

## Practice What You Preach Culturally Responsive Pedagogy During Covid-19

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and the recent national civil and racial unrest provide a golden opportunity for teacher educators to reflect on our own culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as we adapt to alternate modes of instruction and respond to the needs of our teacher candidates who come from historically minoritized communities (e.g., Black, Latinx, immigrant, etc.). Building upon comments from candidates' final projects and personal interactions with ethnically and racially diverse candidates from the semester, I discuss teacher educators' shortcomings in modeling CRP for our teacher candidates during the pandemic. Finally, I offer reflective questions and specific actions to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and anti-racist values in teacher education during and beyond Covid-19.

### Introduction

*"Ms. Smith, you need to model the behavior you desire from your students."*

As a young, emergency-credentialed teacher in my first teaching job working with Black and Brown students with learning and emotional disabilities at a non-public school, I heard the above phrase often dur-

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ing after-school professional development. Mrs. Martin, a southern Black woman who directed the school, required her staff to wear slacks and ties, or dresses and stockings on Mondays, to set the tone for the week and model appropriate behavior for our students. My students, returning to the community from incarceration, had been pushed out of traditional public schools (Losen, 2018; Tate, 2008) and needed positive role models. I was hired as their teacher, but they were the ones who taught me about teaching. In two years at that school, I taught the ninth-grade class and coordinated the school's vocational program, duties that challenged me to understand my students' perspectives, hopes and dreams for their future, and the specific accommodations they needed to access the learning space and curriculum. I learned the importance of treating each student as an individual, determining their motivators and triggers, and discovering each student's personal background. With my new knowledge, I taught ninth graders who read at a second-grade level how to discuss universal themes of courage and friendship, and in turn, they taught me how they demonstrated courage and friendship while detained in juvenile hall, within their families, and in their neighborhoods.

*"Ms. Smith, you need to model the behavior you desire from your students."*

What behaviors did I need to model to my students? At the age of twenty-two, I knew that wearing stockings and skirts once a week would not result in the true behavior change we sought. What then, did Mrs. Martin mean when she implored me to model the behavior I desired? In the beginning of that first year, my students cursed me, damaged school property, and sat there unmotivated by my fledgling instructional lessons. It was clear I had to figure out what Mrs. Martin meant, and figure it out fast. As I learned about children with disabilities and the special education laws that shape our country from my evening credential classes at the university, my non-public school teaching assignment provided the setting for a crash course in culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and its basic tenets of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Learning about my students and their cultural backgrounds allowed me to better tailor their learning experiences, providing the context and scaffolds for students to access the content and meet the high expectations I held for their academic success. I learned that as a teacher, I could help students set personally relevant goals, scaffold their instruction to obtain the skills necessary to achieve their goals, and provide access to resources and supports to circumvent barriers and challenges in pursuit of those goals. Together, we learned that their experiences—whether in gang culture

or incarceration—were valuable and instructive (in ways that were both beneficial and detrimental to their growth). I finally figured out the behavior I wanted to model and demonstrate: culturally responsive teaching practices that showed genuine care and interest in students alienated from traditional schooling spaces (Gay, 2013).

Like beginning teachers, faculty in colleges of education need to figure out what behaviors we should model for our teacher candidates, particularly during the changes wrought by the Covid-19 global pandemic and virtual schooling. We promote the development of culturally responsive teachers, but I believe we often fail to model and demonstrate CRP in action with our teacher candidates (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In the disquisition that follows, I describe three scenarios, one involving revelations after reflection on an assignment and two others involving candidates from historically minoritized groups, that illuminate the ways in which teacher educators fail to authentically model culturally responsive practices for all candidates, and particularly for those candidates from historically marginalized backgrounds. The abrupt shift to virtual learning and the reactive responses of some teacher educators highlighted how teacher education fails to model the basic CRP tenets which require us to learn about our candidates and their backgrounds, adopt an ethos of caring and compassion, and develop a critical understanding of the influences that contribute to the educational pushout of some of our teacher candidates.

## Disquisition

### ***Lack of Knowledge About Our Candidates and Their Personal Backgrounds***

Even as we educate our teacher candidates to learn about and value the diverse cultural backgrounds of their P-12 students, we generally fail to model CRP at the university level. How many of us know the personal stories of our candidates? Are they single parents or taking care of family members? Living with parents or newly married, trying to learn about their partners? How many of our candidates have limited experience with children, and do not yet understand the caregiver's perspective? Thus, our first failure is that when we fail to learn about our candidates, we fail to model perspective taking (Warren, 2017) and we fail to encourage our teacher candidates to learn about and engage the students and families they serve (Doucet, 2019).

The inability to take on the perspectives of others became evident in the unrealistic expectations and lack of knowledge that some of my teacher candidates revealed about the diversity of families this past

spring. When I adapted my course's final assignment to remove the fieldwork assessment component, teacher candidates drafted mock letters to establish new routines and demonstrate their skills in building positive home-school relationships in alternative modes of instruction. Two candidates reflected on the possibility that "parents might not comply" with the virtual class schedule despite having "20 minutes for lunch and additional breaks," and that it would be a challenge to "get parents to serve as paraeducators." Clearly, these teacher candidates did not have realistic expectations or knowledge of the varied roles of parents, little knowledge about the realities of working families, and how families differ by composition, interaction style, schedule, and a host of other factors that potentially impact the ways in which families engage (Miller, 2019). In contrast, other candidates adapted their learning objectives and expectations to focus on the essential content through more authentic assessment measures, and planned to survey families to learn their preferred modes of communication and times when students could receive adult support in the home. The majority of my candidates revealed through their final assignments that they understood how families would require support in different ways to acclimate to virtual learning, and they would need to be flexible with both families and students.

### ***Failure to Demonstrate Genuine Care and Compassion***

The second failure in teacher education in modeling CRP was apparent when one of my Black teacher candidates failed to login for class after the second virtual session. She had previously revealed quite a lot about her personal struggles and triumphs as a learner and how these experiences drove her commitment to becoming a special education teacher. Given what she shared with me, I was concerned when she disappeared. I sent an email expressing how her presence was missed and asking if she needed assistance accessing our online sessions. A few days later, she responded to my email, accepting my offer to have a chat by phone and requesting that I call her in the morning. The next day she explained that due to domestic violence, she was living in a shelter for women. She was unable to retrieve her laptop when she fled her home, and was granted special permission to use the shelter's phone for our call. After checking on her basic needs, we discussed her possibilities for completing the semester successfully and settled on my giving her an incomplete for the course. When I inquired about her other courses, she told me that even though she communicated her situation to her instructors, no one else had informed her about the option of taking an

incomplete. Instead, her other two instructors required her to complete the requirements of the courses as stated in the syllabi. This lack of compassion and failure to demonstrate an ethos of care highlights another major shortcoming of some faculty in teacher education: neglecting to recognize how individual teacher educator practices can contribute to the pushout of candidates historically marginalized from our programs and the profession.

***Contributing to Alienation  
and Pushout of Candidates of Color***

Finally, during the last weeks of the spring semester, I met with a few candidates who needed advice on how to engage with their other instructors. Distressingly, they reported that many of their instructors simply canceled classes for the rest of the semester and only required candidates to submit final projects for grading. While some candidates welcomed the relaxed requirements, many more admitted to being confused about assignments and course content, and worried they were burdening their instructors if they asked too many questions or sent too many emails. In the final week of the semester, a Latina candidate in my class emailed asking for advice on how to handle a grade dispute with another faculty member. Although this candidate was not one of my official advisees, she felt comfortable and secure enough to raise her fears of being stereotyped and pushed out of the credential program for low academic performance with me. In an hour-long virtual meeting, she recounted her futile efforts with her instructor, and relayed her feelings of being dismissed, unheard, and unseen in their interactions. The candidate shared emails and reviewed the timeline with me to prove her case, as evidence that she had attempted to communicate and resolve the conflict with the fieldwork assignment that could no longer be completed due to Covid-19. The instructor gave her a C for the course and told her it was the grade she earned and the grade she deserved.

As I was listening, I realized that I was furious. Not only had I come to personally know this candidate and her immediate family via Zoom when we switched to virtual classes, I also noticed the 2:00 a.m. time stamps on her emails and posts on the class discussion board. She was a hard worker, navigating family demands, ensuring her teenage boys did their schoolwork in the pandemic, and staying engaged with her own learning. Yet when she attempted to advocate for herself, she was met with a callous response based on what appeared to be colorblind values of meritocracy (Sleeter, 2017), such that any consideration made for her would not be fair to other candidates in the course. Clearly, teacher

educators have a way to go in terms of applying a critical race lens for identifying the ways in which our practices promote Whiteness and alienate our teacher candidates from historically minoritized communities.

### Dispatch

During the shift to online instruction it became painfully clear that as we prepare candidates in the time of Covid-19 and beyond, teacher educators must model a genuine desire to learn about the personal lives of our candidates to both honor their presence in the academic space and engage them as learners in community. This requires a culture of care (Gay, 2002) and concern for a candidate's academic and personal success. Compassionate education (Biliias-Lolis et al., 2017) asks educators to consider the struggles and strengths of the individual student, or in this case, the teacher candidate. Beyond learning about our candidates, modeling CRP during this time of Covid-19 requires teacher educators to demonstrate compassion, empathy, and critical understanding of the needs of our teacher candidates. We must recognize them in humanizing ways that affirm their presence, knowledge, and personal experiences. When teacher educators take the time to learn about our teacher candidates and the lenses through which they operate, we can simultaneously help them critically reflect on their own cultural biases and identify opportunities to respectfully engage families in partnership about their children's education during instruction at home (Gist, 2014; Howard, 2003).

As P-12 schools and colleges return to an academic year unlike any before, those of us responsible for teacher and school personnel preparation have a unique opportunity to finally practice what we preach and explicitly model culturally responsive and sustaining practices (Gay, 2010; Paris, 2012) that prioritize and affirm teacher candidates from diverse groups (e.g., ethnic/racial, socioeconomic, ability, sexuality, etc.). The following section offers ideas for modeling CRP for our candidates during Covid-19 and beyond, and ways we can explicitly help our candidates model CRP within P-12 schools and classrooms.

#### ***Learn and Value Your Candidates and their Personal Lives***

Compassionate educators value the effort teacher candidates put forth to show up to the educational space, particularly during Covid-19. Before we create punitive policies and arbitrary rules, we must learn the specific challenges and successes of our candidates so we can prepare them equitably. Are they not turning on their camera during Zoom sessions, but logging in faithfully? Perhaps they are joining from their

cars, closets, or bathrooms because these were the only places where they could be distraction-free. Perhaps they are multi-tasking, providing supervision to siblings or their own children off-camera while also listening to the lecture and the class discussion. Our candidates are real people with competing demands, and as we shift to virtual learning teacher educators can no longer assume that our candidates are in environments conducive to learning.

As we gain perspective on the lives of our candidates, we can truly begin to value the efforts they expend to show up to the virtual classroom. Additionally, we must take the time to learn our candidates' names and their interests as we model the value of building community (Gay, 2002). When we model genuine desire and effort to learn the correct pronunciation and spelling of a name, or apply strategies and cognitive techniques (National Resource Center for Traumatic Brain Injury, 2008) to remember our candidates' unique names, we demonstrate our own humanity and model the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) we expect candidates to develop in their students. We should encourage candidates to share interesting and unique aspects of their lives as they introduce themselves to the class. If candidates introduce themselves with their love for street art or mentoring the church youth group, we have learned alternate ways to connect to these individuals, and we have helped them connect to others in the learning space who share similar interests. Each week, I ask my candidates to share their "rose" from the week to focus on something joyous or positive in their everyday lives. Through this simple check-in, we gain knowledge about each other's children, birthdays, special events and occasions with family, travel, and other personal details.

Learning about our candidates serves as the beginning step to valuing the presence of each individual and the knowledge they bring to the learning environment. This knowledge exists in many forms and comes from prior educational, professional, personal, familial, community, and life experiences. It is our duty as teacher educators to model a genuine interest in this diversity of experience, and value the important knowledge held by our teacher candidates, as we expect them to learn about and value their P-12 students. As a field, we need to focus on emotional supports, positive interactions, and humanizing teaching practices (Doucet, 2017).

### ***Commit to Teacher Candidate Academic Success***

The culturally responsive educator sets high expectations for success, and scaffolds instruction and activities to support learning along the way. We must double-down on our commitment to helping candidates

reach the next level, realizing that they will need and utilize different cultural and experiential filters to succeed in the profession (Gay, 2002). For many of our first generation and teacher candidates of Color, we must also teach them about the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Purpel, 1983) for success in graduate and credential programs. This requires going beyond simply including information in our syllabi about course and university grading policies; CRP requires us to go deeper and do more. For example, we need to schedule our office hours with our candidates' busy, complex schedules in mind, allowing for greater access by scheduling longer blocks of availability. Additionally, when Covid-19 removes the opportunity for candidates to informally chat with us in hallways and buildings on campuses, CRP educators must proactively increase access in virtual learning environments and personally invite candidates to office hours for individual check-ins throughout the semester. If we hope to be "good" teacher educators, we remind candidates about upcoming deadlines, and if we notice assignments are missing, we post announcements reminding candidates to refer to the syllabus or course schedule for assignment due dates. However, if we espouse to model CRP and compassionate, culturally sustaining pedagogy, we must adopt more individualized practices based on knowledge of our candidates and our commitment to their success.

To demonstrate compassion and commitment, culturally responsive educators take the action to the next level by inviting the candidate to a personal dialogue to brainstorm "imaginative strategies" (Gay, 2002, p.110) and other resources to support the candidate's success. For example, teacher educators can encourage and support candidates in connecting with us as instructors, and also encourage them to connect with each other, creating study groups and accountability pairings so candidates do not feel alienated and isolated during the pandemic. Teacher educators could also support candidates in their efforts at systemic change within the college of education. Candidates may want to form a future Black teachers' group or Asian Pacific Islander educator group to provide emotional and cultural support to candidates. Ultimately, the educator who espouses to be culturally responsive and sustaining (Paris, 2012) invites candidates from historically minoritized communities to the decision-making table to develop the strategies that will have contextual fit and contribute to their persistence in the teacher preparation program. Our collective commitment to candidates means that no one gets left behind. During Covid-19 and after, teacher educators must accept this personal, professional, and moral responsibility for the academic success of each of our teacher candidates, particularly our historically minoritized candidates of Color (Gay, 2002). Through our demonstration of genuine



concern that is action-oriented and empowering, our candidates will experience the compassion, care, and commitment to academic success we expect and hope they will enact with their ethnically and racially diverse P-12 students, who are desperately in need of culturally competent and caring teachers.

### ***Critically Examine Practices that Alienate Candidates***

Culturally responsive and sustaining teacher educators develop their own critical consciousness and push back against the dominant White norms and values perpetuated through educational systems, policies, and practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). We must examine not only institutional practices that alienate certain candidates, but our own individual practices and values that reinforce and prioritize Whiteness in schools and colleges of education (Castagno, 2014; Sleeter, 2017). Teacher education faculty must constantly assess whether our practices privilege and promote one way of knowing and being, or whether we demonstrate flexibility and a diversity of perspectives. During Covid-19, terminology such as *norms* and *compliance* might be considered code words for *rigidity* and *pushout*, especially when such terminology results in the disproportionate loss of candidates of Color. As we determine how to best assess our candidates' learning in alternate modalities, we must think critically about the barriers we layer onto the educational experience. Is it truly necessary to use eye-tracking technology or browser lockdown software for proctoring of your online tests and quizzes? Or do your practices require candidates to demonstrate learning in more authentic ways that reflect the range of experiences every classroom holds, and how they will need to perform the skills once they enter the profession? Before you tell a candidate he/she/they deserve a C or F grade, do you reflect on whether you have provided scaffolded instruction, connecting theory to practice in meaningful ways that affirm the candidate's cultural background and experiential knowledge? Do your instructional practices allow you to identify struggling candidates early in your course so you can intervene and provide support, or are graded assignments concentrated later in the semester, after drop deadlines have passed? Do you accept late work with a penalty or offer extra credit so candidates can make up for missed assignments when life circumstances require them to shuffle responsibilities? Do you think critically about your candidates' future success and for whom they may serve as potential future role models?

Through reflection of our practices as teacher educators, we can determine if we're modeling a critical understanding of the realities of our

teacher candidates, who often juggle multiple commitments and bring great diversity to the teaching profession through the dynamic lives they live. Conversely, we may discover that our educational practice, particularly in response to Covid-19, narrowly defines engagement and participation as compliance with having video cameras on during virtual class. It is only through critical conscious reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003) that we can determine whether or not we model CRP and sustain the diverse perspectives of candidates of Color, or if our practices reinforce Whiteness and pushout candidates from historically minoritized communities.

### Conclusion

What happens then, when we don't model the practices and values of culturally responsive and sustaining educators? Our candidates, particularly those who belong to historically marginalized groups, may feel alienated and unwelcome. Through examination and conscious reflection of our own practices within teacher preparation programs and colleges of education using a critical race theory lens, we can begin to learn about the structural racism and subtle microaggressions teacher candidates from historically minoritized groups experience (Solorzano et al., 2000; Sleeter, 2017), and how these experiences may lead to the pushout of candidates of Color. Black undergraduate student enrollment in higher education was on the decline prior to Covid-19 (Miller, 2020), resulting in a corresponding reduction in the number of Black candidates in teacher preparation programs nationally (Partelow, 2019). Our failure to reverse these trends in teacher education and make a serious commitment to the success of our teacher candidates from historically marginalized communities will further exacerbate the lack of racial diversity in the teacher workforce (Partelow, 2019). This could potentially cause a ripple effect, impacting P-12 education by failing to create a pipeline of diverse educators prepared to be culturally responsive to the needs of a wide range of students, and even driving some teachers of Color away from the profession (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). When teacher educators fail to model CRP, to learn and value our candidates, to commit to their success, and to critically examine our own practices, pedagogy, and commitment to equity, we instead model the exact practices and values of the dominant culture that continue to place certain groups in the margins, devaluing their contributions to the educational environment.

*“Ms. Smith, you need to model the behavior you desire from your students.”*

Although I have not worked for Mrs. Martin in many years, I can

still hear her voice urging me on, particularly as I engage with teacher candidates who come from groups historically minoritized and who are currently impacted disproportionately by Covid-19. Empathy, compassion, genuine connection, and an intense commitment to their inclusion and educational equity are the behaviors I model because these are the behaviors I desire to see in our teacher candidates' practice. Our P-12 students deserve nothing less. It's time to practice what we've been preaching and decide today: *Which behaviors will you model?*

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