

Making Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Relevant to Aspiring Teachers

By Marvin Lynn
March 19, 2014



As a scholar of race and education deeply involved in the work of teacher preparation, I always have been concerned about the education of African-American males and whether the teachers

we train are effectively prepared to meet their needs. President Obama's recent announcement of a task force, in the wake of the murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, signals the extent to which the public may be prepared to engage in a discussion about the specific challenges and related solutions needed to resolve the crisis facing this population. Right now, there also is considerable focus on teacher education. As politicians continue to increase the accountability demands on teacher preparation, our community continues to seek new ways to better prepare teachers to effectively serve African-American males and other critically underserved populations.

The truth is that teacher preparation programs are struggling. While most teacher preparation programs provide pre-service teachers with some rudimentary knowledge regarding the foundations of education for underserved populations, our real challenge is translating increased awareness about race, culture and student background into effective practices. We convey the information about the student populations teachers will work with, but we don't make sure that it translates into the skills necessary to effectively teach these populations.

In other words, as a field we too often fail to build links between what is taught, how it is taught and who is being taught.

One of the reasons we struggle with such links is because the knowledge we provide teacher candidates about culture, race, backgrounds and learning is too theoretical and conceptual. It simply is not practical enough to use and have an impact in P-12 classrooms.

"If we are going to change practice in teacher education on a large scale, we are going to have to overcome our discomfort with change and demand more of ourselves and our students."

Culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural education must be more than a feel-good or obligatory addition to teacher preparation. Instead, it must be embedded throughout the teacher preparation curriculum with the ultimate goal being to improve student performance.

We can make this a reality in more programs for more students by moving from talking about diversity and effective multicultural pedagogy to assessing teacher candidates on their ability to demonstrate that they can use this awareness of students' history and students' backgrounds to improve learning.

For the first time in my career, we now have a resource developed by educators for educators that gives me hope for wide-scale progress.

EdTPA is a nationally available performance-based assessment developed by Stanford University with help from more than 1,000 educators nationwide. It calls for candidates to submit written commentaries and an unedited video. This portfolio is independently scored through the lens of five critical areas of teaching that require candidates to demonstrate how their lesson plans, instruction, student assessment and academic language respond to students' strengths, needs and backgrounds.

EdTPA requires candidates — and their instructors — to be sophisticated about P-12 student context, how they learn and what makes them tick. And teacher candidates have to be explicitly non-deficit in their orientation. In other words, aspiring teachers must understand where student potential lies and demonstrate they can leverage it.

Here's why that is so significant: A colleague recently relayed a story to me of a teacher greeting a new student by announcing to the class: "Look at what they dumped on us today." I don't know the student, but I do know that at that point it was clear to that student and everyone else in the classroom that the teacher was not going to take responsibility for that student's learning. We can all predict what happened next.

With edTPA, aspiring teachers can't operate this way. It's not sufficient to say students are poor, they can't learn or their parents aren't involved. Candidates must understand that student learning is tied directly to their teaching. It forces teachers to take responsibility for student learning. Today, that just doesn't happen enough in teacher preparation.

The written exams most teacher candidates take make it easier to prepare for finite questions and answers. A test of one's pedagogy, such as edTPA, is different. It's harder to prepare students to succeed if they don't have the pedagogical skills. It also puts the onus on faculty to make sure candidates are ready to teach, and that hasn't always been a common or clear goal.

Teacher candidates have to be able to write analytically to pass edTPA. To succeed on edTPA, candidates have to understand what they are doing, the research behind it, execute it well and explain it. We need to spend more time requiring this kind of analysis by candidates. Some teachers may see that as requiring new work and strategies on our part, and it makes them uncomfortable.

I realize many of my colleagues also are uncomfortable with scorers from outside of their institutions evaluating their students as part of edTPA. I speak from experience when I say that I know how rigorous the scorer training is. I'm one of them. If everybody is going through what I went through to be a scorer, you can trust them to do this right.

If we are going to change practice in teacher education on a large scale, we are going to have to overcome our discomfort with change and demand more of ourselves and our students. EdTPA provides an objective measure to guide us through that growth as a field.

Teacher preparation must continue to build support for and integrate the ideas embedded in edTPA. By doing so we will do our part as teacher educators to support the nation's goal of helping more minority males succeed while also improving educational opportunity and outcomes for all students.

Dr. Marvin Lynn is dean of the School of Education at Indiana University South Bend.