
Foreword

Christine Sleeter

California State University Monterey Bay

Teachers were filing into the cafeteria as my colleague and I were setting up the projector. We had been invited to this racially diverse middle school to help the predominantly White teaching staff confront the “grades gap” (the gap in report card letter grades between White students and students of color, which had been the subject of a newspaper exposé) and to analyze why students of color, on average, not only received lower grades than White students but were also being overreferred for disciplinary action and special education. My colleague and I arrived armed with data for both the school and the school district levels. Our plan was to present the data, invite teachers to consider why there was a racial gap in student outcomes in their school, and then consider strategies to address the gap.

Within 10 minutes, however, it became apparent that this workshop was not going to go well. While the few Black teachers, along with a handful of White teachers, nodded their heads affirmatively as we talked, several White male teachers sitting near the back of the room, arms folded, glared at us. After we briefly presented the data and then invited discussion, only a few teachers spoke. While some comments focused on what the school could do differently, most characterized the Black students as poorly behaved and their parents as lacking much interest in education. Although my colleague and I expected to hear some deficit thinking from teachers, given that we had been invited to do this workshop, we were unprepared for the wall of hostile silence most of the teachers maintained and the rapidity with which discussion turned into defensive complaints.

How I wish that *Developing Critical Cultural Competence* by Cooper, He, and Levin had been available at that time! This story, which is true, repeats itself countless times, with minor variations. Not only have I found myself doing less-than-helpful professional development workshops, over the years, I have also read about and talked with many colleagues who have done the same. Although research on professional development for multicultural education confirms that short-term workshops, like the one discussed previously, are virtually useless and even counterproductive (McDiarmid, 1992), they continue to occur. This is probably largely because while many school leaders recognize diversity and equity problems within their schools and hear about “experts” who seem have solutions, lacking a strategy to engage teachers with core issues around difference and equity, school leaders hope that bringing in an expert will help. Too often missing, however, is a well-conceptualized approach for professional development for cross-cultural competence.

Research on professional development for multicultural education gives some clues about what does and does not make a positive difference. Professional development projects that are too broad, attempting to rework teachers’ worldviews about issues such as race and justice, are often met with resistance and conflict, even if they are ongoing rather than single workshops (Leistyna, 2001; Sleeter, 1992). Inquiry-based professional development that includes critical reflection is much more likely to make an impact on teachers (El-Haj, 2003; Estrada, 2005; Jennings & Smith, 2002; Moss, 2001; Nieto, 2003; Sleeter, 2009). Community-based learning, which is quite underused, can be a powerful form of professional development (Fickel, 2005; Moll & González, 1994).

What would such professional development look like, especially if it is designed to prompt teachers to grapple with something as emotionally charged as race, racism, and gaps in student outcomes and school experiences? What might it look like if the professional development also addresses a range of forms of diversity including religion, gender equity, sexual orientation, and social class?

Developing Critical Cultural Competence shows what this kind of professional development looks like, and it provides the tools to make it happen. In this marvelous book, Cooper, He, and Levin lay out a system that begins with teachers unpacking diversity in their lives, and then moving outward to consider their students, their school, and the communities the school serves. The activities in this book, which the authors have used often and refined, are very well conceptualized to engage teachers in learning, thinking, and reflecting about what can

be highly emotional and threatening issues. By offering choices and scaffolding sense-making, the activities treat teachers as adults who are capable of learning and looking at problems from different points of view. By offering structured ways to learn from students and communities, the activities help teachers develop their learning strategies, as well as strategies that have the potential to build bridges of ongoing communication among teachers, students, and communities.

Although this book is written for professional developers, I see it as having a wide audience. For school leaders who see problems related to equity and diversity but aren't sure what to do about them, this book will show a very helpful professional development process. Preservice teacher educators will find many useful resources between these covers; as a preservice teacher educator myself, I have used strategies similar to many of these and have identified others in this book I will relish trying. This book can also be useful to teachers who may not be part of an organized professional development program but who want to understand their students better and are looking for guidance.

These days, especially, when much teacher professional development (at least, where I live) involves showing teachers how to use curriculum packages and testing systems, *Developing Critical Cultural Competence* offers a refreshing alternative and an inspiring view of teaching, teachers, students, and the process of learning.