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Do Elementary Preservice Teachers have Cultural Humility? An Investigation into Elementary Preservice Teacher Beliefs about American Indian Culture

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Abstract: *The passage of Washington State Senate Bill 5433 made the teaching of state tribal history, culture, and government mandatory in Washington’s public schools and teacher preparation programs; requiring teacher candidates to show competence in demonstrating the intersection of cultural competence, equity, and pedagogy. This survey study aims to uncover elementary preservice teachers’ cultural humility and perspectives on American Indian culture, leading to development of critical awareness and humility throughout their teacher preparation program. Findings show that preservice teachers self-report high levels of cultural humility, yet many open-ended responses point to a different story.*

Keywords: cultural humility, elementary, preservice teacher, teacher preparation, American Indian

The passage of Washington State Senate Bill 5433 made the teaching of state tribal history, culture, and government mandatory in Washington’s public schools. This Law makes a “commitment to educating the citizens of our state, particularly the youth who are our future leaders, about tribal history, culture, treaty rights, contemporary tribal and state government institutions and relations, and the contributions of Indian nations to the state of Washington” explicit (K-12 Education—Tribal Education, WA SB 5433, 2015, Sec 1.). School districts are expected to use the freely available Since Time Immemorial (STI) curriculum developed by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in conjunction with all 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington, as a starting point for fulfilling this mandate. The OSPI makes clear that teacher preparation programs are now required to integrate STI curricula into their programs and courses (OSPI, 2023). The updated goals of the OSPI for the teacher preparation programs in Washington State are:

To prepare candidates to successfully teach about the history, culture, and government of American Indian people, much more than just curriculum integration is needed. Candidates need to be able to demonstrate the intersection of cultural competence, equity, and pedagogy in their teaching practices (OSPI, 2023, Requirements for teacher preparation programs).

These goals are particularly difficult to achieve, as candidates may “have little understanding of discrimination or racism, and an almost nonexistent background in cross-cultural experiences or knowledge” (Shedrow, 2017, p. 271). Thus, the teaching to foster cultural competence of American Indian people and Tribal Nations must be embedded deeply from the beginning in teacher preparation programs.

CULTURAL HUMILITY

Despite the specific call for ‘cultural competence’ from the Superintendent of Public Instruction and with high regard for the work around and in support of cultural competence (e.g., Moule & Diller, 2012), the framework of cultural humility may have greater importance in teacher education. Critics of cultural competence often focus on the use of the term ‘competence’ as it emphasizes skills and knowledge (e.g., Danso, 2018), whereas cultural humility’s framework centers on relationships and the continual nature of one’s relationship to others and different cultures (Campinha-Bacote, 2019). Specific to teaching, “cultural humility reflects a power-cognizant relationship-centered approach, compared with the more skills-based conceptualization of cultural competence” (Tormala et al., 2018, p. 55). Cultural humility is conceptualized as the intersection of five domains (Tormala et al., 2018, pp 216-217, Fig. 1).

Openness	Willingness to explore new ideas
Self-Awareness	Cognizant of self; one’s values and beliefs as well as how we appear to others
Egoless	Being humble and seeing the value of others equally
Supportive Interactions	Ability to foster environments that nurture creative and positive interactions between people
Self-Reflection	Critical reflection on one’s life

Figure 1: Tormala et al.’s (2018) conceptualization of cultural humility

Given the power dynamics and social nature of teaching, being culturally humble may best allow teachers to support the diversity of learners in their classroom, including American Indian students.

PURPOSE

New state legislation is in effect mandating the teaching of state tribal history and culture within teacher preparation programs, in addition, preservice teachers need help in developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to support the needs of all their future students, including American Indians. Thus, this study is aimed at uncovering elementary preservice teachers’ (EPST) cultural humility and perspectives on the STI curriculum and American Indian culture. Results will help to build effective interventions that foster cultural humility, as a starting point for supporting preservice teachers, in teacher preparation programs.

METHODOLOGY

The Multidimensional Cultural Humility Survey (MCHS: Gonzalez et al., 2021) was used in conjunction with several open-ended questions regarding students' awareness, experiences, influences, and ideas around including American Indian culture into the school classroom (Obery et al., 2022). The survey was distributed at key courses taken throughout the elementary education program, at entry, mid, and final courses in the program series. Participants (N = 55) in this study attend a public, four-year institution in the Northwest and are seeking elementary teacher licensure in a teacher preparation program.

RESULTS

MULTIDIMENSIONAL CULTURAL HUMILITY SCALE

Findings from the MCHS are considered through the five components (Openness, Supportive Interactions, Self-Awareness, Ego-less, and Self-Reflection & Critique). A 7-point Likert scale was used to measure cultural humility, with each component having 3 questions (total possible score of 21 for each component; see Table 1).

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for the five components of the cultural humility

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Openness	18.86	1.62	15	21
Supportive Interactions	13.04	3.05	3	19
Ego-less	18.84	1.78	14	21
Self-Awareness	19.00	1.94	14	21
Self-Reflection & Critique	18.27	1.99	14	21
Overall**	88.00	6.96	70	101

*Note. SD- Standard Deviation

**Scale of 5-105

While many of the components have both similar means and standard deviations, the high standard deviation of Supportive Interactions may be due to the survey design. There are several reverse coded items on the MCHS, all of which are intended to measure Supportive Interactions, whereas no other component has items that are reverse coded. ‘Supportive Interactions’ has the lowest mean of all components of cultural humility, thus highlighting the possible challenges for EPSTs in creating positive interactional exchanges between students (Gonzalez at al., 2021, p. 58). By contrast, EPSTs claim to have high self-awareness. It follows that while EPSTs know themselves well (self-awareness), they appear to have less confidence when fostering supportive interactions in their future classrooms.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended questions pertained to EPST’s experiences with American Indian culture, their thoughts on including American Indian culture into education and ideas for how they might operationalize these ideas in their future classrooms.

EXPERIENCES WITH AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE

Seven EPSTs indicated that they identified as American Indian. Eleven EPSTs indicated they had either very limited or no experience. Of those that did indicate some experience, many shared that most of their experiences were linked to school. Prior experiences according to the respondents mostly connected to historical references such as Thanksgiving, Columbus, Lewis & Clark, and the Oregon Trail or Trail of Tears. Their previous experiences in school were mostly linked to history lessons. Twenty EPSTs indicated their views have changed because of education or school, social media, and personal exploration.

INCLUDING AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Nineteen of the EPSTs in this sample indicated that much of “correct history” (EPST 23) has been left out. They shared that “students should be told the truth about colonialism and some of the harsher parts of American history” (EPST 40). One EPST poignantly shared “I think that talking about America's faults can obviously be a very uncomfortable subject, however, I feel that this makes it all the more important to discuss in our classrooms” (EPST 22). However, there were also responses indicating a bias against giving “special” attention to this topic. One EPST said that “there is no special impact American Indian culture should play in schools. I believe all cultures are equally important and need to be equally portrayed” (EPST 25). Another mentioned, “It [American Indian culture] should be a part of the schools' cultural systems just like white culture” (EPST 44).

Responses regarding how EPSTs might operationalize their ideas in their future classrooms revealed that addressing issues regarding American Indian culture is a subject or a topic rather than a way of thinking. Their ideas tended to be finite and short term. Six EPSTs suggested they would devote “once in the year” (EPST 30) or a “whole week” (EPST 21) to this subject. Others indicated they would cover it “in social studies” (EPST 28) or “during Thanksgiving” (EPST 30). American Indian culture was often viewed as a subject or a topic to be covered briefly then left behind.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to uncover EPSTs’ cultural humility and perspectives on American Indian culture to help inform teacher preparation programs about how to focus interventions to support EPSTs most effectively. To accomplish this, the survey study used the Multidimensional Cultural Humility Scale and open-ended questions to uncover EPSTs’ perspectives. Results point to the development of cultural humility and awareness of American Indian culture as possible first steps for teacher preparation programs to support EPSTs in understanding and teaching about tribal history, culture, and sovereignty. Further, developing cultural humility may help EPSTs create a more equitable learning environment for all students, thus the results of the study may be helpful to teacher educators.

There is, however, more that could be learned. Some of the responses for the study lacked enough depth to provide useful data regarding levels of cultural humility among the surveyed EPSTs, who were drawn from several points in their teacher preparation program. Consider the following responses: “There is no *special* impact American Indian culture should play...” (EPST 25) and “It should be part of schools’ cultural systems *just like* white culture” (EPST 44). There is much ambiguity about the intent of the respondents depending on the intended tone and emphasis of the participant. It could be concluded that although EPSTs may want to serve their students well (15 EPSTs shared such sentiments), they do not have the knowledge or experiences to plan lessons

that would make a real difference. Conversely, it could also be that these statements indicate a lack of experience and knowledge of American Indian culture or lack of understanding of white privilege and the systemic (past, present, and future) abuses of marginalized populations. In either case, the questions remain: Do these EPSTs have a sense of why our state requires that American Indian culture be taught and how to accomplish this? Do they indicate a desire to do this work well? Further research that includes a more nuanced data collection process would enhance the richness of future work towards answering these questions.

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