

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in a Hawai‘i PDS: Preparing Teacher Candidates to Work with Students from Micronesia

Monica Gonzalez Smith
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Nicole Schlaack
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Crista K. Banks
University of North Texas at Dallas

Jennifer F.M. Padua
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Sonja Samsonas
Hawai‘i Department of Education

Abstract: This article highlights the work of a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) Professional Development School (PDS) initiative aimed at promoting teacher candidates’ abilities to understand and work effectively with elementary-aged Micronesian students in Hawai‘i. Findings from this research reveal that a PDS centered on CRP improved teachers’ abilities to work with historically marginalized youth. TCs developed cultural understanding and defined culturally responsive dispositions. To enact CRP, TCs conducted research and used small group instruction to inform relationships with students. The article concludes with implications for PDS work in diverse schools.

KEYWORDS: Culturally responsive pedagogy, Elementary education, Professional development schools, Teacher candidates, Micronesian Islanders

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Essential 2: Clinical Preparation: A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

Introduction

The Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (NHPI) demographic category includes individuals who have “origins in Hawai’i, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Island entries such as the three countries of Micronesia (i.e., Republic of Palau, Republic of Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia (US Census Brief, 2010). The merging of Pacific Islander ethnic groups into one demographic category leads to overt historical marginalization of people who speak less common indigenous languages. Micronesia, a subregion of Oceania, consists of thousands of small islands in the West Pacific. Micronesians migrate to the US-mainland for better health care, education, and employment opportunities (Hawai’i Appleseed Center, 2011). The *Freely Associated States* (FAS) is a label given to three independent countries that have ties to the United States under the *Compacts of Free Association* (COFA) (Kosrae, Yap, Pohnpei, and Chuuk). COFA allows Micronesians to live and work in the US for an indefinite period of time without needing a visa or green card (Hawai’i State Department of the Attorney General, 2007); a “benefit” given since the US uses Micronesian island atolls for nuclear weapons testing. Currently, Micronesians are Hawai’i’s fastest-growing ethnic demographic, but are also the student population that teachers feel the least prepared to work with (Hawai’i Department of Education [HIDOE], 2021; Lee 2018). A handful of Hawai’i public schools are more than 25 percent Micronesian, these schools are clustered in urban, Title 1 schools in the central Honolulu areas of O’ahu (Hawai’i Advisory Committee, 2019). Most Micronesian students in Hawai’i speak Chuukese or Marshallese and enter the classroom with little English proficiency, are chronically absent, are at a high risk of dropping out, and are suspended more often than their peers (Matsuda, 2016). The Hawai’i Department of Education is committed to better preparing teachers for meeting the needs of Micronesian students, and teacher preparation programs (TPPs) shoulder a large part of the responsibility. To our knowledge, no research has been done to describe how TPPs prepare teacher candidates (TCs) for working with Micronesian students. This research aims to fill the gap in the literature and will report on a PDS initiative aimed to better prepare TCs for working with Micronesian elementary students.

Background

A PDS centered on TC preparation for working with Micronesian students was forged by a relationship between the first author and a school principal (fifth author). The school principal works at an urban, Title 1, public, elementary school that has a student population that is over 30% Micronesian. School data revealed that the pandemic had exacerbated academic achievement gaps in reading and math for Micronesian youth. TPP faculty met with the school principal using the *Core Ingredients* (Burns et al., 2016) to guide planning. A PDS grounded in situated learning and culturally responsive pedagogy ensued with the goal to prepare a cohort of undergraduate TCs for working with Micronesian youth.

Situated Learning in a PDS: Linking Theory to Practice

In a situated learning environment, knowledge is socially constructed via apprenticeship within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A PDS recognizes the criticality of theory-to-practice connections in preparing TCs (Allsopp et al., 2006). School sites create spaces where “theory and practice not only meet but where each way of knowing and understanding the world enriches the other” (Dresden et al., 2016, p.68). Situated learning theory is used in this research to explore the following questions:

1. What do TCs learn about CRP as they participate in a PDS aimed at supporting students from Micronesia?
2. How do TCs enact CRP to work with students from Micronesia?

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

CRP is the predecessor to all other “remixes” of culturally responsive teaching, pedagogy, and sustainability (Ladson-Billings, 2014). CRP occurs when teachers use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them (Gay, 2018). Heine (2002) notes that schools that are culturally responsive for Micronesian youth recognize prior schooling expectations and cultural mismatches. Teachers need to understand that the Micronesian culture is primarily affected by diaspora (Spencer, 2013); a mass migration of people who must settle far away from their homelands. Micronesian students often perform below grade level on tasks that require native English proficiency because an indigenous language is spoken at home (English is not introduced on the islands until the 4th grade). Additionally, Micronesian families have an inadequate understanding of the U.S. school system since there are no attendance laws in Micronesia. Micronesian students prefer to engage in collective reasoning over individual decision-making. Pedagogical planning that includes investigations on students’ heritage islands and migration stories are precursors needed for teachers to enact meaningful CRP for Micronesian students.

CRP in School-University Partnerships

TCs who work with diverse student populations need to develop culturally responsive dispositions (values, commitments, or ethics) to combat the racial disparities that exist between students and teachers, and the theories supporting culturally responsive pedagogy and the practices that educator’s model in the classroom (Edwards, 2011). Dispositions and the field experience are connected (Truscott & Obiwo, 2020), TCs who work in diverse schools are more equity-based and socially conscious to benefit students. Villegas and Lucas (2002) affirm that culturally responsive, socioculturally conscious educators, “understand” how learners construct knowledge, and “know” about the lives of youth (p. 20). Although studies in teacher education recognize a need for TCs to “know” their students and develop empathetic dispositions, Warren (2018) concludes that TPPs should focus less on cultural responsiveness as an identity marker to be achieved and instead prepare TCs to cultivate teaching orientations and habits centered on responding flexibly to diverse students’ moment-by-moment. Others (Truscott & Obiwo, 2020) reiterate the importance of deliberate field placements so TCs may engage in clinical practice in diverse urban schools to develop equity-based dispositions.

Explicit theory-to-practice connections support TCs’ understandings of CRP in PDS contexts. Eick and McCormick (2010), described a book study where TCs read chapters to prepare for working with Black and Hispanic students. TCs who completed the book study were more cognizant of teaching in a diverse classroom and reasoned instructional strategies needed to be congruent with student culture. Myers and Jenkins (2020) reported on PDS efforts made to discuss race with kindergartners and undergraduate TCs. TCs were paired with a kindergartner for one hour each week during the semester, observed the classroom teacher delivering lessons on race, then participated in discussions to consider implications for them as future educators. Myers’ and Jenkins’ research demonstrated how university coursework may be linked to the field to establish theory-to-practice connections within a PDS.

Methods

Phenomenological research is understanding the lived experiences from one person's perspective (Moustakas, 1994). We applied phenomenology in this study to explore what TCs learned about CRP through participation in the PDS and how TCs applied CRP to work with students from Micronesia. The first-hand account of people's experiences is a hallmark of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this phenomenological investigation is to describe the universal essence of individuals' experiences with intentionality (direction of experience towards things in the world). Findings are allowed to emerge, rather than being imposed by an investigator (Naubauer, 2019).

Context

The TPP is a two-year program that culminates with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and teaching licensure. TCs may elect to complete dual-license tracks in special education, early childhood education, or multilingual learning. First through third semester, TCs take methods courses and complete classroom-based field experiences. Field experiences take place twice a week on Wednesdays and Thursdays and include monthly seminars.

A total of three schools participated in the PDS to better prepare TCs for working with Micronesian students in grades K-5. School sites had student populations that were at least 25% Micronesian, making it highly likely that TCs would teach Micronesian students. An interdisciplinary approach was used to promote TC's understanding of CRP in the PDS. Method instructors in multilingual learning, math, reading, and writing methods collaborated to create field-based assignments that allowed candidates to use theory or instructional strategies to work with Micronesian students in the field. For example, TCs read chapters from *Making Sense of Micronesia* (Hezel, 2013), as well as other readings on Micronesian diaspora (Spencer, 2019) to support their understanding of student culture in the field.

Participants

Twenty undergraduate TCs participated in the research (19 females; 1 male) that spanned the 16-week semester. Participants (TCs) were college juniors in the first semester of the TPP. Ethnically, 36% of TCs identified as two or more races, 28% identified as Asian, 18% identified as Caucasian, and 18% identified as Native Hawaiian; Sixty-four percent of the cohort spoke or were exposed to a language other than English at home with the most popular languages spoken being Japanese, Korean, and Ilocano. None of the TCs were Micronesian nor spoke a language from Micronesia. Participants were provided with informed consent and agreed to take part in this research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data included six focus group interviews, and 60 journal entries (three per TC). Focus groups took place during week 13 on Zoom, were 60 minutes in length, and were recorded and transcribed. TCs completed open-ended online journals to reflect on their classroom experiences over the course of the semester. Journals were completed online. Data were uploaded into *Dedoose*.

We analyzed data in two phases. In phase one, we distributed journal excerpts amongst us using *Holistic* and *InVivo* coding (Saldaña, 2021) to identify self-standing units of data where TCs (a) discussed understanding of CRP or (b) detailed applications of CRP. During the process, we made sure to bracket potential biases and assumptions (*epoché*) (Moustakas, 1994) using the

Dedoose memo tool. Next, we collaborated to discuss coding until 95% interrater reliability was reached. Phase one resulted in a codebook where “Understanding” and “Enacting” were used as parent codes to categorize 11 child codes. In phase two, we triangulated focus groups to corroborate the codebook and allowed new codes to emerge. To do so, we merged child codes that represented similar ideas to create themes that answered our research questions: What did TCs learn about CRP as they participate in a PDS aimed at supporting students from Micronesia? And, how did TCs enact CRP to work with students from Micronesia?

What did TCs learn about CRP as they participate in a PDS aimed at supporting students from Micronesia?

The PDS provided various opportunities for TCs to see culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom. TCs learned about CRP by engaging with the mentor teachers about classroom practices to develop a cultural understanding of students. Mentor teachers served as a springboard for candidates to better understand teaching and learning for Micronesian students. TCs’ classroom observations and conversations with mentors about culturally responsive practices included incorporating students’ culture into a lesson or how to actively engage students. For example, one candidate observed that her mentor teacher used students’ non-verbal cues as a formative assessment during instruction: “They [Micronesian students] get really overwhelmed if they feel like they don’t understand what’s going on and shut down. I feel if you’re a culturally responsive teacher you’re aware of this situation. This is what I’ve seen my mentor do.” Another TC reported that her mentor teacher shared:

... knowing what’s going on at home culturally, emotionally, etc. helps him [mentor teacher] adapt his teaching style accordingly. For example, some parents have expressed to him that they feel he gives too much homework, and that in their household, when their child comes home from school, they consider it “family time” and don’t want thier time together to be obstructed by homework.

The classroom provided a space for TCs to see CRP in action, and to reflect on the practices that their mentor teachers used to work with Micronesian students.

TCs acknowledged that some Micronesian cultural norms do not align with US schooling expectations. As one TC expressed, “culturally in her home country school attendance is treated differently and her parents don’t understand the US school system. I’m starting to be happy she showed up to begin with instead of nitpicking for her tardiness.” TCs became aware that concepts like attendance and time were aligned to the US schooling system and were not universal constructs known or practiced by all cultures. as TCs began to notice cultural differences between Micronesia and U.S. schooling, they also noticed differences within an ethnic group: “...not all Chuukese students are going to be the same because some of them grew up here, some of them grew up in Chuuk, some of them grew up in other places like on the mainland.... [Their upbringing] really affects their culture and how they learn.” TCs understood that information on students’ lived experiences was needed to inform the culturally responsive practices used in the classroom.

In addition to learning about the students, TCs culturally responsive dispositions were informed. TCs began to view CRP as a teaching strategy for student-centered learning and credited CRP with dispositions such as empathy, respect for students’ cultural backgrounds, open-mindedness, support, and appreciation for students’ native language. One TC voiced: “It is

imperative to draw on the cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and experiences of our students in order to make the learning more meaningful for them.” With a growing awareness to be culturally responsive, TCs learned about the importance of connecting to students by inquiring about students’ cultural customs, using students’ native languages in class, and getting to know students’ interests.

When TCs started defining CRP, they discovered that “it is not something that is simple and could be learned in a day but it is something that takes trial and error over a great period of time”. TCs pointed out the cultural learning that teachers and students experience together. They embraced cultural diversity, and reflected on perspectives that were different from their own. As one TC shared, “Overall, I’ve learned that culturally responsive teaching is a mindset, it’s part of your philosophy, it’s a lens you look through when you’re teaching every lesson, looking at every student”. Another TC expressed, “culturally responsive teaching is a process. It requires awareness. It is not something that is done accidentally. It has to be intentional and requires lot of background knowledge and dedication.” Learning about CRP in the context of the PDS, reminded TCs to be intentional with their teaching, to reflect on their actions, and to be familiar with students’ culture before making instructional action.

How did TCs enact CRP to work with students from Micronesia?

The PDS prompted TCs’ research on Micronesian culture. TCs enacted CRP by getting to know their students and conducting research on cultural information that they encountered in the field. TCs turned to their mentor teachers as sources of knowledge on Micronesian culture: “When I want to know more about Micronesian students in my classroom, I ask my mentor teacher for background information.” While other TCs used their mentors to understand nuances of Micronesian students’ behaviors, “a lot of times. I’ll ask my mentor teacher why is this student coming late, is there a reason for this? And she’ll give me a lot of info”. Although most TCs asked their mentor teachers for information on Micronesian students, it was unclear if TCs turned to their mentors for information because mentors were easily accessible or because mentors were knowledgeable in Micronesian culture.

TCs used the internet to research topics relating to Micronesian culture as they came up in the field: “I do my own research using the internet to keep up with the news as far as major events, as well as [Micronesian] history.” Most TCs used *Google* to search topics that came up during class discussions, “I overheard my Chuukese students wondering if Chuuk had a national anthem. I Googled it on my cell phone and found out that they do.”

Other TCs referenced academic literature, “The readings from my classes gave me perspective on how misunderstood Micronesians can be if the teacher doesn’t take their culture into consideration.” Another TC utilized the University’s library database to obtain information, “I learned how to use the university library database in one of my classes. I look for academic literature on Micronesian culture when I have questions.” The above excerpts demonstrate the power of interdisciplinary collaboration in PDS work. TCs utilized information-gathering strategies obtained across their teacher preparation courses to understand students in the field.

TCs shared CRP actions that detailed small group instruction and how to develop interpersonal relationships with Micronesian students. As one TC stated: “Whenever I work in small groups with the students, that’s when I’m able to gain the most cultural knowledge.” Other TCs implemented small groups to learn more about the languages from Micronesia, “I know they [Micronesian students] speak Chuukese at home. I ask them how to say words in Chuukese, but they get really shy about it, maybe because a teacher has never asked them to talk in their native

language before?” TCs shared experiences demonstrate the role small group work plays in CRP enactment, TCs noticed the benefits of teacher-student dialogue in developing trust and gathering knowledge on Micronesian student culture as an outsider looking in.

Discussion

Findings from this research reveal that a PDS centered on CRP improved TCs’ abilities to work with historically marginalized youth. When it came to learning about CRP, TCs developed cultural understandings and defined culturally responsive dispositions by observing their mentors and reflecting on classroom observations. To enact CRP, TCs conducted research and used small group instruction to inform relationships with students. TCs developed an awareness that CRP and conducting research go hand-in-hand, reasoning that students who are of the same ethnicity may have different cultural practices.

Our study findings corroborate the benefits of using CRP in PDS contexts. Warren (2017) contends that teacher education programs fail to mention the substantial possibilities of empathy for strengthening a TC’s ability to enact CRP. The TCs in this study developed empathetic dispositions about Micronesian students, however one semester was not enough to see their empathetic feelings in action. A longitudinal study where TCs interact with local community organizations outside of the classroom may prove to be more fruitful so TCs may do the introspective work needed to challenge their own beliefs and trends in their teaching behaviors. Moreover, we urge TPPs to consider ways to scaffold CRP across the semesters beginning with dispositions and exposure to diverse student populations before TCs are expected to enact CRP and reflect on CRP instruction.

The TCs included in this study shared that their frames of reference changed; they began to view Micronesian students more positively, and understood that students’ cultural differences did not align with US schooling expectations (e.g., attendance). TCs noticed that students of the same ethnicity had different cultural practices. This finding echoes Eick’s and McCormick’s (2010) work where TCs who participated in a book study stopped viewing and treating students equally. While it is clear that this study better informed TCs about Micronesian students’ unique cultural needs, it is unclear if Micronesian elementary students’ academics improved because of the PDS. More phenomenological research is needed to detail PK-12 student’s experiences with CRP in a PDS. To date, few studies directly connect culturally responsive pedagogy with its impact on student academic learning (Sleeter, 2012).

Mentor teachers are an integral piece of PDS work that cannot be ignored. The TCs in this study frequently turned to their mentors for cultural knowledge. When designing PDS work to mitigate problems in practice, intentional planning is needed at the forefront to ensure we are working to improve student learning and combat systemic racism, not just working to fulfill field placement requirements. Intentional mentor teacher and TC pairings are needed. Mentors need to know what CRP is and should practice (or should want to practice) CRP in their classrooms. Additionally, field supervisors need to provide details to mentor teachers before the semester begins. Mentor teachers should collaborate in deciding on these actions and should work with field supervisors as equal partners. It is important to note that the TCs included in this study began to see a connection between research and practice; turning to Google, their mentor teachers, or other resources to investigate cultural wonderings. This phenomenon reveals an avenue of investigation that needs further exploration: How may inquiry support TCs’ understandings of CRP in PDS work?

Hawai‘i is home to a “super-diverse” culture (Wyatt, 2017). The abundance of diversity on O‘ahu allowed us to easily find and use diversity to promote TC learning in our PDS work. Most of the TCs included in this study identified as being culturally and/or ethnically diverse and were frequently exposed to cultures that differed from their own; a phenomenon which may not be as easy to replicate if the study were conducted on the US mainland. Still, exposure to diversity is just one part of the equation needed to create culturally responsive educators. As teacher educators, it is our kuleana¹ to ensure that TCs are learning about and continuously interacting with student cultures that they are unfamiliar with and that opportunities for critical discussion are included so TCs can make sense of classroom observations. Our research illustrates that PDS work is fruitful when it aims to solve problems in practice. We encourage other teacher preparation programs to use CRP in PDS work and for teacher education faculty to design clinical practice around individual school sites’ needs to better prepare TCs for working with historically marginalized youth.

¹ Kuleana (koo-lay-ah-nah) is the Hawaiian word for responsibility.

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Monica Gonzalez Smith, PhD (monicags@hawaii.edu) is an Associate Professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education. Her research focuses on teacher preparation for emergent bilinguals, culturally responsive pedagogy, and school university partnerships. **Nicole Schlaack, PhD** (schlaack@ghawaii.edu) is a Specialist with the Hawai'i Family Engagement Center at the University of Hawai'i. Her research focuses on teacher education and community involvement in a diverse society. **Crista K. Banks, PhD** (crista.banks@untDallas.edu) is an Assistant Professor at the University of North Texas. Her research focuses on school-university partnerships, arts-based learning, and the integration of social studies curriculum into teacher preparation. **Jennifer F.M. Padua, PhD** (paduajen@hawaii.edu) is an Assistant Professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa College of Education. Her research focuses on teacher preparation programs, literacy, and culturally responsive practices. **Sonja Samsonas, MEd** (sonja.samsonas@k12.hi.us) Is an elementary school principal on the island of O'ahu. She introduced cultural professional development sessions on Pacific Islanders to her school faculty to raise cultural understanding and supports school-university partnerships.