Allies for Education
ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS ACROSS OUR ROLES IN P12 SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Volume 2, Issue 2
2019

Preparing Teacher Candidates for Diverse Learners: Are We Doing Enough?

Melissa Anne Spence
Assistant Professor
California Lutheran University

Tymika Wesley
Assistant Professor
California Lutheran University

Research focused on the academic achievement of K-12 students indicates that students from historically non-dominant communities continue to receive inequitable and/or ineffective educational opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Research Council, 2002). These historically non-dominant communities include culturally and linguistically diverse students as well as students with disabilities. Traditionally acknowledged as an *achievement gap*, this disparity in academic achievement between historically non-dominant student populations and their peers creates barriers to the achievement of a quality education for all, despite federal legislation to do so (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Disproportionality, or the overrepresentation of marginalized groups in special education, further threatens equity in educational practices (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017).

To ensure the achievement of all students, it is necessary for educators to embrace and leverage the diversity existing in today's classrooms by designing equitable instructional experiences that affirm and validate students' diverse ways of learning and knowing (Kea & Trent, 2013). However, for this to occur, teachers must (a) be prepared to delve into culturally responsive teaching practices, and (b) understand how to design instruction in a culturally responsive fashion. The onus of responsibility thus falls to teacher preparation programs to not only ensure teacher candidates are prepared to engage diverse learners but to adequately assess their candidates' readiness to bring their knowledge to their students. In the following paper, we examine the literature regarding culturally responsive teaching practices and teacher-efficacy in implementing such practices. We further reflect on the alignment of our own teacher preparation program to the current literature and how we assess teacher candidates' ability to design equitable instructional environments for diverse learners.

The Current Landscape

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) requires states to annually evaluate teacher education programs to ensure teacher candidates are learning skills and building the necessary disposition to provide instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). The California Department of Education (CDE) has created Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) which require teacher candidates to demonstrate proficiency in employing inclusive pedagogical practices (CDE, n.d.). Further, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) demands academic rigor and opportunity for all students with disabilities, offering safeguards to protect against misidentification and placements in restrictive, segregated learning environments. However, despite legal protections and state mandates, many students continue to fall through the cracks. Students of color are disproportionately represented in special education classrooms (Shealey, McHatton, & Wilson, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). A 2016 national report found that American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students had the highest percentages of students served under IDEA (16% and 15% respectively) followed by students who are White (13%), Hispanic (12%), Pacific Islander (11%), and Asian (6%) (Musu-Gillete et al., 2016). Further, once deemed eligible for special education services, students of color are more likely to receive services in more segregated settings (i.e., an isolated special education classroom vs. an inclusive general education setting) (Skiba et al., 2011) and are more likely to miss academic instruction. At a rate of 48.4%, Black students, both male and female, are suspended from school at far higher rates than their Asian (11.2%), White (21.4%), and Hispanic (22.6%) peers (Musu-Gillete et al., 2016). Further, linguistically and culturally diverse students are less likely to meet academic learning standards (Garcia, Arias, Harris Murri, & Serna, 2010). For the 2018 California statewide assessment, Asian (75%) and White (64%) students were more likely to meet or exceed standards than their Hispanic (38%) and Black (32%) peers (CDE, 2018).

While this data highlights an achievement gap, the challenges are much more complex than mere differences in achievement. An achievement gap is a scholastic disparity between groups of students (Ladson-Billings, 2013a). However, the term *achievement gap* ignores underlying historical, political, and economic factors for such academic discrepancies (Flores, 2018). More recent literature reframes conversations regarding student achievement to include systemic causes of inequities in educational attainment, such as reduced access to: well funded and adequately resourced schools, certified and experienced teachers, rigorous curriculum, and student-centered practices (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gorski, 2013). Thus, the term *opportunity gap* often replaces *achievement gap* in the literature (Gorski, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013b). Opportunity gaps not only acknowledge the societal and systemic inequities leading to student underperformance but shifts our cultural lens from achievement resulting from reactive responses (e.g., removal from inclusive settings) to opportunity resulting from proactive measures (e.g., designing instruction accessible to all students) (Ladson-Billings, 2013b).

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Teacher Preparation Programs

Conceptual and pedagogical models have emerged to assist teachers in envisioning proactive planning and instruction as a way to minimize opportunity gaps. For example, Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2000) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) focus on planning instruction that leverages students' cultural assets and responds to students' specific academic needs. Culturally

Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012) highlights the critical importance of including students' cultural references and funds of knowledge in instructional decisions and designing instruction that affirms students' cultural ways of being and knowing.

Pedagogical Design Capacity (PDC) frames pedagogical planning and can be helpful in assessing pedagogical planning skills in pre-service teachers. PDC is a conceptual framework examining self-efficacy in infusing one's personal resources (i.e. knowledge, beliefs, identity, orientations) into external curriculum (Lim, Son & Kim, 2018). The PDC framework supports culturally responsive pedagogical practices, offsetting the limitations of traditional and standardized curriculum materials typically designed for wide, rather than targeted, student audiences. In order to directly target diverse student needs, PDC allows teachers to modify and adapt curriculum in ways that affirm diverse cultural experiences and capitalize on students' assets (Beyer & Davis, 2012; Brown, 2009). The PDC framework describes three patterns, or strategies, of curriculum use—*offloading*, *adapting*, and *improvising* (Brown, 2009). *Offloading* refers to using the provided curriculum with fidelity. *Adapting* uses the provided curriculum as a resource but adds, deletes, or modifies elements as needed. *Improvising* refers to designing instruction from scratch, minimally assisted by existing resources. In terms of curriculum use, *adapting* seems to be the most effective strategy for teacher candidates. Lim et al. (2018), examined teacher candidates' capacity for lesson planning and found that when given the option to design lessons using any of the PDC strategies, pre-service teachers were most skilled in *adapting*. Those who employed this strategy also reported greater self-efficacy regarding their lesson design and implementation. *Improvising* was the most difficult strategy. Pre-service teachers struggled to independently design lessons that effectively addressed learning objectives, utilized students' background knowledge, and responded to students' academic needs.

Lastly, The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) created a set of standards focused on providing effective instruction to diverse student populations. The CREDE standards (2006) include: Joint Productive Activity (collaboration), Language and Literacy Development (developing academic language across content), Contextualization (connecting students' prior knowledge and lived experiences), Challenging Activities (adding depth and complexity to instruction), and Instructional Conversations (encouraging academic dialogue). Rather than a strict reliance on curriculum, these standards offer practical guidance for teachers to create instruction incorporating best teaching practices.

Despite these resources, preparing teachers to effectively plan and implement instruction for diverse learners remains a consistent challenge for teacher preparation programs (Kea & Trent, 2013; Shealey et al., 2011). In examining classroom-based research studies, researchers found that less than one third of classroom teachers utilized culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to promote academic success and cultural competence (Young, 2010). Many first-year teachers enter the field feeling underprepared to handle the level of skill and expertise required to effectively instruct diverse students (Delpit, 2006; Paris, 2012). New teachers often struggle to support students in ways that promote cultural responsiveness (Kea & Trent, 2013; Shealey et al., 2011). Even veteran teachers have difficulty contextualizing and consistently creating learning environments in which instruction connects to the lived experiences of their diverse student populations.

Assessing Equitable Planning

Our teacher preparation program is situated at a small private institution in Southern California. We currently utilize a traditional lesson plan template and rubric to assess teacher candidates' readiness to design equitable instruction for diverse student populations. But are we succeeding in this endeavor? We wanted to accomplish the following goals while examining our program's instructional design: (a) determine the percentage of students who score 'Proficient' or above on lesson planning assignments, and (b) review the department's current lesson plan rubric to ensure its components adequately assess teacher candidates' ability to design equitable instruction.

Currently, teacher candidates receive a score from 1-4, with 1 deemed 'Unacceptable' and 4 rated as 'Superior.' An analysis of rubric data from the last two years indicates the majority of our candidates (97%) score at 'Proficient' or above (scores of 3 or 4) on lesson plan development. Yet, to what degree does this performance indicate their ability to provide equitable and inclusive instruction? In comparing the criteria described in our grading rubric against the CREDE standards, we found that our current lesson plan rubric focuses heavily on Language and Literacy Development and Contextualization. For example, the lesson plan encourages academic language development activities and prompts candidates to connect learning goals to students' prior knowledge. It does not, however, specifically assess candidates' ability to utilize the CREDE standards related to depth, complexity, and the use of academic discourse (i.e., Challenging Activities and Instructional Conversations standards). A further comparison using the PDC framework highlights the high degree of improvising our lesson plan requires. Candidates are required to create a lesson plan from scratch, rather than adapt from the curriculum utilized in their student teaching environment. An improvised lesson plan model often proves challenging for pre-service teachers, as it requires them to design culturally responsive and inclusive instruction with minimal curricular support.

A basic and improvised lesson plan is not enough for us to ensure our teacher candidates are ready for diverse student populations. Instead of encouraging candidates to create equitable instruction from scratch, we should focus on having candidates adapt district provided curriculum in ways that attend to students' diverse learning needs. Yet, while adjusting the lesson plan and rubric are a start, larger challenges still exist. Candidates must observe and interact with culturally responsive teachers and classrooms with diverse students to practice designing culturally responsive instruction (Kea & Trent, 2013). Do our candidates have enough time to know and understand students' diverse learning needs in order to design culturally responsive lesson plans? Do our veteran master teachers and clinical supervisors have the self-efficacy and skills to model culturally responsive teaching to candidates? It is worth further investigating strategies to assist candidates in designing instruction that meet all of the CREDE standards and follow the PDC framework without adding stress and anxiety to an admittedly challenging task.

About the Authors

Dr. Mel Spence is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Learning and Teaching in the Graduate School of Education. She has 13 years of professional experience working with individuals with autism with 10 of those years spent with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Dr. Spence's research focuses on promoting the instructional efficacy for non-verbal students with autism and helping teachers implement evidence-based practice within their classrooms. Dr. Spence teaches courses on assessment, IEP development, instructional strategies, and non-academic supports. She has been recognized by the DADD division of CEC for the Tom E.C. Smith Early Career Award and Best Practitioner Research.

Dr. Tymika Wesley is an Assistant Professor at California Lutheran University. Dr. Wesley teaches courses in the Department of Learning and Teaching on instructional design and culturally and linguistically diverse K-12 student populations. Dr. Wesley's research focuses on creating effective learning environments for students from historically non-dominant communities, K-12 teacher performance and effectiveness, culturally relevant pedagogical practices, and cultural proficiency in teacher preparation programs. Dr. Wesley's work around cultural proficiency is important because it addresses both individual and systemic impacts on K-12 student populations that are often under-addressed in educational research.

References

Beyer, C., & Davis, E. (2012). Developing preservice elementary teachers' pedagogical design capacity for reform-based curriculum design. Curriculum Inquiry, 42(3), 386-413.

Brown, M. W. (2009). The teacher-tool relationship: Theorizing the design and use of the curriculum materials. In J. T. Remillard, B. A. Herbel-Eisenmann, & G. M. Lloyd (Eds.), *Mathematics teachers at work: Connecting curriculum materials and classroom instruction* (pp.17-36). New York, NY: Routledge.

Boykin, A., Noguera, P., & Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2011). Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the *achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

California Department of Education (2018). California assessment of student performance and progress (CASPP) results for English Language Arts (ELA) by ethnic designation. Retrieved March 1, 2019 from: https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2018/Search

California Department of Education (n.d.). *Equity and access*. Retrieved October 20, 2018 from: https://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/ea/

Carter, P.L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M.I., & Pollock, M. (2017). You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities. *Urban Education 52*(2), 207-235.

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (2006). *Standards: development of CREDE standards*. Retrieved October 15, 2018 from: https://manoa.hawaii.edu/coe/credenational/the-crede-five-standards-for-effective-pedagogy-and-learning/

Darling-Hammond, L., Bae, S., Cook-Harvey, C., Lam, L., Mercer, C., Podolsky, A., Stosich, E. (2016). Pathways to new accountability through the Every Student Succeeds Act. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute.

Delpit, L. (2006). Lessons from teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education, 57*(3), 220-231. Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015-2016).

Flores, O. (2018). (Re) constructing the language of the achievement gap to an opportunity gap:

The counternarratives of three African American women school leaders. *Journal of School Leadership, 28*(3), 344-373.

Garcia, E., Arias, M.B., Harris Murri, N.J., Serna, C. (2010). Developing responsive teachers: A challenge for a demographic reality. *Journal of Teacher Education, 6*(1-2), 132-134.

Gay, G. (2000). Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gorski, P. (2013). Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the *opportunity gap* (2nd Ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.* (2004).

Kea, C.D., & Trent, S.C. (2013). Providing culturally responsive teaching in field-based and student teaching experiences: A case study. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning, 3*(2), 82-101.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American* Educational Research Journal, 32(3), 465-491.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From achievement gap to the educational debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3-12.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2013a). "Stakes is high": Educating new century students. *The Journal of* Negro Education, 82(2), 105-110.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2013b). Lack of achievement or loss of opportunity? In P.L. Carter & K.G. Welner (Eds.), Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance (pp. 1-16). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lim, W., Son, J., & Kim, D. (2018). Understanding preservice teacher skills to construct lesson plans. International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education, 16(3), 519-538.

Musu-Gillette, L., Robinson, J., McFarland, J., KewalRamani, A., Zhang, A., & Wilkinson-Flicker, S. (2016). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups (NCES 2016-007). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

National Research Council (2002). Minority students in special and gifted education (Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education, M. S. Donovan, & C. T. Cross, Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.

Shealey, M.W., McHatton, P.A., & Wilson, V. (2011). Moving beyond disproportionality: The role of culturally responsive teaching in special education. *Teaching Education, 22*(4), 377-396.

Skiba, R.J., Horner, R.H., Chung, C., Rausch, M.K., May, S.L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A natural investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*, 85-107.

Sullivan, A.L. & Bal, A. (2013). Disproportionality in special education: Effects of individual and school variables on disability risk. *Exceptional Children 79*(4), 475-494.

Young, E. (2010). Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice? *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(3), 248–260.