Practitioner
Brief Series

Becoming Culturally Responsive Educators: Rethinking Teacher Education Pedagogy



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Despite the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in schools, not all teacher education programs (TEPs) readily embrace multicultural education or culturally responsive teacher education pedagogy (Gay, 2002). This brief has a twofold purpose: (a) to demonstrate the need for rethinking current approaches to teacher education pedagogy and (b) to provide guidelines for developing culturally responsive teacher education pedagogy.

What Are the Key Challenges Related to Diversity in Teacher Education Programs?

Some schools of education have acknowledged the urgency for developing culturally competent teachers, while others grapple with ways to fit appropriate programs into their curriculum. Unconvinced of the academic merits of culturally responsive programming, but not wanting to appear "anti-diversity," some TEPs will grudgingly add a diversity course to their curriculum. Overcoming this resistance is crucial to developing effective TEPs that will provide preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to educate diverse learners. A major part of the resistance comes from teacher educators' discomfort, if not fear of, addressing issues such as race and racism in their courses, or even on their campuses (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Resistance will persist and children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds will go unserved until schools and faculty acknowledge the need for culturally competent teachers in the classroom and the responsibility of TEPs to properly prepare these teachers. Coupled with this acknowledgement must be a willingness to truly value and celebrate diversity in programming and practices.

What Should Be Done to Create TEPs that are Mindful of Diversity?

Unfortunately, most preservice teachers lack the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and experiences needed to teach ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Davis (2001) found only 12 empirical articles pertaining to multicultural teacher preparation in special education between 1982 and 2000, and the studies reported limited ideas about diversity. Analysis of these studies revealed that researchers often limited ideas about culture to race and ethnicity.

Research suggests that when teachers have had the benefit of multicultural teacher education preparation, they are less likely to embrace cultural deficit views

(Irvine, 2003). Moreover, teachers who have learned culturally responsive pedagogy are more confident and believe they are effective in their instruction of diverse children (Pang & Sablan, 1998).

Despite the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity in our classrooms today, TEPs continue to utilize pedagogy of decades past. Our schools need teachers who know who they are teaching, what to teach, and methodologies to teach them (Kea & Utley, 1998). In other words, we need teachers who can use quality research-based pedagogy; that is pedagogy responsive to the learning, emotional, and social needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities in urban schools.

There is a dire need for TEPs to offer many and varied cross-cultural experiences. Teachers need to know how to adapt the content of instruction and teaching styles. Curriculum, methodology, and instructional materials should be responsive to students' values and cultural norms. Thus, the ultimate challenge for teacher educators is to prepare reflective practitioners who can connect, commit, and practice an ethos of care with diverse students and their families.

Although many TEPs have attempted to address these issues by incorporating "multicultural education" content into courses and field experiences, multicultural education has not been integrated in a thorough, persistent, and overt manner (Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002). Presently, the majority of TEPs in special education, for example, provide little exposure to broader multicultural perspectives (Sorrells, Webb-Johnson, & Townsend, 2004). Teacher educators need to:

- Develop cohesive and comprehensive multicultural curricula in general and special education TEPs
- Infuse multicultural principles throughout to prepare teachers to respond to the needs of diverse learners and their families
- Identify critical teaching behaviors and essential best practices for diverse students

What Are the Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teachers?

Villegas and Lucas (2002) encourage teacher educators to critically examine their programs and systematically interweave six salient characteristics throughout the coursework, learning experiences, and fieldwork of prospective teachers to better prepare culturally responsive teachers to work successfully in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Below is a brief description of the six characteristics.

- *Sociocultural consciousness* means understanding that one's way of thinking, behaving, and being is influenced by race, ethnicity, social class, and language. Therefore, prospective teachers must critically examine their own sociocultural identitiesand the inequalities between schools and society that support institutionalized discrimination to maintain a privileged society based on social class and skin color. Teacher candidates must inspect and confront any negative attitudes they might have toward cultural groups.
- *An affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds* significantly impacts their learning, belief in self, and overall academic performance. By respecting cultural differences and adding education related to the culture of the students, programs become inclusive.
- *Commitment and skills to act as agents of change* enable the prospective teacher to confront barriers/obstacles to change, and develop skills for collaboration and dealing with chaos. As agents of change, teachers assist schools in becoming more equitable over time.
- *Constructivist views of learning* contend that all students are capable of learning, and teachers must provide scaffolds between what students already know through their experiences and what they need to learn. Constructivist teaching promotes critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and the recognition of multiple perspectives.

- *Learning about students'* past experiences, home and community culture, and world both in and outside of school helps build relationships and increase the prospective teachers' use of these experiences in the context of teaching and learning.
- *Culturally responsive teaching strategies* support the constructivist view of knowledge, teaching, and learning. As teachers assist students to construct knowledge, build on their personal and cultural strengths, and examine the curriculum from multiple perspectives, an inclusive classroom environment is created.

There are several implications for culturally responsive TEPs. In the next section, implications for culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogical practices are discussed.

What Are the Implications for a Culturally Responsive Curriculum?

Morey and Kilano (1997) propose a framework for infusing attention to diversity throughout the teacher education curriculum while encouraging self-analysis and reflective thinking using three levels of curriculum transformation.

Exclusive, the lowest level, represents traditional mainstream perspectives of diversity. *Inclusive*, the next level, represents a mixture of normative and nontraditional diversity perspectives. The highest level, the *Transformed* curriculum, represents a structural transformation.

The *Exclusive* level focuses on minor aspects of diversity at the lowest level. Teaching about diversity is restricted to one part of the course. Gender and diverse groups are discussed in relation to stereotypes, and activities are limited to the four "f's—food, folklore, fun and fashion." The content encompasses traditional mainstream experiences and stereotypes. Extracurricular reading materials focus on authors who perpetuate and confirm those myths. Instructional strategies are mainly lecture, basic question and answer, and other basic didactic methods. Instruction is teacher-centered, with assignments that focus on content while avoiding social dynamics. Exams are usually objective (e.g., multiple-choice and fill in the blanks).

The *Inclusive* level adds diversity content but retains the traditional, original structure. That is, diversity is discussed throughout the course and compared to the dominant norm. Reading materials include authors with varying, significant, diverse viewpoints. Social views are discussed but not elaborated upon. There is a wide array of assessment methods, and various speakers add flavor to the content. Although the instruction remains teacher-centered, a variety of methods are used to relate new knowledge. Students are encouraged to construct their own knowledge and use critical thinking skills in conjunction with peer learning.

The *Transformed* curriculum challenges traditional views and encourages reconceptualization and new ways of thinking. The instructor engages in critical pedagogy and issue-oriented approaches. Instruction is student-centered, and students self-evaluate through projects and related assignments that contribute to real-life change. Students learn from each other, and concepts and personal experiences are analyzed. Transformed courses represent a paradigm shift that presents content from a diverse perspective. Self-assessment and reflection techniques are employed that encourage sharing, diverse perspectives and equity in participation, and critical problem solving. Instruction centers on content-related vignettes that require application and examination of values.

Designing a transformed curriculum is a developmental process. After TEPs examine their existing curricula, they can determine the current level of cultural involvement and begin an initiative to evolve to a transformed level. If current programming is exclusive, moving through to the inclusive and then the transformed may be the best option. The following suggestions can assist in the development of a transformed curriculum (see also Table 1).

- Require preservice students to demonstrate multicultural competence via assignments, projects, lesson and unit plan development, and instructional delivery.
- Utilize discussion groups between preservice and inservice teachers who are regarded as excellent culturally responsive teachers in urban schools to dialogue about complicated equity issues that arise in practice.

Table 1. Guidelines for a Culturally Responsive Curriculum (Schmitz, 1999)

(1) Define Learning Goals

- *What do students in your field need to know about:*
  - *the history of diverse groups: their writings, theories, and patterns of participation?*
  - *the social dynamics of identity formation and change?*
  - *structures of power and privilege in society, prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping?*
  - *patterns of communication and interaction within and among different cultural groups?*
  - *theories of personal, institutional, and societal change?*

(2) Question Traditional Concepts

- *Have traditional ways of organizing content in this course obscured, distorted, or excluded certain ideas or groups?*
- *What new research is available that addresses past distortions and exclusions?*
- *How will the course change if I include this new research?*
- *How might a change in this syllabus affect its relationship to the rest of the curriculum?*

(3) Understand Student Diversity

- *What kinds of diverse perspectives and experiences will students bring to the class?*
- *How can I assess students' prior knowledge of race, class, gender, etc.?*
- *How can I incorporate diverse voices without relying on students to speak for different groups?*
- *How will my own characteristics and background affect the learning environment?*
- *Will some students see me as a role model more readily than others?*
- *How can I teach to all students?*

(4) Select Materials and Activities

- *If the course topics remain the same, what new research, examples, and writings can illustrate these topics?*
- *Is there a new thematic approach to this material that will help to put cultural diversity in the foreground?*
- *How do I integrate new material so that it is not simply an "add-on"?*
- *What teaching strategies will facilitate student learning of this new material?*

(5) Evaluate Effectiveness

- *What are my strengths and limitations relative to the new content and teaching techniques?*
- *How will I assess student learning?*

Modified from: Schmitz, B. (1999). Transforming a course. Center for Instructional Development and Research Teaching and Learning Bulletin, 2(4), 1–2. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

- Advocate student volunteerism in a local culture as a "service learning" experience.
- Create opportunities for preservice teachers at ethnically encapsulated university settings (e.g., historically black colleges and universities, other minority institutions, and traditionally white institutions) to engage in multicultural conferences and student and instructor exchange programs.

What Are some Guidelines for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in TEPs?

Considering issues of diversity should be an inherent part of course conceptualization. Consequently, the course description and objectives should reflect how the course will contribute to the development of awareness and/or skills related to diversity and relevant to the focus of the course. The course text, readings, and materials listed on course syllabi should include the interests and contributions of diverse populations and reflect multiple perspectives. Additionally, where feasible, multiple ways to access course materials should be made available (e.g., materials on reserve at the library, course packets, information on instructor's Web page, etc.). Course requirements, projects, and activities for each chapter or topic presented should discuss the implications for ethnically and linguistically diverse learners. Information and activities related to diversity should be infused throughout the course, as opposed to being an isolated single session or segment of the class. This does not preclude sessions that are designed specifically to highlight issues of diversity, but it does suggest that this should not be the only means by which issues are addressed.

It is important to provide varied activities through which students gain knowledge or skills, as well as demonstrate competence. For example, consider the format in which course content is presented (e.g., lecture, large group discussion, small group activity, reading assignment, simulation, performance activity, etc.). If care is not taken to balance the types of activities used, students whose cultural practice repertoires do not match those favored by the instructor may be placed at a disadvantage.

Transformation begins with one course and then a focus on the entire curriculum. These changes in the curriculum should reveal that learning effective cultural pedagogy is not just course or curriculum development, but rather a change in students' thinking, behavior, and ultimately teaching. Next, attention is given to classroom-based pedagogical practices in preservice courses and field experiences.

Classroom-based Pedagogical Practices in Preservice Courses

Villegas and Lucas (2002) outlined classroom-based practices essential to promoting the development of culturally responsive teachers in preservice courses:

- Creating classroom communities of learners—learners construct meaning individually through cognitive processes and socially through a collective participatory process involving interactions with others.
- Developing dispositions, knowledge, and skills of culturally responsive teachers by engaging students in the following:

  > Reflective writing—students engage in introspection about their beliefs and assumptions by writing in journals.

  > Simulations and games—students participate in games and cross-cultural simulations to get first-hand experiences of sociocultural differences and power differentials. For example, "Ba Fa Ba Fa" is a three-hour simulation in which students have the opportunity to become members of one of two completely opposite cultures. Students must learn the language, rules, and roles of their new culture. All students have the opportunity to observe and interact with strangers from a new culture. At the end of the activity students walk away with real empathy, the ability to stand in someone else's shoes and feel what they are feeling" (Shelkin, n.d., Retrieved May 25, 2004).

  > Exploring family histories—students investigate family histories by interviewing family members (e.g., parents and grandparents). This practice can enlighten students about familial cultural influences on their own lives.

  > Articulating sociocultural affiliations—students locate themselves as members of different communities and examine the power and privileges that come with affiliation with each one. For example, students may write an essay exploring how their racial/ethnic identity has impacted their educational experiences or complete a social group membership profile indicating their membership in different groups identified by race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, and ability/disability.

> Exploring personal history and development—students examine their personal history and the development of their awareness of their identities and values.

> Learning about the history and current experiences of diverse groups—students learn about the lives and history of people different from themselves to better understand that personal views are not universal.

> Accounts of successful teaching and learning in diverse settings—students read about exemplary teaching practices in settings with diverse students to begin to develop a "vision of success."

> Teaching case—students analyze cases to promote their understanding of different approaches and perspectives to teaching and learning in diverse settings.

Pedagogical Practices for Field Experiences

Mason (1999) found that learning about the theory and practice of multicultural education in the university classroom coupled with an urban field experience made the information about culture and ethnicity and its implications for teaching more meaningful. Thus, TEPs should include specific, structured activities aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of cultural diversity within the contexts of the community, home, and school of the diverse student population served. Transformation of both the teacher educator and the preservice teacher is the goal. Specific activities to accomplish this should include the following (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Mason, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002):

- Form university partnerships with urban schools that have strong principals, small student/teacher ratios, fair discipline policies, high teacher expectations for students, and programmatic efforts to include parents in the educational process.
- Place teacher candidates in a field experience setting that is different from their own ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Many preservice teachers' first impressions of unfamiliar places are informed or challenged by their own personal experiences in new environments. Surveying preservice teachers about their experiences as students in schools may help them understand how their personal histories can be enriched with new experiences.
- Cultivate and require early field experiences, practica, and internship sites in culturally diverse classrooms and communities.
- Provide meaningful immersions in multicultural schools and communities. An important aspect of "meaningful immersion" is participation in community-centered activities. Teachers are able to support families and communities as they gather to celebrate meaningful events. This requires preservice teachers to invest time into learning about students and families by joining them in meaningful activities and events outside of the formal school environment. Relationship building with families and communities becomes a resource for school-related goals and objectives.
- Place students in schools where *all* students learn and develop to their highest potential. It is not enough to use the rhetoric of "all children can learn." Preservice teachers should experience teaching and learning in schools where students are actively engaged in learning successfully.
- Place preservice teachers with cooperating teachers who have a thorough knowledge of and extensive experience with culturally responsive education.
- Provide authentic experiences in culturally diverse schools and communities over an extended period of time. Build meaningful relationships with community members so that preservice teachers can genuinely engage in community-related activities with other community members.
- Develop host sites where preservice teachers can live in culturally different communities while completing their student teaching.

Conclusion

TEPs are critical in giving prospective teachers opportunities to learn and use culturally relevant pedagogy. Implementing curricula and field experiences that are committed to diversity enables future practitioners to engage in pedagogy with insight and view all communities as resources for learning and social justice.

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Additional Resources

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Center for Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education (CULTURES), directed by Dr. Jacqueline Jordan-Irvine, focused on how to enhance the success of elementary and middle schools in educating culturally diverse students by providing professional development for teachers. CULTURES offered forty hours of professional development services to 60 teachers annually. The teachers took classes at Emory University and also made visits to culturally diverse communities—meeting Hispanic-immigrant mothers, African-American children enrolled in an after school program, and Vietnamese social workers, among others. http://www.emory.edu/IRVINE/CULTURES/

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Notes

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