When teachers start their first positions, they enter schools armed with what they believe are the most important elements of teaching: lesson plans, teaching strategies, good classroom management, and effective instruction and assessment. They usually feel confident about their content area knowledge and believe that if they follow the methodologies prescribed by their teacher preparation courses and professional development workshops, the other aspects of becoming terrific teachers will fall into place.

They often are ill prepared, however, to navigate the cultural and political issues that they quickly encounter. By the end of the first week, many teachers realize that they are unprepared to deal with the multitude of cultural, linguistic, social, and political differences they encounter in modern classrooms. Consequently, they might feel angry with themselves or feel cheated by their professors because their coursework rarely touched upon these unspoken challenges of the profession. They likely received “two-dimensional teacher preparation,” which looks fine on paper, but does not train beginning teachers to function adequately in today’s schools.

As a result of under preparation and other factors, novice teachers are leaving the profession at higher rates than their more experienced counterparts.

How can we keep the next generation of teachers in the profession and train them to become the expert, culturally and politically savvy communicators they need to be?

To contend with this dilemma, we desperately need multi-dimensional teacher preparation and professional development systems to help teachers cultivate cultural competencies, which constitute a big part of the reality of the profession.

**Real Professional Development**

Beginning teachers need preparation and professional development that is multidimensional and adequately prepares them for the challenges of today’s schools. Programs can better prepare teachers for the realities of the profession by asking them to respond to a series of cultural and political vignettes (CPVs). This pedagogical strategy can be used by principals in new teacher meetings, training sessions, and superintendent’s conferences, as well as by professional development leaders and

**Novice Teachers Need Real Professional Development**

Empower teachers to maneuver culturally complex situations with multidimensional professional development.

**BY JACQUELINE DARVIN**
teacher educators in undergraduate and graduate courses. The concept was first articulated in Sonia Nieto’s *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*, where she poses a cultural problem to her students and asks them to reflect on and write about it.

*A new student from India comes to your school and on her first day in the cafeteria, she begins eating rice with her hands. Several of the children make fun of her. You are her teacher and happen to be in the lunchroom when this happens. What do you do?*

The first time I used this CPV, I was amazed at the variety of responses that I received and was even more surprised by the passion and intensity of the discussion that followed. Instantly, teachers divided over whether the teacher should intervene immediately, at a later time, or not at all. Additionally, the types of interventions and the rationales behind them varied greatly. Some teachers believed that an educator must intervene, citing tragedies such as the Columbine incident that resulted from bullying, while others argued that it would only make the situation worse by calling more
ALLOW TEACHERS TO EXPLORE
MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES OF
COMPLEX SITUATIONS TO AVOID
RESPONDING IN WAYS THAT
MIGHT BE BIASED, PREJUDICED,
OR NARROW.

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The September/October 2009 issue of Principal is dedicated to grooming teacher excellence. Visit the magazine’s archives to access articles on empowering teachers.

The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession offers resources to help teachers reflect on their practice and take practical, effective steps to improve their ability to reach all students.

NAESP members now have access to high-quality online professional development—at no cost—thanks to a partnership forged with PD 360, one of the world’s largest sources of online learning for educators.

Role-Playing
A more advanced way of using CPVs is to role-play situations in real time. Teachers are selected to play particular roles in the CPVs (i.e., student, teacher, parent, principal, school board member) and try to respond to the situation as it unfolds. When using this technique, facilitators must emphasize to the audience that this is a difficult activity and that the purpose of the exercise is to allow teachers to make mistakes in a safe, controlled environment. Onlookers are there to support the actors in the role-play, not to point out all the things the actors do wrong or to poke fun.

One way to begin role-playing CPVs is to hand the vignette to the actors, give them five minutes to brainstorm, and then have them demonstrate a brief dialogue that could occur in that particular situation. Another way is to simply begin the dialogue and see how the actors respond without providing brainstorming time.

Facilitators can choose to have audience members respond to the actors verbally during the role-plays by stopping them during the dialogue and soliciting comments, respond verbally at the conclusion of the role-play, or respond anonymously in writing. Add another layer to the activity by asking a second group of actors to “challenge” the first by responding to the same CPV in a different manner and

attention to the girl and making her feel that her cultural values and customs were “wrong” and should be replaced by “more American” ones.

The teachers further dissected the issue, discussing how to address the Indian student and how to talk with the children making fun of her. Several educators believed that the teacher should act as a “socio-cultural mediator” by talking with the Indian student about “American ways of eating rice,” while showing respect for her culture and allowing her to decide whether she wanted to retain this aspect of her cultural upbringing. Others chose a “show, don’t tell, approach” and advocated that the teacher sit beside the student and start eating some American finger food such as French fries to quietly demonstrate to both the children making fun and the Indian student that eating with one’s hands is acceptable in certain situations.

Teachers normally change or broaden their responses to this CPV after the discussion. Beginning teachers must know that there aren’t any right or wrong answers and that all opinions represent possible approaches. The CPV frustrates many teachers because they come away with more questions than answers. This very feeling of uneasiness makes teachers’ professional development experience multi-dimensional because it closely mirrors the feelings that they will encounter in the classroom.

In using CBVs, facilitators must be mindful to help teachers differentiate between acting in culturally and politically responsive ways and teaching to stereotypes. Facilitators can help participants differentiate between the two by posing key questions during the CPV discussion that help uncover whether or not the teachers are being stereotypical or culturally sensitive in their responses. For example, in the discussion following the rice vignette, I often ask the teachers questions such as, “Do all Indian people eat rice with their hands?” and “Are there variations in eating habits that are perhaps dependent upon other factors, such as socioeconomic status and religion, that need to be considered?” Asking questions that help uncover variations within particular cultural groups helps to ensure that participants are being open-minded and not viewing members of particular culture groups in ways that are stereotypical and actually negate the intention of the CPVs. The goal of CPV exercises is to allow teachers to explore multiple perspectives of complex situations and to avoid responding in ways that might be biased, prejudiced, or narrow.
then asking the audience to compare and contrast the two versions.

Role-playing CPVs also demonstrate to beginning teachers the amount of nonverbal communication that occurs in classrooms. By watching their colleagues act out CPVs, they quickly see that gestures, posture, and intonation are just as important, if not more so, than verbal discourse. When we provide opportunities for beginning teachers to observe, analyze, and discuss these aspects of communication in teacher preparation courses and during professional development, then they will be better prepared to effectively respond to subtle interactions in the classroom.

**Professional Development for the Changing Profession**

In order to move toward multidimensional teacher preparation and professional development that meets the needs of a changing profession, principals should provide novice teachers with experiences that allow them to hone not only their organizational skills, knowledge of curriculum content, and lesson planning, but also their abilities to positively and sensitively interact with students, parents, colleagues, and school administrators in culturally and politically complex situations. As the renowned scholar Paolo Freire emphasized in his writings, teaching is a political act, and to deny beginning teachers the chance to delve into and analyze the political influences that will greatly affect their future careers is, in effect, sentencing them to two-dimensional teacher preparation. This can leave new teachers feeling overwhelmed, confused, or in the worst cases, unprepared, unfit, or unwilling to teach.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reports that every school day, nearly 1,000 teachers leave the field of teaching and another 1,000 change schools. This incredibly high rate of attrition does not exist because new teachers cannot write lesson plans, are not knowledgeable about their subjects, or do not properly assess students. It exists, I believe in part, because teacher preparation programs and professional development workshops need to do a better job of preparing teachers for the realities of the changing teaching profession, including providing them with ample opportunities to reveal and discuss the cultural and political issues that they will surely be asked to address in their classrooms.

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