

Urban Teacher Educator Perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Teacher preparation programs (TEPs) are tasked with preparing future teachers to be able to effectively work with diverse learners. For many, a focus on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) supports this charge, thus an increased understanding of teacher educator perspectives and approaches to this work is necessary. The purpose of this study was to examine teacher educators' perceptions of CRP and how they engage their pre-service teachers in developing an understanding of the pedagogy. The findings presented here highlight frustrations teacher educators face with CRP as well as their hopes. Implications and recommendations are provided in efforts to help strengthen this area of TEPs.

Keywords: teacher preparation, culturally relevant pedagogy, urban education

Given the increasing diversity of the public K-12 student body, heightened focus is on the most applicable approaches to curriculum and instruction for diverse learners. Both TEPs and grantors of accreditation to those programs have identified working with diverse learners as a high priority in their planning and evaluation (Dell'Angelo & Seaton, 2016). Similarly, Olson and Rao (2016) argued the need for TEPs to stress the significance of CRP for their pre-service teachers, particularly in efforts to best serve students in urban areas because of this increasing diversity.

Projections for student enrollment in public schools show significant increases for students of color through 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Specific increases in racial and ethnic groups noted by Hussar and Bailey (2013) include: multiracial students by 44%, Latino/Hispanic by 33%, Asian/Pacific Islander students increase by 20%, and Black student enrollment increases by 2%. American Indian/Alaska Native student enrollment is expected to decrease by 5%, and White students will decrease by 6% (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Additionally, English learners have been identified as one of the fastest growing groups of students (Quintero & Hansen, 2017). Although those data show the student population will continue to get more diverse, the teaching population has been stagnant over the past 15 years with about 80% of teachers identifying as White and 77% identifying as female (Taie & Goldring, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Paramount among the many challenges schooling in the US currently faces is the lack of preparation of teachers equipped to serve students from diverse backgrounds (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Trends in teacher employment indicate beginning teachers are more likely to teach in urban districts with high populations of students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Rahman, Fox, Ikoma, & Gray, 2017; US Department of Education, 2014). Of the largest 100 districts in the nation, the majority of students (63%) in urban areas are Black or Latino (Sable, Plots & Mitchell, 2010). These trends are important considering research highlights the lack of a thorough infusion of diversity, urban education, and multicultural courses throughout TEPs, leaving teachers inadequately prepared to serve their students (Milner, 2010; Villegas &

Lucas, 2002). Teachers are primary socializing forces in the lives of students (Fasching-Varner & Seriki, 2012), which makes it necessary to examine the role teacher educators play in teaching pre-service teachers about CRP, as well as encouraging them to critically reflect on race/ethnicity, class, culture, and privilege. The responsibility of preparing a teaching workforce capable and willing to reach and teach all students through CRP falls heavily on teacher educators (Jett, 2012).

There is heightened demand for effective teachers knowledgeable of the affirming aspects of cultural differences and the role they play in the classroom. This requires more instruction about CRP and its inclusion as an integral part of TEPs (Jett, 2012). Due to CRP being both a theory and a pedagogy, there are gaps in the literature on teacher educators' perceptions and understandings of how they work with their pre-service teachers to understand and practice the pedagogy. The aim of this research was to examine teacher educators' perceptions of CRP and how they teach their pre-service teachers about the importance and use of CRP using the following research questions:

1. What are teacher educators' perceptions on the role of CRP in teacher education?
2. How do teacher educators teach their pre-service teachers about the importance and use of CRP?

Conceptual Framework

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Post-integration, parents, teachers, and teacher educators have long advocated for the use of multicultural education in classrooms (Anderson, 1988; Banks 1994). Once Black teachers were pushed out of the profession via *Brown v. Board of Education* (Foster, 1997; Fultz, 2004; Tillman 2004; Walker, 1996), there was a consistent and sophisticated progression of theoretical and pedagogical movement to ensure marginalized children received a quality education from multicultural education to CRP (Milner & Howard, 2004; Walker, 2000). First coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) as a defining creation in this movement, CRP focuses on student empowerment and requires students to be academically successful, be culturally competent, and to develop critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized CRP as the essence of what teachers do in their classroom to ensure academic success for all children, and not a list of strategies or a bag of tricks that supports some children and not others. The power of CRP resides in what teachers believe; teachers should not have a deficit orientation about children of color but be able to see the assets they possess. Extending CRP and explicating its classroom applications, Gay's (2002) work asserts school success of ethnically diverse students can be made possible through the use of the pedagogy and petitions for it to be an integral part of TEPs. Within Gay's (2002) framework, she argued students can be more successful in school if the content and instruction is relative to their lived experiences. Content that is framed and taught, uncritically, from a Eurocentric perspective as well as taught in the same manner can limit how all children, and in particular, children of color or linguistically diverse children interact with it (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Subsequent iterations of CRP have manifested over the years. Paris (2012) introduced Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, which discusses how CRP has become ineffective since it has become a checklist versus teachers' ways of being. As more teachers and teacher educators were introduced to CRP without a framework of racial equity or critical race theory, CRP became to

some a series of steps versus a pedagogical practice. Paris (2012) argues for the sustainability of cultural and linguistic pedagogy in schools by intentional practice, not steps. In efforts to work towards this sustainability, we argue working to understand the perceptions of teacher educators leading this charge is necessary.

Culturally Relevant Teacher Educators

Fasching-Varner and Seriki (2012) explain, although decades of research have been disseminated regarding CRP, teachers still struggle to put CRP practices into action. Part of this difficulty is CRP cannot be taught because it is a dispositional commitment (Fasching-Varner & Seriki, 2012). These dispositions, however, must also be possessed by the teachers of teachers in order to be shared (Fasching-Varner, 2012; Gist, 2014). Teacher educators are also challenged by misunderstandings of CRP as theory and CRP as practice (Fasching-Varner & Seriki, 2012). Another perspective, argued by Hayes and Juarez (2012), is how White privilege impedes progress of CRP within TEPs. They contend the standard in TE is Whiteness - White professors assign readings by White scholars who represent people of color and while pre-service teachers may do field work in culturally diverse settings, they are never challenged to address and dismantle issues of power and privilege (Clark, Zygmunt, Clausen, Mucherah, & Tancock, 2015; Hayes & Juarez, 2012). The lack of support for discussion about CRP is a direct result of a false commitment to diversity maintained by White privilege, which hinders TEPs ability to effectively prepare teachers to teach all students (Hayes & Juarez, 2012).

Methods

Using a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009), this study was designed to learn more about how teacher educators interpret their experiences. This qualitative inquiry took place at a large urban university in the Southeast. The research site stands as the third largest producer of teachers in the state and the only institution to identify as having an urban focus. In this university, there has been a recent push in the Elementary Education program for more encounters with diversity and CRP for their pre-service teachers. At the time of this study, the program requirements for the elementary education undergraduate degree required students to take two diversity courses and no stand-alone course existed for CRP.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify professors from this licensure program who voiced desire to strengthen their focus on CRP. Patton (1990) explains purposeful sampling allows researchers to select cases that are information-rich. "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). This sampling method required some exploratory work to review the research agendas and teaching experience of faculty members in the department. With the help of a notable scholar of CRP in the department, five potential participants were contacted via email to solicit their participation.

Participants

Three participants volunteered, all of whom were White. There were two females, Dr. James and Dr. Matthews, and one male, Dr. Evans (all pseudonyms). Both Dr. Matthews and Dr. Evans are tenured professors and at the time of the study had been at the university for at least six

years. Dr. James, an assistant professor had been there about a year and a half. Dr. Matthews researches classroom technology integration and she teaches social studies methods courses; Dr. Evans researches early childhood writing development and teaches language arts methods courses; and lastly, Dr. James researches Whiteness studies and teaches diversity courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through individual interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to focus on specific information while providing flexibility for both the researchers and participants (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were recorded digitally and ranged between 35 and 60 minutes and all interviews were conducted on campus. After verbatim transcription, coding was done manually. Inductive thematic analysis was used in an effort to discover themes in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain inductive analysis is a “process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (p. 12). The six phases for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to search for and name themes. The process for thematic analysis required familiarization with the data, the creation of initial codes, and collapsing codes into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Three themes were identified from interview data. The first theme was “CRP has specific requirements.” Participants reported at length the components of CRP they believed to be fundamental to strengthening one’s competency of CRP. The second theme was “CRP has unique challenges” which encompassed the individual difficulties participants experienced and discerned from both students and departmental colleagues. The third and final theme was “students can be engaged and understand CRP through hands-on experience.” This theme highlights what participants believed to be some best practices to help heighten students’ understanding of CRP.

CRP Has Specific Requirements

Participants articulated what they believed CRP is, how it was embodied in their classrooms, and what they identified as its key underpinnings. Collectively, CRP was identified as “foundational” to teaching. During interviews, participants spoke about the importance of students being able to speak knowledgeably about educational issues, to be able to recognize multiple perspectives, and to be able to pose critical questions about curricula. According to participants, these elements were found to be the specific requirements of CRP. Dr. Evans was a strong advocate for CRP to have a central focus in TEPs and his thoughts below highlighted the shared essence of what pre-service, in-service, and professors alike need to be able to do:

On all levels, we have to explore cultural backgrounds to know where we are coming from, to acknowledge privilege if we have it and where there are inequities. I think it’s really important to learn about other cultural backgrounds different from your own so you are aware of differences and how other people come to a classroom with their own range of experiences that are going to be different than your own. I think TE programs need to foster that. I think we need a stand-alone class in this but then I also think CRP needs to be woven across all the classes. I think it’s the responsibility of all classes to weave culturally relevant

instruction so it is taught across the curriculum. (Dr. Evans, personal communication, October 12, 2016)

Here Dr. Evans shares what he believes to be crucial to all CRP related efforts. An understanding of various cultures, sources of privilege, and the existence of inequity in society were identified as fundamental knowledge he believed pre-service teachers needed to develop both an understanding and disposition for CRP.

Interview data furthermore found CRP to be difficult to separate from what is known as “good work” in classrooms. Dr. James explained CRP could not be separated from any aspects of TE because:

It’s really hard to be an excellent science, or an excellent math, or an excellent ELA teacher if you are not grounding in terms of language patterns, cultural knowledge, in terms of students’ identifications, and their social world. (Dr. James, personal communication, October 25, 2016)

Like Dr. Evans, Dr. James also identifies some of the integral knowledge teachers should possess in order to be more effective. Both of their perceptions of teaching indicate a necessity for teachers to know who they are teaching as well as the context in which they are teaching.

These two data extractions were highlighted because, in addition to explaining what they perceived to be necessary skills and dispositions for teachers to be more culturally relevant, they also identified CRP as the bedrock of excellent teaching. This first theme shows participants’ personal perceptions and their belief that CRP is a necessary inclusion in TEPs. Above all, the three participants were adamant about CRP not being an add-on or another “thing to do” but a “way of being”. Echoed here is the shared understanding that in order to be rooted in CRP one needs to become more knowledgeable about self and others.

CRP Has Unique Challenges

Though the first theme in essence showed the participants believed CRP was a foundational element to their work, this theme captured some of the difficulties they experienced with their students and co-workers. Participants spoke about student responses to their efforts, how their experiences varied from semester to semester, and the resistance CRP efforts met within their program. Notably, Dr. James spoke mostly about difficulties she has had with her students, while the other participants referenced their challenges mostly with colleagues, which could likely be attributed to difference in their tenure status. More specifically, Dr. James shared she had to reconsider the structure of her classes and which topics she would address in depth and which she would address broadly:

Last year I did a multi-week unit of study on African American language and an expert came to lead a workshop with them. It was hostilely received. I am trying to find that fine line between being untenured needing to have good evaluations and also wanting to push my students. This was not a topic they digested very well so I backed down a little bit this semester. It is not a place I want to stay but it is the place I am in right now so we did a general overview of language and language discrimination. (Dr. James, personal communication, October 25, 2016)

Ultimately, Dr. James faced an internal battle. While she desired to challenge students, she was also mindful of the possibility of students showing their resistance in course evaluations. This excerpt is an example of how teacher educators may have to consider potential negative ramifications of their course design and CRP related work in their classrooms.

In addition to Dr. James' challenges with her students, both Dr. Matthews and Dr. Evans expressed their difficulties with students but they addressed their colleagues, more specifically, Dr. Matthews felt as if the department was not unified on the role of CRP in their work. She explained:

I know a lot of us are doing things but we are not talking to each other about it, it's not cohesive. Just like our students, we are dealing with folks that have personal histories, maybe they've never thought of it, maybe they've been doing it and aren't calling it that but we all just need to come together. So, the role of CRP can be something that brings us together but they just see it as something that fits good with social studies or with the diversity course where I see it as fitting with everything without it being "work". (Dr. Matthews, personal communication, November 10, 2016)

Here Dr. Matthews channeled some frustration with the lack of cohesiveness and unity throughout her department but she highlighted some hope that progress was possible.

In Dr. Evans' interview, he shared that he believed "underlying racism" to be a key factor impeding the CRP efforts in the program. Through outside consulting efforts, he explained many sessions have been eye-opening for him but the lack of participation and "eye-rolls" from colleagues during those sessions was obvious. As a result of these observations, he was left feeling as if "there is a group of people that will embrace this and bring it into their classrooms and I think there are people that no matter what you do, they won't" (Dr. Evans, personal communication, October 12, 2016). Like Dr. Matthews, Dr. Evans displayed some disappointment with what he perceived to be repudiation from colleagues.

These significant pieces of data show the professors faced resistance from their students and their colleagues. Though the resistance from colleagues appeared to be subliminal, a lack of coherence could impact the fervor of the work because the participants desired a stronger sense of unity. Ultimately, tension existed between the role CRP "should" play and the challenges impeding the work.

Students Can Be Engaged and Understand CRP through Hands-On Experience

The final theme captures both examples and perceptions about what the three participants believed to be necessary for students to be able to understand CRP. By and large, the participants advocated for intentionality in readings, topics, classroom activities, and community exposure.

Dr. James spoke about the importance of student-centered classrooms. She articulated there is a difference between students staying rooted in opinions for class discussion and students being able to connect to applicable research. Thus, she worked to curate lots of resources available for students to use to guide their work. She created learning communities and challenged students to work in groups both online and in the classroom. Student groups were also assigned days and topics to teach lessons. Student-centered classrooms are understood as a component of CRP because they allow students and their realms of reference, learning styles, and existing knowledge to be at the forefront. Though valuable, she felt teachers must be careful not to assume student-centered classrooms automatically make a classroom culturally relevant given the additional tenets required of the pedagogy.

Like Dr. James, Dr. Matthews identified student-initiated conversations and reflection as approaches to help strengthen one's understanding of CRP. More specifically, she advocated for genuine experiences for students instead of keeping course assignments as grade driven.

I think a gap comes from either not providing or not showing the connection. Let's say the privilege walk. If I just had them get in a line and go through the step forward and step back and then we just go on to the next day without unpacking, no reflection... that's where the rigor comes in when you have the students really reflect and if you do the work in between that will fill the gap. And I don't know what the work in between is except more experiences. You do the privilege walk first, then a poverty simulation and then go out and do a community study. Another reason there is a gap is because it becomes an assignment and I think when this kind of life stuff becomes an assignment, the students do not see how real it is. (Dr. Matthews, personal communication, November 10, 2016)

Dr. Matthews provides concrete examples of some of the work she believes is necessary to advance pre-service teachers understanding of CRP. Here she challenges faculty to dig deeper than assignments and grades but to increase exposure to experiences and conversations that could help cultivate appropriate teacher dispositions.

Lastly, Dr. Evans' identified very specific ways he engaged students in CRP including building classroom community and trust, using different texts and genres, and by talking about language and different discourses or "grammars":

I really address CRP when I talk about grammar. In writing instruction, the most common thing you hear is "oh these kids don't speak proper grammar or they don't write proper grammar." I really try to break it down and talk to students about it not being an issue of what is correct and incorrect but that grammars are plural and we change those grammars based on the context in which we are speaking or writing. I really confront CRP when I specifically address that topic. (Dr. Evans, personal communication, October 12, 2016)

Through this explicit example, Dr. Evans identifies the need for pre-service teachers to unlearn and reconcile areas of biases regarding home languages, language legitimacy, and cultural pluralism and he challenges those notions in his classroom.

While not tied to the two research questions directly, a significant finding worth noting is the need for faculty to have experiences to help them understand the theory-to-practice gap as it relates to enacting CRP. Participants identified this gap as an attributing cause for teacher educators facing difficulty with CRP. Both Dr. James and Dr. Matthews spoke throughout the interview about the need for more professional development in order to fill this gap. Dr. Evans explained why he thought the gap existed:

I think it exists because we are not providing enough real-world examples of how to close the gap and I think we are not providing that because we're not seeing that. It's hard to pave your own way. I think if you want to learn about excellent literacy practices you could pull up a video online. You don't really have that for CRP. I don't think there is a lot of great practice out there and I think one of the reasons why is because being culturally relevant is antithetical to a lot of what's mandated in schools so teachers have to work extra hard to find out how to make that balance and I also think what's culturally relevant for one person is not for another. There is no generic version of culturally relevant because it is defined by your students... I mean what that means for one classroom is not the same for another classroom so finding these models it's sort of trite right because isn't it generated from within? (Dr. Evans, personal communication, October 12, 2016)

In this excerpt, Dr. Evans identifies the lack of resources that exist for CRP while simultaneously noting that having a toolkit of resources could potentially be less beneficial because of the importance of classroom context. Dr. Evans' thoughts remind us of how CRP instruction is easier said than done.

Discussion

We revealed here in this qualitative study of three participants, the perceptions they hold regarding CRP and how they work to increase their students' understanding of it. Notably, however, is the variation among participants in regards to how CRP is addressed. Throughout Dr. Evans' interview, he spoke about CRP topically and the specific ways he highlights CRP in his classes. This was unlike Dr. James and Dr. Matthews who talked about the pedagogy as a "way to be." This manifestation could arguably be used as a prime example of Paris' (2012) argument of how CRP has become less about teachers' ways of being. Yet, Dr. Evans' leaves us with a lingering question about CRP being dispositional at the end of his interview informing us that he is aware of the overall essence of CRP. This data reminds us of how difficult it can be to teach others "how to be" as well as some of the inherent difficulties teacher educators face in efforts to prepare future teachers for the realities of their classrooms. Collectively, across participants, they each acknowledged the need for more learning and personal discovery concerning CRP for all parties involved. From the data gathered, we feel that each appeared to be in a place where they were not only retrospective, but also introspective regarding their work and growth.

As these professors have shown, some students and faculty are receptive and some are not. Yet, the notion that "it depends on the group of students" as noted by Dr. James poses a problem that could potentially continue to maintain the state of the literature which says teachers continue to leave TEPs unprepared to work with diverse learners. Until programs like this one experience more unity amongst faculty and embed foundational CRP concepts across the program, the results of significant CRP related experiences for students will not be consistent.

Implications and Conclusion

Though this study is limited given its small sample size and the fact that results are not generalizable, the findings have some potential implications for TEPs. Our study demonstrated participant viewpoints that show both faculty and students still struggle to "get it," which could continue to have detrimental effects on the diverse student population of students in K-12 schools, particularly in urban districts. It becomes more important for both theorists and practitioners to find ways to deepen educators' understanding. Teacher educators should spend time in schools and with teachers where it is evident that CRP exists. Faculty development can strengthen the work with pre-service teachers to supply them with the necessary literature and experiences to understand the pedagogy. Teacher education programs are also encouraged to consider whether or not they have both created and explicitly explained expectations and program requirements regarding CRP. This includes not only being intentional regarding program offerings, required readings and experiences, but also employing faculty who have the necessary knowledge and disposition to support the creation of future educators who display the fortitude for CRP. Taken together, these suggestions could help us garner "best practices" in efforts to prepare teachers who are capable and willing to reach and teach all students.

Taking these results into consideration, there is cause for both theorists and practitioners to question whether trying to find models or "best practices" for CRP is being done in vain. It is important for more research to try to understand, if possible, how we can get teachers to embody this pedagogy if it is a dispositional concept. Future research can further examine perceptions and how they contribute to the focus (or lack thereof) on the pedagogy throughout this TEP and perhaps

others. Suggested research includes capturing the perceptions of teacher educators in other TEPs to find ways this data and new data converges and diverges. Additionally, a variety of qualitative work including ethnographies of teacher educators and their pre-service students as well as autoethnographic studies of teacher educators could aid in our understanding of how CRP is approached in TEPs.

Ladson-Billings (2014) expressed CRP interpretations and educational efforts appear to be reductionistic. From the “remix” of her work, scholars have and are encouraged to question, challenge and advance both CRP scholarship and educational practice. This fact informs us that the work on CRP is continuous. Whether or not the participants in this study have mastered navigating CRP within their TEP, what is appreciated is their willingness and intentionality to do the work it takes to get there.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Warming Up Questions

1. Tell me about your professional background. How long have you been an educator? What levels have you taught? (Reference demographic questionnaire here)
2. How long have you worked here, what other schools/universities have you worked, has it always been teacher education programs?
3. Tell me about how you came to this institution.
4. What are your research interests? What courses do you teach?

Preparing Teachers

5. How did you decide to become a teacher educator? Why?
6. Tell me about your teaching philosophy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

7. Talk to me about what you know about culturally relevant pedagogy.
8. How do you define/identify culturally relevant pedagogy?
9. What role do you think CRP plays in teacher education programs?

Context Specific- CRP

10. Tell me about the receptiveness of CRP in this elementary education teacher prep program?
11. What kinds of conversations (if any) do you have with your pre-service teachers about CRP?
12. Would you say that you employ this pedagogy in your classroom work as a professor? If so, how? Why? If not, why not?
13. What do you think are some best practices for CRP with pre-service teachers?

Documents

14. Talk to me about the documents can have to share with me that you use to incorporate CRP in your classroom (syllabus, course assignments, course website, readings/resources).

Conclusion

15. Are there any other types of pedagogies you spend time with discussing with your students?
16. What final thoughts can you share about your overall thoughts about teacher preparation and CRP?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?