

The Foundations of Teaching for Diversity

What Teachers Tell Us about Transferable Skills

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Introduction

In 2010, we conducted a study of how rural schools, colleges, and departments of education (SCDEs) attempted to meet the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) diversity standard (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012). Some respondents maintained NCATE's accreditation process focused on racial and ethnic diversity to the exclusion of other types of diversity, in particular socioeconomic status (SES) and exceptionalities. Respondents argued these two categories were both more locally relevant but also more universally common, and suggested that educating candidates for these populations helped build competence for working with other populations—what we called a “transferable skills” perspective.

For example, respondents indicated:

The Diversity Standard is very broad in its definition but when one tries to make a case that transferable skills related to the area of socioeconomic diversity can help candidates work with different kinds of diversity it is met with little enthusiasm.

As future teachers, I believe that being able to work with all kinds of gifted and challenged children/youth will provide the best training from which to generalize to all other kinds of diversity.

It is intriguing to consider whether there are indeed teachable “transferable skills” (TS) that might mitigate the limitations of a rural location—or indeed, the limitations any program might encounter

in regards to diversity expectations. We wondered if teacher educators using a TS orientation could help bring clarity to this unexplored pedagogical focus, informing the discussion around preparing future teachers for “other people's children” (Delpit, 1995).

For the current study, we surveyed a sample of teacher educators in urban and rural SCDEs, and asked respondents to reply based on their preference for using a TS orientation or what we called a “single group focus” (SGF) orientation (e.g., teaching teacher candidates about students as discrete groups with unique needs). We hoped to better understand:

1. How is a TS orientation defined, especially as opposed to a SGF orientation?
2. What are examples of transferable skills teacher educators seek to foster, and what are examples of ways teacher educators use a SGF focus?
3. Why would either a TS or a SGF orientation be effective for teachers in working with diverse students?

To answer these questions, the survey asked respondents to consider their own orientations to diversity education, structuring the remaining questions based on their choice of either a TS or SGF approach. The SGF designation was modeled on what Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) call the “cultural styles approach.” They describe this approach as originating in the 1970s and 1980s in response to an earlier, prevailing deficit characterization of poor and minority students.

Researchers studying these students sought to position difference, in the form of cultural practices, as both reasonable and functional, and promoted the use of use of such understandings as a vehicle for accommodating diverse learners more effectively. For example, a more traditional lecture

format for teaching might work for middle class White students, but not be as helpful with Black students who were thought to respond better to opportunities for multiple activities and interaction (Shade, 1989).

However, as Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) caution, reliance on a cultural styles approach can too often lead to labeling and generalizing, rather than a “cultural-historical emphasis on understanding individuals as participants in cultural communities” (p. 32). We included the SGF focus as an alternative because we felt providing a counterpoint would allow respondents to be more precise about their own preferences. We also asked for the rationale for their selection, as well as reflection about how the chosen orientation influenced their work with teacher candidates.

This article discusses the conclusions we draw from the new data, which suggest that regardless of whether teacher educators endorse a TS or a SGF perspective, they basically agree on the skills they consider critical for successful teaching and recognize the need for cultural competence as a critical foundation for developing these skills. As a matter of fact, we believe the responses could be interpreted to suggest that while teachers may have particular strategies for, say, building vocabulary development, and those strategies might work quite well with both English language learners (ELLs) and students reading below grade level, teachers will be less able to successfully motivate students and marshal resources to address the problem if they are unaware of cultural contexts.

We argue that social foundations courses, with their emphasis on the social and cultural forces influencing teaching and learning, are in a unique position to contribute to the development of the successful transfer of skills for working with diversity in a way that may or may not be included in methods and content classes.

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We argue as well that it is at our K-12 students' peril that we dismiss the need to develop the "softer" skills of teaching in pursuit of solely quantitative measures of teaching effectiveness.

Literature Review

Teacher Education

Without a doubt, teaching requires both the capacity to be a lifelong learner and the ability to successfully transfer skills and knowledge to solve complex problems faced on a daily basis. Education as a field has posited some specific core skills needed for success in teaching: classroom management, fostering relationships with students and parents, and curriculum planning, to name a few.

However, more than ever, teachers face the challenge of applying these skills while working with increasingly diverse students, regardless of where they teach (NCES, 2010). The student body of America's schools has dramatically changed, adding significant complexity to the work of teaching and obliging teachers to "differentiate" their skills in order to serve a broader range of students. As a result, the question arises as to what skills should be emphasized for addressing diversity, and how these skills should be taught.

Lowenstein (2009) acknowledges that while there are a variety of frameworks describing qualities of culturally competent teachers, "less is known about supporting teacher candidates to achieve or enact [...] models of competence" (p. 176) and she decries the "absence of debate about pedagogy" (p. 178). It appears that while there may be agreement about what teachers should be able to do, it is unclear whether skills like classroom management or relationship building are more effectively taught and practiced if they are presented as contextualized skills and knowledge, or as more generalizable, transferable orientations that can be tweaked as needed.

Difficulties exist, not least because education for diversity seems to be predicated on a balancing act: reliance on generalizations to provide information about various groups along with admonishments to view every student as a unique individual. Longstanding concerns about the ramifications of "colorblindness" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) underlie the tensions between the "genericists," those who believe good teaching requires little attention to cultural difference, and the "multiculturalists" Smith (1998, p. 18) describes, who believe culture "deeply

influences the way children perceive and go about school learning."

Between 1985 and 1995, the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (NCRTL) at Eastern Michigan University examined teacher education and its relationship to teacher learning through its longitudinal Teacher Education and Learning to Teach Study (TELT), conducted between 1986 and 1990. TELT studied eleven programs, including preservice, induction, alternative routes, and inservice programs, and data sources included more than 700 teacher surveys and 160 observations of program participants in their classrooms.

One of TELT's lead researchers noted, in a report called *What to Do About Differences?*:

Little agreement exists on which differences matter, how they matter, and how teachers should address or accommodate these in the classroom. Even if teacher educators could answer these questions, the issue remains of how to help teachers develop an understanding of differences that will enable them to help all learners construct meaningful understandings of themselves and the subject matter. (McDiarmid, 1992, p. 84)

Another report, *Findings on Learning to Teach* (National Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, 1993), reported "despite various attempts to prepare teachers and teacher candidates to teach diverse students, few of the teachers studied could move beyond the two contradictory moral imperatives of teaching—to treat all children equally and to respond to each child as an individual" (p. 3). Researchers concluded knowledge of student diversity was often taught disconnected from other pedagogical knowledge, and recommended:

Rather than lecturing to teachers about all the differences that exist among students, it might be more fruitful to help them learn to *think strategically about learners*—about their differences and their differing needs, about the interaction of these learners with subject matter and the particular school and community context, and about ways to engage them with important substantive ideas. (p. 3, emphasis added)

On the other hand, there are many who continue to endorse what Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) label a cultural styles approach (or what we called the SGF), which holds "there really is a body of special knowledge, skills, processes, and experiences that is different from the knowledge bases of most traditional teacher education programs and that is essential for prepar-

ing teachers to be successful with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations" (Smith, 1998, p. 17). While this orientation had its beginnings in the 1970s, as many African-American scholars grew concerned about Black student achievement (Boykin, 1986; Claxton, 1990; Hilliard, 1989; Shade, 1989), it can still be found in the literature today.

From Ruby Payne's work on educating low-income students (Payne, 2005), to debates about the differences in learning styles between boys and girls (Sax, 2005), to new variations on learning styles and culturally relevant pedagogy for minority students (Kunjufu, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Paik & Walberg, 2007; Shockley & Cleveland, 2011), the importance of educators' understanding students' needs and experiences through the prism of their particular cultures remains an important focus in teacher education programs.

These programs are struggling to figure out the right balance at a time when there appears to be legitimate concern about their capacity to adequately prepare teachers to educate students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Levine's (2006) examination of schools, colleges, and departments of teacher education in the U.S. led him to conclude they are failing to prepare teachers to meet these challenges successfully.

In *Educating School Teachers*, principal data indicated less than half thought teacher education programs were preparing students very or moderately well in meeting the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (28%), working with parents (21%), or helping students with limited English proficiency (16%). Sixty-two percent of alumni reported feeling unprepared to deal with the realities of today's classrooms (Levine, 2006, p. 32). Others (American Enterprise Institute, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Zirkel, 2008) agree teacher education programs have not kept up with the challenge, citing achievement gaps and drop out and graduation rates.

One possible reason for this problem could be, as Levine (2006) argued, that there has been little consensus on the components of a high quality approach to preparation, let alone preparation for work with diverse students. There is great variation in the length of preparation programs, the content covered, and the amount of fieldwork required. There is disagreement as to whether teaching is a profession requiring a substantial amount of formal education or a craft where skills are learned on the job.

Consequently, the issue of preparing future teachers to address the needs of diverse students, despite the acknowledged need for improvement in this area, may receive chiefly lip service in programs facing increased pressure to produce “multiple, valid measures of student achievement to reliably ascertain growth associated with graduates of preparation programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 10) as well as to meet the increasing requirements of states to cover greater amounts of content in areas such as reading, literacy, and assessment, due to the adoption of Common Core Standards.

Tensions regarding how to develop teachers who can effectively teach diverse students—whether to emphasize “good teaching” or the influence of cultural background—raise questions of how best to help teachers think strategically about learners and “develop an understanding of differences that will enable them to help all learners construct meaningful understandings of themselves and the subject matter” (McDiarmid, 1992, p. 84).

Transfer in Learning

Billing (2007), in his review of over 700 articles on transfer, takes Gick and Holyoak’s (1987) definition as his starting point: “Transfer is a phenomenon involving change in the performance of a task as a result of the prior performance of a different task” (p. 486). Transfer can generally be described as low road or near transfer and high road or far transfer. The former involves automatic, direct transfer of regularly practiced skills between similar situations, while the latter applies to the thoughtful application of more abstract knowledge and skills to varied situations that may be quite different from each another (Bereiter, 1995; Bransford & Schwartz, 1999).

The challenge in transfer of learning lies in the fact that skills may not transfer if the similarities among situations are not recognized. The key to high road transfer is the use of metacognition to deliberately identify the knowledge (principles, concepts, ideas) and/or skills (procedures, strategies) that could apply to a variety of situations. Learners, particularly if they lack self-regulation and the motivation for higher-level thinking or are inexperienced, often fail to see similarities that would trigger recognition of relevant knowledge and skills appropriate for addressing situations initially perceived as different.

For the most part Billing claims transfer depends on the methods and

environment in which the skills were learned. Recognizing the importance of context, he argues “knowledge is socially constructed from the contexts in which it is found” (2007, p. 484), yet understanding the limitations of over-contextualization, he specifically notes learners need to be shown the ways skills transfer to diverse circumstances—making connections and seeing similarities—and they need experience practicing the skills in situations they might encounter in the future (p. 512; see also Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Davis, 1965).

Learning to transfer skills is in itself a skill to be learned. Phye (2001; Phye & Sanders, 1994) describes three stages in developing the mindful transfer of skills in a strategic way. Learners first are instructed about the strategy and practice it in the *acquisition* phase. Errors in the strategy are eliminated as learners receive feedback and continue practice during the *retention* phase. Finally, in the *transfer* phase, learners are presented with a variety of new situations that are apparently different but can be solved with the same strategy they have worked to hone.

Billing’s (2007) review leads him to conclude there is more evidence *for* than *against* transfer of skills and knowledge. There is, indeed, evidence core higher-level thinking skills (such as problem solving, critical thinking, and logic) are transferable beyond the context in which they were learned if such skills are supported and developed through multiple experiences (Billing, 2007; Perkins & Salomon, 1988).

While some would argue teaching is so highly contextual that it would be quite difficult, if not impossible, to transfer knowledge and skills across situations, it seems more likely teachers could indeed learn to transfer knowledge effectively by drawing appropriate and explicit connections between situations and selecting the relevant and necessary pedagogical or curricular choices as a result.

Methodology

Design

A web-based survey was developed and administered using SurveyMonkey technology. A pilot survey was distributed to specialists in both educational measurement and multicultural education and the researchers made revisions based on feedback regarding the survey’s clarity, ease of use, and logistics. An introduction provided a brief characterization of both TS (described as “teachable skills generalizable

to any group of diverse K-12 students”) and SGF (described as “teaching about, for example, K-12 African-American students, English Language Learners, or low-income students as discrete groups with particular needs”) for respondents. The number of items to answer depended on the orientation chosen. If a respondent chose TS, the following questions were asked:

1. Describe why you believe it is effective to teach teacher candidates transferable skills, especially as these relate to students from diverse groups.
2. Describe three transferable skills that you believe teachers should master to work effectively with a broad range of diverse students.
3. Under what circumstances do you believe teachers of diverse K-8 elementary students might be more effective with the knowledge acquired through a single group focus?

Respondents that chose SGF were asked the following questions:

1. Describe why you believe it is effective to teach teacher candidates about diversity using a single group focus.
2. Provide at least one example of how you use a single group focus to prepare your teacher candidates for diverse classrooms.
3. Despite using a single group focus in your class(es), do you believe there are transferable skills that can be used to effectively teach a broad range of students regardless of their backgrounds? Why or why not?

In addition, all respondents were asked how diversity content is addressed in their program (stand-alone class, infused throughout, field experiences) and the accreditation status of their program (see Table 1). The survey was sent to 1996 urban and 728 rural (as categorized by the College Board) teacher educators in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri in 2011, with three follow-up attempts.

Our target sample was faculty teaching classes for elementary education majors in which diversity content was either a component or the main focus. Since such courses could originate from a range of departments (e.g., a stand-alone multicultural course offered by a foundations department; a science or reading methods class), invitations were sent to a very broad sample of faculty, including adjuncts. Names were gathered by examining course schedules from spring 2010

through fall 2011 (four semesters) on university websites and sending a survey to any instructor who might plausibly meet our criteria. One hundred twenty emails bounced, leaving a total of 2604 invitations. We received 468 replies to our invitation, for an 18% response rate. Of those, we eliminated respondents who indicated they did not teach a class with any diversity component, leaving 357 responses for analysis.

Analysis

The survey was comprised of open-ended questions. The responses were coded and organized based on key themes that emerged. Some of the coding was fairly straightforward; for example, respondents were asked to provide three examples of skills or strategies they felt teachers should master, and many did simply that, without elaboration (e.g., “being aware of own cultural bigotry,” “building partnerships with families and the community”).

Other questions resulted in some respondents providing answers reflecting multiple skills (e.g., “the ability to seek knowledge about diverse students and to understand various groups—not to assume knowledge,” which refers to professional learning about students and groups and critical reflection on both prior assumptions and the application of new learning). Some participants provided only one example; others wrote multiple examples using

bullet points, and some offered significant detail with paragraph-long responses.

Regardless of format, each idea presented in a comment was coded uniquely. Comments garnered multiple codes if they included more than one of the themes emerging from the overall data. This was a reiterative process as codes were derived from the data rather than using a predetermined coding scheme; codes emerged as we processed the data, using a constant comparative coding scheme (Glaser, 1965) to identify themes and categories.

We used the processing technique Ryan and Bernard (2003) called cutting and sorting to compile lists of responses for a first pass, working from Excel files that contained survey data, and obtained an 86% agreement rate. Previously analyzed data was continually reexamined as the coding scheme developed. After a third review of the data, done together, we created lists of (broader) themes and (narrower) categories as appropriate, depending on the complexity of the responses.

Some of our initial categories were similar enough to be collapsed. This often occurred, for example, when we re-examined broad or sweeping comments about teacher education or diversity as compared to comments from respondents who focused on a specific teaching strategy or aspect of diversity.

Limitations

Participants were asked to make a choice between a TS and SGF orientation and provide a justification. We selected this design to force participants to look more closely at their pedagogy, in hopes of deriving a more precise definition of the orientation. As expected, there were responses expressing displeasure about having to make a choice as well as responses referencing both types of orientations while providing a justification for one.

Finally, we expected a larger number of respondents to choose the TS orientation over the SGF. This proved to be the case, with TS chosen by 298, versus 59 choosing SGF. These numbers resulted in a much more detailed coding scheme for the TS responses than for the SGF.

The low response rate (18%) could also be considered a limitation; however, a purposive sample of teacher educators who include diversity in the classes they teach was not feasible. Limiting the study to include only those teaching a class obviously focused on diversity (perhaps by targeting courses with “diversity” or

“multicultural” in the title) would overlook the reality that diversity is (and should be) addressed in a variety of ways throughout teacher education programs. Therefore, we offered the survey to the widest variety of teacher educators in hopes of receiving a sample representing the broad range of options for presenting diversity content.

One additional possible impact on response rate is the nature of online surveys. In a meta-analysis, Shih and Fan (2009) show email surveys generally have a 20% lower response rate than traditional mailed survey forms. Discomfort may play a part in this; lower response rates could be due to a lack of experience with technology or to concerns about confidentiality or other issues regarding identity or responses, as even anonymous responses can be traced back to IP addresses (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Agreeing to the medium of the survey was a first requirement in whether or not potential respondents chose to participate.

Transferable Skills: Responses

Why is a TS Orientation Effective?

Two hundred ninety-eight (83.5%) respondents chose the transferable skills orientation. One hundred eighty-six responded to the question *Describe why you believe it is effective to teach teacher candidates transferable skills, especially as these relate to students from diverse groups*. Some comments were brief, with a single basic explanation; however, most were longer, more complex, and included multiple justifications. In all, there were 233 separate rationales for a TS orientation.

Conceptually, the comments are best understood within two themes: beliefs about the way things are or will be in schools and society, or explanations of why a TS orientation made sense or promoted more effective teaching. The first theme was divided into three sub-themes: (1) diversity is dynamic, always evolving, and rarely static anywhere; (2) there is diversity within groups and individuals; and (3) there are commonalities among groups. The second was also divided into sub-themes, which either touched on the implications for teacher education programs (e.g., TS is a more practical approach; it promotes critical thinking) and the implications for teaching K-12 students (it helps teachers focus on individual students and their needs; the generalizability of methods).

Table 1
Respondent Characteristics

Primary method of addressing diversity in TE program ^a	f
Part of field experience courses	11
Stand alone diversity/multicultural class	52
Infused throughout the entire curriculum	182
Type of class for diversity ^b	
Stand alone diversity/multicultural class	76
Diversity is a component, not the main focus	187
Program accreditation ^c	
NCATE	164
TEAC	16
Not affiliated	23
Other ^d	34

^a 112 no response

^b 88 no response, 6 both types

^c 120 no response

^d i.e. state board

School and Society

Diversity is dynamic and evolving. Forty-four comments (24%) offered responses reflecting perceptions of diversity in society and classrooms as dynamic and evolving. More classrooms are likely to be multicultural based on changing demographics or the changing situations of children over their schooling career (e.g., going from middle-class to low-income), and teachers need to be prepared for this.

Often when I visit classes at the elementary level, I will see at least 9-10 different cultures represented. We also have inclusive classrooms with students with special needs and ESL students in our classrooms. [Teacher candidates] must be prepared to understand and incorporate strategies which address the needs of all of their students.

I also believe that cohorts of children change over the course of time. Families change, the economy changes, there are historical changes over the course of a teacher's career. Thus, teachers must learn to work with cohorts of children whose needs will vary with the changing times.

Diversity within groups and individuals. Forty comments (21%) referred to either within-group diversity or called attention to the intersectionality within individuals. Within-group diversity underscores the variability in cultural values, traditions, and experiences within groups, and many respondents specifically noted that in terms of learning, no one group monopolizes the same skills or learning needs. Comments reflected teacher educators' choices of knowledge they believed important for candidates to grasp about their future students or about skills needed to be an effective teacher for those students, along with cautions about the danger of stereotyping.

Educators must understand that there is a broad diversity spectrum... there is not "one way" to be White/Black/etc.

To say that there are specific methods for specific groups leads to stereotyping of those groups and is a dangerous practice.

Intersectionality recognizes how elements of diversity "intersect" within an individual. One student could be an English language learner, low-income, male, and Muslim, for example. As a result, it is limiting to perceive a student or to address a student's learning needs through a lens confining that student to one "type."

An understanding of intersectionality

of identity may provide teachers with a richer context to provide students with quality learning experiences.

Commonalities among groups. Ten comments (5%) noted there are commonalities among seemingly diverse groups, suggesting there are similar needs and characteristics that can be found among all students.

Implications for Teaching

Pragmatism regarding job options. Thirty-nine comments (21%) indicated that teacher educators do not know where their students will end up teaching and cannot prepare them for all types of diversity in equally comprehensive ways. Given the dynamics of the changing student population referred to above, it is best to attempt to prepare them to be ready for anything.

I have no idea where my students will end up teaching, so it seems to me that it makes no sense to teach to one specific kind of diversity.

There are more cultural groups than we can count or prepare them for. Thus it's best to provide guiding principles that will work with all groups.

Focus on the individual student. Thirty-five responses (19%) suggested a TS orientation was more effective in helping teachers focus on the needs of the individual student rather than responding to the student as a "type."

Students are individuals first and groups secondly. Seeing the individual first and meeting the needs of the individual will usually meet the needs of the group in the long run.

Teaching transferable skills promotes the idea that you need to look at each child uniquely and decide which strategies will meet their needs.

Teaching strategies that transfer. Twenty-eight responses (15%) referred to teaching strategies that would be helpful with a variety of students. Some teacher educators believed it was essential to emphasize teaching methods and skills that work for a wide variety of students. Others noted that diverse students experiencing similar learning difficulties may respond to the same teaching strategy, even if their backgrounds are very different (e.g., a "slow" reader versus a student from a non-English speaking family). Locating the problem in the student's "difference" could prevent the teacher from making the strategy connection and addressing the issue successfully.

It gives the students a wider "range of vision." The single focus approach in my mind is like having a carpenter by a different hammer for each job. While different parts of a job may need a different hammer... The same set can be used over and effectively at other job sites. (I hope that makes sense.)

Promotion of critical thinking. Twenty-four responses (13%) suggest a TS orientation prepares students for thoughtful and critical thinking, leading to careful assessment of the learner's context, followed by consideration of effective strategies to differentiate instruction accordingly.

Transferable skills are grounded in principles of learning rather than a strategies orientation. In my case, I use sociocultural principles of learning to assess teacher choice in pedagogy, assessment practices, and curriculum design. I focus on the space between the teacher and student.

Three Skills to Master

Respondents were prompted to describe three transferable skills they believed teachers should master to work effectively with a broad range of diverse students. One hundred eight-one participants responded to this question, most listing three skills, but some listing less and some more, for a total of 576 skills. Each skill was coded by content and then grouped by themes, with some themes generating more specific categories. In addition to what could logically be classified as a skill, some respondents also listed dispositions. We coded these as skills nonetheless, reasoning that patience and caring (among others) are skills that can be developed.

Transferable Skills

Six major themes emerged from these comments. The first theme (176 comments, 31%) included skills for curriculum design, instruction, and assessment (CDIA). The second (106 comments, 18%) included skills for critical thinking and inquiry. Working effectively with students was the third largest theme (83, 14%) followed by dispositions (66, 11%), communication skills (47, 8%), human relation skills (36, 6%), and self-reflection (21, 4%). The themes are displayed in Table 2, with their largest categories.

Curriculum design, instruction, and assessment. Curriculum design, instruction, and assessment skills were described in 176 comments as important transferable skills. Within the CDIA theme respondents

addressed four major components. Sixty-nine comments (39%) referenced the ability to use *multiple methods of instruction* to enhance learning, with 24 of those specifically using some form of the term “differentiated instruction.” Terms like “inclusive,” “individualization,” and “a broad range of instructional strategies,” with the focus on engaging K-12 students, are representative.

The ability to *meet student needs through flexibility and adaptation* was named in thirty comments (17%). One teacher educator wrote, “using developmentally appropriate practices with each child within the context of the situation and culture are paramount.”

Forty-four comments (25%) argued teachers need sophisticated *assessment*

skills to evaluate student progress and achievement; one noted, “being able to gauge whether the instruction is effective through some type of formative assessment is critical.” Half of these comments specifically noted that diagnostic skills are critical to assess learning needs, developmental levels, strengths, and students’ prior knowledge and skills.

Critical thinking and inquiry skills. This theme emerged from 106 comments and referred to the need for teachers to think deeply about the nexus between culture, students, and curriculum and to use inquiry to best meet the needs of students. The first category of *critical reflection on others and materials* (47 comments, 44%) included comments recommending teach-

ers be open and critically reflective about the people, communities, and materials they work with.

Respondents noted teachers need skills for dealing with differing perspectives to understand how issues like classism and racism, as well as family and personal history, impact individuals. Thirty-two comments mentioned skills related to “*researching students, their families, and the communities they come from*,” which included the capacity to learn about students and the issues most relevant to them, their families, and the community and community constituents, along with the willingness to learn from and with all these groups. One teacher educator called this a “teach me about your world” orientation.

Finally, the last category under critical thinking and inquiry was inquiry skills to meet students’ needs. This is distinct from the diagnostic assessment skill discussed in the CDIA category. These twenty comments (19%) situated the teacher as detective; as one respondent put it, inquiry involves “viewing each situation as ‘puzzling’—when a student is not engaging in ways teachers had planned, it is our job to use our inquiry skills to figure out how we can create learning opportunities for all students.”

Working with students. The third largest theme (83 comments) emerging from the dataset addressed skills for working with students. One skill category is *inclusiveness* (24 comments, 29%)—the recognition of students’ backgrounds and experiences outside school as resources worthy of consideration and inclusion in curricular and pedagogical choices (what Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) referred to as “funds of knowledge”).

Eighteen comments (22%) referenced the ability to treat students *fairly and equitably*, including creating a classroom climate where students feel accepted and valued. Working to *develop students’ non-academic skills* (e.g., motivation, self-esteem, independence, self-discipline) was mentioned in 15 comments. This theme also produced a few comments about other skills, including a *strengths-based approach to students* (“foster strengths and learning of all students—rather than further separate students based on income or home language skills and resources”); *high expectations*; and *individualized treatment of the student as a person* (e.g., “find ways to highlight each one of them in different ways [...] usually we only know the bright students while many others remain in the background”).

Table 2
Transferable Skills

Theme:		
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment		176
Main Categories:	Multiple methods of instruction	69
	Meeting needs through flexibility and adaptation	32
	Assessment skills	44
Theme:		
Critical Thinking and Inquiry Skills		106
Main Categories:	Critical reflection on others and materials	47
	Research students, families, community	32
	Inquiry to meet students’ needs	20
Theme:		
Working with Students		83
Main Categories:	Inclusiveness	24
	Fair and equitable treatment	18
	Developing students’ non-academic skills	15
	Others (strengths-based, expectations, individualization)	10
Theme:		
Dispositions		66
Main Categories:	Empathy	15
	Respect	14
	Acceptance	12
	Others (e.g., tolerance, caring, compassion, etc.)	25
Theme:		
Communication		47
Main Categories:	Intercultural communication skills	11
	Listening skills	9
	Clarity	8
Theme:		
Human Relations		36
Main Categories:	Relate to and work with parents/families	21
	Relationships with students	8
Theme:		
Self-Reflection		21
Main Categories:	Knowing themselves	14
	Reflection practice	4

Dispositions. Sixty-six comments described dispositions teacher educators felt were critical for working with diverse students. Most commonly, empathy (15) was mentioned, followed by respect (14) and acceptance (12).

Communication skills. The need for communication skills to work with diverse students was the fifth largest theme (47 comments). The main skills named were the abilities to *communicate effectively* with a broad range of students, to *listen* actively and carefully, and to *clearly convey expectations* for instruction and behavior.

Human relations and self-reflection. Skills in human relations emerged as a theme from 36 comments. Respondents included relationships with *parents*, with the *community*, and with *students*, all in service of maximizing student learning and achievement. Finally, self-reflection was mentioned in 21 comments; a representative response called self-reflection for candidates “the ability to know themselves, their fears, biases, strengths and tendencies so they can be more transparent and proactive in their teaching behavior.”

Do TS Advocates Ever See a Reason for SGF?

Of 154 respondents to this question, 137 went beyond simply restating their discomfort with SGF. However, not all of these responses were offered with the same degree of confidence; roughly a third came with qualifiers such as “but,” “perhaps,” or “might be.” Six themes emerged as justifications, however tempered, for a SGF.

Rationales for a SGF orientation included the dominance of a particular group in an area; a gap in knowledge about a particular group; or specialization (e.g., ELLs, Catholic schools, schools for the deaf or blind). A small group of respondents noted a SGF orientation could be beneficial when teaching about the special needs of certain groups, most commonly ELLs and students with disabilities. A smaller number of respondents believed low-income students required specialized attention as well.

Finally, building knowledge for greater understanding was offered as a rationale by 68 respondents. The potential advantages included: (1) greater understanding of particular groups and cultures, including special needs, unique characteristics, and histories; (2) baseline information to build on as candidates move into classroom practice; (3) a foundation for working with other cultures (e.g., awareness that differences exist in one group increases

understanding it exists in all groups); and (4) challenging stereotypes.

Single Group Focus: Responses

Why Is a SGF Orientation Effective?

Fifty-nine respondents (17%) chose the single group focus orientation. Forty-five responded to the question *Describe why you believe it is effective to teach teacher candidates about diversity using a single group focus (focusing on unique needs or characteristics of a particular group)*. As with the question about TS and effectiveness, there were both simple and complex responses to this question.

Deeper understanding. The majority of comments (26, 44%) cited the use of a SGF because of the opportunities it offered for learning about particular groups, from their unique issues and challenges to their distinctive traits, in greater depth.

While there are certainly transferable skills for meeting the needs of diverse students, there are also unique characteristics and needs of each group that must be recognized and addressed in order for students to feel that their home language/culture, sexual orientation, special education needs, etc. are recognized and valued.

Eighteen comments argued the importance of foundational knowledge for teachers to build on, with the aim of deepening understanding and expertise as the new teacher accumulated experience. As one respondent wrote, “For beginning teachers, I think it is important to provide very concrete information/knowledge. As discrete topics are taught, connections across areas can be drawn.”

Strategies for a SGF Orientation

There were 45 responses to the request to *Provide at least one example of how you use a single group focus to prepare your teacher candidates for diverse classrooms*. Most of them (36) listed groups that presumably were specifically studied, including ELLs, low-income students, exceptional students, African Americans, and Native Americans. Six respondents mentioned strategies like case studies and readings.

Others explained a SGF orientation prepared their teacher candidates for diverse classrooms by focusing on accommodations and adaptations to certain groups; fostering understanding of student responses in the classroom; promoting awareness of cultural reactions and communication

styles; and emphasizing the importance of students’ cultural identities.

What about a TS Orientation?

Finally, when asked whether there are transferable skills that enhance teaching effectiveness with a broad range of students regardless of their backgrounds, half the SGF respondents (28) said yes and named dispositions, differentiated instruction and assessment, critical thinking, and communication skills as valuable. Fifteen other respondents agreed a TS orientation could be useful, but felt the need to offer caveats, generally feeling that particular groups (African American students, ELLs, students with disabilities) required specialized knowledge of characteristics and needs; for example:

I think our students would need more preparation to be effective with African-American students. This population shares some of the same needs as ELL populations, but it has needs distinct that we do not cover in our courses.

Students with disabilities are a unique group. They require specific academic and social-behavioral accommodations or modifications, per their IEP, that students of color etc may not have. We must take this into consideration.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study was an effort to explore the concept of a transferable skills orientation for teaching diverse students. It was not structured as a comparison between TS and SGF orientations per se; rather, the purpose was to learn more about how teacher educators think about what they do and how they do it. We believe this research makes an important contribution in terms of clarifying ways teacher preparation for diversity is conceptualized.

It can be argued the types of “soft skills” mentioned by many of the TS respondents, as well as some of the SGF respondents, increase the possibility of teacher efficacy in terms of the ability to use relevant skills broadly and appropriately, and should be as significant a focus for teacher education as content and methods. However, we further argue teachers may be less able to successfully motivate students and marshal resources to address learning needs if they are unaware of relevant cultural contexts.

What Types of Skills Identify a TS or SGF Orientation?

The concept of a single group focus

(teaching about particular students as discrete groups with unique needs) is an established approach to diversity, despite the controversy it has engendered (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). One has only to Google a term like “learning styles” along with the selected demographic to find a myriad of resources about how, for example, to understand the learning styles of African-American males or low-income students.

When we asked our respondents how they use a SGF in their classes, some named particular groups as examples of students with specific needs who presumably merited a targeted focus; others pointed out specific outcomes they felt a SGF would encourage, such as awareness of different cultural reactions and communication styles. About half of those who chose a SGF orientation described a need for group-specific teaching strategies, primarily for ELLs and students with exceptionalities and/or disabilities.

Even respondents who indicated they use a TS orientation confirmed these two student groups merit specific attention. Nonetheless, the trend in the responses of those indicating a TS orientation reflected the belief that skills needed to work with an ELL might be the same skills needed to work with any student facing a language delay as a consequence of environmental factors. As one teacher educator put it:

To speak to the candidates about strategies that are effective for ELL students doesn't always guarantee that the candidates would think of those same strategies as being effective for a broader population. For instance, if you have a group of ELL students and also have a group of students who are below grade level in reading, it would make sense to use the 10 sentence strategy for both groups in order to ensure that the most critical of content is received by both groups of students, even though this strategy is generally associated with ELLs.

When asked to name specific skills, however, we found TS respondents tended to list “softer” skills that came into play prior to deciding on a teaching strategy, rather than specific teaching strategies. Only 20% of the transferable skills offered as examples were observable skills related to instruction and assessment. Of these, the majority referenced the need to use multiple and differentiated methods of instruction and assessment, rather than describing a specific strategy or method.

By softer skills we mean skills that might not be observable in a classroom as we watch a teacher conduct her lessons.

They are latent skills available to teachers as they move through their day, that contribute to and shape the observable decisions they make about teaching and assessment. The remainder of the examples provided by TS respondents reflected these softer skills—specifically, critical thinking and inquiry, working with students, dispositions, communication, human relations, and self-reflection.

As discussed, these soft skills allow teachers to draw upon their knowledge of students' lives and experiences and the communities they teach in, the significance and quality of the relationships they build inside and outside the classroom, and their own prior assumptions and understandings about teaching and learning, to make the best decisions they can for students.

Based on the data, if we were to attempt to define a transferable skills orientation for preparing teachers for K-12 students of diverse backgrounds, we would begin by acknowledging this orientation goes beyond learning to write objectives, lesson plans, and assessments; interpret test scores; know policies; and memorize theories of learning. We are really talking about the capacity to ask the right questions in varied contexts, to recognize and assess possibilities, to make appropriate decisions, to develop and nurture relationships, to see one's own role in successes and failures, and to embody qualities such as empathy and respect. Potentially, every student, every new day, can mean a new challenge requiring teachers with these skills.

Why Is Either Orientation Effective?

Those who selected a TS orientation described it as effective because of their perceptions of a multicultural and diverse society that influences (or should) the realities of teaching and learning. Teachers must be prepared to interact with and facilitate the learning of students with multiple characteristics from varied backgrounds, and avoid relying on however well meaning stereotypes when choosing interventions.

Since there is no way of predicting where teacher candidates will teach over their careers, it is prudent to prepare them to exercise skills applicable for varied environments. Respondents argued teacher education programs must help candidates develop critical thinking tools to recognize and appreciate the complicated impact diversity has in the classroom. At the same time, one key to effective teaching is also to determine the root of a learning problem and employ methods that gener-

alize among student groups regardless of cultural backgrounds.

Those who selected a SGF orientation described it as effective because this orientation allows for the more comprehensive exploration of the unique circumstances and issues certain groups experience, as well as the distinctive traits shared within groups. Cultural trends and history, and the impact these have on specific groups, featured prominently in the SGF comments. How, these respondents ask, can we make sense of a child's needs if we don't have some idea of that child's contexts, resources, and experiences?

While the focus raised by each group of respondents seem distinct on the surface, both ultimately reaffirmed the importance of recognizing and identifying influences outside of the classroom impacting teaching and learning. The TS group tended to focus more on the nature of society itself and the skills teachers would need to teach in such a world; the SGF group tended to focus on the nature of culture and the characteristics and traits teachers would need to be aware of to understand these diverse environments.

What Does This Mean for Teacher Education?

The impetus for this research was a prior study by the authors (Stevens & Miretzky, 2012) documenting the difficulty many rural teacher education programs have meeting the NCATE diversity standard, particularly in providing evidence of “meaningful interaction” with a broad range of diversity. While there is no question direct interaction with multiple types of diversity is vastly preferable to other options, we do not know this is the only way to foster effective diversity skills. Indeed, a handful of respondents from this previous study suggested the skills needed to work effectively with particular groups of students could be taught, and could translate into broader effectiveness with diverse students overall.

Despite the preponderance of TS advocates in this study, we question whether it is possible to be truly successful using transferable skills without the foundational knowledge prompted by a SGF focus. Not unlike professionals in any career, teachers clearly need expertise in a core set of skills to be effective. However, it might be argued that no problem can be solved without a certain amount of context specific information.

For example, research skills (which

are a transferable skill category) allow teachers to gather relevant and helpful information for the purpose of understanding and addressing a given problem. Asking the right questions to understand the students' learning needs is a transferable skill employable in a variety of situations; however, the right questions to ask are going to be *context specific* in each unique situation. This means awareness of specific elements of diversity can be critical, particularly in cases where cultural influences are complicating learning delays.

Furthermore, collecting data to understand the problem—what we know, what we need to know—involves both formal learning or research and informal inquiry. Teachers may have to take a single group focus to discover the history and unique challenges of a particular cultural group while at the same time call upon transferable skills to communicate with students, families, and individuals in the community. The human relation skills that enhance communication are bolstered by knowledge and understanding of at least baseline information regarding cultural communication styles. As one teacher educator who chose a SGF orientation wrote:

I think students need to build a base of knowledge about particular groups so that they actually “know” something, and then transfer those skills to other groups as appropriate. I just do not believe you can begin with a general lack of knowledge, and then propose to transfer it.

For example, if a student has vocabulary issues, there is a limited number of strategies a teacher can attempt. There are other critical aspects to learning, however, such as motivation. A teacher might not be able to be very effective at getting parents to help at home without cultural knowledge. She would not be able to give all her students relatable resources and curriculum to bolster vocabulary skills without cultural knowledge. She would likely not consider the possibility the student's language delay may be due to personal past experiences, taking place in a particular context, without cultural knowledge.

Consider as well classroom management. We can argue that if a teacher is completely unaware of possible differences in parenting styles between middle class and working class families (for example, negotiating with children versus issuing directives; see Lareau, 2003) he may be unable to adjust the way he attempts to shape the classroom environment for optimal learning.

What Can Teacher Education Do?

If we were to consider a model of learning for teacher education candidates, we need to reinforce an understanding of three areas of their future students' development: cognitive, motivational, and social/emotional. These are represented in Figure 1 as separate “gears” moving together in relation to each other. These gears are turning, however smoothly, within the larger context of each individual learner's own *personal experiences* that help shape social and emotional identities and influence motivation. Finally, past (and current) experiences occur within an outer layer of *cultural context*.

The meaning we give to experiences is filtered through the lens of culture as we personally understand it. A young woman who is talented at science, who grows up in a family and a culture that values women as homemakers, will have to persevere in negotiating and challenging these external expectations, or she may end up relinquishing her goals. Educators cannot focus only on learning strategies to improve students' cognitive performance, even with the current emphasis on standardized assessments. The whole of the student needs to be the focus of teaching; this necessarily includes the broader personal and cultural contexts that have helped to shape each individual.

Whether choosing a TS or a SGF orientation, both groups remind us teaching is not about prescribed or predictable methods. Data from this study suggests

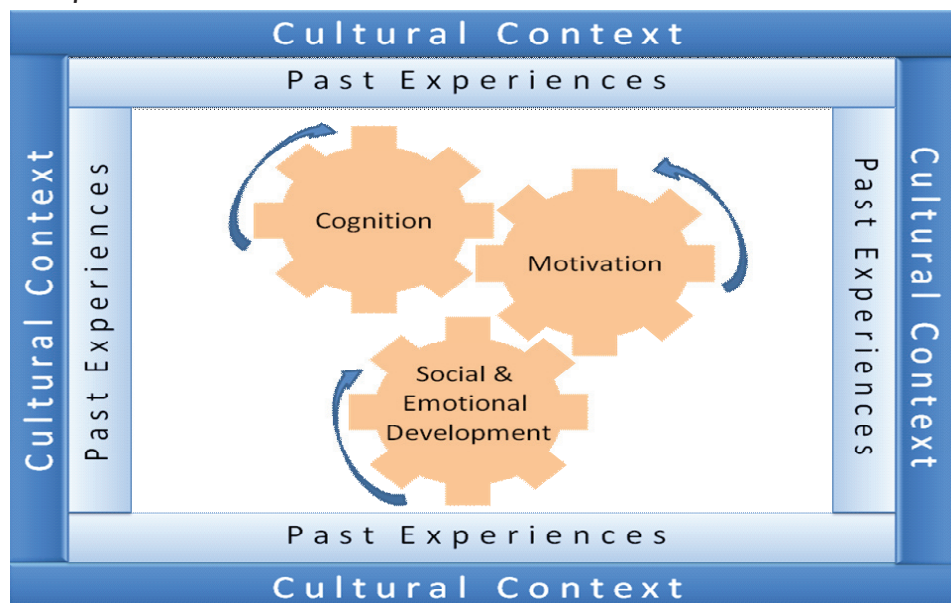
successful teachers must have a repertoire of transferable skills—skills primarily “softer” in nature—that begs the question: To what extent are such skills a focus for teacher education programs?

At the same time, the data also highlight the importance of understanding the very real influence of culture on teaching and learning—a focus often relegated to social foundations of education or “multicultural” courses, which are frequently challenged to demonstrate worth in an environment that privileges facts, accountability, and preparation for high-stakes assessments over professional inquiry and reflective practice (Butin, 2005; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2009; Tozer & Miretzky, 2000).

Transfer. We would suggest possibilities for transfer be reinforced as much as possible throughout a teacher education program. Davis (1965) argued two criteria are necessary for such efforts to be productive—a program's ability “to promote relevant background learnings” and “evoke interest and skill in problem-solving activities” (p. 18); in other words, knowledge of cultural contexts and the skills to recognize and use the knowledge in disparate situations.

Prospective teachers must then be helped to consider whether the knowledge they have gained might be useful in other circumstances. Davis (1965) uses the metaphor of language to explain how the Italian speaker understands written Latin better than the English speaker, despite

Figure 1
Developmental Wheels



neither being familiar with Latin, because the Italian “has already mastered more transferable elements [...] Prior learning of transferable elements, in short, has increased his competence to deal with a situation not encountered earlier” (p. 8). When teaching for transfer, teacher educators must stress both obvious and potential transferable elements, and they must encourage problem-solving, critical thinking, and logic as desirable and necessary skills that will aid teachers in recognizing the possibilities for transfer.

Recommendations for Future Research

An obvious next step is to examine how transfer is being taught or modeled by teacher educators in preparation programs and what sort of impact those strategies are having on teacher effectiveness. Our survey did attempt to elicit such information from TS respondents, asking them to “Describe the strategies you use in your class to teach your students transferable skills to work with a broad range of diverse students.”

What we received were primarily endorsements of learning tasks for teacher candidates—readings, class discussions, case studies, reflection—reinforcing the importance of differentiated instruction, cultural awareness, and diverse curriculum. We received little in terms of explicit description of how candidates were helped to make connections, based on foundational knowledge, between varied classroom situations. This certainly suggests the actual teaching of transferable skills cannot be reduced to a playbook, but rather is a more complex process.

Despite this, some appealing strategies emerged. Some teacher educators noted they provided examples of challenges in diverse teaching circumstances and promoted discussion and reflection about knowledge and skills applicable across contexts. Another had students discuss children’s and young adults’ books with varied protagonists, with an emphasis on examining how their responses to characters’ situations would change if the character’s demographics changed.

Guest speakers of various backgrounds who discuss how teachers can be more effective have been helpful in some classes to highlight similarities. A few respondents wrote about promoting communication and collaboration skills and having students practice these skills with others from different backgrounds. Others talked about how important it was to model the transferable skills perspec-

tive and “present diversity as open-ended, multi-pronged and open to individual interpretation” as a means of reinforcing the need to see students as individuals rather than “types.”

If SCDEs are finding themselves in more of a time crunch than usual in terms of course offerings, due to increased demands to prepare teachers to produce the measurable results increasingly required by districts, states, and the Department of Education, it becomes easier to eliminate or limit teacher candidates’ exposure to foundations classes that typically allow for a more focused examination of areas like diversity, motivation, and human development.

We argue the knowledge and skills identified in this study are too critical to devalue, and that a “toolbox” of both culturally contextualized learning and transferable skills, however rudimentary, is a formidable resource.

We should not have to choose between the skills espoused by proponents of either perspective, and we should not leave pre-service and novice teachers to figure this out by themselves. At minimum, they need and deserve a thorough introduction to cultural contexts and targeted help in applying this knowledge through deliberate work on transferable skills.

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