

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Culturally Responsive Teaching: Readiness, Pedagogies, and Research Gaps

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Abstract

As P–12 classrooms grow increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, teacher education programs face mounting pressure to prepare preservice teachers for equitable and culturally responsive practice. However, the literature continues to show a persistent gap between preservice teachers' general openness to diversity and their pedagogical readiness to enact culturally responsive teaching effectively. This narrative literature review synthesizes recent empirical scholarship to examine how teacher preparation programs address that gap, clarify competing perspectives on effective preparation, and identify methodological and contextual limitations in the current evidence base. Drawing on 12 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, the review integrates qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research on culturally responsive teaching, cultural competence, multicultural efficacy, and preparation for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. The findings indicate that preservice teachers often begin with only moderate levels of multicultural efficacy, and several studies reveal a clear disconnect between personal commitment to diversity and professional self-efficacy. At the same time, structured interventions, including mixed-reality simulations, scaffolded case-based instruction, and reflective experiential learning, appear to strengthen pedagogical readiness. One study reported a 90.5% increase in affective responsiveness, while others found stronger culturally responsive teaching implementation and self-efficacy when theory, practice, and feedback were intentionally aligned. Future research should prioritize longitudinal, multi-institutional, and practice-based designs to determine whether gains in cultural competence are sustained over time and translated into improved outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Pre-service Teachers, Cultural Competence, Simulated Field Experiences, Teaching Self-Efficacy, Multilingual Learners, Teacher Education

Introduction

The demographic composition of P–12 classrooms is shifting rapidly, with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners representing an increasingly significant share of the student population (Kelley et al., 2025; Kwon, 2025; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). In contrast, the preservice teacher (PST) pipeline remains largely homogeneous, consisting predominantly of White, middle-class, monolingual candidates (Kelley et al., 2025; Kwon, 2025; Moore et al., 2021). This demographic mismatch creates substantial educational challenges. When teachers lack understanding of students' lived experiences, cultural dissonance and transactional distance can emerge, often marginalizing CLD learners and reinforcing deficit-oriented perspectives (Ghazarian et al., 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). It may also sustain assimilationist curricula that privilege conformity over equity and suppress students' cultural and linguistic resources (Kazu & Kurtoglu Yalcin, 2023; Kwon, 2025).

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In response, scholars have advanced asset-based frameworks, particularly culturally responsive teaching (CRT). CRT draws on students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and funds of knowledge to make learning more relevant, empowering, and equitable (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Kwon, 2025; Moore et al., 2021). However, meaningful implementation of CRT requires more than superficial recognition of diversity. It calls for cultural competence, including awareness, knowledge, and pedagogical skill, alongside the critical consciousness needed to challenge systemic inequities (Andal & Panergayo, 2025; Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020).

Despite the widespread inclusion of diversity standards in teacher education programs (TEPs), a persistent preparedness gap remains. Research consistently shows that PSTs may express personal openness to diversity while lacking the pedagogical readiness needed to enact CRT effectively (Moore et al., 2021). This gap often appears in the form of “color-blind” or “naïve egalitarian” beliefs, in which candidates endorse equality in principle but fail to use the instructional supports necessary for equitable practice (Lee, 2022). As PSTs enter complex and diverse classrooms without adequate pedagogical grounding, their teaching self-efficacy often declines (Nodine et al., 2024). Reduced self-efficacy can weaken persistence, increase burnout risk, and prompt a return to traditional, assimilationist forms of instruction (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Lee, 2022; Nodine et al., 2024).

To address this gap, many TEPs are moving beyond isolated diversity courses toward integrated models that foster intercultural competence and pedagogical adaptability. These models often combine coursework with diverse clinical experiences (Carpenter et al., 2025). Programs also increasingly incorporate reflective practices, such as action research and structured journaling, to help candidates interrogate biases and revise their assumptions (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Mengxue et al., 2025). In addition, some programs use vicarious learning approaches, including mixed-reality simulations and case-based instruction, to address limited access to diverse placements (Ghazarian et al., 2022; Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024). When intentionally scaffolded, these low-stakes environments allow PSTs to rehearse CRT practices, confront implicit bias, and receive feedback without affecting P–12 students negatively (Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024).

Although the evidence base on culturally responsive teacher preparation continues to expand, the field remains theoretically and methodologically fragmented. Ongoing debates concern the relative value of foundational knowledge versus experiential learning, as well as the extent to which teacher demographics shape the development of cultural competence (Andal & Panergayo, 2025; Nodine et al., 2024). The literature is further constrained by heavy reliance on cross-sectional self-report surveys and localized convenience samples, both of which limit ecological validity and heighten the risk of social desirability bias (Kelley et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2021). Accordingly, this narrative literature review aims to synthesize the contemporary evidence on culturally responsive teacher preparation, clarify competing pedagogical perspectives, and identify the methodological, contextual, and longitudinal limitations that continue to constrain the field. In doing so, it seeks to outline a stronger research agenda capable of linking teacher preparation more effectively to sustained and equitable classroom practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review methodology to critically synthesize the contemporary evidence base on culturally responsive teacher preparation. This approach was selected because the field is characterized by considerable theoretical fragmentation and methodological diversity.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including ERIC, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar. The search combined Boolean operators with keywords directly aligned to the study's objectives. Primary search strings included combinations of ("pre-service teachers" OR "teacher candidates" OR "preservice teacher education") AND ("culturally responsive teaching" OR "cultural competence" OR "culturally relevant pedagogy" OR "multicultural efficacy") AND ("teacher preparation" OR "field experiences" OR "simulations" OR "case-based instruction"). To ensure scholarly rigor, the search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English.

To align with the aims of this narrative review and ensure a rigorous synthesis of contemporary educational practices, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Studies were included if they met four conditions: (1) publication between 2020 and 2025, to reflect current demographic realities, the expansion of online and simulated learning, and recent developments in teacher education; (2) an explicit focus on preservice teachers (PSTs) enrolled in undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation or credentialing programs; (3) examination of constructs directly related to culturally responsive teaching (CRT), cultural competence, multicultural efficacy, or the teaching of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners; and (4) use of primary empirical data, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.

Studies were excluded if they were theoretical or conceptual papers, systematic literature reviews, or focused exclusively on experienced in-service teachers. These criteria helped preserve the review's focus on primary empirical evidence and on the preservice phase of teacher development.

A critical data extraction process was conducted for the 12 selected studies. Key methodological and conceptual features were documented, including research design, sample size and participant characteristics, the instructional context or intervention examined [such as case-based instruction, mixed-reality simulations, or collaborative literature analysis], and the primary outcomes related to culturally responsive teaching [CRT] efficacy.

The extracted data were then examined using thematic synthesis. This iterative process involved reading and coding findings across all included studies to identify recurring patterns, pedagogical tensions, and programmatic outcomes. These codes were subsequently organized into four overarching themes that structure the review: (1) measuring PST readiness and efficacy, (2) reflective practice and transformative learning, (3) innovative simulated and case-based field experiences, and (4) tangible curricular tools and transnational approaches. By integrating quantitative outcome measures with qualitative experiential findings across these domains, the review offers a coherent and critical synthesis of the current state of culturally responsive teacher preparation.

Results

This review synthesizes findings from 12 empirical studies to map the current landscape of culturally responsive teacher preparation and substantiate the themes examined. The selected studies reflect a range of methodological approaches, from large-scale quantitative cross-sectional surveys to in-depth qualitative ethnographic case studies. Together, they provide a broad account of how preservice teachers (PSTs) develop, interpret, and enact culturally responsive teaching (CRT) competencies.

To enhance transparency and demonstrate alignment with the synthesized themes, namely pedagogical readiness, transformative reflection, vicarious and simulated learning, and transnational curricular tools, the principal characteristics and findings of the 12 studies are presented chronologically in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of included studies on pre-service teacher cultural competency and readiness				
Source (Year)	Study Design	Sample (N)	Context / Intervention	Key Findings Aligned with Review Themes
Senyshyn & Martinelli (2020)	Mixed-methods case study	26	Collaborative interclass analysis of multicultural children's literature.	Collaborative peer work triggered crucial dispositional shifts; PSTs transitioned from passive awareness to active mitigation of biases and integration of diverse texts.
Moore et al. (2021)	Quasi-experimental survey design	36	Assessment of personal vs. professional readiness using the CRT Readiness Scale.	Identified a significant disconnect between high personal willingness to embrace diversity and low professional/pedagogical self-efficacy in enacting CRT.
Ghazarian et al. (2022)	Pre-test/post-test quantitative	56	Semester-long immersion in SimSchool virtual field experiences.	Vicarious immersion yielded statistically significant increases in PSTs' cultural value of diversity and self-regulation support, reducing transactional distance.
Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın (2023)	Descriptive quantitative survey	588	Assessment of multicultural efficacy (experience, attitude, self-efficacy).	Baseline multicultural efficacy was moderate; demographic variables (e.g., metropolitan residency, international experience) positively correlated with multicultural readiness.
Koubek & Wasta (2023)	Qualitative action research case study	6	Tutoring migrant students coupled with structured reflective journaling.	Experiential learning and critical reflection enabled PSTs to deconstruct biases and utilize students' home languages to bridge academic content with lived realities.
Kumlu (2023)	Qualitative narrative inquiry	40	Cultural diversity elective course; focus groups and narrative frames.	CRT cultivation fostered emotional resilience and a non-judgmental stance; positioned PSTs as "dreamcatchers" who actively protect classrooms from prejudice.

Nodine et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods intervention	102	Case-based instruction (CBI) comparing text-case scaffolding vs. pure case immersion.	Immersion without foundational texts diminished self-efficacy; scaffolded CBI significantly increased psychological “self-insertion” and proactive problem-solving.
Andal & Panergayo (2025)	Cross-sectional quantitative	633	Multiple regression and moderation analysis of CC and CRT practices.	Cultural knowledge and skills directly predicted CRT implementation; innate demographics did not moderate this relationship, supporting standardized CRT training.
Carpenter et al. (2025)	Convergent mixed-methods	100	Tracking readiness to teach multilingual learners across four different teacher education programs.	Integrated, intensive clinical programs yielded higher pedagogical readiness than disjointed undergraduate tracks; bilingual demographics positively influenced efficacy.
Kelley et al. (2025)	Convergent-parallel mixed-methods	34	Mixed-Reality Simulation (MRS) paired with explicit instruction and performance feedback.	MRS significantly enhanced the practical implementation of CRT strategies and self-efficacy when strategically scaffolded with theoretical knowledge and expert feedback.
Kwon (2025)	Ethnographic case study	7	Online after-school program leveraging transnational funds of knowledge.	Communities of practice and transnational frameworks successfully dismantled monolingual ideologies, empowering PSTs to leverage students’ cross-border cultural assets.
Mengxue et al. (2025)	Mixed-methods sequential explanatory	120-150	Transformative learning experience mode via structured reflective journaling and experiential learning.	Structured reflection led to profound cognitive and affective shifts (e.g., 90.5% improvement in affective responsiveness), systematically eradicating implicit cultural biases.

Discussion

The reviewed literature suggests a clear consensus: although preservice teachers often enter preparation with positive egalitarian beliefs, translating these beliefs into culturally responsive instructional practice requires carefully scaffolded, experiential interventions. At the same time, evaluating the effectiveness of these contemporary preparation models requires critical attention to the limits of the current evidence base. Accordingly, this section situates the transformative potential of current pedagogical approaches while identifying the methodological, sampling, and longitudinal constraints that should shape future research.

Measuring PST Readiness and Efficacy

The literature consistently defines culturally responsive teaching (CRT) readiness as a multidimensional construct that distinguishes teachers' personal attitudes from their professional and pedagogical competence (Andal & Panergayo, 2025; Moore et al., 2021). Across studies, a recurring finding is the gap between preservice teachers' (PSTs) willingness to value diversity and their readiness to enact culturally responsive instruction. Although PSTs often report strong personal commitment to diversity and rejection of discrimination, their pedagogical self-efficacy and professional readiness are typically lower (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Moore et al., 2021). Predictive models further show that cultural awareness, while necessary, does not by itself lead to inclusive instructional practice. Instead, specific cultural knowledge and practical cultural skills more directly predict the implementation of CRT (Andal & Panergayo, 2025). Positive attitudes toward multiculturalism, therefore, must be supported by explicit pedagogical preparation to bridge the gap between awareness and practice.

Baseline assessments often show that PSTs begin with only moderate or low levels of multicultural experience, attitude, and self-efficacy, highlighting persistent weaknesses in traditional teacher education models (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Mengxue et al., 2025). This limited capacity is concerning because teacher self-efficacy, understood as confidence in carrying out specific instructional tasks and influencing student outcomes, is closely tied to the effective provision of equitable support for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Nodine et al., 2024). When PSTs lack the confidence to manage the complex and often ill-structured demands of diverse classrooms, their ability to persist through challenges and sustain culturally responsive practice is weakened (Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024). Without targeted efforts to strengthen these competencies, PSTs may revert to assimilationist assumptions or fail to incorporate students' cultural assets into the curriculum (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023).

Despite these initial limitations, longitudinal and intervention-based studies show that PSTs' pedagogical readiness and self-efficacy can be developed through structured teacher education. Research tracking candidates from program entry to exit reports significant gains in self-perceived preparedness to teach diverse and multilingual learners when programs provide comprehensive and integrated learning experiences (Carpenter et al., 2025). These gains do not appear to depend on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or teaching specialization, suggesting that systematic cultural competency training benefits candidates broadly (Andal & Panergayo, 2025). The literature also points to a strong relationship between foundational declarative knowledge and increased instructional preparedness (Carpenter et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024). When teacher education programs intentionally combine theory-based interventions with ongoing developmental monitoring, PSTs show measurable growth in cognitive awareness, affective responsiveness,

and behavioral adaptability (Mengxue et al., 2025). These gains better position them to translate multicultural efficacy into sustained and equitable classroom practice.

Reflective Practice and Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory suggests that meaningful pedagogical change requires educators to examine and revise their underlying assumptions and beliefs (Mengxue et al., 2025). Developing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) cannot rely on knowledge transmission alone. Instead, teacher education programs must incorporate reflective practices that push preservice teachers (PSTs) to confront their biases and inherited frames of reference (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Kwon, 2025). Without structured opportunities for critical self-reflection, PSTs often avoid difficult conversations about race, equity, and systemic marginalization (Moore et al., 2021). For this reason, systematic reflection has become central to fostering the critical consciousness needed to teach diverse learners effectively.

Experiential learning, when paired with structured reflection, is a key mechanism for this cognitive and affective transformation. Activities such as action research in marginalized communities, including tutoring migrant students, give PSTs opportunities to connect asset-based theory with real instructional practice (Koubek & Wasta, 2023). When combined with targeted reflective journaling, these experiences move beyond observation and become active sites of learning and emotional reorientation (Mengxue et al., 2025). Through repeated cycles of action and reflection, PSTs can move from unexamined bias toward intentional, equity-oriented pedagogies that respond to students' holistic needs (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Mengxue et al., 2025).

The impact of critical reflection is strengthened further in collaborative learning settings. Communities of practice provide PSTs with structured spaces to engage the challenges of teaching diverse learners through shared vulnerability, dialogue, and accountability (Kwon, 2025). For example, collaborative analysis of multicultural texts can prompt important dispositional change, helping candidates move from recognizing their own cultural identities to addressing bias in lesson design (Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). Collective reflection on clinical experiences also helps PSTs build shared repertoires of equitable instructional strategies and challenge the monocultural and monolingual assumptions that limit student participation and sustain inequity (Kwon, 2025; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020).

Ultimately, sustained reflective engagement helps PSTs develop the emotional resilience and nonjudgmental stance needed in culturally diverse classrooms. The literature describes culturally responsive educators as flexible agents who protect the learning environment from prejudice, discrimination, and peer bullying (Kumlu, 2023). Narrative and mixed-methods studies likewise show that structured reflection can reduce preconceived bias while strengthening affective responsiveness and cross-cultural empathy (Kumlu, 2023; Mengxue et al., 2025). By embedding transformative reflection across coursework and field experiences, teacher education programs can prepare educators to turn empathetic, cross-cultural understanding into sustained and responsive classroom practice.

Innovative Simulated and Case-Based Field Experiences

Teacher education programs often face geographic and demographic constraints that limit preservice teachers' (PSTs) access to diverse clinical placements. Traditional practicums may confine candidates to a

single teaching style or a demographically homogeneous school, reducing their readiness for culturally and linguistically complex classrooms (Ghazarian et al., 2022). To address this limitation, teacher preparation programs are increasingly using vicarious learning approaches, including digital simulations and case-based instruction (CBI), to create standardized, low-stakes settings where PSTs can practice culturally responsive teaching (CRT) without the unpredictability of live classrooms (Ghazarian et al., 2022; Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024).

Digital platforms such as Mixed-Reality Simulations (MRS) and SimSchool expose PSTs to a controlled range of classroom interactions and culturally diverse student profiles. Over time, engagement with student avatars displaying varied cognitive, cultural, and affective characteristics has been shown to reduce transactional distance and strengthen candidates' valuing of diversity and support for self-regulation (Ghazarian et al., 2022). However, the literature also shows that simulation alone is not enough. Its effectiveness depends on integration into a broader instructional framework that includes explicit preparation in CRT principles and timely expert feedback (Kelley et al., 2025). When simulations are scaffolded in this way, PSTs show stronger implementation of CRT practices and greater pedagogical self-efficacy, using the safe environment to rehearse instructional decisions and confront implicit bias (Kelley et al., 2025).

Case-based instruction offers a related form of vicarious learning by engaging PSTs in realistic, ill-structured classroom scenarios. As with simulation, its effectiveness depends heavily on instructional design and prior theoretical grounding (Nodine et al., 2024). Although analyzing diverse classroom cases is intended to build culturally responsive teacher efficacy, exposure to complex scenarios without adequate conceptual preparation can lower candidates' confidence (Nodine et al., 2024). Without this foundation, PSTs may remain passive observers who describe classroom situations without proposing meaningful pedagogical responses. In contrast, when CBI is introduced after foundational texts on culturally responsive frameworks, PSTs demonstrate stronger psychological self-insertion, placing themselves in the role of the teacher and generating more proactive, equitable responses (Nodine et al., 2024). Together, research on simulated and case-based field experiences suggests that vicarious exposure to diverse classroom challenges can support culturally responsive teacher preparation, but only when it is carefully scaffolded with foundational knowledge and structured feedback.

Tangible Curricular Tools and Transnational Approaches

Moving from cultural awareness to classroom practice requires preservice teachers (PSTs) to use concrete curricular tools that connect academic content to students' lived experiences. One widely cited tool is multicultural children's literature, which can serve as a mirror that affirms the identities, home languages, and family histories of marginalized learners (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). However, simply providing diverse texts does not ensure culturally responsive teaching. PSTs need structured, collaborative opportunities to examine texts for bias, evaluate their authenticity, and design lessons that use these narratives purposefully (Senshyn & Martinelli, 2020). When literature is selected to reflect students' family and linguistic backgrounds, such as bilingual stories or narratives of migration, it can reduce the disconnect between home and school and strengthen engagement and motivation (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Moore et al., 2021).

The literature also stresses the importance of transnational pedagogical frameworks that challenge monolingual assumptions and fixed views of culture. Traditional language and cultural instruction often

rely on strict language separation and superficial, nation-bound representations of culture, such as flags or customary practices (Kwon, 2025). This approach can reinforce linguistic hierarchies and overlook the complex identities of multilingual learners. In response, scholars advocate drawing on transnational funds of knowledge, meaning the linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources embedded in immigrant and multilingual communities (Kwon, 2025). By centering cross-border ties, diasporic experiences, and multilingual repertoires, teachers can help students affirm and navigate identities that extend beyond national boundaries (Kwon, 2025).

Putting these culturally sustaining and transnational approaches into practice requires PSTs to use multimodal and translanguaging tools. Research shows that purposeful use of students' home languages in classroom materials and interactions can provide emotional support while also scaffolding academic learning (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Nodine et al., 2024). Digital media, including virtual tours, bilingual multimedia texts, and interviews with heritage language speakers, can also help PSTs foster global awareness and cross-cultural empathy (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Kwon, 2025). Importantly, the literature suggests that PSTs do not need immigrant backgrounds themselves to use these approaches effectively. Through thoughtful selection of digital resources and diverse texts, teachers can create meaningful connections with communities across geographic boundaries (Kwon, 2025). Taken together, these curricular tools and transnational approaches help future educators move beyond symbolic inclusion toward classroom practices that actively sustain linguistic and cultural pluralism.

Key Debates and Competing Perspectives

As teacher education programs respond to increasingly diverse classrooms, the literature highlights several unresolved debates about how culturally responsive educators should be prepared. Rather than converging on a single model, scholars continue to differ on the role of teacher demographics, the sequencing of vicarious learning, the structure of diversity coursework, and the ideological foundations of equitable teaching.

One major debate concerns whether preservice teachers' (PSTs) demographic backgrounds and lived experiences shape their cultural competence. Some studies suggest that biographical factors matter. PSTs who speak a first language other than English, live in urban settings, or maintain extensive international and cross-cultural relationships often report higher levels of multicultural efficacy and greater readiness to adapt instruction for diverse learners (Carpenter et al., 2025; Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023). From this view, such experiences provide an important experiential base for culturally responsive pedagogy. Other research, however, challenges a demographic explanation. Moderation analyses indicate that factors such as age, gender, year level, and teaching specialization do not significantly affect the development or enactment of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices (Andal & Panergayo, 2025). This perspective suggests that well-designed cultural competency training can benefit all candidates, regardless of background, and questions the assumption that preparation must be closely tailored to demographic profiles (Andal & Panergayo, 2025).

A second debate concerns the sequencing of vicarious and experiential learning, especially in case-based instruction (CBI) and mixed-reality simulations (MRS). Although these approaches are often promoted as ways to connect theory and practice, researchers caution that immersion without guidance can be counterproductive. When PSTs encounter complex classroom cases without sufficient theoretical

preparation, their teaching self-efficacy may decline, and they may respond as detached observers rather than as instructional problem-solvers (Nodine et al., 2024). As a result, the literature increasingly favors scaffolded approaches over immersion alone. Studies show that when cases or simulations are preceded by explicit instruction in CRT frameworks and supported by immediate expert feedback, PSTs demonstrate stronger self-insertion, greater confidence, and more proactive problem-solving (Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024).

A third area of debate concerns program structure, particularly the difference between isolated diversity courses and integrated clinical models. Many teacher education programs have historically addressed cultural competence through stand-alone or add-on diversity courses. Scholars have criticized this approach, arguing that fragmented treatment of diversity often fails to shift pedagogical beliefs and may even leave implicit biases untouched (Moore et al., 2021). In contrast, a growing body of research supports models that embed multicultural education across methods coursework and link it directly to concurrent field experiences. Evidence suggests that intensive programs combining coursework with full clinical immersion produce stronger preparedness to teach diverse learners than traditional pathways in which coursework and fieldwork are separated over time (Carpenter et al., 2025). This debate points to the importance of aligning theoretical preparation with authentic classroom practice to support deeper transformation (Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Moore et al., 2021).

A final and more fundamental debate concerns the ideological orientation of multicultural education. Despite increased attention to diversity and equity, many PSTs still operate from assimilationist assumptions, believing that unity and the common good are best served by minimizing group differences and avoiding specific recognition of cultural identities (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023). In practice, this orientation often appears in strict language separation and in approaches that reduce culture to symbolic markers while marginalizing more complex identities (Kwon, 2025). Critical scholars offer a contrasting view grounded in pluralistic, transnational, and translanguaging frameworks. From this perspective, educational equity requires dismantling monolingual hierarchies and treating students' transnational funds of knowledge, including diasporic ties and multilingual repertoires, as central curricular resources (Kwon, 2025; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). How teacher education programs navigate this ideological divide remains central to whether they prepare teachers to challenge inequity or reproduce it.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although the literature strongly supports culturally responsive teacher preparation, critical gaps remain in its methods, contexts, and long-term evidence base. One major limitation is the frequent use of cross-sectional, self-report measures to assess preservice teachers' (PSTs) cultural competence, attitudes, and self-efficacy. Such measures are vulnerable to social desirability bias, as candidates may overstate their readiness to align with professional or institutional expectations (Ghazarian et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2021). To address this weakness, scholars call for stronger research designs, including pretest-posttest control group studies and multidimensional assessment models. Observational data, mentor evaluations, and qualitative interviews would provide stronger internal validity and more objective evidence of PST development (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Kelley et al., 2025).

Sampling limitations further restrict the applicability of current findings. Many studies of culturally responsive interventions rely on small, homogeneous convenience samples drawn from single teacher education programs

or narrowly defined geographic settings (Andal & Panergayo, 2025; Carpenter et al., 2025; Ghazarian et al., 2022; Kelley et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2021; Nodine et al., 2024; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020). As a result, it remains difficult to determine whether findings hold across different institutional models, including undergraduate and intensive graduate pathways (Carpenter et al., 2025). Future research should therefore examine larger, multi-institutional, and demographically diverse samples to test whether these interventions remain effective across varied educational and geographic contexts (Kazu & Kurtoğlu Yalçın, 2023; Kelley et al., 2025).

Another important gap concerns ecological validity. Studies based on tightly controlled experiments or isolated instructional modules often fail to capture the complexity of real P–12 classrooms (Nodine et al., 2024). Research on mixed-reality simulations also notes problems with procedural fidelity, including deviations from scripted protocols and inconsistent engagement with required preparatory materials (Kelley et al., 2025). Future studies should embed culturally responsive interventions within authentic coursework and clinical practice rather than separating them from real teaching contexts. At the same time, they should use clearer fidelity measures to ensure consistency across implementation (Kelley et al., 2025; Nodine et al., 2024; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2020).

Perhaps the most significant gap is the limited evidence on the durability of cultural competence and its direct effects on student outcomes. Most studies examine PST development at a single point in time, leaving unclear whether the knowledge, reflection, and self-efficacy developed during teacher preparation translate into sustained practice once candidates enter full-time teaching (Andal & Panergayo, 2025; Ghazarian et al., 2022; Koubek & Wasta, 2023; Kwon, 2025). There is also little direct evidence linking teachers' cultural diversity training to P–12 students' engagement or academic achievement (Moore et al., 2021). Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that follow early-career teachers over time and examine which program features, including the sequencing of methods courses and field experiences, most effectively reduce inequities and improve outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Carpenter et al., 2025; Koubek & Wasta, 2023).

Conclusion

This review examined the empirical landscape of culturally responsive teacher preparation, with attention to the mechanisms, methodological limits, and contextual factors that shape how future educators are prepared for increasingly complex classrooms. More specifically, it sought to move beyond listing instructional strategies by addressing the persistent gap between preservice teachers stated commitments to diversity and their actual pedagogical readiness. In doing so, the review offers a clearer basis for rethinking teacher education program design.

The evidence reveals a consistent pattern. Although many preservice teachers enter preparation programs with egalitarian beliefs and general openness to diversity, they often lack the pedagogical skill needed to implement culturally responsive teaching effectively. Addressing this gap requires more than stand-alone diversity coursework. Stronger preparation depends on scaffolded, integrated clinical models in which experiential learning is grounded in theory, guided by expert feedback, and strengthened through critical reflection. Across mixed-reality simulations, case-based instruction, and community-based placements, the literature suggests that practice becomes most effective when it is intentionally structured rather than left to

immersion alone. The findings also show that cultural competence is not an innate demographic trait but a professional capacity that can be developed through systematic preparation. Transnational perspectives and tangible curricular tools, including translanguaging practices and authentic multicultural literature, further support candidates in affirming the complex identities of their learners.

These findings carry important implications for teacher education. When diversity preparation is fragmented or weakly integrated, it may do little to shift practice and may even leave implicit biases unchallenged. Programs therefore need to treat cultural competence not as an added component, but as a central feature of methodological and clinical training. The evidence reviewed here also suggests practical directions for program design. Mixed-reality simulations and structured case analysis can provide more equitable access to high-quality practice opportunities, especially where diverse field placements are limited. Used well, these approaches can help candidates rehearse equitable responses and develop the confidence needed for real classroom decision-making. In this sense, culturally responsive preparation is not only about awareness, but about building the capacity for deliberate and sustained action.

At the same time, the review highlights several limits in the current evidence base that should shape future research. Much of the literature relies on cross-sectional self-report measures, which are vulnerable to social desirability bias and offer only partial insight into actual competence. The frequent use of localized and homogeneous convenience samples also limits broader applicability. Future research should adopt stronger designs, including experimental and longitudinal approaches, and use richer forms of evidence such as classroom observation, mentor assessment, and student feedback. Most importantly, scholars need to follow candidates into their early teaching years to determine whether the competencies developed in preparation programs persist in practice and improve outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The demographic realities of contemporary classrooms make this work urgent. As student populations become increasingly diverse, teacher education must respond in ways that reduce cultural dissonance and support educational equity. Preparing culturally responsive educators is not an abstract goal, but a practical and pressing responsibility. Teacher education programs must therefore move beyond the appearance of readiness and prepare teachers who can translate equity into everyday classroom practice.

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