

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

# I WOULD QUIT MY JOB:

## UNPACKING PRESERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURE AND DIVERSITY

DIANA MURDOCK  
WINTHROP UNIVERSITY

ERIN HAMEL  
WINTHROP UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

With the changing demographics of classrooms across the United States, preservice teachers must be prepared to provide a just and equitable education for all students (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Villegas, 2007). In order to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population, teacher education programs are responsible for providing support to preservice teachers so, as educators, they honor “the differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups” (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005, p. xviii). Recognizing the impact of respectful and reciprocal relationships between families and schools, we challenged preservice teachers to reflect upon beliefs, perceptions and biases they held about diverse cultures. Data collected through the resulting study have implications for how colleges of education can ensure that candidates have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to effectively work with all children and families.

*Keywords:* Early Childhood Preservice Teacher Education for Diverse Classrooms, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

## INTRODUCTION

*“If I taught a child from this culture, I would quit my job.”*

This quote from a preservice teacher, as she contributed to an in-class discussion concerning culture, families, and children, shines light on our need, as educators, to reflect upon and challenge our often hidden, and unknown biases and assumptions that impact our work with children. Throughout the semester, this student earned a high grade-point-average, faithfully prepared for class, enthusiastically participated in class discussions, created engaging lesson plans, and contributed thoughtful statements regarding her appreciation and respect for all cultures, children and families. This particular response was prompted by her reading and reflecting on the article: *The Body Rituals Among the Nacirema* by Horace Miner (1956). In this article, Miner provides an etic, or outside, perspective of American culture. Occasionally, when using this reading as a course assignment, our preservice teachers recognize the satire and their own rituals detailed in unfamiliar terms. Most of the time, however, they do not. This lack of recognition then creates an interesting space for dialogue about the intersection of what our preservice teachers believe to be true concerning their own biases and assumptions and what proves to be true when these biases and assumptions are challenged in ways that are meaningful to them. For this particular student, the revelation that “this culture” which she found so offensive that she would “quit her job” as a teacher if confronted with its rituals and traditions, was, in fact, a culture with which she most identified.

Motivated by our preservice teachers as they confronted their own cultural beliefs, perceptions, and biases, we share what we learned about the cultural mindsets our preservice teachers hold regarding their work with diverse families and children. Through our analysis of data collected from forty-two preservice teachers, we note findings and important implications as we move forward in our goal to prepare preservice teachers for diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms. We share comments and quotes from our data in the spirit of respect and understanding, acknowledging that we are all works in progress. Our growth as educators, from preservice years into seasoned and experienced mentorship, requires that we analyze and consider the ways that

our cultural mindsets are developed, molded and changed over time. As we reflected and learned with our preservice teachers, we came to embrace the unique and powerful opportunities held by colleges of education in supporting preservice teachers as they begin their work in our diverse schools. It is our hope that this work might inspire others as we all seek to understand both ourselves and those we serve in our schools and communities.

## **GUIDING PERSPECTIVES**

Our work is guided by three bodies of theory and research: (a) preservice teacher preparation for diverse classrooms, (b) mindful teaching, and (c) culturally relevant pedagogy. These perspectives influence our research focus, methodology, and analysis as we seek to better understand the mindsets of our preservice teachers.

## **PRESERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION FOR DIVERSE CLASSROOMS**

The need for highly qualified professionals with knowledge, attitudes and dispositions to effectively work with diverse students and families is well documented in teacher preparation literature (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009; Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Melnick & Zeichner, 1998). Researchers have examined the relationship between mindsets preservice teachers' hold about working with diverse cultures as they enter their preservice teacher education programs and their motivation and abilities to then teach for social justice in their classrooms (Kinloch, 2011; Villegas, 2007). Many within this field note the challenges faced by teacher preparation programs as they prepare teacher candidates from mostly "White, female, heterosexual, middle-class backgrounds" to work with diverse children and families with whom many candidates have had little exposure or experience (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011, p. 534). Clearly, teacher preparation programs must seek to cultivate cultural proficiency – the act of "honoring the differences among cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit, interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups" (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005, p. xviii) in their teacher candidates so that they

might, in turn, provide a just and meaningful education for the diverse students and families with whom they work.

A key aspect for preparing preservice teachers for diverse classrooms is supporting them as they critically self-reflect in order to examine their cultural beliefs, assumptions and attitudes, providing a foundation for building understanding and respect for diverse cultures (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011; Kidd, Sanchez & Thorp, 2008). Recognizing their own cultural identities offers a starting place for addressing well-documented barriers and challenges many preservice teachers face as they engage in their teacher training (i.e. limited background experiences, inflexible thinking) (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Hollins and Guzman, 2005). Specifically, Howard (2003) explains that preservice teachers must “critically reflect on their own racial and cultural identities and... recognize how these identities coexist with the cultural compositions of their students” (p. 196). Autobiographies, reflective journals, action plans, essays and discussions “around issues perceived to be controversial such as racism and discrimination” are useful tools in aiding the exploration and recognition of personal perspectives, biases, and assumptions about other groups (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011, p. 529).

In addition, social justice themes should be expertly woven throughout preservice teacher education programs, rather than addressed through a single course (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2011). One-shot courses with minimal attention to topics surrounding culture and diversity often fail to promote cultural proficiency amongst preservice teachers (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). While there is still much debate about how best to organize social justice curriculum in preservice teacher education programs (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007), the need for systematic and intentionally embedded content and field experiences throughout the program is well documented (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Villegas, 2007). Specifically, diverse internship and field experiences (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse, 2006) are instrumental in impacting preservice teacher dispositions and practices regarding diversity. It is through these lived classroom experiences that preservice teachers can reflect on and employ the beliefs, dispositions, and attitudes that are congru-

ent with cultural proficiency, thus preparing them to teach in diverse classrooms.

## MINDFUL TEACHING

The field of mindful teaching provides important insights concerning teachers' perceptions of culture and families. Nelson and Guerra (2007) describe mindful teaching as the ability to make the subconscious conscious and to recognize one's beliefs, stances, and perspectives while avoiding judgment and single stories (Adichie, 2009). Mindful teaching is grounded in a disposition of self-reflection and the conscious awareness of tendencies to polarize our perceptions of others as "normal" and "not normal" (Sherretz, 2011). In addition, mindful teaching is described by Brown and Langer (1990) as the ability to see the world through multiple perspectives, honoring diversity and multiplicity rather than a single Truth. This ability helps us view children and families in nuanced ways, recognizing the many possibilities of languages, ways of thinking, skills, hobbies, and areas of expertise of diverse cultures (Sherretz, 2011). The work of mindful teaching supports our study by informing our understandings of the complexities of preservice teachers' mindsets regarding culture and families – their abilities to reflect, avoid judgment and single stories, celebrate diverse perspectives and honor multiple truths.

## CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Finally, culturally relevant pedagogy reflects our ultimate hope and goal in our preparation of preservice teachers for diverse classrooms and draws upon ideas central to mindful teaching. Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the importance of building relationships with families using a strengths-based perspective, one that celebrates, honors, and utilizes the wealth of resources diverse families and children bring to classrooms (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy also recognizes the notion that teachers' perceptions of families and their methods for engaging with families are often based upon their own experiences and constructions of family dynamics (Allen, 2007; Graue & Brown, 2003). Because of these limitations, teachers often communicate with families based upon their own assumptions and beliefs about what they consider "normal." When ana-

lyzing behaviors through a lens of what they consider “normal,” teachers position other cultural ways of knowing and doing as “not normal,” therefore creating bias (Lopez-Robertson, Long & Turner-Nash, 2010, p. 100). Implementing culturally relevant teaching practices challenges teachers to co-create meaningful experiences with families so that teachers can work to create more equitable learning environments for their students (Lopez-Robertson, Long & Turner-Nash, 2010, p. 102). When teachers connect with and honor students’ and their families’ funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) they make learning meaningful and culturally relevant by utilizing their strengths as tools for learning (Allen, 2007; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Drawing from key tenets of these three bodies of work – preservice teacher preparation for diverse classrooms, mindful teaching, and culturally relevant pedagogy – our study seeks to unpack the mindsets of preservice teachers concerning culture and families. We aim to better understand their beliefs and perspectives so that we, as preservice teacher educators, can support them in affirming, utilizing, and celebrating diverse cultures as strengths for learning in all classrooms.

## DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

Forty-two preservice teachers participated in this qualitative study over the course of one semester. The preservice teachers were senior-level undergraduate students seeking Bachelor of Science degrees in Early Childhood Education at a midsize southeastern university. All preservice teachers were simultaneously completing field experiences in local public schools. Placements varied between pre-kindergarten through third grades. Preservice teachers spent approximately twenty hours each week assisting and teaching in their assigned classrooms and also completed required coursework on the university campus.

Together we explored the following research question: *What can we learn about the mindsets preservice teachers hold regarding their work with diverse children and families?* Data were collected through reflective questions based on course assignments and engagements and participant observation. A selection of course assignments and engagements are detailed below.

## COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND ENGAGEMENTS

In an effort to both teach our preservice teachers about theory and research concerning culture and families, and learn with our preservice teachers about their cultural mindsets, we intentionally designed course assignments and engagements that allowed preservice teachers to read, experience, debrief and reflect upon issues pertaining to perceptions, beliefs and biases they held concerning culture and families. We summarize course engagements and readings in Table 1 and describe engagements in greater detail below.

Table 1—Course Topics, Engagements and Readings

Selected Course Topics/Engagements	Selected Course Readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funds of Knowledge and Family Artifact Museums</li> <li>• Deconstructing Culture, Cultural “Circles” and Code-Switching</li> <li>• Stereotyping: Adichie—<i>Danger of the Single Story</i></li> <li>• Self-fulfilling Prophecy and Discrimination in <i>A Class Divided</i> Frontline PBS</li> <li>• Emic/Etic Cultural Simulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Singer &amp; Singer—Creating a Museum of Family Artifacts</li> <li>• Carter—Citizenship My Father’s Way</li> <li>• Columbo—Empathy and Cultural Competence</li> <li>• Cowhey—Back Ants and Buddhists</li> <li>• Finders &amp; Lewis—Why Some Parents Don’t Come to School</li> <li>• Miner—Body Rituals Among the Nacirema</li> </ul>

### FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND FAMILY ARTIFACT MUSEUMS

To help our preservice teachers develop a concrete understanding of the idea of using funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) to honor, engage and develop opportunities for meaningful connections to content, we used Singer and Singer’s (2004), *Creating a Museum of Family Artifacts*, as a springboard for discussion. Preser-

vice teachers then created their own classroom museum by identifying and bringing to class their own examples of cultural and family artifacts. While each student shared family stories based on their artifacts, we identified themes from shared stories that we might utilize later as insights into funds of knowledge held by each family. We also looked for areas of commonality across students. We discussed ideas such as, “What connections or themes do we see between student artifacts and stories and required content and curriculum?” and “How might we use family strengths, experiences, and background as a means for developing classroom community, communication between families and school, and relationships?” After developing a list of themes and connections, preservice teachers considered ways in which curriculum might be built with the interests and background knowledge of students at its center.

### **DECONSTRUCTING CULTURE, “CULTURAL CIRCLES,” AND CODE-SWITCHING**

In an attempt to deconstruct and more fully understand the term culture, students brainstormed all areas of life that they recognized as related to and driven by culture. Their lists contained ideas and societal constructs such as music, dress, ways of speaking, gender rules and expectations, religious and spiritual beliefs, family structure, government, geography, and economics. This short list only touches on the ideas shared as preservice teachers expanded on and deconstructed aspects of their lives that make up their individual cultures. Preservice teachers also discussed ways in which individuals are stereotyped and categorized based upon a geographical definition of culture. For example, preservice teachers analyzed ways in which individuals are stereotyped in classroom materials based on their country or continent of origin (i.e. picture books or posters depicting “children around the world” where the children look and are dressed according to stereotypes).

After deconstructing culture, preservice teachers then analyzed their own lives for cultural “circles.” Responding to the question, “What sub-cultures do you belong to?” preservice teachers considered their school, church, family, friends, sports teams, sorority and fraternity groups, and work lives as cultural circles that followed their own



unique and sometimes conflicting social rules (<http://www.tolerance.org/activity/my-multicultural-self>). Students recognized that they often code-switch when changing their dress, language and ways of being as they move from one cultural circle to another. For example, preservice teachers shared that they code-switched and changed behaviors when they attended church with their grandmother on a Sunday morning versus going out clubbing with friends on a Friday night. Preservice teachers then discussed examples of ways that code-switching is relevant to classroom teachers, acknowledging that cultural rules often conflict with home and family rules. Recognizing the intricacies and internal conflicts we all face as we maneuver between cultural circles is important for our preservice teachers.

### **Stereotyping: Adichie's (2009) *The Danger of the Single Story***

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) poignantly discusses finding “cultural voice” and describes stereotypes as single stories in her talk from the Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) conference. Preservice teachers connected to her humble and self-reflective approach and to the idea that single stories should not become Truths (Brown and Langer, 1990) or stereotypes, but often do. They shared examples of times when they believed a single story as Truth about a person or group, along with a time that someone else believed a single story about them. By claiming responsibility for stereotyping others, and reflecting upon the ways they felt and made sense of another believing a stereotype about them, the preservice teachers were able to understand the impact of single stories on a personal level.

## **SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AND DISCRIMINATION IN A CLASS DIVIDED FRONTLINE PBS**

Preservice teachers analyzed and reflected upon self-fulfilling prophecy and discrimination after watching the PBS Frontline documentary titled *A Class Divided*. In the documentary, a third grade teacher in Iowa in 1968 conducts a simulation with her third grade students following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The simulation makes discrimination and hatred very real for these third grade students and prompted intense discussion amongst our preservice

teachers about whether young children should be made to feel uncomfortable or unhappy in order to learn about discrimination first-hand.

## **EMIC/ETIC CULTURAL SIMULATION**

Preservice teachers participated in a cultural simulation designed to not only remind them how it feels to be an outsider to a particular group or culture, but also to help them analyze their own coping skills, strategies and behaviors as they attempted to understand and become a part of a new group. For the simulation, preservice teachers were divided into two groups. One group left the room while the other group was informed about unspoken social rules that drive their interactions. If the outsider group members were able to learn the social rules and follow them, then the insider culture was allowed to talk with and embrace the outsiders. However, if the outsider group members were unable to learn the social rules, then the insider group members were instructed to ignore them. Groups took turns experiencing the outsider and insider cultures and debriefed about their ideas about the social rules that they believed to be governing the culture. Preservice teachers described the simulation as impactful and expressed emotions such as frustration, sadness, and power. Their analysis of their own reactions fueled interesting discussion concerning the application of the simulation and experience to young children in classroom settings.

## **ANALYSIS**

We analyzed data using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First separately, and then together, we coded data, noted important concepts, analyzed concepts for trends, and developed themes from those trends (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) also helped us to develop themes describing key attributes of our preservice teachers' mindsets towards culture and diversity.

## **FINDINGS**

Four major themes helped us make sense of the data in terms of findings and important implications. These themes, discussed below include: (a) definitions of culture, (b) inconsistencies in beliefs, (c) teaching cultural mindsets, and (d) fear.

## DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

The majority of our preservice teachers began our course with a narrowed definition of culture and tended to retain that limited definition throughout the semester. Our hope was to lead preservice teachers to own a broad definition of culture, one that identifies culture as a “dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs” (Gay, 2010, p.8). While some began to move towards embracing this definition, many preservice teachers described a narrowed definition of culture, even at the end of the semester. For example, some continued to define culture in geographical terms, often associating culture with regions of the world and students who were “from another country.” In addition, like the experiences described by Florio-Ruane (2001), our preservice teachers tended to describe culture from an “us” and “them” perspective. Specifically, European American preservice teachers tended to label other European Americans as one cultural group, and all other peoples as belonging to “different” cultural groups and made recommendations to classroom teachers to “help students [from other countries] better understand *our* culture.” In this way, they did not always recognize the unique cultural identities of themselves and their students, defining culture in ways that were more narrow than the definitions that were explored through course readings and engagements.

Finally, many of our preservice teachers limited their definitions of culture to entire ethnicities of people, rather than recognizing the individual cultures of peoples. Statements like “More than likely a [teacher] is going to be teaching some students who come from a different culture” and “At some point in time, every teacher will have students from different cultures in their classrooms” reflect our preservice teachers’ tendencies to return to a narrower definition, seeing culture as broadly belonging to groups of similar peoples, rather than belonging to each and every person.

## INCONSISTENCIES IN BELIEFS

Our preservice teachers revealed inconsistencies in their beliefs when they applied these beliefs to classroom practices. Throughout the semester, we intentionally and systematically supported our pre-

service teachers to expand their theoretical understandings of culture and families and apply these understandings to classroom settings. Similar to findings in Hollins and Guzman (2005), Sleeter and Owuor (2011) and Siwatu, Polydore, and Starker (2009), while we hoped that preservice teachers would be able to connect their growing theoretical understandings about culture and diversity to specific classroom practices that empower all families, we were surprised to find that their discussions revealed disconnections between their stated theoretical beliefs and the ways in which they imagined those beliefs would be lived out through classroom practice. For example, when asked to consider the impact of stereotypes on teaching cultural content to children, one preservice teacher responded, “By teaching a lesson on Native Americans and dressing up like the stereotypical “Indian,” with feathers in your hair, could this possibly be discriminating against a child’s relative who is Native American but wears a different kind of headdress?” While the first half of this statement leads us to believe that the preservice teacher recognized a narrow perspective of culture and the potential for teaching stereotypes while teaching cultural content to children, the second half of her statement reveals that her conceptual understanding is still limited. She seems to continue to embrace a narrowed definition of culture and understanding of culturally relevant practices, focusing on superficial elements of culture (i.e. dress, food, festivals).

Likewise, another student noted, “Having an ELL student or a foreign student in your class should be a learning experience, not a hopeless challenge.” While this student attempted to take an asset perspective and recognize the richness that diversity within a classroom might offer, her comparison of a “learning experience” to a “hopeless challenge” reveals a perspective of diversity that has yet to fully claim an asset view.

## **TEACHING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES**

Throughout the semester, the preservice teachers raised questions regarding the teaching of diverse perspectives. Specifically, they questioned: (a) the appropriateness of including issues of bias and discrimination in early childhood curriculum, (b) who should teach issues of

bias and discrimination, and (c) the ways in which diverse perspectives should be taught. The following examples from the data highlight the kinds of questions the preservice teachers asked.

Preservice teachers questioned the appropriateness of teaching diverse perspectives (i.e. anti-bias and discrimination perspectives), specifically to early childhood aged children. As one student explained, “consideration needs to be given as to the age of the students” and another warned, “it is not developmentally appropriate for students below third grade.” For many of our preservice teachers, using culturally relevant practices -teaching young children to think critically and to question the status quo (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) was not the kind of teaching they imagined suitable for young learners.

Preservice teachers also questioned who should be responsible for teaching issues of diverse perspectives. While some preservice teachers felt that it was the responsibility of the classroom teacher to “incorporate the topic of discrimination, prejudice, and racism along with the regular class lessons” others explained that “teaching about discrimination should start in the home, but when it is not addressed there and becomes a problem in school, then it becomes the teachers’ and the schools’ responsibility.” Yet another student noted that engagements that examine issues of discrimination are “appropriate for a classroom provided there is parental permission.” In these ways, doubts about who is responsible for leading our young children to examine issues of culture and bias, resonated with many of our preservice teachers.

Finally, the preservice teachers questioned the ways that culture and diversity should be addressed in early childhood classrooms. Some preservice teachers explained it should only be addressed “if it naturally came up.” Others expressed their idea that respect for culture and diversity should be taught through explicit and intentional modeling by the teacher. Some preservice teachers felt “a lesson” focused on respect for diversity would be sufficient. Still others explained that “perhaps not all the children in every class, but [some] students” need to be taught about discrimination. Interestingly, like Mysore, Lincoln, and Wavering (2006), some students believed that the teacher’s approach to teaching about discrimination should depend on the demographic makeup of their schools and classrooms. “I don’t think that all teachers

need to address discrimination based on race, because not every area has that as a major issue...” At the end of the semester, our preservice teachers’ continued to question their role in addressing issues related to diversity in early childhood classrooms.

## FEAR

Our preservice teachers expressed fear about teaching issues of culture and diversity in several ways. For example, they often explained they were afraid that students would be harmed by engaging in what can be perceived as “difficult” conversations about culture and diversity. They were afraid children would be emotionally “scarred for life.” Similar to findings in Sleeter (2008) and Howard (2003), our preservice teachers also expressed a fear of being uncomfortable or uncertain about talking about issues of diversity. For example, one student noted, “Discrimination is a very sensitive subject. I honestly would not be comfortable teaching it... Even now when I am in class, I get on edge when the subject comes up.” In addition, they expressed fear of teaching cultural mindsets the *right* way, explaining that “if it is not taught the right way, it could potentially do more evil than good.” Finally, preservice teachers expressed fear of families’ negative reactions towards addressing issues related to cultural mindsets in classrooms, making statements like, “I wouldn’t want any of my students’ families getting upset with me for teaching the topic.” These kinds of responses lead us to believe that many of our preservice teachers did not adopt a mindfulness about teaching culture and diversity in a way that would allow them to see the many possibilities that exist regarding culturally relevant classroom practices.

## IMPLICATIONS

Our work offers important insights for how colleges of education can work to ensure that candidates have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to effectively work with diverse families and children.

## REFLECTING ON BELIEFS AND BIASES

Preservice teachers must reflect on their beliefs and biases in order to be prepared to work with diverse children and families and consider adopting a broader definition of culture that honors diversity

and multiplicity rather than a single Truth (Brown and Langer, 1990). Surface level discussions of beliefs are not enough. Preservice teachers must reflect critically into their own personal backgrounds, cultural discourses and deeply entrenched mindsets in order to move beyond beliefs they know they *should* embrace (i.e. “All children and cultures should be honored and respected”) and beliefs they *actually* embrace (i.e. “If I taught a child from this culture, I would quit by job”) when faced with what they perceive to be cultural conflict or mismatch with their own beliefs and practices. Depth in thinking and critical reflection and analysis are of particular importance in light of inconsistencies we found in preservice teachers stated beliefs and imagined classroom practices. Beliefs concerning the value and potential of all children, regardless of cultural labels and socially-constructed categories, must be emphasized in meaningful ways so that preservice teachers are able to resist returning to previously held and more narrowed ways of thinking when they enter classrooms and are faced with familiar and deeply entrenched biases and assumptions.

## DEFINING CULTURAL IDENTITIES

We need to support preservice teachers in defining their own cultural identities. Our preservice teachers tended to define and understand culture and identity through an ethnocentric lens, solely recognizing culture in peoples belonging to countries, continents, or ethnicities that differed from themselves. In identifying and defining their own cultural identities (Howard, 2003), our preservice teachers might begin to recognize that we all have culture and that each one is relevant and valuable.

## CREATING EMOTIONALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

We need to create emotionally safe environments for our preservice teachers as they engage in critical reflection. Analyzing and learning about oneself as a cultural being requires trust in an emotionally safe environment. While it is well documented that trust and emotional and psychological safety are important in creating effective learning environments (Ladson-Billings, 2009), it became evident that our preservice teachers needed to feel secure as they reflected and shared biases and perspectives. Students noted feeling “uncomfort-

able” and “on edge” when discussing topics related to culture and bias. We must establish and maintain college classroom atmospheres that allow preservice teachers to take risks and be vulnerable as they share personal examples and make connections that are often based on experiences that were hurtful and impactful in forming their beliefs and mindsets towards cultures other than their own.

## **EMBRACING DISCOMFORT AND FEAR**

We need to embrace discomfort and fear rather than be paralyzed or silenced by it. Fear of harming students, upsetting parents, losing one’s job, not doing it “right”, and being uncomfortable can cripple teachers’ attempts to break through barriers, confront assumptions, and seek to understand each individual. We must find ways to empower teachers so that fear and its negative effects on teachers, students, and families are no longer present. Preservice teachers are particularly vulnerable to fear as they gain experience, confidence and identity as teachers. Preservice teacher educators may also need to overcome this fear and become models, practicing ways to have these difficult conversations in the college classroom.

## **DOCUMENTING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING PRACTICES IN CLASSROOMS**

Our preservice teachers struggled to imagine how theories and concepts translated into classroom practices. Therefore, our preservice teachers need multiple examples of authentic, engaging and culturally relevant teaching practices at various grade levels. Many have not experienced this way of teaching in their own backgrounds as students, making it even more difficult for them to conceptualize ways in which theory translates to effective and meaningful practice. An abundance of specific classroom examples that clearly denote culturally relevant teaching practices can serve as an important resource for support of preservice teachers in connecting their evolving beliefs to imagined classroom practices.



## **OBSERVING CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICES AND ENGAGE IN CRITICAL REFLECTION**

We need to offer field experiences that allow preservice teachers to observe culturally relevant practices and provide opportunities to plan and implement them. Field and internship placements can provide unique opportunities for preservice teachers to observe mindful teaching dispositions through the lived experiences of culturally relevant teaching practices. Preservice teachers need deliberate support while in these placements in order to develop and implement culturally relevant practices. While preservice teachers may develop an awareness of diverse cultures and practices, ability to develop culturally relevant curriculum and classroom experiences for children does not necessarily follow from this awareness (Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Siwatu et al., 2009; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). Therefore, preservice teachers need structured models, requirements and support as they develop relationships, communicate with parents, and create culturally relevant curriculum.

## **PROVIDING TIME TO EXPLORE ISSUES OF DIVERSITY**

We need to provide preservice teachers time to explore issues of diversity. Based on our work in this study, we believe that exploring issues regarding culture, family, bias, and discrimination requires more experiences than can be provided in one course over one semester. We must offer multiple opportunities to explore definitions and issues of culture and diversity throughout preservice teacher training. Readings, engagements and discussions that support preservice teachers to reflect on issues of culture and diversity must be embedded within the courses throughout their program of studies (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010). Understanding our cultural mindsets and exploring our biases and assumptions about culture and families require sustained conversations, reflections, and engagements over extended periods of time.

## CONCLUSIONS

With the changing demographics of classrooms across the United States, preservice teachers must be prepared to provide a just and equitable education for all students (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). A critical component of this preparation is to challenge preservice teachers to critically reflect upon their beliefs, biases and personal cultural identities so that they may begin to define culture more broadly, embracing the unique beliefs, languages, customs, values, and traditions of people (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010). Gay (2010) notes that classroom and student “success is most evident in learning ‘spaces’ where culturally relevant content, teacher attitudes and expectations, and instructional actions converge” (p. 213). Colleges of education have unique and powerful opportunities to intentionally provide these kinds of spaces by offering meaningful course engagements, conversations, and diverse field placements that support our future teachers as they develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will prompt them to seek to connect with and empower all students and families. Utilizing these opportunities, preservice teachers can embrace the skills and dispositions required to build impactful relationships with all families – not seeing diversity as a “hopeless challenge” or wanting to quit their jobs when they work with diverse cultures – but instead, celebrating, honoring, and utilizing the rich resources all families and children have the potential to share.

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