

## Developing Culturally Competent Preservice Teachers

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*An unfortunate, yet persistent, truth in U.S. public schools is the large achievement gap existing between children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their White, middle-class counterparts. The potential for cultural dissonance between contemporary teachers and their students necessitates that educators must persistently seek culturally responsive practices. Much has been written regarding strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy; therefore, this article moves beyond a review of culturally responsive pedagogy. Rather than providing teacher candidates with more suggestions for culturally responsive teaching activities, the authors provide teacher educators with specific resources for facilitating the development of cultural competence among preservice teachers.*

In 2013, 50% of the nation's public school students were Hispanic, African American, Native American, Asian, or two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In contrast, less than 10% of American teachers are Hispanic, Native American, Asian, or identify as two or more races, and many are from middle class backgrounds (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). In a recent brief published by the National Center for Education Statistics (Kena et al., 2016), public schools have experienced significantly increased enrollment of students who are Hispanic, English Language Learners (ELL), and/or from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. The potential for cultural dissonance between contemporary teachers and their students

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necessitates that educators persistently seek culturally responsive practices. Indeed, research supports that teachers need targeted training to impact their perspectives of working with diverse students (e.g., Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). Much has been written regarding strategies for culturally responsive pedagogy (e.g., Ford, Stuart, & Vakil, 2014; Ukpokodu, 2011; Wiens, 2015; Wyatt, 2014); therefore, the purpose of this article is to move beyond a review of culturally responsive pedagogy. Rather than providing preservice teachers with more suggestions for culturally responsive teaching activities, this article provides teacher educators with specific resources for facilitating the development of cultural competence among preservice teachers.

### Defining Diversity

When developing practices to increase cultural competence among preservice teachers, we must consider the definition of diversity and its significance in our schools. The National Education Association (2015) defined *diversity* in educational contexts as the total of the ways in which individuals are both alike and different, and many dimensions of diversity are provided: gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, sexual orientation, class, mental and physical ability, and immigration status. Preservice teachers must be taught to view the classroom as a microcosm of the world and that each student is a unique representation of diverse experiences, values, abilities, understanding, approaches, and beliefs. Preservice teachers should be given opportunities to think critically about diversity and culture in a reflective manner. Teacher educators can guide

conversations and provide spaces and activities for these reflective practices. Assisting preservice teachers in understanding themselves as cultural beings may help them examine their beliefs and whether their beliefs are based in absolute truth or in cultural norms. Table 1 describes activities teacher educators can engage in with the preservice teachers to promote cultural competence.

### **Establishing a “Safe” Environment**

Discussions of race, class, opportunity, and privilege often elicit emotional responses. Consequently, it is critical that instructors provide safe environments for preservice teachers to share, reflect, and evolve throughout the cultural competence continuum (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Sue (2013) presented three recommendations for instructors facilitating such discussions in higher education classrooms. First, instructors must develop critical consciousness and understand themselves as racial/cultural beings. This understanding will assist the instructor in identifying potential conflict and/or microaggressions that may occur. Once identified, the instructor can intervene and facilitate discussions about the conflicts and/or microaggressions in a way that is constructive to the students. Second, instructors are encouraged to openly acknowledge and disclose their own biases. This respectful and intimate disclosure models that even the instructor has yet to “arrive” as a fully unbiased being. Thirdly, the instructor must allow for students to express emotions during talks about weighty topics, such as race, power, and privilege. Setting the expectation that feelings about such sensitive topics are inevitable and valid in the instructor’s classroom promote comfort and assist in avoiding the dilution of content about diversity. Instructors can also assist students in labeling their emotions throughout the difficult dialogues.

Cross and colleagues (1989) defined the *cultural competence continuum* as the range of responses to cultural differences. The stages range from *cultural destructiveness*, in which entities seek to dismantle existing capital within a culture or a people, to the final stage, *cultural proficiency*. People operating at this stage highly regard culture and seek opportunities to increase their knowledge of other cultures and intercultural communication. Furthermore, culturally proficient people investigate and disseminate best practices for working with or serving people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Educating students about the continuum may assist in encouraging self-reflective practice, as well as tolerance for others and their respective positions along the continuum. It is critical to note that Cross and colleagues (1989) contended that the movement of individuals along the cultural competence continuum

are not necessarily linear in nature. It is likely that individuals will fluctuate between the stages and never fully arrive at cultural proficiency in all applicable aspects. Instructors are encouraged to provide students with somewhat private opportunities to explore their biases and engage in self-reflective practices. For example, focused journaling and reflective exercises can be assigned and reviewed by the instructor only. Instructors can review the work of all students and consider topics for class discussion or private conferences that will meet the learner where he or she is functioning and encourage reframing activities that will facilitate movement along the cultural competence continuum.

Teacher educators are encouraged to review the work of Gay (2010), who believed it is often challenging for teachers to teach in a culturally responsive manner if they do not first understand cultural differences. She discusses how many teachers do not know of truly internalized cultural differences and what they think they know is mainly superficial, colloquial knowledge gleaned from media. Acquiring a knowledge base about cultural diversity is not enough.

García and Guerra (2004) also identified how an understanding of cultural differences does not automatically equate to an equitable, culturally responsive pedagogy. It is beneficial to focus on both systemic societal constructs that maintain deficit thinking in relation to students from nondominant cultures, and for educators to critically reflect their own prejudices and biases. The first step in the process of diversity consciousness and identity development is an awareness of self and comfort level in dealing with difference. Preservice teachers need to be culturally aware in order to plan for classroom activities, which are grounded in real-world examples and authentic experiences to bridge any disconnect between theory and practice (Ellerbrock & Cruz, 2014).

### **Teacher Preparation Accreditation Tenets and Diversity**

The need to prepare culturally competent teachers has been present in teacher preparation programs for some time, and is—in some programs—mandated by accreditation boards. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) recognized that culturally competent teachers play a crucial role in ensuring academic success of students from diverse backgrounds (CAEP Board of Directors, 2015). Therefore, CAEP places an emphasis on preparing preservice teachers to be culturally competent, stating, “Diversity must be a pervasive characteristic of any quality preparation program” (2015, p. 21). Teacher preparation programs are expected to embed concepts related to diversity into all aspects of course content. CAEP suggests that

**Table 1. Course Activities for Cultivating Cultural Responsiveness**

Name of Activity	CAEP Tenet	Description
Exploring power and privilege	Examine and increase awareness of the relationship between power and privilege in schools.	View “What is Privilege?” (BuzzFeedYellow, 2016) Provide lists of privileges that individuals are given by virtue of social positionality (McIntosh, 1990). Preservice teachers read the lists privately and mark the items they identify with and the items with which they disagree. Candidates pair with a partner and compare lists. Discuss, as a class, individual reactions to the lists, insights gleaned from conversations with peer partners, and lingering questions about the text. Ask preservice teachers to consider possible educational implications.
Exploring colorblindness	Incorporate multiple perspectives into their teaching.	Have preservice teachers read <i>See Baby Discriminate</i> (Bronson & Merryman, 2009) and <i>Racial Incidents as Teachable Moments</i> (Blum, 2008) on conceptions of colorblindness and fragility of childhood innocence. Preservice teachers are given scenarios and asked how they might talk to their students about these scenarios.
Exploring microaggressions	Examine and increase awareness of the relationship between power and privilege in schools.	Have the preservice teachers read <i>Racial Microaggressions as Instigators of Difficult Dialogues on Race: Implications for Student Affairs Educators and Students</i> (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Ask them to describe how the diversity categories (e.g., race, SES status, gender, denomination of religion, sexual orientation) may have affected their identity as a P–12 student. Ask the preservice teachers to refer to the table listing examples of microaggressions in the article. First small-group, then large-group discussion exercise: preservice teachers share their narratives of experiencing and/or committing microaggressions. Class will generate a list of possible ways that microaggressions are manifested in P–12 classrooms.
Diversity dialogue	Support preservice teachers’ understandings of their own culture and biases.	For 5 to 7 minutes of each class, instructors present a concept of an individual who does not fit a stereotype (e.g., picture of a teenager female with physical disabilities, who is also considered gifted). In a Socratic method, the teacher educator opens the class discussion with little detail regarding the topic and gradually provides more details as the conversation among the preservice teachers unfolds. Preservice teachers can discuss how their assumptions and biases might impact their teaching and how to be more culturally competent.
Harvard Implicit Association Test (Project Implicit, 2014).	Support preservice teachers’ understandings of their own culture and biases.	Have preservice teachers take the online assessment at: <a href="https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html">https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html</a> . The online activity assesses individuals’ racial preferences. The activity may challenge individuals’ strongly held beliefs about themselves. Allot time for debriefing and discussion afterward.
Identifying and understanding your own biases	Support preservice teachers’ understandings of their own culture and biases.	Lead discussions about biases and how these biases affect how we teach. Have the preservice teachers write down their bias(es) on a piece of paper. Have the students tear the paper and discuss how we, as teachers, need to dissolve these biases when working with students.
Monopoly in a stratified society (Danner, n.d)	Incorporate multiple perspectives into their teaching.	Lead preservice teachers in playing this game in which players are assigned SES status where different rules (e.g., what property is accessible for purchase) apply for different SES levels. After playing, have the preservice teachers discuss their observations and feelings. Encourage them to connect their experiences in the game to societal issues of status, access, and privilege. Have the preservice teachers generate ideas for how this activity may impact their teaching practices.
Photo activity	Support preservice teachers’ understandings of their own culture and biases.	Show photographs of diverse individuals. Ask the preservice teachers to identify the race of the person in the photo. Use the activity to caution students about making assumptions based on appearance.

**Table 2. Resources Aligned with CAEP Tenets**

CAEP Tenets		CAEP Tenets				
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Incorporate multiple perspectives into their teaching</li> <li>2. Plan instruction that incorporates experiences and histories of diverse populations</li> <li>3. Foster verbal and nonverbal communication skills demonstrating respect for students and families from diverse backgrounds</li> <li>4. Support preservice teachers' understandings of their own culture and biases</li> <li>5. Examine and increase awareness of the relationship between power and privilege in schools</li> </ol>		1	2	3	4	5
Resource	Brief Description					
<b>Literary Resources</b>						
Borrero (2011)	The article explains practitioners' perceptions of teaching in urban settings.		✓			
Delpit (2008)	The text details the concepts through the use of vignettes and personal dialogue of how educators have used language as a way to segregate and alienate students from lower SES classes.					✓
Fadiman (1997)	Fadiman's book chronicles the true story of a young Hmong girl who is considered to have a spiritual gift that is, in western culture, identified as epilepsy. The book documents the clash between the family's desire to honor their daughter's gift and the Americans' desires to treat the epilepsy.	✓				
Kozol (1991)	Kozol's book describes the vast differences in resources between schools in affluent areas and schools in low-income areas.					✓
Laundra and Sutton (2008)	The article discusses cultural bias in intellectual ability assessments. The article also contains an assessment containing questions relating to African American culture.				✓	
McDermott and Rothenberg (2000)	The article is a qualitative study investigating reasons why some families from diverse backgrounds are reluctant to become involved in their children's schools.			✓		
McIntosh (1989)	The article draws attention to a multitude of ways in which White individuals have societal advantages compared to individuals from diverse backgrounds.					✓
Noguera (2008)	In this book about the wide gulf existing between the racial and SES classes in America, Noguera helps individuals reach the highest level of cultural understanding.					✓
Sue (2010)	Sue's book explores the topic of unintentional bias. The book examines the psychological effects of unintentional bias on both the perpetrator and the victim.				✓	
<b>Internet Resources</b>						
Adichie (2009)	Adichie explores the trouble in identifying a person or entire culture through stereotypes that arise because of limited exposure to multiple experiences or stories of a person or culture.					
Generations (Comedy Central, 2014)	This humorous skit supports the concept that holding racist viewpoints is not acceptable simply because the person who holds them is an older individual.			✓		
Substitute Teacher (Comedy Central, 2012)	The skit demonstrates how easily a White teacher can subtly embed dominant cultural behaviors.			✓		
What Kind of Asian are You? (Tanaka, 2013)	This humorous skit demonstrates that often, White individuals automatically assume Asian individuals are not born in the United States.			✓		
The Iris Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University (2016)	The Iris Center at Vanderbilt University has four modules presenting issues surrounding diversity specifically for preservice teachers.				✓	
University of California Berkeley Resource (University of California Berkeley, 2016)	UC Berkeley and other institutions provide suggestions for presenting diversity topics for preservice teachers.				✓	

coursework prepare preservice teachers to be able to (a) incorporate multiple perspectives, (b) deepen awareness of diverse learners for planning instruction, (c) foster verbal and nonverbal communication skills that demonstrate respect for diverse students and their families, and (d) support preservice teachers' understanding of their own culture and biases they may hold. Furthermore, CAEP expects preservice teachers to be familiar with the "relationship of privilege and power in schools" (2015, p. 21) and how the power imbalance impacts teachers' relationships with, and expectations for, diverse learners and their families. This kind of understanding, coupled with holding high standards for all students, is believed to combat the poor educational outcomes that have plagued students from diverse backgrounds for decades (see Dunn, 1968; Ford, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Skiba et al., 2008; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). Teacher educators must help guide preservice teachers' beliefs away from deficit thinking and cultural misunderstandings toward embracing diversity (Ford, 2012; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Using the CAEP tenets as a framework, the following resources and course activities will aid teacher educators in developing cultural competence among preservice educators. Table 2 presents resources teacher educators can use to help develop cultural competence among preservice teachers. Alignment of the resources with the CAEP tenets of diversity is provided.

### Future Directions

In addition to the need for increased cultural competence among educators, practitioners often struggle to discover and implement ways to teach diverse learners effectively (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2006). Therefore, practitioners need a way to evaluate themselves during their teaching. Trainor and Bal (2013) presented a culturally responsive rubric for research in the field of special education designed to help educators evaluate their practices. The rubric helps educators promote optimal learning and engagement for students from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the authors encourage teacher preparation programs to recruit preservice teachers from underrepresented backgrounds into the field, as doing so will enhance the success of pre-kindergarten to 12th grade students from diverse backgrounds (Carrero & Lusk, 2013).

### Conclusion

Higher education faculty and staff face the challenge of preparing preservice teachers who are responsive to the needs of every student in their classrooms (Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009). Teaching critical consciousness can be an overwhelming task that demands instructors to

examine their own identities and worldviews (Bierema, 2010). However, given the continued concerns regarding outcomes for diverse students, it is imperative that preservice teachers become culturally competent and are well prepared to work with diverse students.

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