

Exploring Cultural Competence in Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

This mixed methods study explores teacher candidates' self-efficacy in the application of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as measured by Siwatu's (2007) *Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale* and examines those perceptions considering candidates' performance on targeted rubrics of the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), a nationally recognized tool for assessing teacher readiness. Pearson's official edTPA scores on two culturally relevant rubrics were examined against survey results to ascertain whether perceived abilities align with target scores indicating learner-ready teachers. Interviews with participants provide triangulation and further validation while illuminating other factors related to CRP implementation during the candidates' student teaching semester. Results show that pre-service educators feel efficacious in their capacity to implement CRP in theory; yet scores indicate that in practice, candidates struggle to implement culturally responsive lessons.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher candidate assessment, edTPA, efficacy

1. Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers in the U.S.

The diversity of classrooms in the United States continues to grow, and recent statistics indicate that more than half of elementary and secondary students enrolled in U.S classrooms are students of color (de Brey et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2018). Yet, that rich diversity is not reflected by the faces of the educators with whom those students are placed; teachers of color comprise only 18% of the workforce (Snyder et al., 2018). This is problematic considering the research that shows significant positive results when students of color have teachers who match their race or ethnicity. Data indicate better attendance rates, fewer suspensions, more positive attitudes, higher test scores, increased high school graduation rates, and greater college attendance for students of color who have teachers in the classroom who look like them (Egalite et al., 2014; Gershenson et al., 2017; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Teachers of color also have higher expectations for students of color, which may fuel the other gains (Gershenson et al., 2016). When we consider all the implications, there can be little doubt that the preparation of our future educators is a social justice issue in the United States. While there is not an overnight solution to this problem, there are efforts in progress tasked with advancing the critical cause of recruiting and preparing teachers of color with the goal of creating more equitable outcomes for all students. Moreover, our nation's teacher preparation programs must be purposeful in preparing *all* of our teacher candidates to teach from a mindset of equity and inclusion. Seminal research indicates that preparing teachers with culturally responsive knowledge, attitudes, and skills during preservice education programs improves the school success of diverse students (Gay, 2002), and Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) must critically examine their programs while systematically interweaving opportunities for candidates to employ culturally responsive pedagogy throughout coursework, learning experiences, and residency (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This researcher was the Director of the Teacher Preparation Program and an Assistant Professor at the University in Connecticut where this study took place. In the program's teaching methods courses, candidates complete a practice Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) as part of their preparation for the assessment, a program requirement for initial licensure. The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) developed edTPA based on decades of research and input from educators and researchers, and it is designed to evaluate pre-service teachers in an objective and standardized fashion. The edTPA aims to assess the knowledge and skills of learner-ready teachers and their ability to implement high-leverage practices with diverse student populations (edtpa.com, 2022).

The subject-specific assessment includes rubrics designed to evaluate three tasks: planning, instruction, and assessment. For most of the 28 different teaching fields, there are 15 rubrics – five for each of the three tasks. The rubrics offer a range of scores from one to five with three being the target score that would indicate learner-readiness for teacher candidates (edtpa.com, 2022). All elementary candidates in the EPP are required to take the Elementary Literacy version of edTPA in

which they plan a learning segment around a central literacy focus, teach the lessons, and then administer an assessment followed by an analysis of the performance of three focus students to plan for next steps for instruction. Each task has candidates complete a commentary template wherein candidates reflect upon, explain, and support their decision-making for each task. One commentary element of Task 1 Planning is the context for learning commentary, which helps the assessors understand specific teaching circumstances wherein the teacher candidate is working. In this document, candidates have the opportunity to highlight and discuss the school's demographics, the background and interests of the class to whom the learning segment will be taught, particular instructional programs in use at the school, learning differences of students, and any other contextual factors that could inform the candidate's decision-making related to planning, instruction, and assessment. The context commentary is also used to inform scoring for rubrics within the other three tasks.

While teaching the writing methods course at the University several semesters ago, this researcher was surprised by two separate candidate responses on a practice edTPA within the course. Students in the class completed a series of literacy lessons and the associated commentaries, which included the context for learning; excerpts from two students are found in Figure 1. These candidate responses were, in part, the impetus for this study due to the implicit bias related to students' socio-economic status, ethnicity, and cultural values evidenced in the commentaries.

<p>“Many students in my class are from middle to upper-class white families and there are not many minorities. Most of them have lived “normal” suburban, Connecticut lives and have a life of privilege. I also know that my students all have a, for the most part, happy home life and nothing traumatic has happened at home.” ~ <i>Teacher Candidate A</i></p>	<p>“The majority of the students come from high-income households where education is highly valued which is synonymous with parents being very involved in their children’s education and daily life in school. All the students are native English speakers and 95% of the class makeup is white.” ~ <i>Teacher Candidate B</i></p>
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Figure 1. Teacher Candidates' Context for Learning Responses on the Mock edTPA

On the context for learning commentary, the teacher candidates were prompted to describe any needed supports or special features of the school, classroom, or students that may impact their teaching or affect their learning segment. The two responses, though not reflective of most responses, indicate deficit-thinking. This researcher is of the opinion that no candidates should be exiting the program and entering classrooms while still beholden to the mindsets that suggest that students of color have families who are not involved in their schooling or that students from wealthy white suburban neighborhoods have not experienced trauma. Likewise, equating socio-economic levels with personal values, especially as they relate to education, is a dangerous mindset that reflects ignorance and narrow thinking.

As indicated on the edTPA website, three stated objectives of the assessment are to:

- Help candidates develop the confidence and skills they need to be successful in urban, suburban, and rural schools.
- Measure candidates' ability to differentiate instruction for diverse learners, including English language learners and special education students.
- Provide meaningful and consistent data that can be used to improve and update teacher preparation programs and renew program curriculum (edtpa.com, 2022)

With these goals in mind, this researcher wanted to learn whether the responses shown in Figure 1 could be indicative of a weakness in teacher preparation. Bridging the gap between theory and action remains a challenge for EPPs; this challenge is compounded when opportunities for candidates to examine personal belief systems and bias related to teaching diverse student populations are not prioritized or provided. This researcher was curious whether candidates felt prepared to implement CRP and whether Pearson, the entity charged with scoring the edTPA, validated those beliefs by way of rubric scores indicating readiness on the assessment.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to facilitate an examination of efficacy and beliefs among teacher candidates as they relate to the implementation of a culturally responsive and sustaining mindset and practices in the learning environment. In a joint statement from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), the state's commitment to equity is clearly expressed. “Educators need to be self-reflective so we are not blind to discrimination, inequity, racism, implicit bias, and white privilege. Only by addressing these issues head-on, providing professional learning for all staff, explicit engagement of students and families, and having courageous conversations, will we make positive progress and create truly equitable schools” (2021). In keeping with this stance, this study sought to ascertain how closely aligned pre-service candidates' beliefs about their ability to implement asset-based pedagogy aligned with their official scores for relevant rubrics of the edTPA.

The edTPA is designed to assess teacher readiness for day one in the classroom. This includes assessing candidates on their ability to implement culturally relevant practices. Lynn (2014) noted that “EdTPA requires candidates — and their instructors — to be sophisticated about P-12 student context, how they learn and what makes them tick. And teacher candidates must be explicitly non-deficit in their orientation. In other words, aspiring teachers must understand where student potential lies and demonstrate they can leverage it” (p.2). As such, this study examined candidates’ official scores on two specific rubrics of the edTPA that primarily measure candidates’ ability to do just that.

The research question guiding this study was: What is the relationship between teacher candidates’ culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy and their ability to implement CRP within instruction?

3. Theoretical Framework

Geneva Gay’s (2000) research on cultural responsiveness laid the theoretical foundation for what it means to be culturally competent in a culturally mismatched educational system. Gay (2000) noted that culturally relevant teaching employs “cultural knowledge, prior experiences,

frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning

outcomes more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2013, p.49). The idea of culturally responsive and relevant or culturally sustaining (Paris, 2017) pedagogy has been explored and enhanced by researchers across the field, yet there are underlying competencies that define the framework. Gershenson et al. (2021) define culturally relevant pedagogy as a “set of behaviors, tactics, and strategies that set out to use students’ lived experiences to scaffold their learning” (p. 141). Siwatu (2007), whose *Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy* (CRTSE) survey was utilized in this study, enhances Gershenson et al.’s (2021) definition by including specific behaviors. Siwatu (2007) notes that a culturally responsive educator engages in teaching and learning practices that 1.) use students’ cultural knowledge, experiences, and traditions in communications, engagement strategies, and instructional design; 2.) design learning communities that are compatible with students’ cultural orientations; 3.) assess students using multiple methods and multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning; and 4.) provide students the tools necessary to access and succeed within the mainstream culture while sustaining students’ cultural and linguistic connections.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), often used synonymously with CRP, relates to educators’ dispositions and beliefs and “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 16-17). Thus, being culturally responsive is not just about the attainment of a skillset, but also the reframing of mindsets. Before teachers can respond to and integrate elements of other cultures within their pedagogy, they must have self-awareness about their own culture, belief systems, and biases (Gorski, 2016). Teachers must believe themselves to be efficacious, capable and confident, in implementing practices that meet the needs of students from all walks of life.

Simply stated, Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory, and the self-efficacy construct more specifically, assert that efficacy is a belief about one’s capabilities to execute a specific task. When individuals are successful in mastery and vicarious experiences, when they receive encouraging verbal feedback, or have positive physical or psychological reactions related to their efforts, efficacy is positively impacted (Bandura, 1977). Siwatu (2007) meshed Bandura’s theory with the tenets of culturally responsive education in the design of the *Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale* (CRTSE) which measures the efficacy beliefs of teachers in implementing culturally responsive teaching competencies. The CRTSE was used in this study to explore candidates’ beliefs in one Educator Preparation Program to examine the research question: What is the relationship between teacher candidates’ culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy and their ability to implement CSP within instruction as measured by the edTPA official scores for rubrics 3 & 7?

4. Methodology

The study was situated in a private university in Connecticut in the New England region of the United States. This study focused on teacher candidates enrolled in the Master of Education program within the graduate school of education. The program offers teacher certification in the areas of: Business K-12, Music, Secondary Math, Secondary Science, Secondary Social Studies, Secondary English and Elementary Education via a traditional or internship approach to completing the coursework in the program. Interns are assigned to school districts for the semester and complete the coursework for the program in the evenings. Whether candidates choose a traditional path or the internship approach, any candidate seeking to pursue state certification is required to complete a 14-week or 70-day residency in their final semester following coursework completion. Candidates are placed in a school district, assigned a cooperating teacher, and provided with a supervisor and this team supports the candidate through the student teaching semester and completion of the state licensure exams. Candidates must also complete university requirements which include participation in three separate three-hour seminars—one of which is dedicated solely to implementing culturally responsive practices.

5. Sampling and Data Collection Tools

Teacher candidates in the graduate School of Education who were completing their student teaching and edTPA submission in the spring of 2022 were purposefully sampled to recruit for this study. All potential participants had to have completed the program coursework and been assigned a student-teaching placement. Thirty-five teacher candidates signed the consent documents to participate. Those 35 participants were provided an electronic survey link and asked to complete a questionnaire identifying their area of certification, gender, ethnicity, and whether their student teaching placement was in a rural, suburban, or urban setting. Participants then completed the *Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale* (Siwatu, 2007). This survey (Appendix A), used with permission of the author, consists of 41 questions asking respondents to rate their ability to successfully accomplish each teaching practice or task associated with teaching through a culturally responsive lens. Siwatu's CRTSE survey utilized Likert-type items with a scale of 0 – 100 indicating a degree of confidence (0 – no confidence and 100 – completely confident). With permission from the author, this researcher modified the scale and used a 0 – 10 Likert-type scale with the same indicators (0 – no confidence and 100 – completely confident as the original). Responses to each item were totaled, and an overall score was obtained with higher scores indicating that participants are more confident in their abilities and lower scores indicating less confidence (Siwatu, 2007).

Teacher candidates then participated in the CRP seminar delivered by the Researcher, which was delivered during the third week of student teaching. The seminar included direct instruction on research-based and high-leverage pedagogical practices related to exploring and utilizing students' assets, cultivating a growth mindset, Bloom's Taxonomy, schema theory, and the characteristics of a culturally responsive educator. Candidates watched "Becoming a Culturally Responsive Teacher," a training video from PCG, which is a research-based blended-model strategic professional development organization. Candidates then participated in a jigsaw activity where they broke into discussion groups and read six different scenarios describing culturally responsive lessons in various content areas and grade levels. Finally, candidates explored exemplars of the Context for Learning Commentary that is embedded within task one of the edTPA and had the opportunity to discuss how the template's embedded prompts could inform various aspects of their lesson plans and assessments.

At the time this study was conducted, Connecticut required all teacher candidates to submit and achieve a minimum cut score on the edTPA. However, in August 2023, the submission requirement and cut-score was removed; yet, most EPPs continue to require submission of the edTPA for program completion. The edTPA is completed during candidates' student teaching semester, and requires candidates to plan, teach, and assess in a learning segment consisting of three to five days of lesson plans in their certification area. Candidates then submit their edTPA to Pearson for official scoring.

The edTPA is broken into three tasks: planning, instruction, and assessment. Those tasks are scored by Pearson-trained individuals using a rubric consisting, generally, of 15 rubrics depending on the certification area. Each rubric uses a scale of 1 – 5 to indicate a spectrum of development. The target score that would indicate learner-ready for a novice teacher would be a three. Two of those rubrics specifically, Rubric 3 in Task 1 and Rubric 7 in Task 2, focus on the integration of students' culture, interests, and academic background into the planning for and instruction of the learning segment. For candidates to score at the learner-ready target (3) on these two rubrics, they must either consider students' cultural background and interests or their academic prior knowledge; but are not required to do both. If a candidate includes both areas, they score a four, technically above the learner-ready target on the rubric. Thus, a second data collection tool in this study were participants' edTPA scores for rubrics three (3) and seven (7), respectively. Eighteen (18) of this study's participating teacher candidates submitted their edTPA to Pearson and received scores.

At the completion of the student teaching semester, all of the study's participants (n = 35) were invited to interview with the researcher and respond to questions designed to align with the elements of culturally responsive teaching reflected in Siwatu's survey (Appendix C). Ultimately, five participants availed themselves to be interviewed. Being mindful of COVID-19 protocols, the five participants were provided with the option of completing open-ended questions face-to-face, via Zoom, or electronically. All five opted to complete their responses via email. Participant responses provided a more robust understanding of how efficacy beliefs influenced candidates' classroom practices. Responses were analyzed using Creswell's (2014) approach for qualitative analysis of data, which recommends identifying keywords, codes, and ultimately themes that can be used to interpret and understand the qualitative data.

6. Results

Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale

Results on the *Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale* (Siwatu, 2007) revealed a mean Likert score of 7.5 out of 10 for all participants on all 41 questions. This score indicates that teacher candidates at the start of their residency fell halfway between Moderately Confident (5) and Completely Confident (10) indicating positive feelings of efficacy related to their culturally responsive mindset and integration of CRP practices. Means and standard deviation

for each of the 41 questions on the CRTSE Scale can be found in Appendix B. The three questions with the highest efficacy means were found on the following questions:

1. *I am able to develop a personal relationship with my students (M= 8.57, SD=1.42)*
2. *I am able to help students feel like important members of the classroom (M=8.42, SD=1.35)*
3. *I am able to build a sense of trust in my students (M=8.37, SD=1.43)*

The lowest means were revealed on the following three questions, and all indicate a greater standard deviation than questions with the highest efficacy:

1. *I am able to communicate with the parents of English Language Learners regarding their child's achievement (M=6.31, SD=2.57)*
2. *I am able to design a lesson that shows how other cultural groups have made use of mathematics (M=6.25, SD=2.71)*
3. *I am able to teach students about their cultures' contributions to science (M=5.94, SD=2.22)*

These results indicate that candidates feel very confident in the element of the CRP framework that relates to creating learning communities that are compatible with students' cultural orientations and where students feel safe and supported as important members of the classroom community. Whereas the area of the CRP framework where candidates are only moderately confident relates more towards the use of students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and traditions in communications with parents, and instructional engagement and design, particularly in the areas of math and science. Candidates are weaker when it comes to being able to identify how different cultures have made educational and intellectual contributions to these different content areas.

edTPA Results

Results on Task I Planning rubric three and Task 2 Instruction rubric seven of the edTPA were available for 18 participants since there were some candidates who had not submitted their edTPA portfolio to Pearson at the time of this writing. Figure 2 shows official Pearson scores on these two rubrics, each ranging from 1 – 5 with a score of three (3) indicating that the candidate is “learner-ready” (SCALE, 2022).

Task 1 Planning: Rubric 3: Using Knowledge of Students to Inform Teaching and Learning	Task 2 Instruction: Rubric 7: Engaging Students in Learning
Score of 5 = 0	Score of 5 = 0
Score of 4 = 1	Score of 4 = 0
*SCED HSS	Score of 3 = 9
Score of 3 = 12	*Elem = 2
*SCED Science = 1	*SCED HSS = 4
*Elem = 6	*SCED Business = 2
*SCED HSS = 3	*SCED ELA = 1
*SCED Business = 1	Score of 2 = 8
*SCED ELA = 1	*SCED Science = 2
Score of 2 = 5	*Elem = 4
*SCED Math = 1	*SCED Math = 1
*SCED Music = 1	*SCED Business = 1
*SCED Business = 2	Score of 1 = 1
Score of 1 = 0	*SCED Science

Figure 2. edTPA Task 1 Rubric 3 & Task 2 Rubric 7 Results by Discipline

Note: The abbreviation ‘SCED’ indicates secondary certification (grades 6-12) in the named content areas of History and Social Studies (HSS), Science, Business, English (ELA), Music K-12, and Math. Elementary certification is indicated as Elem.

Results indicated that only one (1) candidate achieved a score of 4 on rubric three, indicating that the candidate used *both* a students' academic background and cultural and community assets to inform teaching and learning. Note that there were no candidates who scored a four (4) on rubric 7. Task 1 Rubric 3 showed that 12 of the 18 candidates met the

learner-ready target while five scored at a level two, which would indicate that the candidates justified their learning tasks with limited attention to academic assets or personal, cultural, or community assets. Task 2 Rubric 7 revealed a greater distribution of scores. Only nine of the 18 participating candidates were learner-ready while eight scored a level 2, indicating vague or superficial links to new learning. One participant scored at level one, which indicated that there is little to no evidence that new learning was linked to any academic, personal, cultural, or community assets.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data was collected in this study through a semi-structured interview. Five individuals who completed the survey also completed the interview component. These participants responded to questions that were framed by tenets of CRP theory (Appendix C). Coding was utilized on the first cycle of analysis with the interview responses, and data were further examined to ascertain themes within and across questions. Responses to these questions serve to further illuminate individual's culturally relevant techniques and concrete examples of cultural competency in action.

When asked what techniques and strategies were utilized by participants to foster relationships with students, three of the four indicated the use of the Responsive Classroom strategy of conducting morning meetings to foster a safe space and create a classroom community. The Responsive Classroom (2022) approach is a "student-centered, social and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline. It is comprised of a set of research, and evidence-based practices designed to create safe, joyful, and engaging classrooms and school communities for both students and teachers" (responsiveclassroom.org). One participant shared, "During the morning meetings, I check in with students to find out how they are feeling other times just to have a chat about the weekend or other pertinent matters. I made sure to talk also about my weekend as well." That mutual sharing between students and their teacher certainly reinforces the safe space and lets students know that their teacher shares common life experiences with them.

Other responses included greeting and speaking to students in their heritage language and using diverse literature to connect with students. One participant shared, "The first activity I did when meeting my new class was to make a giant puzzle, each student had their own puzzle piece where they included information about themselves (favorites, age, birthday). We put the puzzle together as a class. This allowed me to get to know the children's interests right away." These sort of bonding activities are a non-threatening way for students to be able to share what is important to them and about them while learning the same about their classmates and teacher. Another participant shared that they, "would made sure to use simple greetings in Spanish, Polish, and Russian to greet the students who had English as a second language." A smiling face saying hello in a language that is familiar creates a welcoming learning environment where students feel appreciated and comfortable.

Four of the respondents indicated the use of various literacy selections to tap into students' assets and reflect their students' differences and backgrounds. The literature was chosen to represent diverse cultures as students role-played, performed reader's theater, and shared story-telling. One participant indicated that the classroom library was an important element in promoting awareness. They stated, "I included books with characters that look like them and teach them about other cultures in the classroom library." Interestingly, when participants were asked to describe how your submitted edTPA lessons specifically incorporated elements of CSP, all of them indicated the literacy selection used for the read aloud/mentor text and the use of verbal or written translations to meet students' needs and embed culturally relevant experiences to facilitate engagement in strategies and skills such as visualizing, comparing and contrasting, or researching. Student groupings were also noted to promote awareness of classmates' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, interview participants were asked: How prepared do you feel to implement CRP practices now that you've completed the edTPA in your student teaching semester? The responses indicated that all felt very prepared to do so. One example sums this up well:

I am more prepared. I am convinced that the students learned more when the teacher created an environment to get children to learn by experimenting using hands-on (approaches). I will be more responsive to student's needs and include and link the information they have in their background to learning. Also, I encourage them to use their cultural practices from home in classroom discussions.

In sum, the interview participants echoed the survey responses that the program completers are confident and efficacious in their ability to implement culturally relevant practices.

7. Discussion

In their 2021 position statement, the Connecticut State Board of Education (CSBE) outlined clear expectations for college and university EPPs. The CSBE indicated that education programs must prepare teachers to implement culturally relevant practices by:

- Ensuring that pre-service teachers are provided with coursework in English as a second language acquisition and culturally responsive instructional practices
- Researching and developing programs and practices to increase the number of teachers of color or other underrepresented candidates and provide pre-service teachers with rigorous coursework in culturally responsive education across the content areas
- Partnering with CSDE and school districts in providing professional development in research-based and evidence-based strategies in Culturally Responsive Education
- Providing rigorous culturally responsive teacher education programs, linked to national and state standards, with depth and breadth to scientifically based content and pedagogy, including cultural diversity and cognitive learning style theory and research (ct.gov, 2021)

Interview and survey results indicate that the university is providing students with the preparation they need to feel confident in their abilities to instruct and connect with diverse learners in their classrooms. However, Pearson scores on the edTPA indicate that candidates are primarily scoring at level 3 on key rubrics related to cultural competence. There is a mismatch between candidates' perceptions of their competence and the actual application of this ability as measured by the edTPA. Work needs to be done around building authentic learning experiences into the pathway to preparation to facilitate accurate perceptions of abilities for educators to cultivate equitable learning experiences and equitable access to opportunities for their future students.

An additional concern that speaks more broadly toward systemic matters is that the learner-ready expectation (level 3) for new teachers is not that candidates integrate *both* prior academic learning and personal, cultural, or community assets into their planning and instruction; rather, it is the expectation that academic prior knowledge *or* students' assets be incorporated. To illustrate this issue, the edTPA rubric three (3) and rubric seven (7) language from the Elementary Literacy handbook follows, yet the overall verbiage for all handbooks (elementary and secondary content areas) is closely aligned to these same concepts for rubrics three and seven. The key question for rubric 3 is: *How does candidate use knowledge of students to justify instructional plans?* The candidate must justify that learning tasks are appropriate by using examples from prior academic learning **OR** personal, cultural, or community assets. A level 4 on this rubric would be justified by: prior academic learning **AND** personal, cultural, or community assets. Additionally, candidate makes connections to research and/or theory. The key question for rubric 7 is: How does the candidate actively engage students in integrating strategies and skills to *comprehend/compose text* (this italicized sample is from Elementary Literacy yet is modified based on content area central focus). To score Level 3, the candidate must show that students are engaged in learning tasks that address their understanding of the skill and that prior academic learning is linked to new learning. A level 4 score indicates the candidate links prior academic learning **AND** personal, cultural, and community assets to new learning.

The data indicated that only one (1) participant out of 18 was able to use *both* a students' academic background and cultural and community assets to inform teaching and learning, the task 1 planning focus. Though these results are not generalizable, results of this study suggest that teacher candidates are not applying the tenets of culturally relevant practices to their planning and instruction despite their confidence in their ability to do so, as the CRTSE survey suggested. The interviews indicate that teacher candidates seem reliant on the use of mentor literature and common phrases in students' heritage languages to build rapport and create a classroom environment where students feel valued. Survey results emphasize that these are efficacious areas as well. The weakness seems to lie within curricular and instructional design and how we expect teacher candidates to engage students while deeply integrating varied linguistic and cultural contributions. This is not an easy task for novice teachers. One can see that, logically, it follows that Pearson would consider these skills to be beyond a new learner-ready teacher. Yet, going back to the statistics noted previously showing U.S. classrooms with 53% students of color (Snyder et al., 2018), this researcher would argue that we cannot wait for new teachers to catch up on the job and learn how to be culturally responsive *after* they have entered the classrooms. It would be wise to make cultural competence more pervasive across teacher preparation programming to include authentic practice that enables candidates to translate theory into action through focused lesson planning and multiple opportunities to implement plans with K12 students in a variety of settings. Educator preparation programs must better equip candidates during their coursework and provide the time to design and practice culturally relevant lessons during internships and residencies so that they truly are prepared for the rich differences among students that will greet them on day one in urban, rural, and suburban classrooms across the country. Moreover, the entities charged with creating and designing the performance assessments, such as edTPA, used to evaluate teacher-readiness should consider adapting expectations for how teacher candidates consider contextual factors.

A future study that would revisit these participants after completing their first year in the classroom to ascertain what they believe about their abilities to meet the needs of their diverse learners would be interesting. The survey and

interview results from this study show that when candidates were student teaching, they felt confident in their ability to implement culturally relevant practices even if the edTPA indicated that those strategies and skills were not being applied at a level 4, which would indicate that both academic and personal assets were considered. Their edTPA scores indicated that at least half of the 18 who submitted for an official score, were level three learner-ready as it relates to cultural competence. One wonders whether these efficacy beliefs and indicators hold firm once candidates transition to real-world classrooms. It would be important to explore what kind of experiences novice teachers feel were critical to their preparation in this area and what the EPP could have done differently or better to prepare them for the classroom.

Incorporating real-world diverse experiences into the preparation program could provide candidates meaningful practice in the planning and implementation of culturally relevant strategies. Every classroom of students is unique, and teachers must adapt and adjust to be sure their pedagogy is responsive to all. Learning the ways in which responsive educators tap into student assets by watching or participating firsthand gives candidates those efficacy-building mastery and vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1977) that can truly make an impact on their learning and their confidence. Gershenson et al. (2021) emphasize this idea and suggest that if we expect teachers to be teaching in diverse learning environments, they certainly need opportunities to practice cultural competency in low-stake settings (p. 147). Student teaching, residencies, and internships are excellent vehicles in which to gain experiential learning. An important point that EPPs and teacher candidates should consider when assigning placements is that teachers have been shown to be more effective when the demographics of their professional teaching position matches the demographics of the school in which they student taught or completed their residency (Goldhaber et al., 2017).

Certainly, EPPs want to ensure these opportunities for candidates to have these rich learning experiences in diverse settings, but if this is not possible, EPPs should look to provide alternatives. Gershenson et al. (2021) suggest tapping into the virtual-reality technology, such as Mursion [VR] and TLE TeachLive, that have recently entered the educational forum as low-stakes approaches to real-world experiences. These virtual realities provide candidates a safe environment that simulates a real classroom filled with student avatars programmed to act like actual students who may display various learning or developmental needs via scenarios that crop up regularly in school settings (Ferrante, 2017). Moreover, candidates can teach in contexts very different from their own. These could include vast learning experiences with students from rural, urban, wealthy, domestic, or international settings. Gershenson et al. (2021) note, "In addition to experiencing diverse classroom environments with virtual reality, teachers could also literally try on a new skin in the name of empathy development...by donning an avatar with a different skin tone in a virtual world" (p. 151). One can imagine the positive impact these tools can have on candidates' emotional intelligence and cultural competence, and ultimately, the subsequent robust and equitable learning opportunities that may arise from these authentic experiences.

8. Conclusion

Educational professionals must *expect* novice teachers to be capable of utilizing students' academic, linguistic, and cultural assets in student engagement, lesson planning, instruction, and assessment. When candidates receive a score indicating they are learner-ready, it sends the message that they are prepared to meet the learning needs of all of their students. Novice teachers are juggling how to develop a rapport with their students, manage a classroom, plan lessons, implement IEPs, adhere to state and district mandates, address social and emotional needs, and so much more. When a red flag is not hoisted around a particular area, attention will likely be centered to where there is one.

We need to raise the bar in our educator preparation programs and on licensure exams that indicate candidates are learner-ready. Hyler et al. (2013.) acknowledge "edTPA offers ample opportunity for CRP-minded candidates to demonstrate their competency in this area, but it does not force all candidates to devote a substantial portion of their responses to CRP elements." This researcher wonders why not. If new teachers are not expected to consider both academic and cultural assets of students, are they really prepared to teach through a lens of inclusivity? Well prepared student teachers who benefit from a comprehensive program focused on diversity, equity, and high academic standards results in culturally competent novice educators who are focused on equitable outcomes for every student.

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Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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