05$ ($p = .41$) for subjective norms, $-.25$ ($p = .002$) for perceived behavioral control, and $-.33$ ($p < .001$) for self-identity.

**Discussion**

The addition of immigrant students into regular classes creates a group with unique psychological and pedagogical needs. Given that teachers’ attitudes are an important factor for developing adequate training programs, the present study used the planned behavior theory to examine prospective early childhood educators’ attitudes toward teaching multicultural classes. Analysis showed that the planned behavior components accounted for a considerable amount of variability of educators’ behavioral intentions, which was well above the average percent reported by Armitage and Conner (2001) in their meta-analytic study (39%). These findings are encouraging and seem to extend the predictive utility of this theory to the multicultural education domain. Similar findings were reported by Theodorakis, et al. (1999) who examined undergraduate physical education students’ attitudes toward teaching individuals with disabilities. Thus, other researchers may have increased confidence when applying the planned behavior theoretical framework to studying prospective educators’ attitudes.

Students’ attitudes seemed to be affected by their perceptions of the ease or difficulty in teaching multicultural classes. It should be underlined that subjective norms did not contribute to the prediction of students’ intentions. The inconsistent role of subjective norms frequently has been mentioned (Terry, et al., 1999), and some explanations have been offered (e.g., Tsigilis, et al., 2006).

Moreover, the contribution of the self-identity to the predictive power of the model was tested. Previous studies found a significant independent effect of self-identity on various behavioral intentions ranging from 1.5% to 7% (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Terry, et al., 1999; Bebetsos, et al., 2003; Pierro, et al., 2003; Giles, McClenahan, Cairns, & Maller, 2004). Furthermore, Moun, et al. (2003) cited the results of a meta-analysis based on 24 studies which showed that self-identity explained an additional 7% variance beyond the original planned behavior variables. This increase was observed even after controlling for past behavior. In the present study, self-identity accounted for 4.8% more variance in the students’ behavioral intentions. Based on the results of past studies, this additional percentage was considered substantial, indicating that self-identity should be taken into consideration when studying attitudes in educational settings.

It has been suggested that self-identity is more relevant in predicting repeated behaviors, including teaching (Chang, et al., 1988; Pierro, et al., 2003). According to Chang, et al. (1988), performing repeated behaviors “…are often part of an identifiable part and may become incorporated into the self-concept as a part of our picture of who we are” (p. 304). Thus, it is claimed that self-identity strengthens and increases its predictive power when the behavior in question is executed (Chang, et al., 1988; Rizzo & Viafoel, 1992; Theodorakis, et al., 1995). In particular, in the education setting Theodorakis, et al. (1995) suggested that undergraduate students’ practical experience with teaching can enhance self-identity.

On a practical level, the above-mentioned studies along with the results of the present study suggest that preparation programs should create opportunities for students in early childhood education to work with children and families from various cultures. Incorporating such activities into the curriculum, apart from fostering prospective educators’ attitudes, will also increase their cultural competencies (Lim & A’ Ole-Boune, 2009) and provide them concrete experiences and a firsthand understanding of cultural diversity. Sub-
sequent research should examine whether frequent and direct contact with children from various cultural backgrounds would foster students’ self-identity and positively influence their attitudes toward teaching culturally diverse classes.

REFERENCES


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