

# Swimming upstream

PREPARING FUTURE TEACHERS TO EFFECTIVELY  
AND COMPASSIONATELY TEACH LATINO/A  
CHILDREN

*Claudia Peralta, Ph.D.*

Bilingual Department  
Boise State University  
claudiaperalta@boisestate.edu

*Patricia A. Whang, Ph.D.*

California State University, Monterey Bay  
Patricia\_whang@csumb.edu

## RESUMEN

Como educadoras, luchamos para preparar a nuestros estudiantes de práctica docente, predominantemente anglosajones, a enseñar con eficacia y compasión a niños latinos. Con este fin, diseñamos una secuencia de lecciones que ofrecieron la oportunidad de explorar, no solo el potencial existente en el aprendizaje de las vidas dentro y fuera de las escuelas de los estudiantes latinos, sino también el valor de incorporar lo aprendido en lecciones contextualizadas en el aprendizaje cultural. Un análisis crítico del trabajo, de las discusiones transcritas y de los apuntes de nuestros alumnos será utilizado para examinar las ventajas y los retos que se presentaron en respuesta a nuestros esfuerzos de preparar, con más eficacia, a los estudiantes de práctica docente, como futuros educadores de niños y niñas cultural y lingüísticamente diversos.

**Palabras clave:** diversidad cultural, diversidad lingüística, lecciones contextual y culturalmente relevantes, riqueza de conocimiento, scaffolding

## ABSTRACT

As teacher educators, we struggled to prepare our predominantly white teacher education students to effectively and compassionately teach Latino/a children. We designed a stream of lessons that afforded preservice teachers an opportunity to explore the potential inherent in learning about the in- and out-of- school lives of Latino students, and the power of incorporating what they learned into culturally and contextually relevant lessons. A critical analysis of our students' work, transcribed discussions, and

field notes will be used to examine the benefits and challenges that arose in response to our efforts to more effectively prepare future educators to teach linguistically and culturally diverse populations.

**Keywords:** cultural and linguistically diverse, contextually and culturally relevant, Scaffolding, Stream of lessons

What you are about to read is grounded in the desire to make a beneficial difference in the living and learning of linguistically and culturally diverse populations. We will use the following observations, conducted while Patty was supervising a multiple-subject credential student, to establish the need for the pedagogical practices that are at the heart of this study. The demographics of this school, located in Mer<sup>1</sup>, California, is 43 percent Latino/a, 20 percent white, 10 percent African American, and 24 percent Asian/Pacific Islander (California Department of Education [CDE], s.f.). Furthermore, and according to the same source, 79 percent of the students receive a free or reduced lunch.

#### ■ Testing the water before jumping in: A true story

On this particular day I happened to be supervising a student who had a field-placement in a local public school. The social studies lesson on maps was being taught by the regular classroom teacher. Before turning on the audio tape that would read the section in the textbook that the students would be following along with, the teacher thought to check the students' background knowledge of the material to be covered. The focus of this lesson was on a map of Boston, Massachusetts. She asked this primarily Latino/a class whether they knew where Fanneuil Hall, Beacon Hill, or the Boston Tea Party ship was. When no one responded, she gave a hint, "it starts with an 'M'." Suddenly hands were waving in the air and shouts of "Mexico" erupted from the students. "No, it's in the United States." Then confident shouts of "Mer" rang around the room. Frustrated, the teacher walked to the front of the room, pulled down a large map of the United States and said "No, we're going to be learning about Massachusetts." As she pointed to the state that was far from the known reality of these children, I could

not help but think that this teacher might have well have been teaching about Mars.

This lesson was less than ideal as a vehicle for learning for a number of reasons. First, if the students had no prior schema for Boston or Massachusetts, the ability to associate the information with prior knowledge so that it is more likely to be recalled is lessened. Also, the lack of prior schema lessens the likelihood of higher order thinking taking place. Moreover, if what one is teaching holds little meaning or allure, then attention can be negatively impacted, as well as motivation to learn the subject matter. The potency of this last point becomes apparent when one considers what might have happened if this lesson on maps had used Mexico or Mer as its basis. Drawing upon prior knowledge may have been especially important for easing the transition for those children who are adjusting to a new language, culture, and way of life (Collier, 2002). Doing so would be consistent with Gay's (2000) suggestion that teachers use the "cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Similarly, Cummins' (1986) pedagogy of empowerment, Trueba's (1987) cultural learning, as well as Tharp and Gallimore's (1989) cultural view of providing instructional assistance or guidance uphold the importance of respect for and integration of students' values, beliefs, histories and experiences. Students are also recognized as needing to play an active role in the learning process.

We have characterized our call for culturally and contextually relevant lessons as requiring "swimming upstream," because more work is required on the part of the educator. For example, as apparent from the Massachusetts map lesson, the textbook companies make it easy to go with the flow. Consider that the teacher does not even have to read to the students, they just have to turn on the audiotape. Culturally and contextually relevant lessons, however, require that teachers avail themselves of multiple opportunities for exposure to the lives and points of view of children (Sleeter, 1992; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992). This exposure should afford a deep understanding of the teaching practices in the children's homes and communities, their cultural stories, life experiences, as well as the urgent concerns or triumphs that texture

lives. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, Cochran (1993) has called for teacher educators to help preservice teachers examine the contexts they will be working and develop opportunities for appreciating insiders' perspectives on their communities. This should be done in concert with offering preservice teachers opportunities to confront and evaluate personal assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and communities that are different from their own, as well as create curriculum and engage in pedagogical practices that respect local cultures.

The question that served as the impetus for this study was "how can we help teachers to realize the power and potency of culturally and contextually relevant lessons?" Our attempts to answer this inquiry resulted in the design of a stream of lessons that scaffolded our students' exploration and incorporation of local cultures and contexts into lessons. We will work to make visible "the meaning" preservice teachers made of working through the sequence of assignments. Such efforts warrant consideration, because recent directives and legislation seem designed to assure that "new teachers will not be equipped to understand the majority of their students linguistically, culturally or academically" (Katz & Kohl, 2002, p. 7). We hope that our efforts provide other teacher educators with concrete ideas for resisting the "escalating attacks on multiculturalism and linguistic diversity, which are disingenuously conducted in the name of children's best interests" (Katz & Kohl, 2002, p. 7). The educational trend in California, as well as other states like Texas, is that teaching to the tests and test preparation are "usurping" a substantive curriculum, and this testing is divorced from children's experience and culture, while widening the educational gap between rich and poor, and between mainstream and language learners (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001).

### ■ The "swimmers"

Instructors and Researchers

Our collaboration began when Claudia taught a social foundations course, and Patty a psychological foundations course to the same cohort of preservice teachers. Important considerations that influenced our decision to work together included similar commitments to preparing effective teachers who are committed

to understanding and validating students' culture and "world" knowledge. Furthermore, we were willing to take pedagogical risks as a means to achieving greater understanding of theories and concepts that we were mutually responsible for teaching. We also recognized the importance of "practicing what we preached." Thus, we were attempting to model the transgression of the usual practice of teachers working in isolation and the typical decontextualization of learning from the real world and the lives of students. Lastly, we wanted to model working within and against state mandates.

We took this opportunity to collaborate and design a stream of assignments that served as the focus of this study. We considered them to be "bridge" assignments because they were required for both of our courses, though different elements of the assignments were graded for each of the two courses.

## Students

The cohort in this study was composed of two white males, nine white females, two Latino males, six Latina females, and one African American female. The make-up of this cohort was atypical. A typical cohort consists primarily of white, monolingual females with one or two white males, and two or three Latinas/os. We believe that some of the bilingual students may have selected this cohort because they were aware that it would be taught by two professors of color, one of whom spoke Spanish.

All of the students were enrolled in a fifth year multiple subject credential program that is intensive, requires field placement and takes one year to complete. Because of the focus and commitments of the program, all placements were in schools that served culturally and linguistically diverse populations from low to middle socioeconomic status families.

## ■ Assignments

The stream of assignments that we developed represents our commitments to developing an appreciation for the in- and out-of-school lives of students, especially those who bring linguistic and cultural diversity to a classroom. Moreover, we wanted the preservice teachers to experience both the power of project based

learning that is contextualized within the local community and the worth of designing curriculum that affords seamlessness between the lives of students. We wanted to affirm the experiences and lived histories of the students, their families and the communities in which they live, and give voice to the students' own personal histories, which are often silent in the classrooms because their stories do not match those of the dominant culture. The following three assignments reflect our attempts to both uphold state mandates and make good on our commitments.

#### The Multiple-I Child Study x 2 Assignment

This assignment required preservice teachers to select two students from their field placement. One of them was to be an English language learner and the other a behavioral challenge<sup>2</sup>. The assignment was structured so that the preservice teachers had to create thick, rich descriptions of the students' neighborhoods, the school, and the classroom. Then, based on interviews with teacher, parent, and child, they were to write about the child from each of these perspectives, hence the multiple I's. Next, based on their observations as a participant observer, preservice teachers were asked to analyze the child's experiences in school. During this section, it was important not only to draw upon readings to justify and advocate the points being made, but also to take into consideration what interviewees shared. Based on their research, preservice teachers were required to write a letter, which they were invited to send, describing concrete recommendations for one of the two children observed. The final requirement of this task was a guided reflection about both their experiences with this assignment and the ways in which it might inform their future practice as educators.

#### The Culturally and Contextually Relevant Research Assignment

Inspired by Ayers (2001), this second assignment required preservice teachers to develop an authentic, urgent, and personally meaningful question about the world. Then they had to go out and find an answer to the question by getting close to it so as to better understand how it impacts lives and the sorts of community resources that are available. Our intention was that the Multiple-I Child Study would serve as the basis for developing an

understanding of the sorts of questions that would be authentic, urgent, and personally meaningful, given the contexts and cultures that texture and contextualize the lives of the students in their field placement. After brainstorming and narrowing down the questions, preservice teachers formed groups based on common interests. One group prompted by the fact that their field placement schools were surrounded by agricultural fields, on which helicopters frequently spray pesticides, wanted to learn more about the impact of pesticides on health. Knowing that the majority of the schools' population rode buses to and from school, a second group posed a question about the impact of bus fumes on student health. The other two groups focused on immigration issues and the ramifications of the lack of affordable housing in the area.

An emphasis was placed on learning more about the focus issue by engaging in relevant activities that required seeing, touching and feeling. Students were required to obtain multiple perspectives on the issue and to use a variety of research methods. We wanted their research to be as community based as possible, as opposed to being driven by information that could be found in books, articles, or the Internet. Once questions were developed and the research conducted, the groups compiled their findings and reflections in scrapbooks.

### Culturally and Contextually Relevant Curriculum Development Assignment

As the final assignment, preservice teachers were asked to design a stream of lessons based on the topic researched in the scrapbook and reflective of the insights gained from engaging in project based learning contextualized in the local community. To help the preservice teachers become familiar with the wealth of lessons available on the topics, we asked them to begin with a benchmark lesson and modify it. We felt that this was important because this experience would serve to remind teachers that they do not have to reinvent the wheel when designing curriculum, on account of the great wealth of lessons available. Furthermore, this provided them with a structured activity to modify lessons reflective of an understanding of their students, the local communities, and state standards.

## ■ Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected throughout the semester and included documentation from the three main assignments: copies of case studies, scrapbooks, and units or stream of lessons. Other data included relevant journal reflections, assignments, and transcribed audio tapes of preservice teachers' participation and discussions in class activities. Field notes were also taken by the visiting instructor during relevant class activities. Each data segment presented here was taken *verbatim* from the written work and oral participation, and was marked with both the preservice teacher's pseudonym (no actual names were used) and date of the entry.

We began by analyzing the case studies and journal entries that revealed the preservice teachers' interactions with the students. At the end of the semester, we examined the scrapbooks, streams of lessons, and audio tapes recorded during class activities and oral presentations. The analysis will focus on the "meaning" preservice teachers made as a result of their working through all of the assignments. Specifically, the data were reviewed to identify evidence of preservice teachers' understanding of the importance of creating contextually and relevant curriculum.

As we read the data, several analytical categories were evident, and further analysis revealed that the emerging themes folded into three of the five principles used by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence [CREDE] (<http://crede.berkeley.edu/>). This federally research program focuses on improving the educational opportunities of students whose prospects are challenged by their race, poverty, cultural barriers, or geographical location. Thus, our commitment in preparing effective teachers who recognize diversity as an asset aligns with theirs:

1. Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences in home, community and school;
2. Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.

Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences in home, community and school

Having students get close to the question by seeing, touching and feeling it and then documenting the process in a variety of ways (Ayers, 2001) clearly provided preservice teachers with a

wider understanding of the communities and available resources for answering their questions. One group framed their question around the impact of pesticides on health because the school was surrounded by agricultural fields. Joaquín, who is a Mexican immigrant, contacted a representative from California Rural Legal Assistance to learn what services they provided. He was surprised by the large amount of written information available to field workers on the impact of pesticides on their health. Joaquín learned that the program provided support by finding health resources for families. Liz, another member of the group, discovered that the Healthy School Act of 2000 states: “Prior to a pesticide application, the school must post notification 24 hours prior to an application and 72 hours after the application.” This took her by surprise since she had grown up and attended the schools in the area, yet had never seen any posting. In her final statement she pondered, “How come we are building schools around agricultural fields [after all we know about their harm]?” (Scrapbook, pets peg 31).

The group focusing on immigration asked, “Why do people immigrate to the U.S. and to [city of the study]?” They also inquired, “Where do they immigrate from and what happens to them once they get here?” Ismael, a Mexican immigrant himself, interviewed members of the field workers community who are immigrants, and asked them about the problems they faced and their reasons for immigrating. He commented that these interviews “are really informative and from the heart” realizing that we are surrounded by resources that are often untapped when teaching the curriculum. He pointed out that many of the students who he works with often wondered “who they are” because they hear labels such as “immigrant,” “illegal immigrant,” and “undocumented,” and how this labeling reality is rarely explored in the schools. He shared that when he becomes a teacher he would invite immigrants to the class to speak about their experiences, stories and triumphs (class discussion).

Another member of the group visited the Medi-Cal agency and learned that previously undocumented pregnant mothers were receiving services, but that this is no longer the case. The only way that the agency would help them is if they were hurt, for example, if they needed to abort because the pregnancy is harmful. She then

visited a lawyer and inquired about the possibilities for becoming a documented immigrant. Sadly, at this point, the only avenues are to marry a citizen, or to be requested by a member of the family who is a citizen. Such information devastated the preservice teacher, and in her oral reflection she wondered how many students knew this information and how it could be included in the curriculum. She also interviewed a community member who works for the Community Action Board, an agency that deals with fair housing, living wage campaign, among other topics, and learned about resources such as classes for English language learners, and counseling services offered by the Immigration Project.

These experiences offered preservice teachers the opportunity to hear the realities of an often-dismissed sector of the population, as well as placing value on the resources available within the community. They began to realize the importance of including issues in the curriculum that are faced by many of their Latino students. Furthermore, they began to question the disparities of opportunities, accesses, and experiences that existed between their own lives and the lives of the students who they were working with. In many ways, issues such as the right to a shelter, medical care or food —that are not often embraced in the curriculum— were beginning to surface during classroom conversations.

Challenge students toward cognitive complexity

Under this theme, three sub-themes emerged: a) Difficulties utilizing nontraditional pedagogical practices, b) more complex understanding of teaching, and c) working with English language learners.

### *Difficulties utilizing nontraditional pedagogical practices*

As faculty members we understood the importance of utilizing nontraditional pedagogical practices as an avenue to engage university students to link the purpose of schooling to critical citizenship. We also believed that by engaging preservice teachers in nontraditional pedagogical practices, we were affording the marginalized population, Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Latinas/os an opportunity to articulate themselves as subjects through their own personal struggles, language and other members of the community. Furthermore, we believed that the experience would

encourage preservice teachers to help students gain a wider membership in a democratic society.

During a class discussion, Dan, a preservice teacher placed in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, excitedly thanked us. He shared that he understood what we meant, “because when you introduce a subject to the students, they need to touch it, feel it, smell it and then you can build from there” (class discussion). He shared that he had stood in front of his class and asked students, “What is global warming?” and got no response. Then he asked, “What is air pollution?” and a few students responded. But it was not until he asked, “What is bus exhaust?” that everyone had something to say. He pointed out that by starting with the local, students would eventually understand what global warming meant. He became aware of the fact that everyone had had an experience riding a bus and everyone could contribute, however he realized that often, local knowledge is not included or explored. Dan shared that he actually sat before school started and waited for the buses to come in, and that he rode the bus to get a first-hand experience.

Difficulty framing questions that were authentic, urgent and personally meaningful was evident when the affording housing group presented their initial attempts at research. Initially, the group reported on interviews conducted with two realtors within the wealthiest areas, and shared a brochure published by them. At this point, we realized that we needed to help the group reframe the question, “What is affordable housing?” Asking about the subject didn’t seem to push them to get closer to their inquiry, touch it, feel it, thus we scaffold their understanding by helping them think what they were interested in learning, understanding. They eventually realized that they wanted to learn the ramifications that affordable housing had on their students. Eventually they got involved with a local community agency that is building affordable housing through community support.

### *More complex understanding of teaching*

Dan concluded that many teachers saw themselves as being responsible for helping students fit into the mainstream of American culture, and that this translated into the use of strategies aimed to compensate for deficiencies. After several observations and conversations with students, Dan became painfully aware that even

though 48 of the 50 students in the class came from Mexico, there were no artifacts reflecting their Mexican culture. Moreover, he shared that often students nostalgically recounted the games they played and the dances they performed in Mexico. It was here that Dan wondered where were the bridges to help students cross over into the mainstream (case study, analysis). He then set out to create lessons that integrated the culture of the students and made an effort to collaborate with the Master Teacher addressing these connections.

### *Working with English Language Learners*

Rosana studied Graciela, a girl from Mexico who was biliterate but who was behind in her academic development. Rosana learned that Graciela really enjoyed school, and had high aspirations: she wanted to be a doctor and grow up to help her mother with her chores. In her analysis Rosana confessed that she had selected Graciela because she wanted to see “how long she would stay in school” since last year she had missed 90 days. She acknowledged that when she first contacted the parents, she was a little scared because she truly believed they didn’t care. When visiting with the mom she learned that Graciela missing school was not a choice, rather a necessity. The father had lost his job, and they went to Washington for seasonal fruit picking. Afterwards, because he couldn’t find a job in the states, they returned to Mexico for three months. The mom asked for tips on how to help Graciela, and Rosana suggested reading to her in Spanish. After this initial home visit, she noticed that Graciela kept asking for books because “now her mom and dad were reading to her.” “I really thought this family did not care, but after getting to know the family, I realized how much they really care. No one had told them that it was important to read to their children in their native language” (I-Child Study).

During a class discussion, Roger shared how he came to realize the importance of learning how to communicate with parents of English language learners. He pointed out that his first attempt at communication with parents was unsuccessful. He attributed the lack of response to the fact that he had only sent the home visit form for parents to sign. The second letter, which was translated, and in which he introduced himself, produced a greater

response. He reflected on the importance of knowing each child's background and especially of making connection with parents. Moreover, in a letter to the teacher regarding one of the children he studied, Roger recommended:

Finally, I think it would be beneficial for you to set up a meeting with his parents and other support staff. This would help you to come up with a plan to help his classroom behavior and homework completion. Having all the influential people in Jesus' life working together for a common goal can only help the situation. (letter)

Roger had visited the child's home, and in the oral discussion he further reflected how much he appreciated the opportunity to converse with the parents. He began to understand the role that families play in the educational field and how collaboration among teachers and parents can help create a class environment that is effective for the students.

Such reflections show how these experiences broadened preservice teachers' responsibilities. They were no longer wondering why they had to engage in all of the assignments, but they were instead asking: How can I, as the teacher, assure that my students' experiences are being validated?

## ■ Conclusion

The reason we were so committed to this experience were several, but two of the foremost are that we strongly believe that teachers unexamined attitudes and beliefs about the perceived "deficiencies" of Latino students and their families contributes to students' academic failure (Díaz & Flores, 2001). Furthermore, it is well known that once preservice teachers join the workforce, they will most likely rely on their own comfort zone, using the same strategies and models of teaching used by their teachers (O'Loughlin, 1995). Thus, creating opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in reflective experiences and creating curriculum is a way of disrupting these assumptions, and including local knowledge.

Secondly, we believe that for preservice teachers to gain critical understanding of the socioeconomic and political conditions of their students' lives, opportunities for dialogue need to be provided, and the knowledge gained should lead to action. Scaffolding

preservice teachers through this “consciousness” not only means the creation of assignments affording opportunities for dialogue, but it also means the creation of dialogical spaces within the classroom where their own experiences can be shared.

Third, we recognized that making transparent our collaboration would help disrupt the notions that teaching is done in isolation and it is decontextualized. Building trust and relationships translated in “hearing” preservice teachers’ perspectives, concerns and questions. We engaged in critical conversations to ensure that they were actively involved in the construction of knowledge and we modeled how a contextualized curriculum was created. We worked hard to disrupt what Martin (2000) refers to as “aerial distance” or the intellectual practice of maintaining too great a distance from objects of study, thus allowing pain, suffering, and horror to remain abstract. But perhaps most importantly was the shift on preservice teachers’ perception of the importance of knowing their students and its impact in adapting the unique characteristics of a particular community to create curriculum that addressed the interests and needs of the students while providing experiences in problem solving and fostering critical thinking.

## REFERENCES

- Ayers, W. (2001). *To Teach: The journey of a teacher*. NY: Teacher’s College Press.
- California Department of Education. (s.f.). *Academic Performance Index (API) Data Files*. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/>
- Cochran, M. (1993). *The International Handbook of Child Care Policies and Programs*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Collier, M.D. (2002). Changing the face of teaching: Preparing educators for diverse settings. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29, 49-59.
- Cummins, J. (1986). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(1), 18-36.
- Díaz, E. & Flores, B. (2001). Teacher as sociocultural, Sociohistorical mediator, Teaching to the potential. In M. Reyes & J. J. Halcón (Eds.), *The best for our children. Critical perspectives on literacy for Latino students* (pp. 29-47). New York, N.Y: Teachers College Press.

- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research and practice*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Katz, S., & Kohl, H. (2002, December 9). Banishing bilingualism. *The Nation*, 275, 6-7.
- Martin, J. R. (2000). *Coming of age in academe: Rekindling women's hopes and reforming the academy*. New York: Routledge.
- McNeil, L. & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In M. Kornhaber & G. Orfield (Eds), *The high effects of high stakes testing on minority youth* (pp. 127-150). NY: Century Foundation.
- O'Loughlin, M. (1995). Daring the imagination: Unlocking voices of dissent and possibility in teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 34, 107-116.
- Sleeter, C. E. (1992). *Keepers of the American Dream: A study of staff development and multicultural education*. Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press.
- Tharp, R. G. & Gallimore, R. (1989). *Challenging cultural minds*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Trueba, H. (1987). *Success or failure? Learning and the language minority students*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Veléz-Ibañez, C. & Greenberg, J. B. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S.-Mexican households. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 23(4), 313-335.

## NOTES

- 1 All names for people and places are pseudonyms for privacy reasons.
- 2 For the purpose of this paper we will only focus on the data collected on English language learners.