
Introduction

What Do We Need to Do to Prepare Teachers for Today's Diverse Classrooms?

Given increasing student diversity and gaps in student achievement, we all have to ask, What can we do to enhance the achievement of all students? What should be the focus of professional development to best prepare educators to work effectively with today's diverse student populations? What are some concrete strategies and activities we could adapt and employ in our grade level, at our schools, or in districtwide workshops to truly engage and affect today's educators? Because research indicates that culturally competent educators can improve the success of diverse students at schools (Gay, 2010; C. Grant, Elsbree, & Fondrie, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995), it is our intention to offer concrete, interactive, and challenging activities throughout this book to prepare educators, including all kinds of teachers (preservice and inservice) and administrators, to develop their critical cultural competence.

Why do we need educators with critical cultural competence in today's schools?

Growing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity is what describes today's classroom. Furthermore, educators are seeing student diversity that includes much more than ethnic and linguistic differences because of the changing demographics listed here:

- In 2005, immigrants represented one in nine of all U.S. residents, but their children represented one in five of all children younger than age 18 (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto-Hernandez, 2005).
- In 2009, approximately 17 million school-age children spoke a language other than English at home, and more than 3 million reported problems in speaking English (Rong & Preissle, 2009).
- About 11.3% of the U.S. population was living in poverty in 2005; but 17.6% of children younger than 18 years old lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).
- Among students and families who were impacted the most by the current economic downturn, women and those from ethnic minority groups or lower socioeconomic classes were disproportionately overrepresented (Shim & Serido, 2010).

In addition to increasing diversity among our student population, educators continue to face pressures from all levels to do more to raise achievement and close the achievement gap that still exists. For example, although the overall reading scores of students based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data were slightly higher in 2007 than in 1992 and the achievement gaps in reading and mathematics were narrower, White students still had higher scores than Black students (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Similarly, even though far more efforts have been devoted to instruction for English Learners (ELs) since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the academic achievement gap between ELs and their native-English-speaking peers is still significant nationwide.

Given these demographic imperatives, we describe our goals for writing this book by sharing our experiences, strategies, and activities with others interested in developing educators with critical cultural competent.

How can we move professional development *about* diversity beyond knowledge?

With the increasing complexity of student diversity, knowledge about the different facets of diversity is not enough for teachers and administrators to implement meaningful strategies in their daily work with diverse students. Furthermore, all elements of culture intersect with

one another to create an environment where individuals' multifaceted identities emerge. As a result, student diversity is becoming increasingly complex. Considering this complexity, it almost becomes more misleading than informative to learn only about characteristics of specific cultural groups because within-group diversity is at least as vast as cross-group differences, if not more.

Take ELs as an example. Students are typically labeled as English as a second language (ESL) or limited English proficiency (LEP) at school because their parents indicated on a form that a different home language is used and the student's English proficiency does not test at the native-speaker level based on the placement test. However, the labels ESL or LEP do not reflect the student's cultural background, reasons for coming to the United States, prior schooling experiences, first-language literacy level, academic content mastery, family socio-economic level, parents' educational backgrounds, and the like. For example, the needs of a new student born in a refugee camp without formal schooling are very different from sojourner students who visit the United States because of their parents' temporary job assignment, even though both of them may appear to have African, Arabic, or Asian ancestry, are labeled as ESL, and do not seem to participate in classroom discussions.

Even with increasing educators' understanding of the complexity of our students' backgrounds, it is impossible for them to be prepared with exhaustive knowledge about specific combinations of various facets of their students' culture, language, ethnicity, and the like that may be visible, invisible, seen, unseen, recognized, or unrecognized. In professional development, therefore, our goal is not to provide a complete set of facts or list of concepts about diverse learners. Rather, in this book, we aim to develop teachers' competence regarding diversity that goes beyond knowledge. That is, we aim to develop teachers' *critical cultural competence* by enhancing their skills and strategies to evaluate and extend their understandings and practices through reflections and daily interactions with diverse students and families both inside and outside the school building.

Going beyond knowledge of the educator-self, of one's students, and their families and home communities through the professional development activities, we would like to challenge teachers to develop *critical cultural competence*, which entails teachers' abilities to

- engage in self-reflection about their cultural identities and experiences and also in critical reflection to surface personal

biases and to form visions and beliefs that guide, and even transform, educational practices in diverse settings;

- explore the cultural backgrounds of their students, families, and the communities and find ways to negotiate their roles as teachers and administrators to leverage students' strengths and assets to maximize learning; and
- transform their individual practices in classrooms, schools, and in other their local educational settings by using systematic, thoughtful, and innovative practices and collaborations.

Who are we in this thing called diversity?

As many researchers have pointed out, educators' reflection is an inseparable part of their professional development. Therefore, before we can talk about what student diversity is and how we could effectively work with diverse students and their families, it is important to first examine the individual, personal lens through which we view today's diverse world and where we see ourselves fitting into the changing sociocultural contexts.

Educators' values and assumptions about student diversity are strongly influenced by their personal experiences within and beyond classrooms settings. Although the majority of today's public school teachers are still White, middle-class females (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), many have had experiences interacting with people from ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds different from their own as a result of the changing demographics in the country, globalization, and enhanced use of technology. The widespread use of websites, blogs, wikis, and other forums have broadened our perspectives and made global issues local because of much faster exchanges of information. In addition, educators today also have more opportunities to participate in international exchange programs, to be engaged in intercultural relationships, and to devote time and effort to service in progressively diverse local communities, all of which foster their enhanced appreciation for diversity (Dee & Henkin, 2002; R. W. Smith, 2000). In professional development, it is critical that we build on these new opportunities and experiences that teachers have and be more purposeful in guiding all educators' critical examination of their typically individualistic and meritocratic beliefs. By doing so, teachers and administrators may be able to connect their experiences with diversity to make a shift in their ideologies to reach a deeper

understanding of critical cultural competence and to take action for social change.

Through professional development activities that engage educators in critical examination of their beliefs and identities with the goal of increasing self-understanding, they are encouraged not only to be aware of their assumptions and potential biases but also to make explicit their visions, goals, and practical theories that guide their actions and interactions with all students. Therefore, beginning with understanding oneself as a cultural being and developing habits of self-reflection are promoted throughout this book.

How do we leverage assets of students, families, and communities?

In addition to promoting critical self-reflection, we also promote the development of asset-based thinking about diverse students, families, and communities through additional professional development activities that lead to learning about and making use of students' strengths in educating them. Different from merely being positive, asset-based thinking is "based on direct, systematic observation into how a growing minority of highly effective, satisfied people thinks, feels and acts. . . . [It] calls for positive action and traction in the present moment" (Cramer & Wasiak, 2006, p. 15). Applied to professional development and classroom instruction, asset-based instruction highlights students' strengths and requires teachers to focus on both the cognitive and affective development of their students. For example, in Boston public schools, district-level professional development and coaching were provided for secondary mathematics teachers to build on students' strengths and assets (Paek, 2008). Teachers then applied asset-based thinking during their instruction to (1) identify students' mathematics strengths through students' sharing of their previous experiences with mathematics concepts, (2) link new mathematics concepts and procedures explicitly to identified student strengths through teacher demonstrations, and (3) encourage students' reflection on the metacognitive process of learning. This asset-based, strength-based approach not only enhanced students' mathematics achievement but also allowed teachers to truly co-construct positive learning experiences with their students.

In this book, we share professional development activities we have used to develop asset- and strength-based thinking, and include statements from teachers about how these activities have impacted their interactions with students and their families and communities. We believe that the only way to effectively prepare educators with critical cultural competence for all students is to intentionally provide experiences with guided reflections for teachers and administrators to explore ways to become learners of their students and the families within and beyond classroom settings (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010).

Bringing It All Together

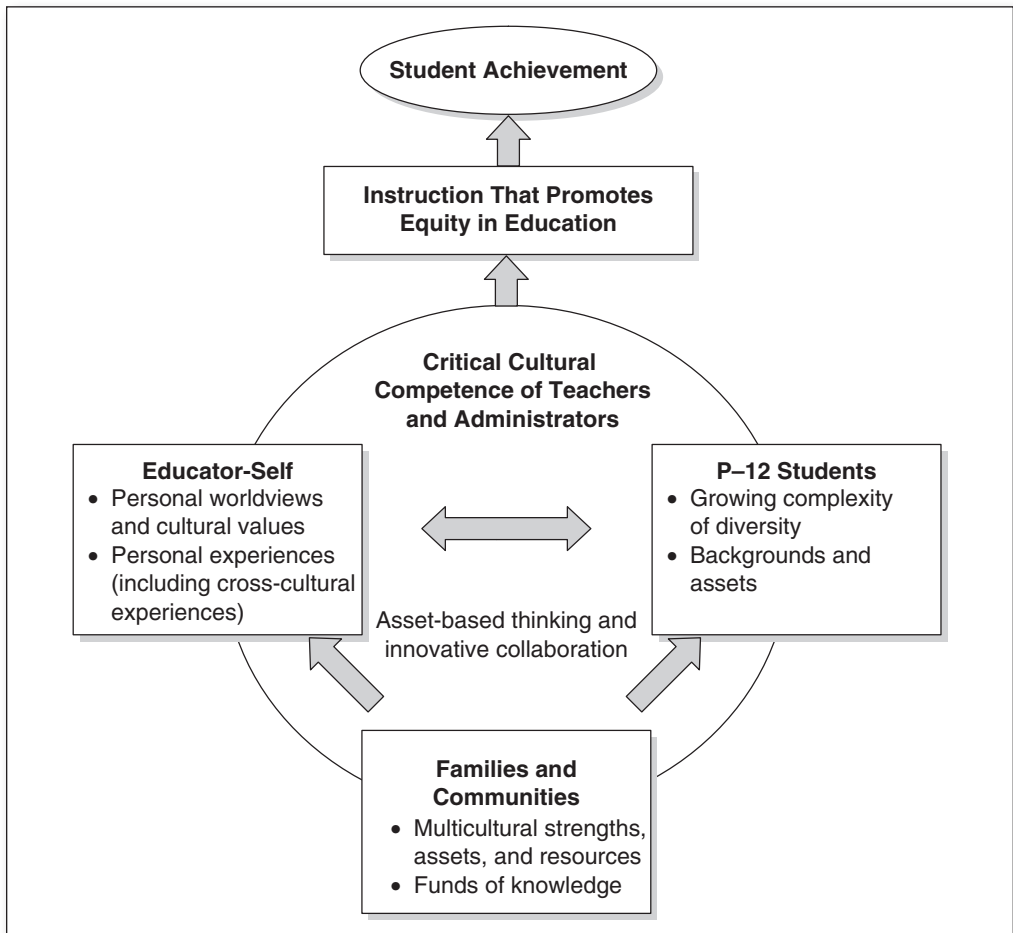
While other researchers have presented different models for developing teachers' understanding, awareness of, and competence with diversity (J. A. Banks, 2006; Grant & Sleeter, 2006; Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001; McLaren, 2006; Nieto, 2000), they all emphasize the importance of all educators (1) engaging in critical self-reflection about their assumptions and cultural beliefs, (2) developing deeper understanding of student diversity and assets, and (3) building on the "funds of knowledge" generated through the diverse cultural perspectives and heritage in the communities.

As is shown in Figure FM.1, the goal of developing or enhancing educators' critical cultural competence is to impact instructional practices and to promote the achievement of students, especially those who are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Toward this end, the focus of this book is on professional development activities and ideas that facilitate the development of critical cultural competence from the viewpoint of three additional and inseparable aspects: *self, students, and families and communities*.

These three aspects—self, students, and families and communities—are intertwined through asset-based thinking and innovative collaboration with peers, students, families, and communities to promote teachers' and administrators' ongoing development toward critical cultural competence. In this book, we devote specific chapters for each of the three aspects related to critical cultural competence. Through the professional development activities described in this book, we encourage educators to apply their new understandings and to transform their current instructional practices to promote equity education and, ultimately, enhance the academic success of all students. Figure FM.1 captures the major components that we believe

are needed beyond knowledge to promote students' achievement in today's diverse schools.

Figure FM.1 Teacher Critical Cultural Competence



SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

This introduction includes an overview of the need to help educators develop critical cultural competence in today's increasingly diversity classrooms. The purposes and the theoretical foundations that guide the design of the book are also shared:

- Student diversity is a complex concept, and professional development regarding diversity issues needs to include more than just knowledge about diversity.

- We argue for the importance of developing educators' *critical cultural competence*, which includes the ability to engage in critical reflection of self from alternative perspectives to surface implicit personal biases and assumptions; negotiate understanding within and across cultural groups to promote learning; and transform local educational settings through thoughtful, innovative practices to enhance equity in education.

REFLECTION AND EXTENSION

- Thinking about the teachers and administrators you are working with, what do you think are the major goals and objectives for the professional development on diversity issues?
- What would you like to see because of professional development efforts at your school or in your district?