Preparing Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Educators: Connecting Theory to Practice in a Teacher Education Program

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Abstract: This practice brief is written by two Black members of an IHE who instruct in a teacher preparation program. One author is an assistant professor in the department of education, and the other, is an adjunct faculty member and field supervisor for student teachers, longtime administrator, and adjunct faculty member at multiple IHEs. Additionally, both authors have contributed to the development of the CR-SE competencies adopted by their state department of education.

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Introduction

How can we teach pre-service teachers to be culturally relevant and sustaining educators (CR-SE) when many of the faculty and staff entrusted to develop student-teachers have never had formal training in CR-SE or informal life experiences that help them internalize related concepts? The authors acknowledge that some faculty and staff may be prepared to teach the CR-SE competencies, but it is also an acknowledgement that these competencies have just recently (e.g., Cole-Malott et al., 2021) been codified and developed in many states (e.g. Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022). Other states like Illinois and New York have only recently required similar competencies as well (Illinois State Board of Education, 2021; New York State Department of Education, n.d.). It is the belief of these authors that institutions of Higher Education (IHE) will need concrete practices that will help teacher education programs prepare their students to meet and demonstrate these competencies in a way that is impactful.

This practice brief is written by two Black members of an IHE, who instruct in a teacher preparation program. One author, Dr. M, is an assistant professor in the department of education and the other, Professor P, is an adjunct faculty member and field supervisor for student teachers, longtime administrator, and adjunct faculty member at multiple IHEs. It is also important to note that Professor P was an administrator for the same teacher preparation program where Dr. M is a faculty member. Additionally, both authors have contributed to the development of the CR-SE competencies adopted by their state department of education.

Dr. M and Professor P teach co-requisite courses, student teaching seminar and student teaching (field) course, for undergraduate and graduate students seeking pk-12 Special Education certification. To address the recent CR-SE competencies released by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the authors incorporated the competencies into their syllabi with an intentional connection between fieldwork and seminar. As a field supervisor, Professor P. does not work with all students in the seminar, however this article will present components that can be utilized by all student teaching supervisors in the future.

Course activities, assignments, and other pedagogical and content choices are only modifications. Simply put, the authors added language and outcomes to their syllabi, modified, and added activities to their courses to ensure that they were meeting CR-SE competencies. This article presents a course preparation and collaboration model for instructors teaching co-requisite courses such as a student teaching (field) course and a student teaching seminar. The model provides a coherent and complementary learning experience although elements of the authors' respective practices can be integrated into student teaching supervision or student teaching seminars, respectively.

Positionality Statement

As critical scholars, we acknowledge that our lived experiences influence our perspectives. Our lived experiences frame our approaches to teaching whether we are conscious of them or not. Any attempt to be culturally relevant requires understanding how one's culture influences our values and decisions. Therefore, attempts to describe CR-SE must be framed by the authors'

positionality. Here are critical pieces of our stories.

Rochelle (Professor P)

I am a Black GENX cisgender woman, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York who has lived in the whitest state in the nation (Vermont) and has called Philadelphia, PA home for 28+ years. Having experienced significant educational privileges in several different contexts, I gained an asset-based approach to education that is grounded by a critical theoretical framework. Initially trained as a Sociologist, I sought to understand how social agents and institutions influence students' educational experiences while serving as an administrator to assist students gain access to and thrive in higher education. After 18 years, primarily in administration and teaching occasionally, I began teaching pk-12 pre-service and in-service educators in Cultural Foundations of Education (a.k.a. Multicultural Education) and Urban Education courses; teaching Sociology and Sociology of Education to adults returning to college; and teaching first year college students justice-centered frameworks.

My experiences in educational spaces were consistently affirming as a student. As an educator, however, I found myself among very few educators who provided the crucial support marginalized students needed to thrive.

Trent (Dr. M)

I am a Black cisgender male that has experienced school in a variety of contexts as a student and educator. As a student, I was able to experience public and private education in both pk-12 and within higher education. My current role is an assistant professor in the department of education; however, prior to becoming a member of an IHE, I spent 12 years working in pk-12 educational settings in a variety of roles. My time as a special education teacher and administrator in rural, urban, and suburban contexts has shaped my perspective on equity in pk-12 schools. My experiences as a student and as a teacher have helped me to live and witness the inequalities that are both overt and covert within schools. For example, I have seen similar behaviors of students across all settings but noticed a marked disparity between the responses of educators. I found that schools in suburban areas provided responses to student behavior aligned with practices of restorative justice and trauma-informed pedagogy. In urban settings, I have seen behavioral responses that are punitive responses (e.g., suspensions, placement changes). In the different urban settings, I have seen restorative practices and trauma-informed pedagogy discussed and utilized in theory more than in practice.

I hold a bachelor's in psychology, master's in education and human development, and doctorate in special education with a minor in counseling. I believe in an ecological approach because our life experiences and interactions are influenced by a multitude of systems. Similarly, I believe in the social model of disability.

Theoretical Context

Theoretical constructs that guide our work are (1) *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, (2) *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*, (3) *Critical Race Theory and (4) DisCrit.* Education that is Culturally Sustaining perpetuates and fosters linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (Paris, 2012). It is the expectation that teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy which requires them to be culturally competent to support student academic achievement and their development of

critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2009). Finally, Culturally Relevant Sustaining Educational (CR-SE) practice acknowledges how institutionalized and systemic racism and other forms of oppression contribute to inequalities within education (Adams et al., 2022; Delgado, 1995).

DisCrit is a theory that combines Critical Race Theory and Disabilities Studies (Annamma et al., 2016). Critical Race Theory states, "racism is not a series of isolated acts, but it is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally and even psychologically" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.52). Disabilities Studies rejects the deficit focus of the medical model and views disability as "…a social phenomenon as well as a civil/human rights issue (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 269)". Annamma, et al. (2016) developed this intersectional framework with the intention for scholars to disrupt and illuminate inequalities in the field of education.

What You/We Can Do
Teacher preparation programs can make meaningful adjustments to their student-teaching and seminar experience that will help pre-service teachers practically and theoretically understand how to integrate CR-SE competencies into their coursework. We will outline how student-teaching field and seminar co-requisite courses can integrate CR-SE competencies into their curricula.

Student-Teaching Field Supervision
In an attempt to integrate CR-SE Competencies outlined in the Pennsylvania Department of Education *Culturally-Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) Program Framework Guidelines* (2022) into the Student Teaching (Field) Course, the learning outcomes in Table 1 were added or adapted as follows:

Table 1
Student Teacher (Field) Course CR-SE Related Learning Outcomes

LEARNING OUTCOMES	
1. Increase Culturally Relevant-Sustaining Educator Competency in two (2) areas	2. Increase knowledge of, at least, one cultural group represented in your classroom
3. Plan, implement and evaluate effective lessons that target specific skills, knowledge of content, and incorporate multiple perspectives that capitalize on learners' real-world experiences, identities, and heritage.	4. Identify, access, and evaluate instructional resources, including but not limited to culturally responsive/relevant resources and use these materials to assist in preparing for and delivering instruction

We made these new and adapted outcomes for the Student Teaching (Field) Course in preparation for Spring 2024 courses. Since the competencies, released in November 2022, are to be integrated into education preparation programs no later than the 2024-25 academic year, the authors made adaptations to syllabi under the assumption that the majority of Spring 2024 teacher candidates will be introduced to the competencies for the first time during their student teaching period. Therefore, it was

important to limit expectations for increased competency in the Student Teaching (Field) Course to a maximum of two competencies. Teacher candidates will identify areas of growth with the assistance of the instructor and, minimally, deepen their knowledge of their students' identities and cultural heritages. This increased knowledge will strengthen relationships with students and families and be used to inform planning and instruction that connects to learners' daily lives and cultural backgrounds (Muniz, 2020)-CRSE 3 *Design and Facilitate Culturally Relevant Learning that Brings Real World Experiences into Educational Spaces* (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022).

The following adjustments were made to student-teacher supervision with both the original and new course learning outcomes in mind.

Culturally Relevant-Sustaining Education (CR-SE) Self-Assessment
Although the CR-SE Self-Assessment can be used as a pre- and post-assessment tool for any course integrating the CR-SE competencies, the self-assessment tool was initially created as a pre- and post-assessment for the Student Teaching field course. The self-assessment tool is designed to allow teacher candidates to rate their knowledge, skill and attitudes related to each indicator for the nine CR-SE Competencies on a Likert scale of 1-3:
1=Rarely/Never
2=Often but not consistently
3=Always, consistently and thoroughly

Table 2
CR-SE Competency Self-Assessment Sample

PDE Competency Indicator	Some examples of evidence	1	2	3
CRSE1.A Reflect on their own life experiences and membership to various identity groups (race, skin color, ethnicity, gender identity, age, nationality, language, class, economic status, ability, level of education, sexual orientation, and religion).	They ask themselves how these aspects of identity influence their beliefs about others in the practice of critical self-awareness.			
CRSE2.C Identify literature and professional learning opportunities for themselves to understand more about the manifestations of racism and other biases at institutional and structural levels that can result in disadvantaging some groups of learners, educators, educational leaders, and families while privileging others.	**Intentionally** identify literature and professional learning opportunities for themselves to understand more about the manifestations of racism and other (biases) **forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism)** at institutional and structural levels that can result in disadvantaging some groups of learners, educators, educational leaders, and families while privileging others.			

After agreeing to collaborate, both instructors decided that to time the self-assessment to be completed in the first two weeks of the student teaching seminar course after an overview of all competencies. The pre-assessment would be completed before the student teaching (field) course begins (two weeks after

seminar begins) and as a post-assessment at the end of the student teaching seminar.

Upon first administration of the tool, the University Supervisor, Professor P., and her teacher candidates would also use the self-assessment to identify indicators of two competencies to target in the student's professional learning plan during the student teaching period (see Table 1, Outcome 1). Therefore, teacher candidates would complete the CR-SE competency self-assessment twice and use the information in both courses.

Culture of Study Project

Students were to self-select a culture represented in their classroom to study and set goals for how they will use the new information in their practice during the student teaching period. For example, the teacher candidate might choose to integrate new knowledge in one-two observed lessons; integrate knowledge into a Math, Reading or other subject learning activity; and/or use the information to strengthen connection with their students' family members.

The University Supervisor will help the student identify strategies during pre- and post-observation conferences.

This project consisted of completing a cultural profile in their host classroom, completing targeted journal entries and a self-selected activity related to their culture of study to demonstrate increased knowledge of, at least, one culture in their host classroom (see Table 1, Outcome 2).

The cultural profile is a narrative that describes the number and or percentages of students who represent diverse races, ethnicities, nationalities, immigrant statuses, genders, neighborhood, and other identity markers represented by the students in the host classroom. This profile development helps the teacher candidate get to know students and inform the teacher candidate's decision about a culture the candidate will study (culture of study) during the student teaching experience.

Select Journal entry prompts (see Table 3) have been designed to help the student teacher record and reflect on what they are learning about their students and themselves and in doing so, demonstrate increased knowledge of a culture with which they have low to no previous knowledge.

Table 3
Sample Journal Prompts

Week	Topic	Journal Entry
Week #2	*Teacher Social Location*	*In your entry for this week, answer questions below:* 1. Where (country, state, city,) were you born? 2. What language(s) or dialect(s) were spoken in your home? 4. Describe the neighborhood where you grew up. 5. What is your race or ethnic heritage? 6. Was religion/spirituality considered important during your upbringing? If yes, what was said or done that makes you believe it was important? 7. Who makes up your family? 8. What traditions does your family follow? 9. What values does your family consider most meaningful? 10. How do the members of your family relate to each other?

Week #4	*Planning & Preparation*	In preparation for the observed lesson, think about the real-world experiences, identities, and cultural heritages represented in your host classroom.
		1. Identify 1-2 experiences, identities and/or cultures that you want to integrate into your lesson.
		2. What has happened in the classroom that influenced your desire to integrate those experiences, identities and/or cultures into your lesson?

Lesson Plans

Lesson plans for the student teaching field course are to be written for every lesson, and in the university approved format. Plans must be reviewed and signed by the cooperating teacher before submission to the instructor; and a short-written reflection is required after implementation of each lesson. To integrate CR-SE competency development, a requirement was added for Professor P's students to "incorporate multiple perspectives that capitalize on learners' real-world experiences, identities, and heritages", minimally, in the 4 observed lessons and ideally, in all lessons (see Table 1, Outcome 3).

This adaptation to lesson planning assignments requires the student teacher to identify at least one CR-SE competency demonstrated in each of 4 observed lessons which will further refine their focus on multiple perspectives, real-world perspectives, identities, and heritages that also increase the cultural competency of their students. For example, in a family tree lesson, the teacher candidate would consider that there are adopted children, children in foster care, experiencing housing insecurity, and those with same gender caregivers/parents in their classroom. Teacher candidates would plan to model a family tree that reflects multiple family structures. The resources to accompany the lesson e.g. media, books, audio, pictures would also include, but are not limited to, multiple family structures, racial/ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, abilities and disabilities, religious diversity, and more. The list is endless, but what is most important is that over the course of time the multiple identities in that classroom will be represented in lessons.

Student-Teaching Special Education Seminar

Dr. M teaches a senior seminar that is a co-requisite for student teaching in a special education setting. This seminar builds teacher candidates' knowledge of special education as they are fully immersed in a special education field placement. The course has assignments that the teacher candidate is expected to implement in their field experiences to help connect theory to practice. This course is rich with opportunities to develop culturally responsive and sustaining educators. While this is the final course of teacher candidate's programs of study, it can be an opportunity to prepare future educators in practical ways.

Assignments related to student teaching seminars were enhanced from previously used syllabi for this course. The assignments are a CR-SE self-assessment and an "enhanced" Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Positive Behavioral Support Plan (PBSP).

CR-SE Self-Assessment

The purpose of the self-assessment in the seminar, developed by Professor P, is to introduce the CR-SE competencies to all

teacher candidates and provide them with data to be included in their professional development plan. This professional development plan is part of a student's senior portfolio that requires teacher candidates to develop a plan to address areas of growth based on their student-teaching experiences, feedback, observations, and self-reflection. The goal of this pre- and post- self-assessment is to prepare teacher candidates with an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in CR-SE as they prepare to enter the field.

Enhanced FBA/PBSP

Students in Dr. M's seminars were expected to complete narratives for a (functional behavioral assessment) FBA and corresponding positive behavioral support plan (PBSP) for a focus student in their field placement. While these assignments are not intended to be completed with students that have active FBAs and PBSPs in place, the intent of the assignment is for students to learn how to gather information on a student's behavior and craft a personalized behavioral plan to meet the hypothesized function of the behavior of concern. This project is a necessity for future special educators, and it is an assignment that is connected to state competencies for special education. The assignment is a great place for students to understand the implications of the medical model on how we engage in the development of special education documents. This is an opportunity for teacher candidates to learn how to complete the necessary work of a special education teacher; while also engaging in the tension of the reality that we (intentionally or unintentionally) are creating a plan that is centered on a deficit model. While a strong FBA takes into consideration the environment and gathers information from

sources across different settings, the outcome posits that a problem rests within the child and behavior of concern needs to be addressed. This assignment was revised to better reflect the social model of disability.

For this assignment, teacher candidates were expected to gather direct and indirect data on their focus child. This is done through interviews and direct observations. Additionally, they were expected to engage in research to find best practices related to their indirect and direct assessment. To enhance this assignment teacher candidates were asked, "how are you going to reject the medical model?" Specifically, students will be expected to consider school system, structure, teacher, interactions, community/family, and historical implications of the identified disability as well as the racial background of the child. This will help the teacher candidate develop a PBSP that is not solely focused on "fixing" a behavior.

This DisCrit framework outlined in this practice brief underpins the need for the adjustments made by Dr. M to his seminar course assignments. The enhancements to the Functional Behavioral Assessment and Positive Behavior Support Plan challenges the deficit view often associated with behavior. Additionally, the enhancements take into consideration the historical context for disability and the legal implications on practice.

Student-Teaching and Seminar Integration

In the Student Teaching Seminar, we added the CR-SE Self-Assessment. Teacher candidates were asked to assess their level of competency on each indicator of Nine CR-SE competencies as outlined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2022) during the two weeks prior to

beginning their student teaching field experience.

While all seminar students were provided with an overview of the competencies and completed the CR-SE Self-Assessment prior to and after the student teaching period, Professor P identified the competencies she indicates as an area in which each individual teacher candidate she supervises needed further development. Together, the teacher candidate and supervisor (Professor P) determined the two areas the teacher candidate should focus on to increase their competency during student teaching. The supervisor then gathered or pointed the student to resources (such as articles, book chapters, videos, events) to support the student's development during the 13-week period.

If a teacher preparation program employs multiple faculty and staff for student-teacher supervision and seminar instruction, we recommend clear communication between seminar instructors and supervisors. There should be a unified plan between instructors that intentionally incorporates CR-SE competencies. It is equally critical to manage the student perception of power as the faculty and staff may have different roles within the department (e.g., tenured faculty, adjunct faculty). A united front will help manage student expectations and demonstrate cohesion on the integration of the CR-SE competencies.

Conclusion

Faculty and staff at IHEs that are engaging in this work need to demonstrate the CR-SE competencies. We recommend that faculty members working with preservice teachers also engage in self-reflection on how they are meeting the competencies and areas they need to grow in as educators. Both

instructors are committed to incorporating all competencies into our practice and to facilitating our students' competency development. We unequivocally contend that you can only facilitate CR-SE competency development among your students if you exercise and develop your own CR-SE competency.

While only Professor P's students engaged in every activity outlined in this article, ideally, every university supervisor would have an overview of the competencies, examples of evidence of each competency, add the 4 learning outcomes into their syllabi, develop assignments to meet those outcomes, and be trained to use the self-assessment tool as outlined here so that every student teacher will benefit fully from integration of CR-SE competencies into both courses.

Additionally, professional development for all faculty, and staff who work with pre-service teachers should be complemented by leadership that is grounded in the competencies to allow for greater accountability, self-reflection and, therefore, increase the CR-SE competency of entire departments, programs, and schools of education.

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