

# Teacher Candidates' Beliefs About ELL Characteristics

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Teacher education research has started to explore the beliefs that are part of teachers' cognition repertoires (Borg, 2006). Examining teachers' and teacher candidates' (TCs) beliefs is important because these act as filters through which learners, the classroom, and the learning process are viewed (Kagan, 1992). Moreover, beliefs are translated into teaching practices. As a result, teachers' negative beliefs can hinder the learning process by perpetuating stereotypes about learners. Stereotypical beliefs about English language learners (ELLs) may lead to a lack of recognition of the rich primary linguistic and cultural repertoires ELLs do possess. Research stresses that if these repertoires were part of the lessons, they would facilitate the learning and development of English (Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti, 2005; Moll, 2010). ELLs would consequently be more likely to become bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate learners, who contribute to the U.S. and to the global community.

This study aimed at assessing the impact of an ESL methods course on TCs' beliefs about ELL characteristics. TCs answered open-ended survey questions before and after they completed the course. The findings suggest that out of four beliefs about the characteristics of ELLs, two common beliefs (ethnicity and spoken language) reflect the current reality, while the other two (language proficiency and origin) are inaccurate or incomplete. Since TCs will be instructing diverse students, they need to have an informed and accurate perspective of who ELLs are.

After a review of the relevant literature, this study and its findings are summarized and implications are discussed.

## Literature Review

Kagan (1992) states that a belief is “a form of *personal knowledge* consisting of *implicit assumptions* about students, learning, or classrooms” (p. 70, italics added). This definition is pivotal for this study. It suggests that TCs will act according to their personal knowledge and implicit assumptions unless they have become aware that their personal knowledge or implicit assumptions are incomplete or inaccurate versions of reality. For example, some TCs may believe that ELLs code-switch because they do not know either language well. However, research has widely challenged this implicit assumption (Poplack, 2000; Reyes, 2004).

ELLs' characteristics can be viewed from at least two standpoints: from a deficit perspective (Valencia, 1997) or from an additive approach. From a deficit view, the ELL's primary language can be viewed as *a problem*, whereas from an additive approach, the ELL's primary language can be seen as *a resource* or *an asset* (Ruiz, 1984). Interestingly, the deficit discourse appears to be the one that has trickled down to the general public. One such example stems from the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 which labels ELLs as “limited English proficient,” or LEP learners. Garcia (2009) proposes a different construct for this population of stu-