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Growing Our Own for Urban Classrooms: The Paraprofessionals-to-Teachers Pipeline

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Introduction and Components of CUE



The Center for Urban Education at the University of Northern Colorado works to prepare teachers from traditionally underrepresented communities and offers teacher preparation programs leading to Colorado licensure in Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education (with a CLD endorsement) and Special Education. It aligns teacher preparation efforts with specific needs of local school districts and schools. Since the Center's founding in 2000, more than 1200 students have graduated. For the past 5 years, people of

color compose more than 75 percent of the Center's students. We strive to increase the number of teachers of color hired in the Denver metropolitan area.

Traditional teacher-preparation programs typically go heavy on classroom learning—at the university, not in the school where the student will eventually teach. It's the traditional model: The professor and the university are the primary sources of knowledge. In that model, novice teachers go into the real world to practice their craft for a semester under the supervision of an already busy classroom teacher. Then, they graduate and are left to themselves in their very first classroom filled with 20 or 40 students who all bring their own cultures, values, history, and experiences with them. The traditional model does not always prepare teacher candidates for the complexities of today's classrooms. First-year teachers must figure out how to bridge the gaps between what they have learned in the university classroom and how to apply it.

A New Way: Alignment

There is another way—a model that

assumes people make sense of the world by analyzing it through multiple lenses. It's called alignment, a third space, or a hybrid space, where three elements come together:

1. Academic knowledge (what the professor and the university teach);
2. Practitioner knowledge (what teachers are doing in the field); and
3. Community expertise (mentorship by experienced community members).

At the Center for Urban Education (CUE), students split time equally between taking classes and getting practical experience as a paraprofessional in a school. In the mornings, our teacher candidates work 15 – 20 hours per week in public-school and charter school classrooms and attend 15 – 20 hours per week of university classes in the afternoons/evenings. They practice the theories learned at CUE the very next day with their students. They observe how the cooperating teacher interacts with the pupils, debrief, and reflect with their cooperating teacher. They see an idea through three lenses: their own, the university professor, and the cooperating teacher. This process also allows the teacher candidates the opportunity to practice, make mistakes, get feedback, try again, and experience success.

The state of Colorado requires that teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs complete at least 800 hours of field-based experience. Center for Urban Education graduates spend 3,000-4,000 hours in K- 12 classrooms during their 4-year program. Because paraprofessionals are likely to be invested in the communities where they work and they see what teachers do every day, they know the demands that teaching requires. Their attrition rate is lower once they become teachers. Program

partners including the Denver Public Schools, Aurora Public Schools, Cherry Creek Public Schools, Sheridan Public Schools, Jefferson County Public Schools, Adams County District 12, Adams County District 14, Mapleton Public Schools, and other Denver area school districts have helped the Center achieve nearly 100-percent job placement among graduates.

At UNC Center for Urban Education, we develop excellent teachers by immersing them in classroom environments that mirror the ones they themselves will someday create. We model high-quality teaching strategies that make a difference in student learning outcomes.



Mitigate the Mismatch in Demographics Between Students and Teachers

It is important to build a work force that mirrors the demographics of the children in our classrooms. The classroom is an intimate environment, five days a week. Teachers, principals, and paraprofessionals should share a lived experience with the students as much of the time as possible.

Of the high school students in the DPS EdConnect Program who have self-

identified that they would like to become teachers, 84% are Latino, and 8% are African American. Of the 2,200 paraprofessionals in DPS, 65% are people of color.

For decades, school districts have attempted to increase the diversity of their teaching staffs—with varying degrees of success. In the Denver Public Schools, for example, the percent of students of color (77%) remains significantly higher than the percent of teachers of color (28%). Similar trends exist in other districts across Colorado where white teachers make up 88% of the teaching corps while 8% are Hispanic, 1% are black, 1% are Asian and 2% are other.

That's where the UNC Center for Urban Education comes in. We are doing this work at our Center. We are creating a system that prepares teachers within the community that they serve. In fact, more than 90% of the teacher candidates at the Center grew up in the Denver metro area. And if they didn't grow up in Denver, they can often relate to the children who speak English as a second language or come from another country. Our graduates connect with the students at a deeper level because they share the students' culture and language. They are sensitive to the needs, interests and talents of each student, and they keep honing that sensitivity.

A shared experience is a shortcut to getting the work done. If a student knows that the teacher understands their disinterest in reading, their love of race cars, or the benefits and challenges of their family structure, it paves the way to learning. The child feels more accepted and understood and is therefore more open to new experiences and ideas. They don't have to be hypervigilant learners, trying to behave and respond in a way that pleases the teacher but

doesn't reflect their own learning style or personality.

The skills that CUE teacher candidates acquire during their time in their degree program help them build an inclusive classroom. For example, they learn strategies for culturally responsive teaching and learning in multiple content areas. They also learn how to use 21st-century tools that level the playing field for learners. We strive to graduate teachers who are ready to respect and support every child in a way that is meaningful to each learner.



Diversifying the Faculty at the Center for Urban Education

Meeting the needs of all learners depends on teachers who can relate to the students, and the teacher candidates at CUE develop practical and theoretical knowledge to be successful with all students. The CUE teacher candidates benefit from professors and mentors of color and their relationships with CUE leaders build trust and collaboration and teacher candidates see faculty as partners in their learning.

Frequent discussions with other multicultural educators are vitally important for professional support and personal revitalization. The Center's mentors and faculty members discuss readings about culturally responsive teaching in monthly

meetings, which provides that support and revitalization. We prepare ourselves so that we can prepare our teacher candidates.

Community Expertise by Way of Mentors



We hire experienced teachers, principals, and administrators as mentors. The mentors observe our teacher candidates at work in the classroom and provide specific, real-time, actionable feedback.

The most effective mentorship is continuous, so that a deep trust can build between mentor and mentee. In some traditional programs, one graduate student works with a group of teacher candidates for a semester. A different doctoral student is assigned to those same students the next semester. Our approach is to assign a mentor to the same teacher candidates during the length of their degree program.

Effective mentors must be familiar with what's being taught in the university classroom, so they can help teacher candidates apply theory to the real world. Many of our mentors teach one or more of the university courses their mentees attend. Mentors are more effective if they are locally based and understand how local teachers are reaching students. Our mentors teach in or are retired from Denver-area schools. They know exactly what's

happening in the classroom. They've taught in those same classrooms.

A Caring Community

By aligning academic, practitioner, and community knowledge, the Center for Urban Education creates a successful third space. It integrates what have traditionally been competing ideas and power bases. We moved from an either/or perspective to a both/and perspective, where all points of view are valid. We are by no means the only institution that has created a hybrid model, but we believe ours is uniquely aligned because of its hyperfocus on the local community.

At the end of their degree program, our teacher candidates are enamored of children and teaching. They know how to create inclusive classrooms. They are prepared to create their own hybrid space where they align their knowledge with their students' knowledge and tie in community expertise by way of family and community members. In short, our model produces novice teachers who are confident and prepared for the realities of our urban classrooms.

The mentors and professors at the UNC Center for Urban Education (CUE) ask the teacher candidates to show care for their students. They demonstrate the practice by integrating caring into their own teaching. For some of our students, it may be the first time they've seen caring modeled in a classroom. In fifth grade, a teacher told one of our teacher candidates—now a junior at the Center—that he would probably never graduate from high school. He was labeled as “special education.” The education he received reflected the teachers' belief that he couldn't learn.

Luckily, when he transferred schools in sixth grade, his teachers believed in who

he was and knew he had the potential to succeed. He went on to graduate high school, thanks to the foundation those teachers laid. But when he went to college there was no community of caring people. After leaving two colleges, he enrolled in the Center for Urban Education.

At CUE, this teacher candidate flourished, thanks to the umbrella of caring teachers, mentors, students, and staff. The faculty and staff at the Center build personal relationships with the students and provide multiple opportunities for students to connect with each other through discussions and group projects. Teachers are dedicated to helping students succeed, and they're always available to students.

When we see students as children first, we focus on their wellbeing as humans. Our partnerships with their parents and family members can help us know students more completely. Then, we can design classrooms and lessons that are matched to their talents and interests. With frequent interactions among schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school.

At the Center for Urban Education, the faculty and mentors work together as a cohesive group of multicultural teacher educators. We are sensitive and responsive to issues of diversity in our own student body. Our modeling helps to prepare teacher candidates who can mirror that behavior in their own classrooms. We desperately need to provide that level of attention to reach today's K–12 students.



Culturally Responsive Teaching

The Census Bureau projects that more than 50% of all students in US public schools will be students of color by the year 2020. Culturally responsive teaching is no longer optional. We must actively build the learning capacity of students if we are to create lifelong learners who are prepared to be strong democratic citizens.

But what is culturally responsive teaching? In nonacademic terms, it's a way of teaching that acknowledges, accommodates, and celebrates all aspects of all students' cultural identities, including language; behavioral norms; ethnicity; socio-economic status; gender; religion; and learning style.

Listed are five ways culturally responsive teaching changes the conversation about student success:

- 1. We see parents and families as allies.** They are partners in students' learning. Teachers and school leaders make decisions with parents and families. Parents benefit from joint decision-making. They feel seen and heard. They feel a sense of ownership in

the school and in their children's achievement. They increase their knowledge of and confidence in parenting, and they gain leadership skills.

2. We have high expectations of all students. The try–fail–learn cycle is more important than one test score or grade. Students feel challenged and like they have learned something of value.

3. Our instruction is student-centered rather than test-centered, teacher-centered, or school-centered. We design a curriculum that creates personal relevance for students and gives them choice.

4. Learning happens within the context of culture. We plan and host ongoing multicultural activities that promote cultural awareness. Teachers and students respect and are connected to one another.

5. The teacher is a facilitator rather than the expert. Students bring their own expertise, views, and opinions to class. Students are a part of the teaching-learning cycle.

The Center is working to be inclusive of both the role of teacher preparation *and* the needs of urban schools. It is important to keep in mind the mission and the implications of simultaneously renewing schools and the education of educators and marry the two. . . because teacher education has been regarded for so long as the prerogative of higher education—in spite of the obvious role of schools.

Cultural Responsiveness in the Classroom

Culturally responsive teachers have consistently high expectations of all learners and draw upon students' lived experiences, interests, and ways of learning to help students understand what's being taught. There is no better way to teach cultural responsiveness to pre-service teachers than to use those methods in the university classroom.

Professors at the Center:

- Build **trust and community**—student to student, student to professor, and professor/school to student's family.
- Support students as people and not just as learners
- Have students use **reflective tools** such as journals so professors can understand what students are learning, what they are struggling with, and how they are feeling about their learning.
- Start with and focus on students' strengths and naming those strengths in front of the class.
- Assign **engaging projects**, such as researching events, analyzing literature, publishing original creative writing, conducting scientific experiments, and applying models to the real world.
- Build on a successive series of conversations, projects, field experiences, presentations, and opportunities for revision to take students from different starting points to the same level of proficiency.
- Put students in several **different groups and pairings** to encourage

them to learn from one another as much as from the professor.

- Use a variety of **culturally relevant visual representations** to present material and give students the opportunity to present their understanding through images.
- Assess performance in several ways to account for different approaches to learning.



Partnering with Leadership Council Members

As we strive to diversify the teaching ranks, partnerships with school districts are critically important. To further the Center’s mission and reach, CUE created a collaborative community of practice that includes leaders from PK-12 schools, colleges and universities, communities of color, businesses and foundations . . . leaders who are passionate about and committed to creating exceptional learning opportunities for all students. This professional network serves as a community of practice and activism designed to change how and what we do to support urban students and their families. Distinguished members of this collaborative serve as ambassadors by creating enthusiasm about CUE’s mission, recruiting future teachers

who want to change the world, and informing CUE’s mission, vision and work going forward.

Why choose to call this group the “Leadership Council?” The Center is helping to facilitate a change in how the larger society understands the terms “Leader” and “Leadership” and how those terms relate to diversity within our public schools. The Center recognizes that Council members bring unique roles and capacities to the team, and these qualities help us to critically engage each other. Together, we reach new understandings about shared priorities and what is needed to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for urban students. Rather than seeking a solitary leader or small leadership group who generates ideas and solves problems, CUE believes that education organizations are most creative and effective when conditions allow and encourage all stakeholders to work together toward common goals and a shared vision. As such, CUE’s leadership theory and practice rest upon the following principles:

- Cultivate environments that help *all* members to develop and emerge as idea generators and problem solvers (i.e., leaders)
- Encourage and support diverse ways of thinking, bringing together perspectives that are sometimes marginalized and/or understood as being oppositional.
- Support Council members to act for the good of urban learning communities.
- Build enthusiasm and initiative, which are essential to healthy learning organizations.

- Advance communication and interpersonal networks based on mutual trust and respect.
- Engender compassion, harmony, and tolerance of diverse opinions.

External Funding

The Center received an infusion of funds from the Maycomb Capital Team in New York and BDT and MSD Partners in Chicago. The group committed \$600,000 to the Center for Urban Education through a Community Outcomes Fund. Managed by Trendlines, the funding is a five-year investment that will be repaid as school districts hire and retain CUE program graduates as full-time teachers in their schools.

Several school districts have already agreed to partner with the center in this pay-for-outcomes arrangement, including Aurora Public Schools, Cherry Creek Public Schools, Sheridan School District, and the Denver School of Science and Technology charter network. The Trendlines team is helping CUE sustainably expand its operations by assisting with recruitment, data systems, and performance management. Investors hope this unusual model will also become a viable strategy for other paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline development programs nationwide.

Conclusion

The Center recognizes the urgent challenge to recruit, develop and retain a diverse teacher corps that is prepared to support strong learning outcomes for all students. CUE has been actively working to build broad-based collaborations and to prepare teachers from underrepresented communities to help correct the incongruity between student and teacher demographics. To accomplish this lofty purpose, the Center

has simultaneously developed its faculty, mentors, and curriculum along with the CUE Leadership Council, a school-based network of working professionals. Doing so has allowed the Center to align its teacher preparation efforts with the specific needs of local education providers.



The CUE staff has dedicated its energies toward solving entrenched problems, and the Center has achieved success preparing paraprofessionals to be teachers who understand and are prepared to support urban students. Ultimately, the Center's goals are to create a professional teacher development program that promotes critical inquiry into urban teaching and learning that helps experienced teachers and teacher candidates; supports innovative, relevant and responsible research and development; helps school teachers and

leaders and the CUE faculty work together toward shared goals; and strengthens the relationship between schools and the broader political, social and economic communities in which they reside.

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