

## Creating Inclusive Excellence: A Model for Culturally Relevant Teacher Education

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### Abstract

With increasing racial and linguistic diversity in U.S. public schools, scholars argue for teacher education programs that explicitly focus on issues of diversity. Based on this assumption, teacher education programs must consider: *How* do we successfully prepare teachers to teach diverse students? As teacher educators, we support effective preparation of teachers in meeting the needs of *all* students, but we are especially concerned about the preparation of teachers in urban classrooms. We developed a *culturally relevant* teacher education model that demonstrates our efforts to connect theory and practice. For this initiative, we organized a daylong conference with eight professional development workshops. The workshops in this paper focused on culturally relevant pedagogies addressing racial, cultural or linguistic diversity. We analyzed 122 post-workshop surveys to capture the effectiveness and relevance of the workshops. Findings indicate several nuanced processes are necessary for adequately preparing educators in culturally relevant traditions, even when educators are already well-meaning.

**Keywords:** culturally relevant teacher education, critical teacher reflection, teacher education, urban education, teacher professional development

## Introduction

As current faculty researchers and teacher educators we have committed to sustaining and strengthening research and teaching rooted in educational equity. Throughout our paper, we reflect on and present findings from a University initiative focused on addressing equity within teacher preparation. During our doctoral teacher preparation program, we developed a culturally relevant teacher education model, the *Creating Inclusive Excellence in Teacher Education (CIETE)* Initiative. It was designed to enhance teacher preparation for teachers of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students in urban contexts. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In determining the direction of the CIETE model, these tenets provided a framework for how teacher education could meet the needs of diverse students. In this article, we traced our steps from conceptualization (in coursework) to implementation (during the final year of our doctoral studies). Through sharing our work in this way, we urge graduate students who have urban education initiatives to take meaningful action *now*, rather than wait until they become faculty.

### Mapping The Urgency For Culturally Relevant Teaching In Teacher Education

As of 2012, approximately 63% of the U.S. population was White (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2014). Some scholars project that by 2050, racially diverse students will outnumber Whites, an unprecedented change in the U.S. population (Taylor & Cohn, 2012) as cited in (Nieto 2015, p. 17). Even though diverse student populations (racially, culturally, and linguistically) are *exponentially* increasing, the majority of teachers in the U.S. are White (Sleeter, 2008). When the race, ethnicity, or linguistic heritages of diverse students are not welcomed or validated, issues arise in classrooms. Because of the diversity gaps between students and their teachers, there is a need for some explicit instructional supports that involve

consciousness-raising activities and ongoing professional development. We wrestled with Nieto's question in this article: *How* do we successfully prepare teachers to teach diverse students populations? We addressed this question by tapping into the available resources at our institution to implement the CIETE initiative.

It is critical to acknowledge, understand, affirm, and sustain students' cultures in the classroom (Au & Jordan, 1981; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). To create classrooms that effectively honor students, Ladson-Billings (1995) through her seminal work, emphatically states *academic success* for children who have been historically underserved in our nation is central. Assuring students' academic success requires several important considerations. For example, Ladson-Billings outlined that developing deep understandings of students at the micro and macro levels are essential. Teachers must have a keen interest in knowing students personally while also understanding the socio-historical origins of their students. In other words, their humanity and their history are equally valuable. Furthermore, academic success must be paired with a commitment to developing students' *cultural competence*. According to Ladson-Billings, teachers must also aid students in developing a *critical consciousness* of sociopolitical contexts. That is, students must have a set of tools for critiquing "cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequalities" (p. 162).

Gay (2002) proposed beyond being culturally relevant, teachers must be *culturally responsive*. In being responsive, Gay asserted teachers need to understand the *formal, symbolic, and societal* curricula in caring ways that value the perspectives and experiences of students. She explained how teachers might develop their "knowledge base about cultural diversity" and "respond to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction" (p. 106). More recent, Paris (2012) argued we must concern ourselves with ways to make teaching *culturally sustaining*. Culturally

sustaining pedagogy, according to Paris, seeks to perpetuate and foster the linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic process of schooling. It rejects the notion of monolingualism and monocultural traditions to instead embrace cultural plurality and cultural equality.

In theory, many of the pre-service teachers and interns [1] we interacted with found culturally relevant ideologies meaningful. However, in practice they lacked concrete skills and strategies for being culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teachers. Teacher preparation programs represent vital spaces for culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining instruction, given the important responsibility to prepare the next generation of teachers. Several studies (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Leavell, Cowart & Wilhelm, 1999; Tidwell & Thompson, 2008) highlight teacher preparation programs that foster teachers who effectively embrace and engage in culturally relevant teaching. These initiatives represent examples of teacher preparation programs committed to infusing culturally relevant teaching throughout teacher training for pre-service teachers. Villegas and Lucas (2002) advocated to sustain these commitments and to move away from “fragmented and superficial treatment of diversity that currently prevails” (p. 20) in teacher education programs. They compelled teacher educators to articulate a vision of culturally responsive teachers *and* use that vision to systematically guide the infusion of issues *throughout* pre-service programs. Milner (2009), emphasized (1) concepts that *all* teachers need to know before they enter the classroom and (2) called teacher education programs to “better prepare teacher education students for more complicated matters of diversity that they will continue facing in U.S. society’s public schools” (p. 127). Undoubtedly, teachers at all levels, including Pre-K through the university need to continually extend and interrogate their own teaching practices. In the discussion that follows, we detail our efforts to engage in this process through our CIETE initiative.

### **Author Positionalities: Our Pathway From Conceptualization to Implementation**

Sakeena's enthusiasm for entering teacher education with a special emphasis on urban education stems from her own schooling experiences. From kindergarten- twelfth grade, she attended predominantly Black Title I urban public schools. Despite this, she attended a predominantly White Ivy League institution for her undergraduate studies. This extreme juxtaposition within her own educational experiences contribute to her sensitivity with diverse students, especially as their teachers wrestle with the incongruity between theory, research, and practice. Later in her career as an English teacher in a Title I urban public school, she grappled with the absence in the curriculum of support for her students' diverse identities, multiple languages, and wide-ranging academic capacities. Through this quandary, she committed to cultivating curricula and instruction to meet the needs of students *like her* through her doctoral studies in teacher education. In fulfilling this commitment, she teaches pre-service teachers and conducts professional development with in-service teachers across multiple contexts-- toward the goal of developing highly qualified and culturally competent teachers.

Theda's commitment to ensuring that all students are embraced in educational spaces that allow them to thrive academically stems from her own educational experiences as well as her experiences as an educational practitioner. During her previous career, she had the pleasure of working with and developing curricula for middle and high school student participants in the GEAR-UP, pre-college program. Her students, like all students, were brilliant and capable of academic success. They had aspirations of graduating high school and attending college, yet many students had not been provided with the educational tools to realize their dreams. It was because of and for her students, and all students in similar situations that she pursued doctoral studies, research, and practice to eliminate many of the barriers that prevented them from

experiencing academic success. She committed to doing so through supporting pre-service teachers to develop the skills to effectively embrace and teach all students.

As Black women, our collective experiences, research, and educational practices reflect our commitments to creating more equitable and affirming spaces for all students, particularly for diverse students in urban contexts. Our experiences guided our development of a proposal that advocated for culturally relevant teaching in our teacher education program. At the time, we thought we were simply fulfilling a graded assignment for our doctoral seminar. However, we received positive feedback and support from our course instructor, faculty mentor, and department chair to secure grant funds and *actualize* our proposal to launch the CIETE initiative.

#### **Context: Creating Inclusive Excellence in Teacher Education (CIETE)**

The larger initiative consisted of two colloquia and a daylong conference with concurrent workshops. The colloquia were a part of our original proposal in our doctoral seminar and presented unique opportunities for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members in our college of education to unite in this necessary, yet challenging work. However, the daylong conference was a suggestion from participants in our colloquia; they wanted more time to engage these topics. We created the CIETE initiative to connect theory in the academy with classroom policy and practice for teachers and administrators in today's schools.

The conference registration was open to teachers, administrators, and concerned community members in the state. CIETE attracted over 150 participants on a Saturday morning, including educators from 12 different public school districts. The response to CIETE illuminated the need for targeted and explicit professional development focusing on culturally relevant approaches. CIETE had eight concurrent workshops and a closing keynote session with education scholar, Dr. Richard Milner. The workshops were designed for participants to

share their experiences and learn new teaching strategies to meet the needs of current and future students. In the context of this paper, we focus on findings from participants' experiences during the conference workshops.

### Method

To gain a better understanding of participants' experiences with the conference, we developed and administered two anonymous evaluations. The evaluations allowed us to capture the effectiveness and relevance of the individual workshops and the overall conference. Each evaluation included six brief questions focused on the following topics: relevance of the workshop, the usefulness of the teaching strategies participants learned, and suggestions for future sessions. In the context of this paper, we discuss findings from three of the eight individual workshops. We analyzed the three workshops with the highest number of submitted evaluations, which totaled 122. Additionally, five of the eight workshop facilitators offered us strategic plans for their workshops, which are included in our analysis.

We approached the analysis of the evaluations using a grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2013). We engaged in three rounds of coding the evaluations. The first round of analysis involved open coding where we read the surveys to document and make sense of emerging themes both *within* and *across* workshops. In our second round of focused coding, we categorized quotes from participants in the conference workshops. In the third round, we compared the evaluation quotes and the facilitator workshop strategic plans for thematic commonalities. Upon our analysis of the evaluation data, two major themes emerged: (1) *critical awareness* and the (2) *acquisition of culturally relevant teaching strategies and tools*.

### **Fostering Critical Awareness & Acquisition of Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies**

In our conceptualization of critical awareness relative to participants' experiences with the CIETE initiative, we drew upon Howard's (2003) work on *critical reflection*. Howard explained, "to become culturally relevant, teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection that challenges them to see how their positionality influences their students in either positive or negative ways" (p. 197). Critical reflection is difficult because it forces us to contend with biases, misunderstandings, and stereotypes that negatively impact our ability to successfully connect with and teach our students. Through critical reflection teachers can understand how systematic structures such as racism, classism, and linguicism operate and are perpetuated in classrooms. Furthermore, engaging in critical reflection and gaining critical awareness provide a space for educators to understand the utility of engaging in culturally relevant teaching practices.

The data included in our analysis speak to the critical reflection that occurred and the critical awareness gained among educators participating in the CIETE initiative. Beyond critical awareness, our data demonstrate a need for teachers to acquire and employ culturally relevant teaching strategies. The data below focus on the responses from participants' anonymous evaluations. More specifically, we illuminate the ways participants identified their consciousness raising and made concrete connections between the theories raised in the workshops and practical resources for their own classrooms.

### **Issues of Power in the Classroom: Exploring Culturally Relevant Pedagogies**

This first workshop examined the importance of culturally relevant teaching through the lens of power; it was led by a teacher education faculty member and a doctoral student. An elementary intern explained they gained "aware[ness] about the differences between culturally relevant and assimilationist teaching." The intern was previously unaware of the differences

between culturally relevant and assimilationist teaching. Learning about these distinctions allowed the intern to reflect inwardly and critically. Providing a space for the intern to reflect in this way is an example of fostering critical awareness. A second elementary intern commented on learning “how to look at common beliefs and evaluate how/where I am within those beliefs.” These critically reflective activities developed the teachers’ critical awareness at micro and macro levels. A doctoral student left the workshop with tools “to reflect on my own teaching philosophy and explore how to better match my practice to my pedagogy.” Beyond developing critical awareness of their own ideologies, critical reflection provided important scaffolds for aligning their ideologies with their teaching. Comments from the participants demonstrate how teachers at various levels (interns and doctoral students) engaged in critical reflection that challenged them to reexamine their own positionality with diverse students.

### **Teaching Beyond the Text(s): Selecting Humanizing Literature for Social Justice & Cultural Agency**

The second workshop, led by two faculty members and a doctoral candidate, explored the importance of linguistic diversity and social justice using diverse texts. One of the workshop facilitators offered debate as a teaching and learning tool. Below she commented on the potential of debate for African American youth.

It provides a creative space to dialogue, research and develop cultural and educative identities, fosters greater self-confidence, and develops leaders, informed citizens and community activists. It also creates a pipeline to college...Through my session participants were able to analyze a debate text that my former debate students created.

Her narrative captured the powerful ways that culturally relevant pedagogy is intentionally woven into the purpose and goals of debate. Through the intentional use of diverse debate texts, the facilitator acknowledged her students' humanity and their own cultural histories. A faculty participant in African and African-American studies explained that learning how to utilize "debate as a form of providing agency to students" is a perspective she had not considered before. A pre-service English teacher learned "how to incorporate student voice and commentary on social justice through debates." Participants learned that debate as practiced by the facilitator, embodies the three tenets of culturally relevant teaching since it affirms students' cultural identities, supports their academic development, and is a vehicle useful for their engagement in community change.

The second facilitator of Teaching Beyond the Text(s) focused on expanding the types of texts teachers utilize when teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement. Below she illuminated the impetus behind her specific focus on texts that affirm the voices of local Civil Rights leaders.

My session focused on achieving social justice by teaching different narratives in relation to the Civil Rights movement. In particular, my session addressed Meira Levinson's (2012) concern about young people not knowing other influential members of the Civil Rights movement.

She provided examples of texts that highlighted several civil rights leaders and encouraged participants to seek out texts honoring local leaders in their students' communities. In response, a pre-service teacher learned to "use smaller, local, relevant stories to connect to larger movements," an innovative idea for this pre-service teacher. An in-service teacher gained "ideas for texts, [and an awareness of the] importance of bringing local community into the

classroom.” Participants’ responses showed how teachers build upon students’ cultural competence to honor and expand knowledge of localized cultural history.

Additionally, the third facilitator focused on linguistic discrimination and more specifically, how African American Language and speakers of African American Language are often devalued (Baker-Bell, 2013). Below the faculty presenter shared her inspiration for discussing this topic.

My inspiration comes from me being a classroom teacher and being ill-prepared to address language diversity and more specifically African American Language. This is when I realized that linguistic oppression was a real thing...I think that this is an entry point into talking about linguistic oppression or dealing with language, power and identity. This is a space to begin and we don’t do a good job of using texts to do so.

Several participants expressed new understandings of linguistic justice because of reflecting on this topic. For example, a pre-service teacher specializing in secondary English noted, “the idea of linguistic social justice- normally it’s thought of as race justice, not language (or in my head that’s how it was).” This teacher’s comment highlights the existence of blind spots in teacher preparation for linguistic justice, even for teachers who study language. Another pre-service teacher commented on gaining tools for, “looking critically at several themes and ideas not included in multicultural literature, such as looking at language diversity in *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960).” The workshop re-framed how teachers might recycle resources they already have access to in the classroom, thereby reading canonical texts with a critically conscious, linguistic-justice lens to extend student learning in meaningful ways.

## Meeting the Needs of Linguistically Diverse Students: Classroom and Schoolwide Strategies

Two doctoral students led the third workshop, which focused on fostering awareness and skills-building for supporting multilingual learners. One workshop facilitator shared that she was connected to this work in part to demystify negative assumptions about multilingualism.

Too often, there are myths and misunderstandings about multilingualism and English language learners and biases about who is allowed to be multilingual. I want my work to address these--to help students foster and build their multilingualism, to help teachers build their confidence and ability in teaching language learners, and to help counter the discourse that you can only be multilingual if you can speak English first.

These misunderstandings and assumptions were also evident in the responses of participants. A pre-service teacher majoring in secondary English and Spanish shared that the workshop helped her “make sure I am aware of my language assumptions.” This workshop supported additional teacher-participants as they developed a critical consciousness of their own misunderstandings and biases about language. A faculty member explained the importance of integrating this content in their college-level courses, “to check that I am helping teachers reach English Language Learners (ELL’s). That is, that we present the same key ideas and strategies.” The workshop facilitators disrupted assumptions about language awareness. A special education and language arts teacher commented on gaining “strategies for working with students and families to help students (with) language acquisition and content knowledge.” This response emphasized that multilingualism awareness is not enough. Rather, teachers need targeted activities that reinforce the elements of culturally relevant teaching in ongoing ways.

## Discussion

Through this paper, we grappled with the following question: How do we successfully prepare teachers to teach diverse student populations? To address this question, we conceptualized and implemented the CIETE initiative, a professional development opportunity designed for educators to learn more about culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching practices. Our data from the CIETE initiative demonstrated it takes several nuanced steps to adequately prepare educators in the culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining traditions, even when educators are already well-meaning educators. We stressed the necessity for *critical awareness* as a first step toward *the acquisition of culturally relevant teaching strategies* to meet the needs of diverse students. It is essential to foster critical reflection among intergenerational educators who are at various points in their careers (e.g. pre-service and in-service teachers, graduate students and faculty in education, school administrators), in the same room, at the same time. These spaces demystify critical awareness as a mastery construct.

Educators need time to move from critical awareness toward implementing culturally relevant teaching traditions. To illustrate this point, the CIETE conference participants sacrificed a Saturday- time *beyond* the regular workweek to learn how to put these theories into practice. We were surprised that participants most commonly requested additional time and support-- beyond the conference, according to the evaluations. This lets us know having a willingness to be a culturally relevant teacher, attending professional development on the weekends, engaging in critical awareness activities, and acquiring strategies still fall short in meeting the needs of educators who genuinely want to honor students through culturally relevant teaching.

It is also evident that educators need *ongoing* professional development. Research consistently reveals that isolated and stand-alone courses, field experiences and professional

development do not solely provide the teacher training and development that is needed. These environments must be conducive to the vulnerabilities of educators so they are comfortable asking questions. The ongoing support helps educators to transition through the theoretical and practical shifts needed in the classroom, on a daily basis. For example, the teachers who attended *Teaching Beyond the Texts(s)* needed additional support (beyond the workshop) with *how* to teach linguistic justice using *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They needed direct instruction on *how* to apply their newly acquired critical awareness to their teaching. We advance work on culturally relevant teacher education by illuminating these nuances. Educators truly committed to engaging in culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching must provide adequate time to acquire new knowledge and skills and provide ongoing support to help teachers through paradigm shifts.

### **Implications**

The CIETE initiative demonstrated the importance of spaces that bring educators together to critically reflect about inequality, diversity, and effective teaching. The topics covered in the workshops represent topics that must be effectively woven throughout teacher training programs and ongoing professional development-- if it seeks to connect theory and practice between schools of education and schools with diverse K-12 student populations.

We avoid reducing culturally relevant teacher education to a set of prescribed and fixed practices. Instead, teacher preparation programs and professional development should be viewed as additional spaces that can and should foster sustained critical teacher reflection. CIETE represents one of myriad steps necessary for advancing culturally relevant teacher preparation.

As we grapple with next steps, we want to return to our starting point: graduate students in education have important contributions to make to the field and should not wait until they are

faculty to actualize their own initiatives. Furthermore, we want to consider whether teachers' critical awareness manifests into their actual teaching practice and in what ways. Our evaluation results support a need for closer examination of *whether* and *how* culturally relevant professional development affects students' academic outcomes, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Notes:

[1] "Interns are students who have completed a BA or a BS in their subject matter, and are spending an academic year working with experienced mentor teachers and field instructors on their teaching practice while taking graduate courses in the Teacher Education department" (Secondary Education Internship Guide, Michigan State University).

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