January 2010

Resolving a Cultural Conflict in the Classroom: An Exploration of Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Interventions

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This study employed qualitative research methods to explore preservice teachers' thoughts about the effectiveness of interventions designed to resolve a cultural conflict involving an African American student. Ninety-five preservice teachers in the Southwest read a 300-word case study that was followed by four experienced teachers' responses and their proposed culturally or non-culturally responsive interventions. Participants were asked to identify which of the four interventions were most and least effective and supplement their responses with an explanation. The results revealed that most preservice teachers were aware of the effectiveness of interventions that incorporated the student's culture into the teaching and learning process. A few preservice teachers however, questioned the effectiveness of interventions that "overemphasized the role of culture." The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: teacher education, culturally responsive teaching, teacher self-efficacy

The disproportionate number of African American children in special education and the differential administration of discipline involving African American children have been well documented (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Klinger et al., 2005, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). Unfortunately, despite the amount of discussion addressing these issues, the problem of disproportionality and the differential administration of discipline involving African American children remain (Salend & Duhaney, 2005). The longevity of these issues has prompted members of the educational research community to question special education referral policies and practices, school disciplinary practices, and the factors that lead to these actions (Artiles et al., 2002).

When examining the factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in special education, scholars have scrutinized African American students' schooling experiences (Artiles et al., 2002; Blanchett, 2006; Klinger et al., 2005). With a critical eye focused on what happens in the classroom, researchers contend that African American students are often taught by teachers who do not understand the cultural context of classroom behavior and the role of culture in the teaching and learning process (Artiles et al., 2002). Without this understanding these teachers may not be able to teach in culturally responsive ways (Gay, 2002a). According to Gay (2000), teaching in culturally responsive ways is the process of, "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29).

In a review of literature examining the key competencies of culturally responsive teachers, Siwatu (2007a) concluded that culturally responsive teachers, among other things, developed a rich knowledge base of their students' cultural background and home life. In addition, culturally responsive teachers know that all students bring to school a set of cultural practices, norms, and preferences that influence classroom behavior and the teaching and learning process. Unfortunately, since many teachers do not have a rich knowledge base of their students' cultural background, African American students' cultural practices, norms, and preferences are often not valued, reinforced, or affirmed at school (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 2001). Failure to infuse African American students' culture in the teaching and learning

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process can have negative outcomes such as student withdrawal and low academic achievement (Irvine, 1990; Irvine & Armento, 2001).

Another negative outcome of not understanding the cultural context of class behavior and the role of culture in the teaching and learning process is the overrepresentation of African American students in special education (Gay, 2000). In particular, researchers and practitioners who advocate for the implementation of culturally responsive and sensitive teaching practices believe that the overrepresentation of African American children in special education may stem from cultural conflicts in the classroom and teachers' failure to recognize the relationship between culture and classroom behavior (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2002b; Monroe & Obidah, 2004; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

Cultural conflicts can arise when teachers fail to understand or acknowledge the cultural basis of students' classroom behavior (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 1981, Irvine, 1990). These cultural conflicts may lead to the misinterpretation of a child's classroom behavior, thereby resulting in unnecessary disciplinary action or referral to special education (Gay, 2000; Townsend, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2004). It has been noted that African American students are often the recipients of unnecessary discipline for behaviors that may actually be appropriate (or normal) when viewed through a cultural lens (Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Gouldner (1978) contends that in many of these cases the "inappropriate" behaviors exhibited by African American students are often times not intended to be disruptive.

Teachers who do not understand the cultural context of students' classroom behavior may encounter students from diverse cultural backgrounds who they perceive, albeit incorrectly, to be "difficult to teach." Undeservingly, this label of difficult-to-teach is often given to students whose classroom behavior, although consistent with cultural norms, is viewed through the eyes of a teacher as disruptive and counterproductive. Difficulty teaching these students may arise when the teacher fails to understand the relationship between culture and classroom behavior and therefore implements traditional instructional and classroom management approaches that may be ineffective when working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In contrast, as previously mentioned, culturally responsive teachers understand that all students bring to school a set of cultural practices, norms, and preferences that influence classroom behavior and the teaching and learning process (Gay, 2002a). Culturally responsive teachers also understand that students' cultural practices may not be in harmony with the school's culture (Irvine, 1990). Stemming from this understanding, teachers who have adopted an instructional pedagogy that is responsive and sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds may be able to effectively minimize the effects of cultural conflicts (Gay, 2002b).

Although many preservice teachers foresee working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds, they possess little knowledge about the cultural background of their would-be students (Sleeter, 2001). Developing an understanding of the cultural context of classroom behavior may *potentially* minimize the occurrence of cultural conflicts in the classroom (Gay, 1981). Developing this understanding prior to entering the classroom can benefit preservice teachers. Understanding the relationship between culture and classroom behavior may assist teachers in making informed judgments of inappropriate and appropriate classroom behavior. This understanding may also influence whether teachers implement culturally responsive interventions to resolve cultural conflicts that arise in the classroom (Gay, 2002b; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Unfortunately, preservice teachers often do not understand the relationship between culture and classroom behavior and are insufficiently prepared to engage in the practices associated with culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This lack of understanding and preparation may influence prospective teachers' decision-making when attempting to resolve a cultural conflict in the classroom.

The purpose of the current study was to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of effective interventions designed to resolve a cultural conflict involving an African American male student. The authors believed that preservice teachers who are aware of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior should be able to identify appropriate interventions. The following

research questions guided this qualitative inquiry: What interventions do preservice teachers find the most and least effective when resolving a cultural conflict involving an African American student? What reasons do preservice teachers provide when explaining why they found that an intervention was the most and least effective?

METHODS

Participants

The data for this study were drawn from a population of preservice teachers enrolled in a teacher education program located in the Southwest. Of the total sample ($N = 95$), 75 (79%) were female and 20 (21%) were male. Participants were asked to indicate their race/ethnicity: 85 (89%) indicated that they were White and 10 (11%) were non-White (e.g., Native Hawaiian, Asian American, Mexican American, and African American). The sample of preservice teachers had a mean age of 21.97 ($SD = 2.72$) and consisted of 9 (10%) sophomores, 33 (35%) juniors, 50 (53%) seniors, and 3 (3%) students enrolled in either a post-baccalaureate or graduate teacher education program. Ten (11%) of the participants were prospective preschool and kindergarten teachers, 38 (40%) elementary, 19 (20%) middle, and 27 (28%) high school teachers.

Data Collection

Participants read a 300-word case study written from the perspective of a White, female seventh-grade math teacher working in a culturally diverse school located in the Southwest (see Appendix A). The case study documents the teacher's difficulty working with Devon (pseudonym) an African American male student. After describing Devon's classroom behavior (e.g., disruptive in class; speaking without permission; slow in completing assignments), the teacher discusses her instructional approach which consisted mainly of individualized seatwork. When asked why he was not completing his classroom assignments, Devon replied, "I want to be a NBA basketball player. Basketball players do not need math to be successful. Basketball players don't need no math." The case study concludes with the teacher asking for advice from fellow teachers on how to resolve the conflict with Devon. After reading the case study, preservice teachers were presented with four experienced teachers' written responses to the case study (see Appendix B). These responses included a description of what each teacher would do if in a similar situation. Each of the proposed interventions ended with the teacher describing what she believed was the intended outcome of the intervention (e.g., less disruptive behavior). To control for possible order effects, the teachers' responses were counter-balanced.

Unbeknownst to the preservice teachers, each of the experienced teachers' responses was labeled either a culturally responsive or a non-culturally responsive intervention. Two of the four teachers' responses reflected a culturally responsive intervention—Gloria Tillman and Heather Jackson (pseudonyms). Consistent with the literature, a culturally responsive intervention reflected a teacher's understanding of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior and her attempt to adapt instruction or the structure of the classroom to be more culturally responsive. From the perspective of these two teachers, being more culturally responsive in their approach to teaching and classroom management could potentially decrease Devon's disruptive classroom behavior.

Gloria Tillman's proposed intervention involved using Devon's interest in basketball as a conduit for learning. Gloria Tillman believed that if basketball was incorporated into math problems and math concepts, Devon's interest in math would increase. This approach is similar to the methods employed by the Jaime Escalante Math Program (Escalante & Dirmann, 1990). Heather Jackson's proposed intervention involved applying her knowledge of Devon's cultural background and home life to design a more culturally responsive classroom environment. This

intervention was in direct response to the case study teacher's current classroom structure, which consisted of individualized seatwork on a daily basis.

In contrast to the proposed interventions that were culturally responsive, two of the teachers' responses reflected a non-culturally responsive intervention—Keondra Simms and Tanya Higgins (pseudonyms). A non-culturally responsive intervention reflected a teacher's apparent lack of understanding of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior. Stemming from this lack of understanding, both Keondra Simms and Tanya Higgins viewed Devon's behavior using a White middle-class cultural lens. This viewpoint resulted in a misinterpretation of Devon's behavior and led to the proposal of a behavior modification program and the solicitation of outside help (e.g., a school psychologist).

Keondra Simms' proposed intervention focused on Devon's disruptive behavior rather than its underlying causes. As a result, she proposed an intervention designed to minimize Devon's classroom behavior by using a system of reinforcement and punishment. While Tanya Higgins' proposed intervention is typical of a teacher who is not self-efficacious in her or his ability to resolve a cultural conflict involving an African American male student. Stemming from this low sense of self-efficacy, Tanya Higgins suggests that Devon be tested and placed into a special education program that is better equipped to meet his needs. According to Bandura (1997), the solicitation of outside help is a characteristic of an individual who has low self-efficacy beliefs.

Participants answered two sets of questions designed to elicit their perceptions of the most and least effective interventions. To identify preservice teachers' perceptions of the most effective intervention, the following questions were asked:

- After reading the above examples of how experienced teachers would handle the problem, which teacher's intervention do you believe will be the MOST effective?
- Why do you believe this intervention will be the MOST effective?

Similarly, to elicit preservice teachers' perceptions of the least effective intervention, the following questions were asked:

- After reading the above examples of how experienced teachers would handle the problem, which teacher's intervention do you believe will be the LEAST effective?
- Why do you believe this intervention will be the LEAST effective?

Data Analysis

In the first phase, the data were analyzed in the form of descriptive statistics to furnish data to answer the first research question. In the second phase, the authors analyzed the data using an inductive analysis (Strauss & Crobin, 1998; Thomas, 2006) method to answer the second research question that guided this study. Participants' responses to the two open-ended questions were read (e.g., Why do you believe this intervention will be the MOST/LEAST effective?) several times to begin the process of identifying codes and themes. While reading the responses, the authors each generated a list of potential codes and themes. Next, they met to share the lists of potential themes and discussed ways in which some of the themes may be grouped under new labels. During this process these authors also discussed the relationships between the themes by highlighting their similarities and differences. Discussing these relationships provided them with an opportunity to identify additional themes that could be grouped into larger categories.

After finalizing the descriptions of each theme, a coding consistency check was conducted to examine the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fifteen participants' responses were randomly selected (i.e., text segments) and coded them based on the written descriptions of the themes. The authors coded each response independently and met to share how they coded each of the 15 responses. As could be expected, differences of opinion emerged and typically stemmed from one of two sources. The first source of variation was a theme's label. It was concluded that some of the labels were not an accurate reflection of the meaning of the theme.

Consequently, this was resolved by changing a theme's label. The second source of discord was a theme's description. In this case, the theme's description failed to capture the essence of its meaning and was best resolved by revising the description of the theme in question. Once the authors agreed to these changes, the remaining responses were analyzed using the revised coding frame.

The remaining responses were analyzed together but were independently read and then coded accordingly. After every 15 responses the authors stopped to share how each of the previous responses were coded. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and cooperation.

FINDINGS

In the first phase of data analysis, the authors examined descriptive data that were used to answer the following research question: What interventions do preservice teachers believe are most and least effective when resolving a cultural conflict involving an African American student? When asked to identify what they believed to be the most effective interventions, 85 participants (89% of the sample) selected an intervention proposed by either Gloria Tillman ($n = 57$) or Heather Jackson ($n = 28$). These two interventions were reflective of what was labeled a culturally responsive intervention. However, 84 participants (88% of the sample) selected one of the two non-culturally responsive interventions proposed by either Keondra Simms ($n = 23$) or Tanya Higgins ($n = 61$) as being least effective.

These findings suggest that preservice teachers are able to *identify* effective classroom interventions. The descriptive data, however, failed to uncover preservice teachers' reasons that a particular intervention would be most or least effective. It is the authors' belief that the value of this study rested on the ability to uncover these reasons. In the next sections, qualitative data were presented to answer the following research question: What reasons do preservice teachers provide when explaining why they believed an intervention was most and least effective?

Perceptions of the Most Effective Intervention

Five themes emerged from preservice teachers' explanation why an intervention was most effective. Table 1 presents data to illustrate the number of times themes were mentioned and provides a disaggregated look at the responses of preservice teachers who selected a culturally responsive or a non-culturally responsive intervention as being most effective.

Table 1

Thematic Frequency Counts (Perceptions of Most Effective Interventions)

Theme	Culturally Responsive Interventions		Non-culturally Responsive Interventions	
	Gloria Tillman	Heather Jackson	Keondra Simms	Tanya Higgins
Enhancing Student Motivation	53	2	0	0
Culturally Responsive/Relevant	8	12	0	0
Adapt Teaching to Fit the Student	11	1	0	0
Changing the Learning Environment	0	12	0	0
Student Adapts to Teaching	0	0	4	0

Enhancing student motivation. Preservice teachers who selected Gloria Tillman or Heather Jackson as having the most effective intervention most frequently gave an explanation reflective of this theme. This theme reflects preservice teachers' belief that an intervention was most effective because of its potential to increase Devon's motivation, which in turn would enhance his classroom learning. A closer look at preservice teachers' explanations uncovered differences in their perceptions regarding the actual source of the motivation. The first source of motivation

stemmed from an intervention's ability to capture Devon's interests. According to preservice teachers, both Gloria Tillman and Heather Jackson's interventions could potentially capture Devon's interest.

Gloria Tillman acknowledged the role of culture in the teaching and learning process. This awareness led to the proposal of designing instructional activities that would be perceived by the student to be interesting and relevant to his life outside of school. Preservice teachers believed that this approach would be effective because it would increase the Devon's interest in course material. One preservice teacher responded,

> I believe that most disruptive students are disruptive because they can't stay on task because what they are learning is uninteresting. I think that her intervention would be most effective because it is focusing on what the student finds interesting and then relating it to the topic being taught.

Students who selected Heather Jackson's intervention as the most effective believed that attempts to create a culturally compatible learning environment by encouraging cooperative learning would increase Devon's interest in working with his friends. One student commented, "Because small groups will help Devon work, and keep him interested. He will be less disruptive and less fidgety if he has contact and communication with other students."

The second source of motivation stemmed from Gloria Tillman's strategy of incorporating real world experiences or examples into classroom instruction. One preservice teacher made note of Devon's question, "Why should I do this when I'll never do it in the 'real world'?" and continued "I think Gloria's approach shows us why—because there are practical applications for this and it does happen in the real world and even basketball stars need to be able to understand math." The responses from participants seem to imply that they are aware of the benefits of connecting classroom learning to students' lives outside of school and their related interests. According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), these attempts to make real-world connections may enhance students' motivation to actively participate in learning activities.

Culturally responsive/relevant. The second most-cited response indicated that Gloria Tillman and Heather Jackson's intervention was most effective because each teacher was attempting to integrate her understanding of the student's cultural background. Heather Jackson, for example, realized that students may come from cultures or home environments that value collaboration and in Devon's case the opportunity to work with others may decrease the frequency of undesirable behavior that may be a result of having to work by himself. This suggested intervention is an example of culturally mediated instruction (Hollins, 1996), whereby Miss Jackson created a culturally appropriate social situation that was conducive to learning. In analyzing responses that reflect this theme it was evident that some preservice teachers understand that "one size does not fit all." One individual explained, "I feel this way because students are not the same and it is up to us to adjust our teaching styles to be culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate."

Adapt teaching to fit the student. Several respondents who thought Gloria Tillman or Heather Jackson's intervention was most effective believed that it reflected a pedagogical practice which focused on adapting a teacher's instructional style in order to increase student learning, as opposed to focusing on changing the student. One participant's statement explains it simply: "instead of trying to change the student to fit how you want to teach, you change the teaching to fit the student." Preservice teachers, whose response reflects this theme, appear to believe that it is more effective to adjust one's instructional approach than it is to change the student.

Changing the learning environment. Several respondents who selected Heather Jackson's intervention as the most effective believed that it reflected a teacher's attempt to change or modify the learning environment to fit Devon's needs. Respondents stressed the importance of adapting the classroom environment so that it is responsive to students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

One preservice teacher believed that Heather Jackson's intervention was most effective, because "it doesn't require changing the lesson plans at all, but it still allows for more interaction and activity. It's the most feasible."

Student adapts to teaching. The least occurring theme reflects preservice teachers' perceptions that the intervention proposed by Keondra Simms was most effective because it reinforced the importance of students adapting to the culture of the classroom (e.g., teaching methods, rules, etc.). In addition, preservice teachers whose explanation reflects this theme believed that it was important to modify Devon's behavior rather than change instruction or the classroom environment. For example, one student commented,

> I agree with her in that there are punishments and reinforcements that need to occur with students with behavior issues. I think that this type of intervention would be very effective with Devon because he would know exactly what was expected of him and what would happen if he did or did not meet these certain expectations.

This attempt to force Devon to adapt to the culture of the classroom intensified the cultural conflict.

The qualitative data from this phase of the study paints a very diverse picture of preservice teachers' perceptions why a particular intervention was most effective. In the next section to the authors explore preservice teachers' reasoning behind an intervention that was believed to be least effective.

Perceptions of the Least Effective Intervention

Five themes emerged from preservice teachers' explanations why an intervention was least effective. Table 2 presents data to illustrate the number of times themes were mentioned and provides a disaggregated look at the responses of preservice teachers who selected a culturally responsive or a non-culturally responsive intervention as being least effective.

Failure to explore alternative options. Preservice teachers were most critical of Tanya Higgins and Keondra Simms' proposed intervention because the teachers failed to explore or consider other viable options in resolving the cultural conflict involving Devon. Preservice teachers believed the interventions proposed by Keondra Simms and Tanya Higgins were temporary solutions and failed to examine the "why" of behavior. "I don't think it is fair to label Devon without further investigating the root of the problem from psychological, cultural, and motivational perspectives first," replied one preservice teacher. Therefore, in the eyes of this preservice teacher and others, Tanya Higgins' proposed intervention would not be effective because she failed to explore alternative options and did not fully consider how to change Devon's classroom behavior through other means. For these reasons, preservice teachers felt that referring Devon to special education was a premature decision.

Preservice teachers believed that the failure to explore alternative options resulted in Tanya Higgins and Keondra Simms proposing surface level interventions. Consequently, preservice teachers felt that these types of interventions would not be effective because they were not addressing the root of the problem. One preservice teacher said this of the proposed intervention: "It is not looking at why Devon is being disruptive. You need to find out the reasons for Devon's behavior before you try to stop it."

Table 2

Thematic Frequency Counts (Perceptions of Least Effective Interventions)

Theme	Culturally Responsive Interventions		Non-culturally Responsive Interventions	
	Gloria Tillman	Heather Jackson	Keondra Simms	Tanya Higgins
Failure To Explore Alternative Options	1	2	8	22
Shifting Responsibility As a Means of a Quick Fix	0	0	1	28
Adverse Effects of Special Educational Placement	0	0	0	18
Limitations and Adverse Effects of Punishment	0	0	16	1
Intervention Overemphasizes the Role of Culture	0	5	0	0

Shifting responsibility as a means of a quick fix. The sample of preservice teachers who identified Tanya Higgins as having the least effective intervention believed that it appeared as though the teacher was in search of a quick fix in an attempt to resolve the cultural conflict. Preservice teachers believed that Tanya Higgins incorrectly attributed Devon's behavior to a learning disability. Doing so would provide an opportunity for Tanya Higgins to refer Devon to special education. But why? According to preservice teachers, a referral to special education was Tanya Higgins' way of shifting responsibility for resolving the conflict. Preservice teachers used phrases such as, "sending off," "shifting responsibility," "pawning off," and "passing off."

In many ways, shifting the responsibility of resolving the conflict with Devon was viewed by preservice teachers as a concrete indicator that Tanya Higgins had given up on him. One preservice teacher passionately replied,

> Tanya seems to be looking for an easy way to get Devon removed from her classroom so that she doesn't have to deal with him. She is quick to jump to a possible ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] diagnosis which I feel is used as a copout way too much in the education system today.

In coding the responses it became evident that many preservice teachers recognized that this search for a quick fix often resulted in what Soodak and Podell (1998) referred to as the "overidentification phenomenon."

Adverse effects of special education placement. This theme describes preservice teachers' beliefs that Tanya Higgins' intervention was least effective because of the likelihood of the adverse effects of special education placement and the potential limitations of such placement. In describing these adverse effects, preservice teachers' explanations fell primarily into one of two categories. The first category reflects preservice teachers' understanding of the potential *adverse psychological and social effects* of a special education placement. Statements representative of this first category include: "I think sending a student to a psychologist can be detrimental to a student's self esteem if the student is "mislabeled" by a teacher." Another preservice teacher replied, "If you label a student as BD [behavioral disordered] or LD [learning disabled], they will become BD or LD." The second category reflects preservice teachers' understanding of the potential *adverse academic effects* of a special education placement. According to one preservice teacher, "If the student doesn't belong in special ed., the teacher is hurting his chance to receive the best education available to him."

Limitations and adverse effects of punishment. For several respondents, Keondra Simms' intervention was perceived to be least effective because of the limitations and adverse effects of punishment. Keondra Simms believed that the best way to decrease the Devon's disruptive behavior was to implement a behavior modification program consisting of both punishment and reinforcement. Preservice teachers believed that punishment is not always an effective means of resolving behavioral issues in the classroom. As one student put it, "cracking the whip does not always work." This theme addresses the limitations of punishment as well as some of the possible adverse effects that may be counterproductive at the very least. One preservice teacher commented, ". . . and even if behavioral rules are clearly specified in the classroom, will it still motivate Devon to do his work?"

Another preservice teacher expressed concern about the subtle message that is being sent to Devon regarding the value of classroom learning with the statement: "if you are telling a student that . . . "learning" is only good if there is a reward that follows it, you are taking away from the child the fact that educating oneself is a reward in itself." This preservice teacher does not understand that students are not always intrinsically motivated to learn and may sometimes benefit from extra incentives and external sources of motivation.

Intervention overemphasizes the role of culture. Preservice teachers, who viewed Heather Jackson's intervention as being the least effective, cited it as overly accentuating the role of culture. This theme describes preservice teachers' belief that attempts to look at culture as a means to understanding classroom conflicts is not always appropriate and perhaps overrated. Comments from preservice teachers include, "she is focusing too much on the cultural aspect. In this case I don't think that has very much to do with the problem" and "this intervention is concerned with culture and not the behavior problem."

One student believed that the role of culture was overly emphasized because,

> she [Heather Jackson] seems to be only looking at this issue from only one perspective. I think looking at his culture is very important, but the majority of the class is also African American and don't seem to be having this problem.

This respondent does not seem to be aware of the existence of within culture differences. According to Gay (2000), within culture differences may stem from mediating variables such as gender, social class, and education.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of effective interventions to resolve a cultural conflict involving an African American student. The descriptive data revealed that a majority of preservice teachers participating in this study believed that a culturally responsive intervention was most effective when working with Devon. As evidenced by the descriptive data, most preservice teachers selected Gloria Tillman or Heather Jackson's proposed intervention as the most effective. In designing this study, the authors assumed, albeit incorrectly, that preservice teachers would naturally gravitate to Heather Jackson's intervention because it consisted of engaging students in cooperative learning, a topic seemingly covered in a variety of teacher education courses. In contrast, how to make academic content culturally relevant and meaningful might be a topic covered in a few teacher education courses. Although both interventions were labeled "culturally responsive," to the authors pondered what aspects of Gloria Tillman's intervention might have made it *appear* more effective than Heather Jackson's? A future study should examine those aspects of disparity to clarify both interventions.

Preservice teachers selecting a culturally responsive intervention as being most effective did so based on the teacher's ability to capture Devon's interest by engaging in culturally responsive teaching (i.e., adapting teaching practices) and classroom management practices (i.e., adapting the learning environment), and by connecting classroom learning to the student's life outside of

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school. These instructional and classroom management approaches were believed to also enhance Devon's motivation to learn. Although few in number, several preservice teachers believed that a non-culturally responsive intervention was most effective. These prospective teachers believed that Devon should adapt to the culture of the classroom and that Keondra Simms' intervention was best suited to help the student achieve this goal.

The descriptive data revealed that a majority of preservice teachers believed a non-culturally responsive intervention was least effective when working with Devon. The participants noted that Tanya Higgins' proposed intervention was the least effective and cited various reasons. Most of those felt that the Higgins intervention failed to explore other alternatives that would potentially help resolve the conflict with Devon. In addition, several participants pointed to the potential adverse psychological, social, and academic effects of placing Devon in special education.

Several preservice teachers acknowledged the ineffectiveness of an intervention because it appeared as though the teacher addressed the symptoms of the problem rather than the problem itself. Participants were also very critical when it appeared that Tanya Higgins was giving up on Devon and shifting responsibility to a special education teacher. Within the context of social cognitive theory, the act of shifting responsibility may resemble *proxy control* (Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura, individuals with a low self-efficacy are likely to become dependent on others who will act on their behalf. Stemming from low teaching self-efficacy beliefs, Tanya Higgins relinquished control and shifted the responsibility of teaching Devon. Winfield (1986) and Ladson-Billings (1994) would classify Tanya Higgins, as a *referral agent*, who shifts responsibility to other school administrators and staff because she does not believe in her ability to resolve the conflict.

LIMITATIONS

In light of these findings, several limitations should be considered in the interpretation and generalization of these findings. First, this study only looks at whether preservice teachers could identify effective interventions designed to resolve a cultural conflict in the classroom. Although a majority of preservice teachers recognized a culturally responsive intervention as being most effective when resolving a cultural conflict, it should not be assumed that this recognition would automatically translate into culturally responsive teaching behaviors when these preservice teachers find themselves in a similar situation. Second, preservice teachers in this study were only given an opportunity to analyze a case study and proposed interventions involving an African American male student. Therefore, it is unclear whether similar findings would emerge if the race and/or gender of the student were different. Third, although the four teacher responses reflected experienced teachers' reactions to the case study, it is possible that Gloria Tillman and Heather Jackson's proposed interventions reflect simplistic views of culturally responsive teaching. Although Tillman and Jackson's responses contain attributes as described in the literature, it is unclear whether the findings would have been different if the interventions reflected the complexities of culturally responsive teaching and resolving cultural conflicts in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

Confronting the overrepresentation of African American children referred to or placed in special education requires the preparation of current and future teachers who are culturally competent and confident in their abilities to teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Siwatu, 2007b, Siwatu & Starker, 2010). According to the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002), culturally competent teachers are those who "acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn" (p. 29). For example, culturally competent teachers

- possess general knowledge of diversity and the influence of culture in the teaching and learning process (knowledge),
- have acquired vital strategies and techniques needed to effectively teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds (skills), and
- value the importance of multicultural teaching (dispositions, Hong, Troutman, Hartzell, & Kyles, 2006).

Effectively teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds requires the development of these competencies (Hong et al., 2006; McAllister & Irvine, 2000; NCATE, 2002).

Preservice teachers in this study appeared to be aware of the relationship between culture, teaching, learning, and classroom behavior. The explanations of a few participants; however, suggest a lack of awareness of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior. Throughout the study, the authors were cautious not to confuse preservice teachers' *awareness* with *understanding* the relationship between culture and classroom behavior. Developing awareness must precede the development of an understanding of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior. Nevertheless, prospective teachers who lack this understanding may be less likely to consider or implement culturally responsive classroom interventions when attempting to resolve a cultural conflict involving students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Preservice teachers can develop an understanding of the relationship between culture and classroom behavior by analyzing and discussing case studies similar to the one used in the current study. Engaging preservice teachers in more meaningful experiences with culturally diverse students may assist in the development of this understanding. Other methods that can be used in developing this understanding include the reflective dialogue among preservice and in-service teachers (Rowley & Hart, 1996) and the use of popular media to assist students in changing their beliefs about the role of culture in the teaching and learning process (Grant, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study suggest that preservice teachers know what intervention is the most effective (i.e., a culturally responsive intervention) and the least effective (i.e., a non-culturally responsive intervention). This study is successful in clearly documenting preservice teachers' awareness of the effectiveness of culturally responsive interventions; however, several questions remain unanswered. First, will this awareness translate into practice? It is indeed desirable for preservice teachers to be aware of what constitutes effective interventions when attempting to resolve a cultural conflict in the classroom and to possess the knowledge of culturally responsive teaching. However, it is not that simple, hence the second unanswered question: How self-efficacious are preservice teachers in their ability to execute what they believe are the most effective interventions?

Despite a person's awareness of effective interventions, they should also be self-efficacious in their ability to execute elements of the intervention, which are embedded in a culturally responsive pedagogy. Research suggests that an individual who doubts his or her abilities to complete a task successfully will be less likely to persevere in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1997). Similarly, a novice teacher who doubts his or her ability to design and execute culturally responsive classroom interventions may not persevere when experiencing difficulty working with a culturally diverse student. Consequently, the novice teacher may resort to using traditional approaches to instruction and classroom management that may be less effective in resolving a cultural conflict. Given the predictive nature of self-efficacy beliefs, these authors argue that exploring preservice teachers' self-efficacy to teach students from culturally diverse backgrounds and their self-efficacy to resolve classroom conflicts will be a fruitful avenue of empirical investigation.

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Appendix A

> ### *The Case Study**
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> My name is Lisa Sanders and I have been a teacher for three years. My school is located in a culturally diverse neighborhood in Lubbock, Texas. I am currently teaching seventh-grade. In my class this year, I have 22 students—11 boys and 11 girls. Of those children, one is Caucasian American, three are Hispanic, and 18 are African American. They are either 12 or 13 years old. I currently do not have any students with extreme special needs; however, I do have a student who is often difficult-to-teach. This student's name is Devon. Devon is an African American, male student who repeated the sixth-grade. In my class, Devon is experiencing difficulty learning math and he often has problems with self-control. Below is a description of Devon's classroom behavior:
>
> - Does not listen in class
> - Slow in completing class assignments
> - Performs poorly on timed assignments
> - Fidgety
> - Is disruptive in class
> - Has a short attention span
> - Speaking without permission
>
> Each day begins with an overview of the previous lesson and an introduction of the day's lesson including any related activities and assignments. When introducing new content I typically allow students to practice as a group before completing their individual assignments for the day.
>
> A majority of the work in my class consists of students individually completing math worksheets at their desks. When working by himself, Devon seems to be disengaged and not motivated. One day I asked him why he was not completing his work, Devon replied, "I want to be a NBA basketball player. Basketball players do not need math to be successful. Basketball players don't need no math." In seeking the advice from my fellow teachers, I ask, "What should I do with Devon, a difficult-to-teach student?"
>
> *This is a case study from an actual seventh grade teacher. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of both the teacher and student.*

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*Excerpts from the Proposed Interventions**
Culturally Responsive

Gloria Tillman: Stemming from my previous experiences teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, I have learned that 'one size does not fit all' . . . In my class if Devon were having difficulty in math, it would be beneficial for me to find alternative ways to teach math . . . Devon is obviously interested in basketball, therefore as a teacher, I would use his interests to his, as well as my advantage . . . I believe that students' achievement motivation may suffer when they fail to see the connection between academic content and its use outside of the classroom. I believe that providing this context and capitalizing on this student's interests will go a long way in changing his classroom behavior and his motivation to learn.

Heather Jackson: Many of the problems that the teacher is reporting may be a result of the differences between Devon and the teacher's background . . . Using this knowledge of Devon's cultural background and home environment and taking into consideration that most of the students in the class are African American, I would redesign the classroom to create a culturally compatible learning environment that is warm and supportive. Most notably I would change the desk arrangement (e.g., desk clusters) so that it encourages more cooperative learning and less individualized learning . . . I am a firm believer that working together often helps students learn on a higher level as they learn from each other's knowledge base and learning processes, and students are also more engaged when they can work together. I believe that giving Devon the option of working collectively with his classmates may decrease the frequency of his undesirable classroom behavior.

Non-Culturally Responsive

Keondra Simms: When I read this teacher's case describing Devon, a difficult-to-teach student, what sticks out the most is the student's disruptive behavior . . . If I were the teacher in this case, I would implement a series of steps geared toward modifying his undesirable behavior while simultaneously fostering more productive classroom behavior. These series of steps would consist of both punishment and reinforcement . . . This system of behavior modification is essential in maintaining a productive learning environment . . . Some of Devon's behavior may be influenced by his cultural background, however, I feel that his behavior not only hinders his own learning, but also disrupts the overall learning environment. Implementing this system of reinforcement and punishment will gradually shape his behavior. In due time, I believe that Devon's behavior will change for the good.

Tanya Higgins: As I read the case study, the teacher's description of Devon's classroom behavior resonated with me the most . . . Devon's classroom behavior seems to fit the profile of a student with an undiagnosed learning ability. For example, the teacher described Devon as having a limited attention span, fidgety, and disruptive. These, I believe, are all classic signs of a student with ADHD . . . Speaking from my previous experiences, I think the teacher's options for helping Devon from an instructional standpoint are limited . . . The only real option in my opinion is to refer Devon to the school psychologist so that they can test and place him in a classroom that best suits his needs . . . A special education placement grants Devon his right to a free, appropriate public education. In addition, students who are placed in special education have increased chances of graduating and going to college.

*These are actual interventions proposed by inservice teachers. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of each teacher.

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