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## Culturally Sustaining Practices in Middle Schools

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## **Culturally Sustaining Practices in Middle Schools**

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### **Abstract**

The social unrest during the summer of 2020 in the United States produced an unprecedented need for the examination of K-12 curriculum and the development of culturally sustaining practices. Teacher preparation programs must now be intentional in developing preservice teachers who understand and embrace culturally sustaining pedagogical practices. This paper offers four pillars to frame classroom practices to be integrated holistically and support middle level preservice teachers' development of their culturally sustaining practices. Pillar one focuses on understanding Self. The ability to honestly self-reflect and to understand personal practice deeply and continually is critical. Pillar two is De-centering Whiteness/Self. This is the act of interrogating curriculum and classroom experiences to uncover places where teachers can widen their frames and incorporate perspectives from historically marginalized populations. Pillar three is Outreach. Personalized learning and examining asset-based perspectives allow preservice teachers opportunities to develop their own outreach practices. Pillar four is Communication. The ability to express ourselves in a variety of ways and view our individual cultures and experiences as assets are important in communicating what is important to us and the needs that must be met. These four pillars give agency and a strong framework for developing culturally sustaining teachers at a time that is urgent.

*Key Words:* culturally sustaining, self, de-centering, outreach, communication

### **Introduction**

Advocating for young adolescents is at the cornerstone of middle level education. Our focus as middle level teacher educators is to create opportunities for our preservice teachers to become transformative learners in their practice and teach them tools that support culturally

sustaining practices. For the past fifty years, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly the National Middle School Association (NMSA) has provided support, research, practices, and guidelines to advocate for young adolescents. In the most recent version of AMLE's position paper, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), there are five essential attributes teachers focus on that support young adolescents. These attributes call for middle school classrooms to be: responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging. When these attributes are examined through culturally sustaining practices, they lead to transformative dispositions of teacher educators.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, social, economic, political, and world events brought to the forefront diversity issues that underscore a need for radical change. For example, gay marriage, affordable housing, election of a Black president, racial profiling, and the world health crises related to a pandemic elevate the discursive contexts that extinguish the views and examples our students see. Additionally, changing demographics of our children and a large national trend of white female teacher profiles in our country are challenging professors to intentionally prepare preservice teachers to advocate for and use these current events to respond to the needs of diverse learners (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2021).

Paris & Alim (2017) define *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) as efforts that sustain “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation (p. 1). The focus of their work is on using asset-based practices that integrate linguistics, literacy, and cultural pluralism of historically marginalized communities. Asset-based pedagogy validates the strengths students bring to the classroom. Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, and Haynes (2017) reflect on the impact asset-based teaching has on students who have experienced trauma and chronic stress. They suggest teachers:

- Identify inherent assets that students bring to the classroom,
- Connect to students' experiences through instructional planning and delivery,
- Foster students' strengths through the use of predictable routines and structured paired and small-group learning experiences, and
- Develop family and community partnerships.

In order to support culturally sustaining practices (CSP), we present classroom tools that we have used in our preservice programs. Each reflects one of four pillars that make up a recommended pedagogical framework that relates to CSP to “ensure that each student feels socially connected and valued, becomes competent and skilled, and develops independence and responsibility” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 4) in the areas of linguistics, literacy, and cultural pluralism.

This framework is an example of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Cranton, 1996) grounded in critical theory. Transformative education develops teacher educators and their adolescent learners to challenge the status quo and become agents of change by transforming their communities into a more just society through the four pillars.

The pillars include Self, De-centering Self/Whiteness, Outreach, and Communication. Each pillar has two tools that are examples of culturally sustaining practices of linguistics, literacy, or cultural pluralism. It is the intent that teacher educators use these tools to better understand their own practice to be able to transform preservice teachers, who will then transform their own students. It must be underscored that every teacher who uses these tools

help develop a level of cultural responsiveness to ethically lead students through classroom experiences; meaning, the teacher has to do the inner self work of identifying areas in which they need more growth and competencies with marginalized populations to not do further harm. In the article, the term *student* is often used in reference to preservice teachers enrolled in teacher education programs but in some instances, it will refer to adolescents when there is a classroom context.

### **Pillar 1: Self**

The first pillar is Self, which corresponds to the CSP of cultural pluralism. As teacher educators, it is important that we do some identity work to determine our own preconceived notions and biases and how those relate to our practices. Williams and Brown (2019) state “we must begin to awaken our mindsets to the influence culture has on our bias, assumptions, beliefs, and ultimately our practices in schools” (n.p.) Our ultimate goal, of course, is to prepare future teachers to welcome, value, and embrace all adolescents from all backgrounds. Being able to do this requires us to recognize where we are coming from and where we then meet our learners. Bullough and Pinnegar (2021), in summarizing the research of Pinar (1980, 1981), assert that “one always teaches the self” (p. 13).

Teacher educators, then, much begin by questioning analyzing their own taken-for-granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and unexamined explanations (Loughran, 2002). Studying the self allows teacher educators to examine beliefs, practices, and the interconnectedness of both (Samaras, 2011). In doing so, we can consider institutional contexts including demographics, location, and role definitions. Many times, teacher educators, teachers, and future teachers rely solely on their own lived experiences, which can have inherent biases and preconceptions. In order to deconstruct and reconstruct our practices to ensure culturally sustaining practices, we must deeply examine our *critical perspectives* (Phelan & Ng, 2015), and reflect upon our “selves” and how they influence our interactions with adolescents, our curricular choices, and our instructional practices. Preservice teachers or practitioners must also do this work. Mezirow (1990) purports that critical reflection ignites transformation when one can challenge their presuppositions of prior knowledge. To be a culturally sustaining practitioner, one must be in continual transformation. There are two tools we use to help preservice teachers engage in identity work and the culturally sustaining practice of cultural pluralism: the Common Beliefs Survey and Spheres of Influence.

#### ***Tool 1 – Common Beliefs Survey***

In this section, learners complete the *Common Beliefs Survey: Teaching Racially and Ethnically Diverse Students*, created by Learning for Justice. Learners begin by completing The Common Beliefs Survey worksheet. It can be found [here](#). Once they have completed the questions, the teacher uses *The Common Beliefs* descriptions teacher discussion guide. There is a short paragraph the teacher can use as talking points as well as one to three questions to be considered to further push student thinking. A culminating community experience is to then use students’ answers to create a word cloud that they share with their peers. It is a way to get preservice teachers thinking about commonly held beliefs about education in general, but particularly about teaching students from diverse backgrounds. The word cloud component can create a sense of community in a safe way. Rather than having students share their responses (which might include some deeply held biases), they share their word cloud, highlighting the key points from everyone’s responses.

### ***Tool 2 - Spheres of Influence***

A second tool, spheres of influence, is an activity that looks at four spheres, from the text *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams et al., 2007). The four spheres are: self; close family and friends; social, school, and work relationships; and community. Preservice teachers discuss how each of these constructs influences their views, biases, and concerns. They then create a “plan of action,” describing three things they can do to address, enhance, or change an aspect of each sphere. This activity allows future teachers to begin to think about their role to enact change. Again, this must start with the self. Preservice teachers consider things they could change in their own lives. Often, in doing this activity, students recognize those closest to them and recognize a need for some level of change.

In concert, this activity is designed to help learners examine self and then encourage action. A common starting point is to share that everyone is in a different place and has different backgrounds, so it is important to allow them to work from where they are instead of forcing on an “equal” end goal. Each person has the opportunity to grow. This experience examines culturally sustaining practices, dispositions of equity, and ways to create safe, inclusive classrooms where all learners are welcomed and valued.

### **Pillar 2: De-centering Self and Whiteness**

The second pillar is De-centering Self and Whiteness, and it corresponds to the CSP of Cultural Pluralism. De-centering Whiteness begins with recognizing two aspects in education; first, the majority of K-12 teachers are white, and second, the substantial presence of white European and Christian standards are the default knowledge base in schools.

According to the IES (2020) report, 79 percent of US teachers are white whereas 47 percent of the PK-12 students are white. This fundamental context of disproportionality is critical to one’s transformation through awareness, cognitive dissonance, and reflection that is required to be responsive when educating adolescents through what is often an historically marginalized perspective. We recognize the need to intentionally prepare our white preservice teachers to collaborate and consider how they can use the diversity of race, religion, and culture to enhance their teaching.

This co-construction of learning experiences in our programs assumes that and in those deep and caring relationships there is symbiosis. We consider the call by scholars to create a more just schooling experience for all stakeholders by de-centering whiteness as the default (Matias et al., 2017; Salazar, 2018; Sleeter, 2001, 2017). Two tools to demonstrate culturally pluralistic society through the pillar of De-centering Whiteness and Self are contextualizing the self in relation to others and widening individuals’ frames.

### ***Tool 1 - Contextualize the self in relation to others: If the World Were a Village [100 People]***

The second edition of *If the World Were a Village* (Smith, 2020) illustrates world demographic categories as a reduction to 100 people. Instructors can use the online videos that narrate illustrations of the various categories such as gender, access to technology, and religious choice. Before watching the video, preservice teachers write their numerical guesses between 1 and 100 for each category covered in the video. After they have completed their guesses, either while reading the book or viewing the video, the students write the factual answers and make notations about the answers that were eye opening. The notations can help preservice teachers frame discussion points. Instructors should point out that this activity can be

teacher led or student led. The lead discussion question can be, “Which answer surprised you and why?” A closure activity can include a 3-2-1, asking students to write 3 takeaways, 2 reflections that connect to their own personal experiences, and 1 specific idea for informed action.

### ***Tool 2 – Widen Your Frame: The Danger of a Single Story, TEDGlobal Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie***

A second tool uses Adichie’s 2009 TEDGlobal Talk titled, *The danger of a single story*. She describes her views of a country and an entire culture based upon one movie. We introduce this talk by sharing that we often find ourselves filling in the unknown facts about people when we do not know the complex identity of a person or group and not pausing when our brains begin to make assumptions. Her story reminds us that we need to interrogate any story line not only for singularity but also the lens used to view others. One goal of cultural pluralism is for our students to understand how problematic it is to view a group of people from a deficit frame that can lead to uninterrupted biases.

Preservice teachers are asked to write down their takeaways or ah-ha moments when watching the video. Guiding prompts include:

- What does it mean to have a single story?
- Describe a time you viewed someone with a singular lens or story.
- Describe a time someone viewed you through a singular lens.
- What might happen if you consistently widen your frame/lens?

This video challenges our assumptions about others and reminds us to keep our biases in check before we act upon those biases. Widening our frame is critical to culturally sustaining practices that support a just education. The cognitive dissonance created from hearing diverse voices is intentional and necessary for reflection and growth. Having learners write a reflection with connections to their own personal experiences continues to widen their frames and interrupt implicit biases. A follow-up activity to guide students in beginning to recognize implicit biases is to complete the Harvard Implicit Bias Test to examine their self-awareness journey.

### **Pillar 3: Outreach**

The third pillar is Outreach and it also corresponds to the *CSP* of Cultural Pluralism, Linguistics, and Literacy. In the *2022 Revised Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards* document (Hurd, 2022), the first standard relates to middle school principles and practices. In this standard, preservice teachers must demonstrate developmentally responsive and equitable practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogies explore and embrace these notions to be accountable to their communities. Practices that engage preservice teachers in knowing more about their community and the world, enhance curriculum, and allow for more insights into helping them develop their own approaches to address social justice standards (Learning for Justice, 2016).

Four social justice anchor standards relate to identity, diversity, justice, and action. One of the specific standards relates to helping students analyze harmful impacts of bias and injustice in the world, historically and today. By exploring resources and interdisciplinary

connections that relate to bias and injustice, preservice teachers have a chance to become more aware of their world and their possible impact on it. When preservice teachers share their ideas and concerns, they build on their own transformative practices of integrating content with real-world issues and weaving them into their developing classroom cultures.

### ***Tool 1 - Individualized Professional Development: A Digital Network Toolkit***

The pillar of outreach begins with teachers engaging in their own personalized professional development, which can be experienced through individual experiences or collaborative opportunities. Preservice teachers are given specific topics to enhance their own learning experiences such as implicit bias, de-centering whiteness, social justice, equity literacy, culturally responsive teaching, and World Language Speakers/English Language Learners. The instructions are as follows. Students are put in teams of two or three. They each choose a topic and must locate four resources (a website or blog; a video or podcast, something out of our textbook, and a resource from the library) on the topic and record their findings. They each summarize their findings for each resource then select three pieces of advice to share. They then describe something they learned to express what it could look like in an actual classroom. Finally, they reflect on their findings with one or two other group members.

### ***Tool 2 - Critical-conscious Service Learning with Interdisciplinary Planning***

A second tool that can enhance outreach is critical-conscious service learning in local middle schools. Allowing preservice teachers to work in middle schools to create lessons that address social justice and service learning provides opportunities to reflect on culturally sustaining practices using literature in a practicum experience. Preservice teachers used the book *A Single Shard* (Park, 2011) to design and implement an interdisciplinary unit that brought knowledge about South Korea to a group of 6th graders. A member of the class was from South Korea so participants examined the student's experiences as the class read the book. Lessons included art, discussion, reflection, and personal narratives. Every lesson included a reflection element of how preservice teachers engaged and empowered students using social justice standards. After the experience, preservice teachers reflected on how students responded to the lessons and considered what aspects were most engaging and empowering.

When preservice teachers engage in service learning, they gather knowledge of how young adolescents learn, skills of managing students, and dispositions related to the value of relationships (Barnes & McCallops, 2019; McMurtrie et al., 2014). Balfanz (2009) notes, "Groups rather than individual service learning projects, encourage students to put their collective energy to use solving problems and helping others" (p. 9). In our role as faculty, the experiences we engage in with our students and partner districts empowers our preservice teachers to reflect on multiple layers of what it means to be a middle school teacher. When middle level programs incorporate service learning opportunities, preservice teachers develop leadership skills and reflect on practices they can take into their future classrooms.

### **Pillar 4: Communication**

Communication is the fourth pillar of culturally sustaining practices and relates to linguistics and literacy. The pillar of Communication is all-encompassing and plays a role in each of the three other pillars. Intrapersonal communication is a tool that can be used for the identity work in the pillar of Self, and interpersonal communication is a tool that can be used for both of the pillars of De-centering Whiteness and Outreach. In *The Successful Middle*

*School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), there are five essential attributes and 18 characteristics of successful middle schools that have been affirmed by AMLE, and communication is at the heart of each one. Communication should be responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging in order to create a safe space where culture is celebrated and accepted as the norm. It helps to build culture and community, plays a role in designing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and is an integral part of leadership and organization. As the fourth and final pillar for developing culturally sustaining practices that relate to preparing middle level preservice teachers, communication works in tandem with the other three pillars, sharing equal importance and bearing equal weight in the building of a foundation of equity, equality, and justice. On its own, however, there are two major functions of communication in the teaching and preparation of preservice middle level teachers: 1) as a means of disseminating information to the stakeholders (i.e., administrators, parents, students, and community), and 2) as a framework for building culturally sustaining pedagogies. The former ensures that the stakeholders are acknowledged as essential to the conceptualization of the middle level classroom; the latter ensures that the students are at the center of those conceptualizations. The following communication tools can be used in the classroom that supports developing culturally responsive practices that support growth in linguistics and literacy.

### ***Tool 1 - Table Talk Protocol to Develop Language and Literacy Sponsorship***

Sponsorship is a means to engage students in discourse analysis through sponsorship of new ways of communicating. “Sponsors are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy — and gain advantage by it in some way” (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). As instructors of preservice teachers, we must “enable, support, teach, and model” language and literacy sponsorship to our own students so that they can become positive sponsors themselves. One way to do this would be to encourage discussion, collaboration, and interactions through critical language pedagogy (Godley & Minnici, 2008) through using the *Table Talk Protocol* (MGI, 2020). Participants are placed in groups of three to four and invited to share their findings, their advice, chapter reviews, and their take-aways from their readings and their experiences. It is an effective way to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to share and discuss culturally sustaining practices and insights.

Incorporating critical language awareness activities on a regular basis allows preservice teachers to examine power structures and challenge dominant ideologies (Freire, 1970) to build upon culturally sustaining pedagogical practices. For some preservice teachers and their future students, the “cultural discontinuity” and “sociolinguistic interference” that they experience between their home and school languages, dialects, and means of communication are significant (Cazden, 1998, 2001). As language and literacy sponsors, higher education instructors and their preservice middle level teachers have the tools to engage students in critical language pedagogy to develop their awareness of cultural variance.

### ***Tool 2 – Metacognitive Reflection Stations***

According to Rychly and Graves (2012), culturally responsive teachers must have four characteristics. They must be 1) caring and empathetic, 2) reflective about their attitudes and beliefs about other cultures, 3) reflective about their own cultural frames of references, and 4) knowledgeable about other cultures. Given these characteristics, preservice teachers benefit

from the process of metacognitive reflection through tools such as reflection stations where they take part in activities such as research, journaling, creative outlets, and small group interactions. We often use a carousel activity to allow students to reflect on their topics. At the beginning of the year, preservice teachers create a culturally sustaining reflective journal. We post chart paper around the room and ask students to first define the four characteristics. Each group reflects with sticky notes, posts their thoughts then engages with one another in a discussion of their insights. We repeat this exercise at midterm and at the end of the semester. Each type of activity activates a different part of the brain which enables preservice teachers to identify these characteristics within themselves. This is not an easy task. Taking part in a metacognitive process asks preservice teachers to identify and acknowledge their influence on the emotional, physical, and social development of young adolescents. As middle level students begin to experience more of the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's (1992) Ecological Theory of Child Development, they start to learn more about—and therefore question—the systems in place. Using tools such as metacognitive reflection stations gives preservice teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own attitudes and beliefs about other cultures before asking their students to do the same.

Situating their preservice teaching philosophies within the constructs of middle level education needs to take into consideration child and adolescent development, which “has been rooted in white, heterosexual, male supremacy,” and even “the ‘forefathers’ of the middle school movement were largely white, middle class, men” (Harrison, Hurd, & Brinegar, 2019, p. 8). This is where the work begins.

### **Implications & Conclusions**

As education preparation programs continue this important work, these four pillars (Self, De-centering Whiteness, Outreach, and Communication) can be incorporated into the training of preservice middle level teachers as they transform their practice and become culturally sustaining teachers (Paris & Alim, 2017). As instructors of preservice teachers who focus on the importance and power of advocacy, we believe these pillars provide a framework for decision making around all aspects of successful middle schools. We recommend addressing the pillars in the order shared. Starting with self builds community, addressing the realities of how curriculum and our current educational systems are focused on white/Eurocentric views can lead our students into searching for ways to implement activities and experiences as part of outreach into the classrooms and the schools. And the final focus on communication helps our preservice teachers become and continue to focus on who they are and how they are interacting with one another, their students, their families, and the community. By engaging preservice teachers in this framework, we create intentional student-centered pedagogy that centers on building metacognitive awareness. Once preservice teachers feel comfortable with this framework, the hope is that they take these tools with them to create a similar metacognitive, student-centered curriculum in their own schools and classrooms.

We must be intentional about providing experiences that cause cognitive dissonance into lessons for teacher preservice teachers to learn and grow towards being culturally sustaining teachers. According to Andrews and Leonard (2018) students who evaluate their own thinking learn to consider their roles and positions of power and authority. Teachers of adolescents are grounded in teaching from a student-centered place. Being unintentional in our lesson planning in college courses can bring devastating consequences for future teachers who simply do not understand their students. We cannot teach preservice teachers who we cannot

reach. Professors may find they have more work to do to be able to appropriately lead course experiences that move their preservice teachers towards growing their culturally sustaining practices. They, too, must engage in professional development; the four pillars are an excellent way to begin.

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