

# PREPARING FOR DIVERSITY: PROGRAM EVALUATION OF AN ACCREDITED TEACHER CERTIFICATION PROGRAM IN TEXAS

**Jessica J. Keen, MAT**

Doctoral Student, Sam Houston State University

**Rebecca M. Bustamante, Ph.D.**

Sam Houston State University

## Abstract

*As student populations continue to diversify, the need to prepare teachers to work effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse students becomes increasingly crucial. In this study, degree plans and course descriptions for one university-based teacher preparation program were analyzed to identify intentional strategies designed to prepare elementary, middle, and high school teacher candidates to work in culturally and linguistically diverse environments. Results showed that the elementary certification program required more courses aimed at culturally and linguistically responsive teacher preparation than the secondary certification program, especially in working with English Language Learners. Requirements for the number of field experiences teacher candidates were required to complete surfaced as the most prevalent at all teacher preparation program levels, including elementary, middle, and high school. For this reason, particular attention to placing teacher candidates in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom and school environments is essential.*

Keywords: cultural and linguistic diversity, culturally relevant, preservice teachers

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Today's educational leaders and teachers are faced with a multitude of complex scenarios, including curriculum standards and standardized testing, a higher demand for technology usage, and an increasingly more diverse student population (Bryant, Moss, & Zijdemans Boudreau, 2015; Guyton & Wesche, 2005; Nadelson et al., 2012; Schellen & King, 2014). In 2016, the Texas Education Agency reported the number of Hispanic and Black students enrolled in Texas public schools was continuing to increase, while White student enrollment was declining. These demographic complexities, mixed with high turnover rates for new teachers, urge those who lead educator preparation programs to seek ways to become more efficient and effective in meeting preparing teachers to thrive in culturally diverse environments. Moreover, the U.S. teaching force predominantly comprises White, middle-class women who are likely to have culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in their classrooms. Therefore, teacher candidates (TCs) must adequately be prepared to work with all types of students. This preparation includes both coursework, which emphasizes cultural and linguistic knowledge and strategies, and field experiences, in which teacher candidates can apply what they learned as they interact with culturally and linguistically students. Teacher preparation programs must provide numerous opportunities for teacher candidates to focus on the aspects of teaching that address meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically students. The purpose of this study was to identify the intentional preparation of *teacher candidates* (TCs) to work with culturally and linguistically students by evaluating a large, university-based teacher preparation at a select institution in south central Texas.

Throughout this article, the terms *preservice teacher* (PST) and *teacher candidate* (TC) will be used to describe a teacher-in-training who is enrolled in a teacher preparation course, namely in a university-based program. Any studies that

refer to *alternative certification* (not housed in a university setting) will be explicitly stated and likely describes a program in which a PST has previously obtained a bachelor's degree and is completing state of Texas requirements for teacher certification.

### Literature Review

Ladson-Billings (2011) argued that teacher preparation programs are often dominated by older, White educators who are “too far removed from PreK-12 teaching to be much help when it comes to preparing novice teachers for diverse classrooms” (p. 14). Ladson-Billings also noted that the few professors who actually come from culturally diverse backgrounds often are “pigeon-holed” into teaching courses on multiculturalism or English Language Learners (ELLs). Teacher preparation programs often offer limited coursework that appropriately addresses the impact language or culture may have on students' learning (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Researchers have suggested including coursework that specifically addresses teacher candidates' knowledge about different cultures is essential to adequately preparing teacher candidates to work with students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Gay, 2002; Robinson & Clardy, 2011; Schellen & King, 2014).

According to Robinson and Clardy (2011), teacher candidates are not the only stakeholders who should reflect on their experiences with an understanding of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In their auto ethnographic study, Robinson and Clardy reflected upon their first-hand experiences with teacher educators, as well as their personal interactions with teacher candidates enrolled in their courses. They summarized the three dominant approaches typically taken in addressing diversity within teacher preparation programs. The first approach was the *segregated diversity course approach*. In this approach, culturally and linguistically is emphasized only in specific courses that explicitly address responding to diversity in schools. In teacher preparation programs that use this type of approach, meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically students is not addressed in other coursework outside of these specialized classes, so preservice teachers may not recognize how these ideas fit in with other aspects of their training. The second approach was *programmatically diversity integration approach* in which all courses address culturally and linguistically to some extent (Robinson & Clardy, 2011). In this case, the expectation is that all professors integrate culturally and linguistically instruction in every course in the program. The problem with this type of approach is that it may neglect to teach explicit knowledge about various cultures, which researchers have suggested is an integral part in adequately preparing culturally responsive teachers (Gay, 2002; Schellen & King, 2014). The researchers suggested, however, that the third and most effective approach combined the first two approaches. Ultimately, Robinson and Clardy concluded that, just like the teacher candidates they teach, teacher educators should incorporate many of the same strategies that K-12 teachers use to address the needs of culturally and linguistically students. To do so would require specific training for teacher educators, as well as a focused consideration by the teacher education program to integrate diversity-related coursework and maximize field experiences in which teacher candidates can interact with culturally and linguistically students.

Robinson and Clardy (2011) and Gay (2002) concur that coursework that directly addressing culturally and linguistically should be included in all teacher preparation programs. Gay described the need for teacher candidates to gain explicit knowledge about various cultures, because culture might directly influence a students' engagement, learning style, motivation, and more (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, Gay recommended training teacher candidates to apply knowledge of different cultures to identify any potential gaps in the cultural responsiveness of curriculum and resources and then to fill these gaps using appropriate instructional strategies. Both Robinson and Clardy (2011) and Gay (2002) urged teachers to create communities of mutual respect between teachers and all students, where both students and teachers can learn from one another. An integral part of creating this safe environment includes effective communication between all members of the classroom community.

In a study designed to investigate preservice teacher's perceived preparation for working with diverse students, Nadelson et al. (2012) utilized the Multicultural Efficacy Scale. This 35-item survey was designed to collect data on teachers' experiences with and attitudes toward working with students from various backgrounds, as well as their opinions regarding their perceived ability to teach all students effectively. Of the 88 teachers surveyed, the majority were lower to

middle class White teachers, and approximately a quarter of the preservice teachers who participated spoke a second language in addition to English. Nadelson et al. (2012) concluded that being taught about multicultural education was not as highly regarded by PSTs as their interactions with different types of students. Experiences with other races, cultures, religions, and languages had a much stronger influence on the preservice teachers' reported confidence in working in diverse classrooms.

Schellen and King (2014) also explored several teacher preparation structures, including coursework and field experiences, aimed at preparing PSTs to work with diverse groups of students in Grade 4 through Grade 8. The authors examined 53 preservice teacher's portfolios that included written assessments of essential learnings from their coursework, sample lessons, classroom designs, reflections from student teaching experiences, and other similar artifacts that focused on multicultural education and ELLs, specifically. Schellen and King also collected data from syllabi and required readings of courses that pertained to diversity. All of the preservice teachers completed the same coursework, had multiple field experiences, and completed their student teaching in one of two districts, which varied drastically in demographics. The researchers noticed that although all of the PST's portfolios demonstrated some understanding of working with students from multiple backgrounds, the preservice teachers who completed their student teaching in the predominately-Hispanic district applied their learnings more consistently than their peers in the predominately-White district. Due to their coursework, all of the preservice teachers expressed the importance of acknowledging student differences, but the preservice teachers who student taught in the more inner-city district regularly used the strategies from this coursework more in their work with the students. Schellen and King suggested that preservice teachers benefitted most when exposed to multiple platforms to learn about and apply multicultural education strategies, including coursework and field experiences.

When Ronfeldt, Schwartz, and Jacob (2014) investigated the benefits of opportunities for PSTs to practice teaching, they discovered that teacher candidates who obtained an alternative certification typically have drastically fewer hours practicing in a classroom than their peers who received their certification through a college or university program. The information they collected through the Schools and Staffing Surveys, the Teacher Follow-Up Survey, and the Common Core of Data revealed that although both traditional and alternative routes require a comparable number of methods courses, "almost half of alternative route teachers completed zero practice teaching" (Ronfeldt et al., 2014, p. 15). Furthermore, the authors concluded that teachers who spent more time in field experiences reported higher feelings of preparedness and were more likely to remain in education longer. Methods courses were also positively correlated to teacher candidates' readiness, but the coursework was not as highly correlated as the time spent practicing with students and mentor teachers.

Supporting the conclusions of Ronfeldt et al. (2014), Wood and Turner (2015) also contributed to the research about the importance of mentor teachers and field experiences to the training of PSTs. In this particular study, a cohort of 11 teacher candidates and 25 mentors worked in pairs to interview individual elementary-aged students regarding their comprehension of a math problem and the steps they used to solve it. Following these interviews, the mentor teacher and PSTs reflected on their observations of the student, whereas the preservice teacher's university professor facilitated these conversations. The researchers identified several benefits of the collaborative efforts between the university professor and the mentor teacher. Specifically, Wood and Turner noticed that the mentor teacher added to the PST's learning by providing context of the classroom and the student's prior knowledge, as well as modeling continued professional learning. Meanwhile, the university professor was able to make connections between the discussed observations and the context of the methods courses that the teacher candidates had previously completed. The authors concluded that both the mentor teacher and the university professor made different contributions to the essential learning of the preservice teacher, and therefore, the teacher candidate likely benefitted from the combination of their field experiences and their coursework.

Focusing specifically on preservice teachers' interactions with diverse populations, Bennett (2012) designed a qualitative study to identify specific characteristics of these opportunities that were effective and ineffective in increasing teacher candidates understanding of cultural responsive teaching. The researcher collected data from eight White elementary preservice teachers who completed some of their field experience by tutoring at a community center that served students who were economically disadvantaged and who were predominately African American or Hispanic. These participants were concurrently enrolled in a writing course, in which the instructor required students to write their reflections, field notes, and

journal. Through these artifacts and interviews, Bennett identified a few effective characteristics of this experience, including one-to-one interactions between students and teachers as well as the reflective opportunities for preservice teachers to discuss their experiences and understandings with one another. The researcher labeled the lack of interaction with students by some of the participants as an ineffective component. Additionally, although the instructor of the writing course also subtly incorporated components of cultural responsiveness throughout the course, the majority of the participants failed to acknowledge this inclusion in their reflections, resulting in the researcher labeling the indirect instruction as ineffective.

In this study, researchers examined preparation program requirements and descriptions at one university-based program to determine how well program requirements reflected a focus on preparing teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The purpose of the study was to describe the teacher preparation program design based on degree plans and course descriptions. An examination of program effectiveness represents the next research phase and was not the objective of this study.

The following research questions guided this program evaluation study: (a) What courses are elementary, middle and high school teacher candidates required to take that address meeting the needs of culturally diverse students?; (b) What courses are elementary, middle and high school teacher candidates required to take that address meeting the needs of linguistically diverse students?; and (c) What opportunities do elementary, middle and high school teacher candidates have to work directly with CLD students?

### **Program Description and Background**

The university teacher preparation program evaluated in this study is designed for students who are working towards obtaining their teacher certifications as part of a bachelor's degree requirement. In addition to courses required to obtain a degree, students seeking teacher certification through this program are required to take courses focused on the pedagogy of teaching. Undergraduate students may pursue teaching certifications in elementary, middle, or secondary grades. A teacher candidate's coursework typically depends on both the school level and content area. Most of TCs who are interested in teaching early childhood (EC) through sixth grade typically major in Interdisciplinary Studies and take additional certification courses. Teacher candidates seeking to teach middle school, fourth through eighth grade, will also major in Interdisciplinary Studies and take additional certification courses focused on either English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR)/Social Studies Composite, Mathematics, or Mathematics/Science Composite. The Interdisciplinary Studies major includes education-related courses, but the specific courses vary slightly, based on certification focus. High school level teacher candidates will major in their chosen teaching field and take six certification courses and two semesters of student teaching.

Regardless of the grade level, PSTs need to be prepared to work with culturally and linguistically students. This preparation is crucial to both teacher and student success in the classroom. Because secondary teacher candidates take more content courses, coursework relevant to working with culturally and linguistically students is limited and does not allow the same amount of time dedicated to pedagogical preparation received by elementary teacher candidates.

All teacher candidates are required to complete at least two semesters of student teaching. The preparation program partners with over 70 of the surrounding school districts to place teachers in practicum situations. Before beginning their student teaching, preservice teachers will select four districts as preferences in completing their student teaching. The degree types, majors, and certification areas are outlined in Table 1. These are the program areas that were examined in this study.

Table 1  
*Degree Plans for Teacher Candidates*

Degree Type	Major (Minor)	Certification
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies, EC-6 Generalist	EC-6 Generalist ESL Supplement
Bachelor of Arts	Interdisciplinary Studies, Bilingual Education	EC-6 Bilingual Generalist
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies, Bilingual Education	EC-6 Bilingual Generalist
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies	EC-6 Generalist and EC-12 Special Education
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies	4-8 ELAR/Social Studies Composite
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies	4-8 Mathematics
Bachelor of Science	Interdisciplinary Studies	4-8 Mathematics/Science Composite
Unspecified (depends on major)	Major in teaching field of student's choice (Minor in Education)	7 or 8-12 in teaching field

### Data Collection Methods

Degree plans for each of the four EC-6 certifications, three 4-8 certifications, and the secondary certification were obtained online through the program's website. After determining which courses were required for each certification, course descriptions available online were gathered. These clusters of courses included Bilingual Education, Early Childhood Education, Curriculum and Instruction for Elementary Education, Curriculum and Instruction for Middle School Education, English as a Second Language, Reading, Special Education, and Secondary Education.

Each of the available course descriptions were placed in an Excel spreadsheet. Then, Saldana's (2015) approach to coding qualitative data was applied to analyze significant statements and assign descriptive codes. Second cycle structural coding was then used to group codes into common themes, which were also noted in the spreadsheet and described in Table 2. A content analysis approach was then used to sort data by structural codes and count the number of occurrences for each code within each of the eight degree plans. Frequency counts were used to tally the number of codes as shown in Table 3.

Table 2  
*Definitions of Structural Codes for Course Descriptions*

Structural Code	Code Description
Language	Courses that referred to language development, ELLs, second languages, literacy, or bilingual education
Culture	Courses that specifically reference cultural diversity
Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	Courses that referenced the historical development of changing demographics of subpopulations or the interaction of languages and the different cultures that speak these languages
Diversity	Courses that referred to “diversity” but did not specify cultural or linguistic diversity
Families	Courses that specified working with and communicating with parents or families. This code was given to any course that referred to families or parents, even if it did not specify CLD.
Field Experiences	Courses that specified field experiences in grade level-appropriate public school settings. Student teaching is included in this code.

Table 3  
*Frequency counts for Structural Codes by Degree Plan*

Degree / Certification	Language	Cultural	CLD	Diversity	Families	Field Experience	Total Courses Coded
BS - EC-6 Gen, ESL Supplement	12	2	6	1	1	17	21
BA - EC-6 Bilingual Gen	11	2	5	1	1	16	20
BS - EC-6 Bilingual Gen	11	2	5	1	1	16	20
BS - EC-6 Gen, EC-12 Sp Ed	8	2	6	0	2	14	19
BS - 4-8 ELAR/Social Studies	6	2	5	1	1	11	14
BS - 4-8 Math	4	2	5	1	1	8	12
BS - 4-8 Math/Science	3	2	4	0	1	7	11
Secondary	0	0	1	1	1	7	8

### Findings

Results indicated that elementary teacher candidates were exposed to all six themes or structural codes related to culturally responsive instruction through their required coursework, whereas their middle and high school counterparts received less required coursework in these areas. Because middle and high school teacher candidates are required to take more content specific courses based on their teaching field, the number of required education courses is drastically lower than elementary certifications. Even so, EC-6 Generalist teacher candidates took half as many culture-focused courses as language-focused courses. Composite ELAR/Social Studies teacher candidates took the most language-focused courses of all 4-8 certification candidates, but these six courses were half of the number of language-focused courses their EC-6 Generalist counterparts were required to take. Secondary teacher candidates had eight total courses that were coded, and only three of them referenced culturally and linguistically, Diversity, or Families, and none of the courses referenced Language or Culture.

On the other hand, almost 88%, seven out of eight of the secondary courses, require teacher candidates to complete some field experiences. At least 63%, seven out of 11, middle school certification courses and almost 74%, 14 out of 19, elementary school certification courses require field experiences. This code was, by far, the most frequently referenced focus in the available course descriptions. Worth noting, is the fact that approximately half of all courses were coded with both field experience in addition to another code. Readers are directed to Table 3 for the frequency counts of each code for each degree plan.

### Implications

The strongest component of this teacher preparation program was the number of field experiences that teacher candidates were required to complete throughout their certification program with this university. A number of researchers (Nadelson, et al., 2012; Ronfeldt, Schwartz, & Jacob, 2014; Schellen & King, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2015) emphasize the importance of field experiences as one of the best ways to adequately prepare teacher candidates to work with culturally and linguistically students. Furthermore, because approximately half of the courses were dual coded with Field Experience and at least one other code, many opportunities exist for university supervisors to help teacher candidates relate material discussed in coursework to experiences in the classroom (Schellen & King., 2014; Wood & Turner, 2015) and to reflect on their developing understanding of cultural responsiveness (Bennett, 2012). No evidence was found to describe coordination and collaboration between the mentor teachers and the university professors. This collaboration would enhance further connections and applications of explicit knowledge on pedagogical practices with culturally and linguistically learners and real-world applications in classrooms, as recommended by Wood and Turner (2015). This is an area for further study.

Although the student teaching partnerships provide teacher candidates with numerous options to conduct their practicum in highly diverse school districts, the program studied did not require teacher candidates to participate in at least one campus with a high number of culturally and linguistically students. Additionally, in conducting this study, little information was evident regarding the types of classrooms in which teacher candidates completed their field experiences. Close monitoring of the types of school and classroom environments in which teacher candidates are placed might aid teacher preparation programs in enhance further teacher candidates' preparedness in effectively meeting the academic and social needs of culturally and linguistically students in schools as researchers have emphasized the importance of teacher practicum experiences (Nadelson et al., 2012; Schellen & King, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2015). Although the university-based program explored in this study placed emphasis on teacher candidates' interactions in public school settings, further investigation might take into account the types of settings teacher candidates are placed in, with a particular focus on exposing candidates to culturally and linguistically diverse classroom environments.

Based on the information available and analyzed in this study, the university-based teacher preparation program studied tended to place greater emphasis on linguistic diversity in coursework and field opportunities than on cultural diversity. Further research might determine what, specifically, is taught in the few culture-specific courses offered in the program to gain a more accurate sense of the culturally and linguistically teaching strategies presented and identify possible

gaps in learning. Special attention should be paid to the lack of culturally and linguistically emphasis at the secondary level for those teacher candidates seeking middle and high school certification.

### **Conclusions**

Educational researchers have recommended that teacher preparation programs include a combination of coursework that provides teacher candidates with specific knowledge about students' cultures and languages (Bennett, 2012; Gay, 2002; Robinson & Clardy, 2011; Schellen & King, 2014). Likewise, researchers stress that teacher candidates should be provided with ample opportunities to work directly with students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Nadelson et al., 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2014; Schellen & King, 2014). The university-based program explored in this study program required TCs to engage in substantial classroom experiences relevant to working with culturally and linguistically students at elementary, middle, and high school level. This component appeared to be one of the strongest aspects of the teacher training program but would be further strengthened by the inclusion of specific requirements for preservice teachers to work in classes with culturally and linguistically students. The university was, at the time of the study, beginning to develop these requirements. Although little information was available regarding the interaction between concepts taught in teacher preparation courses and their application in classroom settings, several courses included field work in conjunction with the classwork and provided many opportunities for reflection and discussions (Bennett, 2012).

This study was an initial exploration into how a select university-based teacher preparation program intentionally focused on preparing preservice teachers to work with culturally and linguistically students. The findings reinforce the extant research that teacher preparation programs emphasize the teaching of both explicit knowledge about cultures and languages, as well as deliberately provide opportunities for teacher candidates to work with students who represent a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This study can be used as a model for how other teacher preparation programs might closely examine their program requirements to determine how well they intentionally are preparing teacher candidates to support the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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