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# Intercultural Fortuitous Learning

## Preparing Prospective Teachers to Teach Culturally Diverse Populations

**Carrie Kondor, Angela Owusu-Ansah, & Lynn Keyne-Michaels**

### Introduction

Out of every three students enrolled in either elementary or secondary school in the United States, one is of a racial or ethnic minority, whereas about 87% of the teachers are White and female (Cross, 2003; Griner & Stewart, 2013; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The rate of increase in minority K–12 students, who are often also living in poverty, is projected to increase to 41% by the year 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

In contrast, “those coming into teaching, and those who teach prospective teachers [remain for the most part] White females who have been raised in middle class homes in rural and suburban communities” (Assaf, Garza, & Battle, 2010, p. 115), strengthening the persistence of the existing cultural divide between students and teachers.

This cultural divide, reflecting disparity between an overwhelmingly homogeneous teaching force and an increasingly diverse student population (Gallego, 2001; Grant & Secada, 1990; Griner & Stewart, 2013), can lead to devastating learning experiences for the students (Anton, 1999; Cho & Reich, 2008; Griner & Stewart, 2013). Griner and Stewart explained that a cultural divide can present significant barriers in adapting to school processes and expectations linked with the dominant culture and can hamper positive learning outcomes.

Considering this cultural divide, teacher preparation programs are in an

imperative position to prepare prospective teachers to mitigate this divide in order to improve outcomes for diverse student populations. In addition, teacher education researchers have stressed the need to increase understanding of how prospective teachers can be effectively prepared to work with diverse student populations (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Larkin, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 1996).

However, preparing teachers who are willing and able to teach in increasingly diverse classrooms may be one of the most challenging tasks facing teacher preparation programs today (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2002; Villegas, 2008). Research on promoting effective teaching of culturally diverse student populations has addressed gaps and deficits in prospective teachers’ experiences, attitudes, and perceptions (Castro, 2010).

For example, Sleeter (as cited in Castro, 2010) delineated four issues that impact the instructional effectiveness of many White prospective teachers. These include a failure to recognize the pervasiveness of racial inequity, holding deficit views about and lower expectations for students of color, denying the very significance of race in their practices through a color-blind approach, and “lacking a sense of themselves as cultural beings, resulting in their assumptions that their own cultural lenses represent the norm for all other students” (Castro, 2010, p. 198).

### Developing Cultural Competency

It appears that one way to counter this divide is to develop cultural competency in prospective teachers in teacher preparation programs. Cultural competency is understanding oneself as a cultural being, having an appreciation for and an under-

standing of diverse populations, and interacting with other cultural groups in ways that recognize and value their differences (Cross, 2008; Gallavan, 2005; Miller & Mikulec, 2014). However, studies have revealed prospective teachers’ overwhelming resistance to development toward cultural competency when explicitly taught in their teacher preparation coursework (Brown, 2004; Larkin, 2012; Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005; Lockhart, 2009; Sleeter, 2001; Taylor, 2010; Zeichner et al., 1998).

Despite disappointing research findings related to the impact of coursework on the development of cultural competency, studies have found that when prospective teachers have prior cross-cultural experiences, they are more likely to glean concepts of cultural competency that lead to culturally responsive teaching (Adams, Bondy, & Kuhel, 2005; Burant & Kirby, 2002; Hollins, 2011; Keengwe, 2010; Miller & Mikulec, 2014). In addition, there is a sustained attitudinal change in prospective teachers when they are required to reflect deeply about the experiences (Dewey, 1933; French, 2005; Gallego, 2001; Hernandez, Morales, & Shroyer, 2013; Hollingsworth, 1989; Nussbaum, 1997; Taylor, 2010; Wade, 2000).

Our study expands on previous published studies of cultural competency in field experiences of teacher education coursework. It explores prospective teachers’ fortuitous learning through our teacher education program’s cross-cultural community-based tutoring program. While the tutoring experience does not directly teach the prospective teachers about cultural competency, prospective teachers have the opportunity to interact cross-culturally with children and families and reflect upon those experiences. The study explores how experience and reflection combined impact

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prospective teachers' development toward cultural competency.

The community-based cross-cultural tutoring experience at our university provided us with the opportunity to study the development of prospective teachers' cultural competence through situated learning, intercultural interaction, and reflection. We refer to this experience of incidental cultural growth through situated learning, intercultural interaction, and reflection as *fortuitous learning* (Kondor, 2016). Fortuitous learning is incidental learning that "generally takes place without much external facilitation" (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 30) and occurs due to a combination of situated learning and reflection.

Additionally, for the purposes of this study, specific meanings were assigned for the following terms:

*conceptual change.* An individual's change in his or her views on a concept through engagement in, and reflection upon, an experience (Larkin, 2012).

*cross-cultural experiences/interactions.* Experiences in which there is opportunity for direct interaction with one or more individuals from a cultural group different from one's own (Garmon, 2004).

*cultural competency.* Cultural competency is understanding oneself as a cultural being, having an appreciation for and an understanding of diverse populations, and interacting with other cultural groups in ways that recognize and value their differences (Cross, 2008; Gallavan, 2005; Miller & Mikulec, 2014).

*culturally responsive teaching.* "Using 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, 2002, p. 29).

*cultural self-awareness.* Understanding oneself as a cultural being, including a personal set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies (Cross, 1988).

*intercultural understanding.* An understanding of others' cultures and how to work effectively in cross-cultural situations in ways that recognize and value their differences (adapted from Cross, 1988).

## Review of the Literature

Many teacher education programs include coursework related to diversity, multiculturalism, or culturally responsive pedagogy in response to the need to prepare teachers for increasingly diverse preK–12 classrooms (Keengwe, 2010).

However, Brown (2005) explained that many prospective teachers do not make progress in stand-alone courses that focus on diversity because of their "resentment and/or resistance to multicultural doctrine, instruction, application, and interaction" (pp. 325–326). Instead, a stand-alone course can actually perpetuate a cultural deficit view of students from diverse student populations (Brown, 2005).

Brown (2005) suggested that cultural and racial interactions form a vital component of preparing prospective teachers, in place of a stand-alone multicultural course in teacher preparation curriculums. Additional studies revealed that when prospective teachers have cross-cultural experiences prior to coursework, they are more likely to glean concepts of cultural competency (Adams, Bondy, & Kuhel, 2005; Burant & Kirby, 2002; Hollins, 2011; Keengwe, 2010; Miller & Mikulec, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a sustained attitudinal change in prospective teachers when they are required to reflect deeply about these experiences (Dewey, 1933; French, 2005; Hernandez, Morales, & Shroyer, 2013; Taylor, 2010). In addition, studies conducted by Bennett (2013), Capella-Santana (2003), and Miller and Mikulec (2014) found the effects of cross-cultural experience and social interaction dismantled prospective teachers' stereotypes and increased understanding, which decreased cultural divide.

Situated learning, grounded in a sociocultural perspective, was summarized by Hollins (2015) as follows:

Learning and cognition are culturally mediated and supported through purposeful activity; learning and the social context in which it occurs transform the person, resulting in a new identity; learning is dependent on the productive use of cultural tools, artifacts, prior knowledge and experiences that are familiar to the learners and that form the basis for constructing new knowledge and understanding; understanding and expertise are developed through extended situated experience that is influenced by affordances, constraints, focus and guidance in a social context with others. (p. 94)

Situated learning must be combined with reflection to allow for fortuitous growth. Simply working with diverse students would not make a strong impact on a preservice teacher's cultural understandings unless the candidates reflected on the interactions and their own learning based on those interactions (Anders & Richardson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann,

1983; French, 2005; Gallego, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Taylor, 2010).

For example, studies such as Haberman and Post (1992) found that situated learning involving short-term tutoring experiences solidified negative beliefs about students and their cultures. However, although Milner (2003) found that situated learning in which prospective teachers work with diverse urban populations alone perpetuated racial stereotypes, when situated learning was compounded with reflection, preservice teachers had deeper cultural and racial awareness and insight and were able to bridge theory and practice.

Mezirow (1991) defined reflection as "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (p. 104). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning confirms that "transformative learning cannot happen unless critical reflection is involved at every stage" (p. 125). Almost a century ago, John Dewey (1933) explained reflection in his book *How We Think*. Rodgers (2002) summarized Dewey's explanation of reflection into four main criteria:

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas.
2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.
3. Reflection needs to happen in a community, in interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others. (p. 845)

The combination of situated learning and reflection impacts the way individuals interpret their experiences. Larkin (2012) labeled this impact as conceptual change theory. Conceptual change is the process where an experience disrupts a person's particular viewpoint, such as a cultural deficit view, and if an alternate viewpoint is seen as intelligible, plausible, and/or fruitful, the individual will modify his or her conception, thus transforming his or her personal view.

The timing of situated learning is critical to transformation of personal views related to culture for prospective teachers. Intercultural experiences that occur prior to, or at the onset of, formal teacher training are more likely to develop cultural self-awareness and intercultural understandings in preservice teachers (Adams,

Bondy, & Kuhel, 2005; Burant & Kirby, 2002; Hollins, 2011; Keengwe, 2010; Miller & Mikulec, 2014). Nieto (2004) claimed that developing into a culturally competent teacher requires personal transformation.

Providing an intercultural experience such as cross-cultural tutoring during these pivotal college years, which Perry (1970) described as relativism and Phinney (1989) described as transition, could contribute to a transformed sense of cultural self-awareness for preservice teachers because of the consistent time spent with students and families who share perceptions, outlooks, and cultures different from their own.

Perry's (1970) work reveals developmental patterns of transformation of individuals during the college years. Perry studied the cognitive, intellectual, and moral development of collegiate students and concluded that college students progress through three major stages: dualism, relativism, and commitment (Garrison, 2007). As college students progress through these stages, they "accept other outlooks on life [culture of others], differing from his own [culture of self], as being valid and valuable, potentially ones he could possess" (Garrison, 2007, p. 90).

Another factor that has been shown to move prospective teachers beyond stereotypical thinking is community-based fieldwork (French, 2005). Thomas and Mucherah (2016) posited that "the cultural gap that can occur between teachers and students is great and should be addressed through curriculum interventions such as community-based immersive programs" (p. 369). Hollins (2015) stated how "early and diverse field experiences have been touted as one of the keys to successful teacher education programs" (p. 100).

In this study, prospective teachers' tutoring experience is a community-based immersive program because it is situated in a community's children's library and involves children, families, and university volunteers. Prospective teachers participate in the tutoring program before they are officially admitted to the teacher preparation program and prior to teacher preparation coursework. Such early cross-cultural experiences for prospective teachers have been linked to greater openness to diversity and working with children from cultural backgrounds different from the teachers' own (Adams et al., 2005; Castro, 2010; Garmon, 2004; Keengwe, 2010; Whipp, 2013).

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, What is the impact of a specific cross-cultural community-based tutoring experience on the phenomenon of prospective teachers' fortuitous development toward cultural competency? We studied the impact of a 10-week lived experience in cross-cultural tutoring in a community setting on prospective teachers' development toward cultural competency.

The tutoring program originated in 2011 and runs each spring semester. The program's director was invited to participate in a collective grant project involving three university communities. The universities share the twin goals of supporting struggling pre-K–12 readers in their neighboring schools and providing prospective teachers the opportunity to tutor. Though all three universities have the same goals, the individual programs were developed in response to each university's unique community.

Our university developed a for-credit experience for first-year undergraduates planning to major in education where they receive reading instruction training before tutoring struggling readers. Both tutors and pre-K through 9th grade students benefit from this program. Tutors learn to work one on one or in small groups with struggling readers and engage with families once a week for 10 weeks, and children improve their reading and comprehension skills.

Since the context of the tutoring experience is key to the phenomenon, we felt a case study was the appropriate methodology. Yin (2014) defined a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16).

Although bound by a case, the focus of this study was not the case itself, but rather understanding how the experience contributed to prospective teachers' development toward cultural competency. Miller and Mikulec (2014) used a phenomenological study to investigate preservice teachers explicitly confronting issues of diversity through a radical field experience. Based on Yin (2014) and Miller and Mikulec (2014), we determined that a phenomenological multiple case study was appropriate for our situation.

This approach was the best fit for our study because a multiple case study design provided snapshots of the program's impact

on two distinct subpopulations: potential preservice teachers (PPSTs) and late-stage preservice teachers (PTs). The design did not compare the subpopulations; rather, it gleaned an understanding of the impact of the case at different points in time. The primary target population included first-year undergraduates participating in the cross-cultural tutoring program during the spring term at a private university. These students participated in the cross-cultural tutoring program as a prerequisite to entry into the teacher preparation program. We refer to this group of participants as PPSTs.

Twenty-six first-year undergraduate students who were interested in becoming teachers registered for the program's class. Of those 26 PPSTs, 19 agreed to participate in this study. In an online questionnaire, during class sessions, and through individual conversations, many PPSTs admitted they had not had significant experiences with others from different cultural backgrounds.

The second target participant population comprised PTs in their final year of the teacher preparation program. These students had participated in the cross-cultural tutoring program 3 years prior, and they were currently engaged in student teaching or teaching in K–12 schools under supervision.

There were 137 undergraduate students enrolled in the college of education (COE). The demographics of the undergraduate students in the COE were comparable to national data on teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools. In the COE, 78% of the students were female, and of those who identified an ethnic background, 71% identified themselves as White.

These data were relevant to this study because the university PPSTs reflect these demographics and were working with children and families who come from local, urban elementary schools. Children participating in the program were from

**Table 1**  
**Race/ Ethnicity of Participants**

<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Latino	26.3
One racial group, not Latino	
African American	29.6
Asian	2.3
Native American	1.5
Pacific Islander	0.6
White	26.1
Multiracial	
Asian/White	1.8
Other ancestries	11.8



the surrounding neighborhood. The race and ethnicity of the children participating reflected those of the adjacent neighborhood school (see Table 1). Some children were English language learners whose first language was Spanish. Most children, approximately 66%, were assessed at reading levels below grade level at the onset of the tutoring program.

Fortuitous learning is not easily evaluated because the learning cannot be anticipated (Bova & Kroth, 2001). Therefore we used multiple data collection methods to capture evidence of the themes related to fortuitous learning. With the first subpopulation of participants (PPSTs), we triangulated the data using five tools: (a) an initial online questionnaire with open-ended questions; (b) focus group interviews with potential follow-up individual interviews; (c) observations of PPSTs' interactions during tutoring; (d) field notes in a reflexive journal; and (e) a review of students' written reflections.

Because the study's unique niche was in gleaning fortuitous development in cultural competency, we explained the study's purpose broadly to the participants. We wrote the interview questions using a pattern that wove in the true purpose of the study without revealing it. If we made the research question and purpose obvious, we would have potentially interfered with the participants' responses and also jeopardized the trustworthiness of the study by leading participants toward desired outcomes.

We approached data analysis with a lens that recognizes a teacher's cultural competency is key to success for all students (Cross, 1988) and is the umbrella under which cultural self-awareness and intercultural understandings fall. We recognized that because one cross-cultural, 10-week tutoring experience could not possibly claim total development of cultural competency, movement toward cultural self-awareness and understanding and valuing differences in other cultures was explored using Cross's cultural competence continuum.

### Findings

Our analysis of the data from the 25 prospective preservice teachers revealed two main findings. First, we found that fortuitous interactions can reduce cultural deficit or culturally blind perspectives in prospective teachers. Second, we found that providing a cross-cultural experience combined with reflection early in the teacher preparation program creates an

environment that leads to fortuitous development toward cultural competency.

### Discussion of the Findings

Our findings from the data provide further insight into the relationship of fortuitous learning and key educational theories in the development of prospective teachers' cultural competency.

### Fortuitous Learning

This study revealed, as did Anders and Richardson (1991), Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1983), French (2005), Gallego (2001), Hollingsworth (1989), and Taylor (2010), that reflection on cross-cultural interactions, and prospective teachers' own learning based on those interactions, is critical to their cultural understandings. In our study, situated learning and reflection (reflective practice) led to a conceptual change for some PPSTs prior to entering formal teacher preparation coursework; essentially, they progressed on a continuum toward cultural competency through fortuitous learning.

Prospective teachers explained that the tutoring experience helped them break down previous fears or resistances related to working with students from diverse populations, begin to demystify or dismantle stereotypes, begin to form cherished cross-cultural relationships, and gain more confidence with working with students who are culturally different from themselves.

Following the situated learning experience of cross-cultural tutoring, some PPSTs reported that the experience helped build their self-confidence around interacting with others who come from different cultures. In particular, one PPST wrote in her final questionnaire response, "I have never actually had the experience to interact extensively 1-on-1 with a black child before the tutoring, and I would say I had a slight nervousness about it. This experience definitely made me feel more comfortable."

Another PPST reported, "I think the tutoring experience supported me in my professional journey in terms of experience interacting with youth and youth of other cultures." And yet another example from final questionnaire responses read,

I have grown more confident in myself by getting to work with such a diverse group of students and cultures. Although I went into this class wanting to make a change in my tutee's life, I think more than anything [my student] has changed me and in a way we both changed together. This

experience has given me a lot of valuable skills that I know will help me as a teacher in the future.

Through interaction and building relationships during the tutoring experience, PPSTs were able to begin to dismantle previous fears or stereotypes and feel open to this work rather than more fearful and resistant to concepts of diversity.

### Reduction of Cultural Deficit and Culturally Blind Perspectives

This study affirmed findings of previous researchers, including Castro (2010), Lockhart (2009), and Sleeter (2001), who revealed that many prospective teachers enter teacher preparation programs with deficit or culturally blind perspectives. Prevalence of cultural deficits and culturally blind viewpoints in prospective teachers was further illustrated in Murdock and Hamel's (2016) study of 42 preservice teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and biases about students from diverse cultures.

Their findings confirm the cultural deficit and color-blind views held by prospective teachers, and they found that these students are afraid to have conversations about cultural diversity. We found these tendencies in our participants as well and believe that it is important to understand that this fear is prevalent among prospective teachers and often impedes their cultural competency development.

Cultural deficit theory posits that individuals from nonmainstream cultures are inferior (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Bolina, n.d.; Hess & Shipman, 1965) and, as Martin Deutsch (1967) outlined, not able to sustain middle-class values and expectations in the education system. At the onset of the tutoring experience, many students exhibited cultural deficit views. For example, PPSTs communicated that they viewed parents from diverse backgrounds as a challenge, particularly if the parents spoke a language other than English. One PPST explained,

I expect the parent to be there physically but maybe not all there mentally. It would honestly make me more nervous to have a parent watch what I am doing. I do not do well with micromanagement. At the same time I think it will be very beneficial to have the parents learn the techniques as well so that way the child can continue to learn throughout the week.

Another PPST stated at the onset of the tutoring experience,

I've never really seen the parents. They never come up or talk to me when they

drop them off. I don't even know if they know what's going on here. It's difficult because I'm used to parents wanting to know what's going on. I don't think they don't want to know, but it's weird that they don't ask or have some form of communication.

Similarly, another PPST commented that the parents "don't care" and "don't want to know" what happens during tutoring. In addition to cultural deficit perspectives, when asked what they had learned about themselves and working with students from diverse populations during the first few weeks of tutoring, participants' responses were reflective of cultural blindness, or "acting as if differences among cultures do not exist and refusing to recognize any differences" (Cross, 1988). For example, one PPST replied,

My student is in second grade, so I don't know if she's entirely aware of diversity issues. It hasn't really been something I've thought of really because . . . I mean, I've thought about it, but it wasn't something that was on my mind dealing with a second grader. I don't know if I could bring it up and ask, like maybe ask what kind of character she wants. I don't know how to handle that. I've always personally tried to look past that kind of stuff, so it never once occurred to me that a second grader might have their own personal views on diversity.

Furthermore, our field notes revealed that some PPSTs were not accepting of a student's vernacular during a spelling game, ignored parent input or questions, and became frustrated about communication difficulties. Each of these examples demonstrates the research findings on cultural deficit theory, where White teachers see the child's social, cultural, or economic environment as being "deprived and deprived" of the elements necessary to comply with behavioral rules and role requirements, and they believed this environment, unless changed, will limit the academic progress of culturally deprived students (Bolima, n.d.; Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Hess & Shipman, 1965).

Some prospective teachers reported typical discomfort or fear at the onset of a cross-cultural experience, however, at the culmination of the experience, they described a dismantling of these fears, a reduction of racial stereotypes, and increased comfort and engagement with cross-cultural interactions. In fact, our study revealed that fortuitous aspects of intercultural experiences can reduce, to varying degrees, the cultural deficit perspectives of prospective teachers.

When viewed through the lenses of

Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity model, Erikson's (1968) social identity model, and Vygotsky's (1978) work related to the zone of proximal development, this method of placing prospective teachers in a cross-cultural situated learning opportunity during their early years in an undergraduate teacher preparation program may provide just the appropriate level of disequilibrium related to cultural interactions to promote growth on the cultural competency continuum.

Both previous research and our findings lead us to believe that it is essential to explore avenues other than coursework for PPSTs to reduce their cultural deficit or color-blindness mind-set. A plethora of data gleaned from the PTs' in their responses and observable behaviors revealed the inadequacy of solely delivering coursework related to diversity or cultural competency to prospective teachers, as it tends to perpetuate cultural deficit and blindness perspectives when students have not had significant prior cross-cultural experiences.

Providing opportunities for authentic interactions between predominantly White prospective teachers and K-12 students of color may allow a space for development toward cultural competency to the point where perhaps PPSTs are ready to meaningfully engage in, and even embrace, culturally responsive practices. This would involve PPST conceptual change.

Prior experiences shape an individual's cultural map or schema (R. E. Lee et al., 2010). PPSTs who explained that they simply had not experienced interacting with other cultures, as well as PPSTs who explained that they are familiar with interacting with other cultures, commented on how their tutoring experience helped them understand more about others.

Overall, many comments from participants echoed the sentiment expressed in this quote: "I think the tutoring experience supported me in my professional journey in terms of experience interacting with youth and youth of other cultures." The experience was also impactful for PPSTs who claimed to have had former significant cross-cultural experiences. A PPST who identified herself as Latina explained,

Coming from the south where there is a great Hispanic population, it was nice to have that familiarity with my girl. It was good for me to see the diversity of [the urban area]. Living on campus without a car, you don't get to go to very many places that you can't walk to. It was good to see so many people from a neighborhood that I've become a part of.

Another PPST commented on the impact the experience had on her attitude toward diverse populations:

My attitude toward people and schools and other people I don't know definitely changed. I was really nervous coming somewhere that no one I know is from, and I knew everyone and everyone's brothers and sisters in my elementary school and middle school and high school. Then coming here, I didn't know anyone. My attitude changed toward [an urban population] in general.

The tutoring experience allowed these students to begin adding to their cultural schemas and develop toward cultural competence.

### **Cross-Cultural Experience and Reflection**

At the culmination of the cross-cultural experience and opportunities to engage in reflection, PPSTs expressed growth and change regarding the views of the families and children with whom they worked, essentially beginning to demystify preconceptions and fears. Miller and Mikulec's (2014) study noted the importance of demystifying diversity, or providing an experience with diversity, rather than relying on a conceptual presentation of diversity in coursework, which is "often viewed by pre-service teachers as an intangible concept" (p. 22).

The use of the term *demystification* of diversity captured much of the data as PPSTs progressed through the tutoring experience. Conversely to initial deficit model themes, as the experience unfolded, PPSTs discussed a realization of parents' desires to be involved and to see their children succeed. For example, a PPST said, "Despite the parents' language boundary, it was so nice seeing how invested in their child's education and progress they were! I really enjoyed it."

One PPST's process of demystification came through an interaction that allowed her to realize how the dominant culture impacted her student and herself differently. She explained this in a focus group session:

One time, actually, when I just had the girl, she was asking me about who I was voting for because . . . she actually physically said, "I hate Donald Trump because he's going to send me away." I didn't know what to say to that because that's not something that really affects me and I ignore it most of the time. I just tried to switch subjects but she kept bringing it up. I had to grab [the director] at one point and I was like, "I really don't know what



to say to her," so [the director] talked to her about it for a little, and then we went back to what we were doing. You have to be fully aware of just what they hear around in the world and how it's going to affect them and their background. That was something I had never even thought of, of her bringing that up to me at all. That was just a bigger reality check for me.

For this PPST, the experience of interacting with her student naturally led her to an awareness or realization that a culturally blind perspective was insufficient. This kind of subtle interaction pushed her to recognize cultural difference in a good way, whereas prior to this experience, she would "ignore it most of the time." She experienced a conceptual change as a result of this interaction, and the idea was not presented to her in a teacher preparation course in class.

However, critical reflection is necessary to promote such growth. Murdock and Hamel (2016) suggested creating "emotionally safe environments" (p. 99) where preservice teachers are able to reflect critically and learn about themselves as cultural beings. For example, in a nonthreatening environment, preservice teacher engagement in situated learning experiences can cause them to realize a discrepancy in their beliefs, and incorporating reflection on the experiences and incongruities may lead to a change in their worldviews (Dewey, 1933; Gallego, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Larkin, 2012; Mezirow, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

Without embedded critical reflection, field experiences alone risk the perpetuation of previously held stereotypes. In a recent study, Peters, Margolin, Fragnoli, and Bloom (2016) found that a semester of student teaching in diverse classrooms alone was ineffective at changing stereotypes—in fact, White "student teachers were more color-blind about institutional discrimination and blatant racial issues at the conclusion of student teaching" (p. 1)—whereas when Barnes (2016) encouraged prospective teachers to better understand diverse communities through a community inquiry project coupled with reflection, "an analysis of the reflections of three participants demonstrates how contact with the people and places of the community influenced their understandings of the community itself as well as of themselves as future teachers" (p. 149).

Our study revealed that an early situated learning experience, where prospective teachers engaged with students and families from cultures different from their own in a community setting, com-

bined with critical reflection contributed to prospective teachers' development toward cultural competency.

Prospective preservice teachers who engaged in the cross-cultural tutoring experience had multiple opportunities for reflection, including weekly group debriefing sessions and a final written reflection at the end of the term. Participants in this study also had additional opportunities to reflect through their participation in an online questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study and focus group interviews that involved reflective discussion. PPSTs were not prompted to reflect solely on culture, diversity, or multicultural issues alone; they were asked many questions about their experience, including how they felt about working with children from diverse populations.

PPSTs expressed growth and change regarding their views of the families and children with whom they worked, essentially beginning to demystify preconceptions and fears. Both Larkin's (2012) theory of conceptual change and Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning help explain the growth that PPSTs experienced. In addition, as the experience unfolded, PPSTs discussed a change in their original perceptions in the realization of parents' desire to be involved and to see their children succeed.

There was seemingly an overall reduction of assumptions based on cultural background as well. Relative comments included "don't assume that they have the same background" and "don't assume that they feel a certain way about this because of where they're from." This demystification happened fortuitously through PPSTs' interactions with students from diverse populations.

### **Sustainability**

Including a second group of participants in this study who were further along in their teacher preparation program was immensely valuable, not only in confirmation of themes from the first group but also to explore if and how the cross-cultural tutoring experience impacted their overall development toward cultural competency, considering that they are currently full-time student teachers weeks away from graduation and then probable licensure.

In a focus group session, we asked PTs to recall their tutoring experience as well as other factors that had contributed to their development toward cultural competency. Their responses supported previous

literature; the PTs overwhelmingly described reactions of fear and resistance to a teacher preparation stand-alone course on equity and diversity. Their focus group responses also revealed a similar theme of demystification of diversity through situated learning.

One PT offered her perspective on how the tutoring experience was beneficial:

I do think the tutoring experience was beneficial, the progression makes sense. If we had just dove into all these classes, and we skipped those hours in the [tutoring experience], then it would have been hard to picture back. It gave you just an experience to refer back to a baseline, something to start with, a kid to picture in your head to make it real, and not so abstract. I think that was really important, just to think of the angle. You're not learning all this information for nothing, it's for these kids. I think that was really beneficial and important.

Furthermore, another PT described how, "looking back, the tutoring experience was beneficial, and I equate it more to what I'm doing now than those other experiences [such as the 10-hour classroom observations or 30-hour field experience]." PTs communicated that the tutoring experience was essentially an "application of cultural competency theories that were at least attempted to be taught in some of our later classes."

These data support the results of a recent study by Bodur (2003), who found that teacher preparation programs that combine fieldwork and coursework impact prospective teachers' multicultural beliefs and attitudes positively. In our study, several PTs also touched on longitudinal application of their experiential learning from a curriculum and instruction perspective.

One PT commented on how he was able to make real connections to his tutoring experiences during subsequent coursework. Another PT noted that in the course on cultural competency, prospective teachers would bring up the child with whom they had worked in their tutoring experiences. As one PT reiterated, "having that chance to build those relationships and having that safe environment where you're actually interacting and learning to notice and respect and honor someone else's culture and having it be a two-way street" was instrumental in growth toward cultural competency.

Hawkins (2008) called these experiences that later can be referred back to and contribute to overall sustained learning micromoments "based on the notion that

learning progresses slowly over time, via many small steps” (p. 1). Hawkins posited that attention to these micromoments is imperative because “the arc of learning is one whose genesis is demonstrated in minute, or micro, moment-to-moment occurrences. Insofar as the goal of a sociocultural approach is to illuminate underlying social processes of learning as they lead to cognitive development” (p. 1). The process of retro-thinking requires some degree of reflection.

### Limitations of the Study

Upon review of participants’ interpretive reflections, both written and oral, we were able to determine whether entries and responses demonstrate cross-cultural experience effects on development toward cultural competency through use of Cross’s (1988) model. However, we were hoping to see evidence in the PPSTs’ written reflections that, through this experience, they were becoming more aware of themselves as cultural beings, and that by reflecting on their interactions and experiences with diverse families, they were beginning to broaden their worldviews.

Unfortunately, their responses on the final written reflection and online questionnaires were quite limited. Kaywork’s (2011) study on analyzing reflective practices with prospective teachers may provide an explanation for our finding. Kaywork found that prospective teachers had difficulty getting their thoughts down on paper in an organized manner and appropriate length, and they felt that the written reflections did not “do justice” in providing an appropriate format for them to reflect about their teaching day. However, Kaywork found that the prospective teachers also met with each other and the researcher weekly for reflective discussion, which gave them the opportunity to thoroughly express their thoughts and reflect on their teaching experiences.

In our study, we also found that prospective teachers reflected most deeply when engaging orally in the focus group discussions. Consequently, we believe the data with the most validity originate from oral reflections gleaned from the focus group interview format. Patton (2015) claimed that the focus group format “increases the meaningfulness and validity of findings because our perspectives are formed and sustained in social groups” (p. 475). Because the PPSTs were already used to working and growing together, sharing their experiences and debriefing regularly,

interviewing them in a group setting provided not only increased meaningfulness and validity but also a comfort level that promoted a deeper willingness to share.

We acknowledge that findings related to the second group of participants, PTs, include retroactive data in that PTs are asked to recall and reflect on their experiences with cross-cultural tutoring 3 years later. With every question posed, respondents had to first comprehend and then retrieve relevant information. Retrieving a response requires PTs to recall or share an opinion.

One could question the validity of encoding experiences 3 years prior, particularly because cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists agree that there is a fundamental difference between short-term memory (temporary storage) and long-term memory (greater enduring storage system). Although decay or forgetting occurs over a term, individuals can retrieve memories for many decades (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

Although earlier research has suggested that recall can be improved by matching the context of their recall to the context in which they encoded the information originally (Godden & Baddeley, 1975; L. Lee et al., 1999; Tulving & Thomson, 1973), Fisher and Quigley (1992) found that reinstating context is not necessary. In other words, it is not necessary to physically re-create the original encoding context because people can imagine the original context at the time of recall. People are able to put themselves back in the state they were in when they first encoded or encountered the information they are currently being asked to recall.

### Implications of the Findings for Practice, Policy, and Theory

We understand that our research findings are not necessarily generalizable. However, the findings do provide possible implications for teacher preparation practices, licensure policies, and theory on the relationship between early field experiences, fortuitous learning, and the development of cultural competency.

#### Practice

We hope that understandings revealed by our research may be applied with caution to teacher preparation programs. In this study, we affirmed that a cross-cultural field experience in a community setting either before or at the onset of teacher preparation coursework increased prospective teachers’

levels of cultural competency as reflected on Cross’s (1988) cultural competency continuum. These intercultural experiences provide opportunities for prospective teachers to dismantle their cultural stereotypes and reduce the fear and resistance that typically accompany cultural competence-related coursework.

Such early cross-cultural experiences for prospective teachers have been linked to greater openness both to diversity and to working with children from cultural backgrounds different from the teachers’ own (Adams et al., 2005; Castro, 2010; Garmon, 2004; Keengwe, 2010; Whipp, 2013). Additionally, community-based field experiences, or experiences that happen outside of the preK–12 classroom, have the power to transform the ways that novice and prospective teachers think about the effects of schooling and social factors on their students’ lives and help them to consider the cultural and institutional expectations of what it means to be a teacher (Coffey, 2010; Hollins, 2015).

#### Policy

With the increasing numbers of students from diverse populations in preK–12 classrooms, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs provide candidates with the necessary skills and background to effectively educate diverse populations of students (Miller & Mikulec, 2014; Sleeter, 2001).

With a growing body of research indicating a resistance to coursework related to the development of culturally competent teachers and the effects of cross-cultural situated learning, state licensing agencies may want to examine their policies related to administrative rules for teacher licensure and requirements for cross-cultural situated learning clinical experiences.

#### Theory

Considering the typical resistance found among prospective teachers to the development of cultural competency when it is explicitly taught in their teacher preparation coursework (Brown, 2005; Larkin, 2012; Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005; Lockhart, 2009; Sleeter, 2001; Taylor, 2010; Xu, 2001; Zeichner et al., 1998) and the findings of our study, continued exploration on fortuitous learning may contribute to theory on the development of cultural competency in prospective teachers.

Potential theory on fortuitous learning and its relationship with the development



of cultural competency should consider the location and timing of the situated learning experience as well as the integration of critical reflection. Existing research studies that examine early, cross-cultural situated learning have taken place within a school setting and/or included explicit instruction related to multicultural education, diversity, cultural competency, or culturally responsive teaching practices (Bennett, 2013; Capella-Santana, 2003; Miller & Mikulec, 2014).

Our study explored the possible impact on prospective teachers' development of cultural competency through situated learning without any training around cultural competency or being embedded in a school setting; the development instead occurred fortuitously due to a combination of situated learning and reflection. Our study's fortuitous nature was based on previous research by Marsick and Watkins (2001), who suggested enhancing incidental learning because of significant implications for "adult education because of its learner-centered focus and the lessons that can be learned from life experience" (p. 25). They argued that "informal and incidental learning takes place wherever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning" (p. 28).

Although the relationship between incidental or fortuitous learning and the development toward cultural competency has not been examined in previous research studies, Mealman (1993) examined incidental learning through a case study on adults in a nontraditional degree program and found that outcomes from incidental learning include increased competence and increased self-knowledge.

Cross-cultural tutoring experiences have the potential to circumvent the production of resentment and resistance and, instead, cultivate learning fortuitously through social interactions, cross-cultural experiences, and reflection. Garmon's (2004) exploratory study of one student's development of multicultural awareness before, during, and at the end of a teacher preparation program attributed growth in relationship to disposition and self-awareness to early intercultural interactions and field experiences, followed by multicultural coursework.

Garmon concluded that "multicultural teacher education courses and field experiences are certainly important tools for developing students' awareness of and sensitivity to diversity" (p. 211). However, he emphasized that experiential factors may be significant to a prospective teacher's readiness to learn from coursework.

This concept was supported in our study through prospective teachers who participated in the cross-cultural tutoring experience 3 years prior and who concluded that the experience contributed to their overall development toward cultural competency as they progressed through other field experiences and coursework in their teacher preparation program.

It is important to reiterate that the tutoring experience in our study took place in a community setting, where participants have limited exposure to guidance from a licensed classroom teacher. French (2005) found that a cultural divide and perpetuated stereotypes emerge with classroom-based field experiences, but community-based fieldwork moves prospective teachers beyond stereotypical thinking.

Zeichner (1996) confirmed that classroom field experiences vary in the quality and clarity in which they exemplify culturally competent practices. They also only provide a singular view of both the teacher and the students. Surprisingly, research examining the impact of school-community fieldwork on preservice teachers' cultural competency is lacking (French, 2005; Hollins, 2015).

However, Hollins's (2015) recent book, *Rethinking Field Experiences in Preservice Teacher Preparation*, has defined community-based field experiences and provided an explanation of variations and recent studies. According to Hollins, community-based field experiences are

field experiences in teacher education that take place in non-school venues . . . and have the goal of prompting teacher candidates to explore how school and community histories shape instructional practices and curricular goals and how families and schools interact within these contexts. (p. 115)

Hollins stated that community-based field experiences are very successful in preparing teachers. These field experiences, which happen outside of the classroom, help prospective teachers

re-envision who they might become as a professional self . . . [as] teachers mediate their stories of self with the cultural and institutional expectations of what it means to be a teacher" (p. 101).

## Conclusion

Our findings lead us to theorize, therefore, that a novel, natural approach to moving college students, such as prospective teachers, toward growth in intercultural competence involves immersing them ear-

ly into an outside-the-classroom, situated learning experience, such as tutoring preK-12 students of diverse cultures in the community, that also requires the college students to engage in reflective practices on their experience.

We call this *intercultural fortuitous learning*, and although further research is necessary to support these findings, we are optimistic about testing the theory and continued development of innovative and effective methods to increase the cultural competency of prospective teachers. With the continuous growth in the numbers of diverse students in K-12 schools, our findings are a response to the call that "all teachers need to develop cultural competence in order to effectively teach students with backgrounds different from their own" (Banks et al., 2005, p. 237).

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