

# Unpacking Biases: Developing Cultural Humility in Early Childhood and Elementary Teacher Candidates

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## Abstract

Changing demographics in the U.S. require a focus on educating future teachers on how to engage children and families with diverse backgrounds. Teacher educators have been charged to address teachers' cultural competence and provide pedagogical instruction for working with diverse populations. We bolster this line of inquiry by sharing activities used in our university classrooms that support the development of teacher candidates' cultural competence vis-à-vis cultural humility. Acknowledging the development of cultural humility as a process, we provide teacher candidates with opportunities to transform their knowledge, skills, and abilities for working with diverse children and their families, through guided critical reflection, real life situations and field experiences.

American families are increasingly diverse and complex in terms of race, ethnicity, immigrant status, socioeconomic circumstances, and family structures (Cherlin, 2010; Walsh, 2012). In comparison to previous decades, the racial and ethnic diversity of children and families in nearly all states has increased (Hernandez, 2009), and nearly 16 million children or 22% of all children now live in poverty (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). Moreover “demographic trends reveal an increasingly diverse and complex family life, and a more ambiguous and fluid set of categories traditionally used to define the family,” such that our understanding of family dynamics and our approaches to working with “families must be attuned to our times and social contexts” (Walsh, 2012, p. 10). In this

paper, we discuss the importance of developing cultural competence vis-à-vis cultural humility in teacher candidates, and detail two exemplar cases of courses in early childhood and elementary teacher education programs. We aim to provide insight into potential strategies other teacher educators might incorporate in their university classrooms for developing cultural humility and competence for working with diverse children and families.

While United States classrooms have become ever more diverse (Banks & Banks, 2009; Howard, 2010), the teaching population has not. The vast majority of teachers in the United States remain middle-class and white (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). Given these demographics and, in turn, cultural differences, it is particularly alarming that teacher candidates lack awareness for how their students' and families' cultures<sup>2</sup> pertain to their instruction and classroom climate (Kumar & Hamer, 2012; Barry & Lechner, 1995). Moreover, teacher candidates continue to demonstrate resistance towards multicultural education courses in their teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2004; Villegas, 2007).

The cultural differences between mostly White, middle class teachers and their diverse students can have implications for student learning and development. Teachers' lack of understanding of students' cultural context can result in misinterpretation of behavior such that students are mislabeled as behavior problems or having learning disabilities (Rogoff, 2003). Looking to the effects on the wider society, Sleeter (2008) highlights how White teachers' lack of racial understanding further perpetuates institutionalized racism in the educational system. Grounded in a sociocultural perspective, Civil (2014) highlights the

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<sup>2</sup> In our courses we draw from multiple definitions of culture. Specifically, Swidler (1986) conceptualizes culture as a "tool kit" of habits, preferences, and abilities that contribute to "strategies of action" or the processes individuals experience to navigate their environment. However, it is contextual factors like social, institutional, and material resources (Lowe & Weisner, 2004) that shape action. Weisner (1997) considers culture to be the ways that everyday activities of individuals and families reflect shared cultural models or beliefs of a community. Components of each of these definitions guide how we discuss culture with teacher candidates, especially considering families' strategies of action interacting with society throughout their daily routines. Moreover, we work with teacher candidates to understand the intersectionality (Hill Collins, 1998) of identities related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, family structure, and ability that contribute to the cultural experiences in families.

importance of teaching from students' "everyday" context to not just make learning accessible but to empower them to transform their situation (p. 79). Teachers without knowledge of their students' context miss out on this potentially transformative opportunity.

This lack of awareness combined with the growing cultural divide between teachers and their students means that candidates need preparation for the diverse student environments they may encounter (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011; Marx & Moss, 2011). Consequently, teacher educators must support the on-going *process* of developing cultural competency (Waters & Asbill, 2013) in teacher candidates across teacher education programs (Diller & Moule, 2005). Through these experiences, candidates gain not only knowledge and facts regarding diversity but the *attitudes* necessary for working effectively with diverse children and families (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) acknowledges the importance of culturally competent teaching, specifically urging teacher education programs to prepare teachers for a diverse community of students (NCATE, 2008).

### **Cultural Humility**

Cultural humility is an important component of a process-oriented frame of cultural competence (Waters & Asbill, 2013) and consists of the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]" (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 2). Cultural humility has three foci: (a) continuous self-evaluation and self-critique; (b) desire to fix power imbalances; and (c) commitment to systematically advocate for others (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). To develop cultural humility, teachers need: (a) the ability to recognize how their ethnocentrism and backgrounds shape their work with

students whose backgrounds differ from theirs; (b) an understanding of the broader context of society; and (c) a willingness and ability to use strategies of cultural competence (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

The question arises, however, how can we best to support teacher candidates in developing these knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to cultural humility?

Recent research suggests that transformations in teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, *and* attitudes occur best with a combination of experiential and classroom learning opportunities (Harlin, Murray, & Shea, 2007; Melser, 2006; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark, 2007). In emphasizing the role of experiential learning, CAEP, calls for “the redesign [of teacher] preparation programs to support the close coupling of practice, content, theory and pedagogy” (NCATE, 2010, p. iii).

Specifically, the *Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning* (NCATE, 2010) urges programs to combine classroom cultural considerations with practical experience in the field with children and families from diverse backgrounds. To further the growth of cultural understandings, CAEP emphasizes also developing the habit of reflective practice in pre-service teachers so that field experiences can provide feedback for future practice and for enhanced self-understanding as a culturally competent teacher.

In addition to reflective practice, we expect our students to develop skills of critical reflection which requires them to consider not only their own ideology but “to look beneath the surface to see what may influence the situation and consider the “bigger picture” or examine entire context of situations with children and families (Lucas, 2012, p. 1). Critical reflection is necessary for the transformation of attitudes and development of cultural humility (Mezirow, 1990). Moreover, maintaining cultural humility using critical reflection is an on-going *process*, and

requires continual self-awareness, critical reflection and change of attitude if necessary.

### **Working with Diverse Families**

There is a strong, positive link between family engagement and student outcomes (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008; Weiss, Capse, & Lopez, 2006; Swap, 1993). However, limited research exists on working with *diverse* students *and* their families (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorpe, 2005). Parents, families, and communities are important educational resources as they act as “funds of knowledge”, with the cultural knowledge and skills accumulated over time and demonstrated via daily routines that maintain family and community well-being and functioning (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 35). With candidates unprepared to work with diverse families as well as children, these important “funds of knowledge” may not be accessed and critical home-school partnerships may not form, causing student outcomes to suffer.

Consequently, in our courses we focus on fostering cultural competence vis-à-vis cultural humility so teacher candidates may work effectively with individuals and families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Diller & Moule, 2005). Below we highlight two exemplar courses that demonstrate how we foster our teacher candidates’ perceptions of and capacity for working with diverse children and families. We expand former conversations by emphasizing process-based experiences that aim to transform attitudes and perspectives while developing skills necessary for cultural competence. In particular, strategies discussed elucidate the relevance of critical reflection for maintaining a process- rather than product-oriented stance towards cultural competence, such that candidates develop the habit of examining their on-going work. We endeavor to provide teacher educators with ideas and strategies for working with teacher candidates in developing cultural

competence vis-à-vis cultural humility from a process-oriented frame.

## **Doing the Work: Building Cultural Humility**

### **Program Context**

Social justice is a core value of the college in which our early childhood education (ECE) and elementary education (ELEM) courses are situated. As such this core value is infused across all teacher education programs in the college. The focus of our ECE program, in particular, is on working with culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse children and families. One specific course, “Engaging Families of Diverse Young Learners”, focuses entirely on building culturally humble partnerships with families and communities. Teacher candidates in this course gain general knowledge regarding family demographics, structures, functions, and theories (e.g., family systems, family stress and resilience frameworks, and ecological models), as well as instruction on how families’ unique identities (i.e., race, class, culture, sexual orientation of family members, abilities of family members, immigration status) intersect to situate each child and their family in terms of access to societal resources. This knowledge equips teacher candidates to critically reflect from a strengths-based perspective on their own experiences as well as on children and families’ needs and experiences. They also explore the role of implicit bias in working with children and families with diverse backgrounds. Moreover, ECE teacher candidates gain “hands-on” experience in applying this knowledge with families in the community.

**ECE instructor positionality.** As the primary instructor of this course, I am a married White, upper-middle class female, whose work focuses on family-strengths and critically examines the structures and policies that oppress those who are most marginalized. I engage in an on-going process of developing and maintaining personal awareness of the power and privilege afforded by my

financially secure SES, family structure, sexual orientation, education, and race. Committed to social justice action, I engage in Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) in partnership with low-income immigrant communities to shift the structures and policies that perpetuate inequality and shape the development of individual, family, and community well-being and resilience. In the ECE course, I share my work with diverse, marginalized families and young children to provide real-life examples of the concepts we explore during the course. By sharing, I also hope to demonstrate how I critically reflect and grapple with my own situatedness and privilege.

Likewise, the elementary education (ELEM) program's focus on diversity in classrooms, family engagement and child development is embedded within a course titled, "Children, Family, Culture and Schools (Ages 4-12)." Using an ecological systems framework, this course focuses on situating candidates in understanding children's overall development and learning in light of their familial, cultural and individual developmental capacities and to generalize how these variables, in turn, may influence a child's optimal learning potential. The course focuses on topics around family engagement, implicit bias, developmentally appropriate practice and working with diverse learners. Further, this includes weekly field-based experiences in which students expand upon the content discussed in class and how it applies to the teaching practice with expectations for general and critical self-reflection throughout.

**ELEM instructor positionality.** I am a White Euro-American, married female in my mid-thirties. As a former elementary educator who worked in the southeast quadrant of Washington, D.C. as well as a rural community on the eastern shore of Maryland, my research, teaching, and service situates in closing the persistent achievement gap. All my work remains vested in social justice and equality for

marginalized students, families and communities and the importance of future educators approaching their teaching with an ecological understanding of students' development. As the primary instructor of this ELEM course, I emphasize candidates' knowledge, understanding and skills in educating *all* children with particular focus on ecological systems theory, family engagement, implicit biases, and developmental assets of learning.

### **Diversity Awareness Activity: Recognizing Stereotypes, Implicit Biases, and Assumptions**

Simulation exercises such as the *Biases and Stereotypes Assessment* and *Check Your Assumptions* are two activities utilized to help candidates across our ECE and ELEM courses to acknowledge, challenge and even shift formerly unrecognized biases that might influence their perceptions of students' and families' cultural backgrounds. Rooted in critical reflection, these two activities, coupled with critical readings, lectures, and discussions focused on implicit bias (Kirwan Institute, 2013, 2014), intersectionality (Hill Collins, 1998), White privilege (Kendall, 2002), strengths-based and resilience-based perspectives (Walsh, 2003; Walsh, 2006), and culture (Lynch & Hanson, 2011; Weisner, 1997), drive candidates to not only *understand* these concepts but to *acknowledge* their own personal biases that arise naturally when reading simple phrases and cases as well as interacting with individuals and families. Reflecting on their implicit biases puts teacher candidates on the path to developing cultural competence vis-à-vis cultural humility.

For the *Biases and Stereotypes Assessment*, the focus is on racial-ethnic biases and involves first reading a phrase such as, "*We are considered to be the dominant group, the majority. We are upper class, uppity. We come from two parent stable homes. We have the power in the American society.*" From a list of eight racial-

ethnic backgrounds, candidates identify the group most associated with the statement and anonymously write their answers. The facilitator collects the responses, tallies the frequencies for each selection and then guides a discussion based on the students' answers. In addition to discussing the choices made and their frequency, students are encouraged to look inward to their own personal, internal response to the prompt as well as the class' cumulative response. The following questions might be included in the debrief: (a) *How did you feel about that activity? Did you feel comfortable with the responses? Why did you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?* and (b) *Why do you think it is important for teachers to recognize, understand, and deal with implicit biases?* During this dialogue, it is important for facilitators to consider that this may be the first time candidates become aware of their prejudices, so it is crucial that students feel safe to speak about their tensions in completing the activity. From the beginning of the semester, we emphasize the importance of a supportive and non-judgmental class climate through modeling, explicit discussion and group rapport-building activities.

Culminating this activity, candidates prepare a reflection essay discussing how their personal biases might have been challenged by this exercise and how the insights gained may influence their future work with students and families. As instructors, we then provide feedback about those reflections, encouraging the process of self-inquiry, critical reflection, and subsequent plans for change. While this activity highlights ethnic biases, this activity could also address other aspects of diversity like family structure, gender, and disability.

A second activity is *Check Your Assumptions*, which situates candidates within realistic scenarios and requires them to reflect on their perspectives regarding diversity. We present candidates with short classroom situations like the following: *"A parent of one of your students arrives 30 minutes late for a meeting.*

*This is not the first time this parent has been late. The parent apologizes profusely...*” Teacher candidates reflect upon their initial thoughts about the scenario after reading the following prompts: (a) *Describe who you ‘picture’ in your mind—consider the intersections of race/class/gender;* and (b) *What is your first reaction as to why the parent is late?* Next, instructors provide candidates with a descriptor of the parent or guardian such as, “an upper middle class Latina mother”. Given additional information, candidates critically reflect on reasons why the parent is late.

After individual reflections, candidates work in small groups to discuss their varied responses to the initial parent descriptions and to consider potential reasons for these descriptors, as well as their reactions to the parent being late. These conversations help candidates uncover possible implicit biases, which could contribute to assumptions they make about parents and families. Working in a group also provides opportunities for candidates to see how others perceive them and to observe differing initial perceptions based on their classmates ethnic or socioeconomic background. Our ultimate goal with this exercise is that, through individual and shared *critical* reflection, our candidates develop a more holistic view of diverse students and families, which will begin to transform their work with marginalized individuals.

Through these classroom activities, candidates’ biases become explicit thus providing opportunity to acknowledge, challenge and reflect upon this new awareness and to consider how it informs their own cultural humility. Anecdotal feedback from candidate participants illustrates the potentially transformative importance of these types of activities. As one student noted, “I had no idea I thought this way and it made me feel badly when I wrote certain labels on paper. I wonder if I put these labels on my students’?” Another student shared:

Yes, I know that stereotypes exist in our world, but I thought that given my diverse experiences, my thoughts and ideas about these stereotypes might have changed...this class activity really made me think about how my thoughts – ones that aren't even on my surface as I know I don't treat people differently – might influence how I talk to, teach or even think about my future students.

### **Cultural Diversities Reflection through Case Study Reviews**

An integral strategy for preparing teachers to work with diverse children and families is providing them with theoretical and empirical information, experiential learning, rich field-based activities and opportunities to reflect on the connection between the literature and practice (Kantar, 2013). Emphasizing the family's role in students' overall learning, we utilize, short case studies and simulation exercises that pose specific diversity dilemmas that again, prompt student self-reflection and reflection on varying family structures, values and functions. These case studies focus on diversity related to culture, language, race, ability, and family structure. Through small and large group interactions students are able to understand the attitudes and assumptions they hold about families from diverse backgrounds, and consider how varying family structures, culture, abilities and language affect the developmental needs of their future students and families.

Candidates' first review cases individually, then meet in small groups for shared peer reflection. Through these small group exchanges, we challenge our students to consider their peers' implicit biases and assumptions and work to support each other in understanding those biases. We also continually ask students to regroup so they work with different classmates throughout the course to ensure that they learn from as many unique perspectives as possible, necessary for their abilities to critically reflect. As an example, a specific case study we use illustrates the importance of culturally and linguistically sensitive communication between

home and school. After assessing and reflecting on an already prepared teacher communication, teacher candidates practice composing school/home communications such as a classroom newsletter or back-to-school correspondence. Candidates consider teacher tone, the language used and implicit biases within the text. This exercise provides “real-life” connections and practice to the course’s cultural humility content. One student’s feedback after engaging in a practice phone parent-teacher conference:

I didn’t realize how flustered I’d get when talking with parents and that I would say things that they might take as inappropriate. Practicing how a conversation might happen with a parent really helped to show me that I need to have a clear idea about why I’m calling parents and also the need to build better relationships with my families of my students so that parents believe what I’m sharing with them.

Engaging in these case study and simulation activities provides opportunities for students to conceptualize and anticipate how to work with diverse children and families.

### **Beyond the University Classroom Walls**

In keeping CAEP’s call for more field learning experiences for teacher candidates, a final strategy that goes a step beyond classroom case studies is one that requires candidates to work with children and families in the “real world”. We require our candidates to meet with school communities and families whose background differs from their own. Candidates reflect again on their own attitudes and biases, but this time they must consider how the family’s “different” background affects the students’ developmental needs.

**Home visits.** The ECE course provides candidates with direct experiences with diverse families. Each candidate conducts a home visit with a family whose socio-cultural context is different from his/her own. Home visits are an effective way to engage and build partnerships with families. They are linked to multiple positive developmental and academic outcomes for children, as well as increasing parents’

confidence in collaborating with their children's schools (see Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009 for a review of this research). This assignment is intended to serve dual purposes in teacher candidates' preparation. First, candidates witness firsthand the unique experiences and needs of diverse children and their families, and then use this involvement to critically reflect on the children's and families' cultural frameworks with the hope of developing greater cultural humility. Second, candidates are prepared to conduct home visits as part of their practice as classroom teachers.

ECE teacher candidates select a family who is marginalized by U.S. society in a way the student is not. For example, student of White European descent who grew up in a low-income family, and thus was marginalized based on socioeconomic status (SES) will select a family who is marginalized for another aspect of their identity including race, immigration status, sexual orientation, family structure, religion, or ability. Through face-to-face interviews, meetings, and observations, candidates learn about their chosen families. In the first part of the assignment, teacher candidates describe: (a) the family; (b) why they chose the family and how the family is marginalized in U.S. society; and (c) how they will introduce themselves to the family. Candidates consider what they have in common with the family and reflect on the strengths or deficit-based assumptions that emerge prior to meeting the family. Candidates also create a list of questions to ask the family about their experiences as parents as well as about the focal child. These questions usually consist of questions regarding the family's daily routine, parenting challenges, the hopes and dreams parents have for their children, and how parents would describe their children.

The second component of the assignment encompasses an in-depth interview and observation at the family's home or neighborhood during a family event at

which multiple members of the family are present. During this visit, candidates have the opportunity to observe differing family structures, roles and dynamics, and how varied family structures can accomplish similar and important family functions. They notice how the family interacts with one another and can begin to learn about how varying cultures affect interactions and dynamics within families.

Meeting in the family's home allows candidates to immerse themselves in an otherwise unfamiliar culture providing for more contextual information and the opportunity to witness the family's funds of knowledge transmission and to gather everyday cues to make their teaching more relevant, accessible and empowering to their students (Civil, 2014). Moreover, the home visit presents the possibility of candidate transformation as the candidates' immersion forces the reconciliation of preconceived biases they may have had with the experience they have in the family's setting.

Following the home visit, teacher candidates critically reflect on what they learned from the visit and most importantly revisit their original assumptions. As one student wrote:

...my greatest take away from this experience was not what I learned about this student but rather what I learned about myself...I have struggled to admit in [my work as a teacher], [the] stereotypes [I hold]. As a teacher in this community, I am prisoner to these stereotypes no matter how hard I try to escape them. [The home visit] experience allowed me to get to know a family as individuals, which pushed me to realize some of the things I assumed, were in reality, very untrue.

For the final component of the assignment, ECE candidates present their families' stories to their classmates and discuss what they learned and how their thinking about families transformed. Again, peers provide additional feedback as they share their experiences and reflections, further fostering candidates with opportunities to learn about various families' stories.

**Community mapping activity.** Using an ecological systems framework

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979), ELEM candidates engage in a community mapping activity that connects theory to practice through rich field-based exercises. The purpose of the activity is to familiarize candidates with the myriad of factors across micro- to macro-level systems that influence students' daily school experiences. This familiarity allows our candidates to relate their teaching to students' everyday contexts thus making the education experience more accessible and powerful. Based on the location of their school-based field assignment, candidates collect data to create a map of the ecological climate of their school's environment. Candidates are to ask questions regarding school demographics, school and community climate, neighborhoods, family engagement and student body of school-based teachers, students, leaders, staff, parents and community liaisons to provide a comprehensive picture of the school landscape.

In addition to providing ongoing support and feedback, instructors also continually encourage critical reflection throughout the information gathering process to unpack implicit biases and to document how school-based information collected may or may not have been considered prior to learning about the school's ecology. Finally, the assignment links candidates' understanding of how ecological systems influence teachers' perceptions of a child's development, which often reflects candidates' struggles with understanding the diversity of students and their families.

Feedback from our candidates illustrates the potential value of participating in the community mapping activity. As one candidate noted:

The information on the district website I thought told us a lot about the school and the students that went there. But, [these] demographics of the school really only provided us a limited understanding about what really influences students' lives. Had we not done the community mapping activity, I never would have considered how district policies or even cultural practices influence how my future students might learn and develop.

The community mapping activity connects macro-level influences with micro-level

dynamics, deepening teacher candidates' understanding of the intersection of influences that impact a child's development and learning. Further, the activity encourages candidates to consider how their biases about others and their perceptions about schools may inhibit their future work and students' learning. Most notably, the assignment extends the CAEP mission of combining classroom cultural competence with field-based experiences to saturate candidates' knowledge of working with children and families from diverse backgrounds (NCATE, 2010).

### **Building from these Experiences: Conclusions and Recommendations**

With increasing diversity among students and their families, there is a growing need for teacher candidates to develop culturally competent ways to engage children and families from various backgrounds. Above we described several activities that provide opportunities to develop cultural competence vis-à-vis cultural humility in teacher candidates by uncovering their implicit biases and reflecting on observations of differing cultural and familial backgrounds. These activities are embedded within early childhood and elementary teacher preparation courses focused on the application of theory to practice as a means to develop cultural competence.

While we have outlined the practical aspects of the activities, we believe that two features of our exercises are fundamental. First, we have threaded guided critical reflection throughout every activity. Experiences can only be transformative if they are acknowledged and reflections are continually absorbed and refined. Without critical reflection, field experiences may even deepen biases (Sleeter 2001). Throughout these course activities, candidates self-reflect individually, and engage in collaborative critical reflection with peers. Further, instructors provide ongoing feedback on candidates' attitudes and perceptions.

Through this essential medium for transforming attitudes of cultural humility, reflection provides the platform for revealing implicit biases and uncovering unknown cultural assumptions. Second, these course activities provided field-based experiences, emphasizing a basis for deepening candidates' cultural humility perspective. As some of our candidates explained, unknown implicit biases may persist without authentic experience to uncover perceptions that candidates never knew they had. Therefore the incorporation of case studies, simulation exercises, and "real world" activities heightened knowledge and challenged attitudes for working with children and families from diverse backgrounds, and thus built cultural competence vis-a-vis cultural humility for these teacher candidates.

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