

# Educator Preparation for Social-Emotional Learning, Cultural Competence, and Equity at Trinity University

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## About the Educator Preparation Laboratory

Trinity University is among the 15 network partners of the Educator Preparation Laboratory (EdPrepLab), an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education. EdPrepLab aims to strengthen educator preparation in the United States by building the collaborative capacity of preparation programs, school districts, and state policymakers. Linking research, policy, and practice, EdPrepLab supports preparation programs that are equity-focused, student-centered, and grounded in the science of learning and development, and seeks to expand these approaches systemwide. This brief describes efforts to focus on the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning and their relation to identity, cultural competence, and equity at Trinity and in its PDS partner schools.

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## Introduction

Trinity University in San Antonio, TX, is nationally recognized for its innovative and clinically intensive educator preparation model. The 5-year program leading to a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) features a 32-hour teacher certification program combining graduate coursework with a yearlong internship as an apprentice in the classrooms of expert teachers. These internships occur through Trinity's long-standing Professional Development School (PDS) partnerships with local urban schools serving historically underserved student populations, where Trinity faculty work alongside public school teachers.

Across three semesters, Trinity's MAT program engages candidates in examining three essential questions:

- Who am I as a teacher, learner, and human being?
- Who are my students as learners?
- What do I need to know, do, and be in order to create and sustain culturally responsive teaching practices?

These questions, explored in many different courses, are connected by a framework developed by Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge<sup>1</sup> that lays out three essential skill sets needed for both students and teachers to thrive in the classroom:

- **Understanding ourselves:** This includes exploring our interior world, connecting with our sense of purpose and deepest aspirations, and understanding why we feel the way we do and what to do about those feelings. It also includes how to concentrate on the task at hand, ignore distractions, and manage our disturbing emotions.
- **Tuning in to other people:** This set of skills includes the ability to empathize, to understand another person's reality, and to relate to them from their perspective, not just from our own. It also includes the ability to work together and build effective, connected relationships.
- **Understanding the larger world:** This includes understanding the larger systems of which we are a part. These systems extend power and privilege to some while denying them to others. This skill set includes examining the ways in which systems interact and create webs of either interdependence or privilege.

In engaging candidates in examining these questions, Trinity's program follows several vital assumptions. For candidates to know themselves and their students as learners and human beings, and to examine the larger systems that extend or deny privilege—as well as their role in interrupting those systems—they need to establish a strong learning community in which to share identities, question assumptions, take risks, and make mistakes. Moreover, educators' personal identities and professional practices can play a role in interrupting or perpetuating inequities in schools, so candidates need to first explore the impact that race plays in their own lives before examining the impact race plays in schools and in their teaching practice. Finally, teachers should be challenged to consider the expression of emotions as a significant component of their professional development, given the role that emotions play in driving creativity, learning, decision-making, and behavior,<sup>2</sup> and to view teaching itself as an intellectually, physically, and emotionally demanding profession.

## Creating a Learning Community for Trinity Candidates

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Throughout the program, but especially in the initial summer session, faculty support the creation of that learning community by establishing rituals and norms and engaging in team-building exercises, all of which demonstrate practices that candidates will be able to institute in their own classrooms. Trinity faculty introduce opening rituals that are used at the beginning of every class, including Gratitude Circle, Connections, and Norms and Agenda Review. For example, in the Gratitude Circle, candidates are encouraged to conjure up feelings of gratitude as they verbally express why they feel gratitude. As University of Massachusetts researchers explain:

Our thoughts can actually trigger physiological changes in our body that affect our mental and physical health. Basically, what you think affects how you feel (both emotionally and physically). So if you increase your positive thoughts, like gratitude, you can increase your subjective sense of well-being as well as, perhaps, objective measures of physical health (like fewer symptoms of illness and increased immune functioning).<sup>3</sup>

Candidates are encouraged to train themselves to notice—in the moment—things for which they are thankful, a skill they can pass on to their students.

Through these rituals, candidates learn to attend to feelings of gratitude in the moment, transition from their personal to professional lives to focus on the learning at hand, and make explicit what they need from each other in order to learn well together. Engaging in these rituals and creating shared norms helps candidates build the trust needed to take risks required for deeper learning and for addressing issues of equity. Team-building exercises such as Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger<sup>4</sup> emphasize the importance of risk-taking for learning while helping candidates explore the fact that some of them, based on their identities, experience an abundance of comfort in their everyday lives and in their schooling while others experience a disproportionate amount of danger.

## Supporting Candidates' Exploration of Their Own and Each Other's Identities

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A number of experiences offered in the initial summer semester are designed to help candidates explore their own identities: how they define themselves; how others define them; and their sense of belonging in society based on their experiences with socially constructed categories such as race, ethnicity, first language, national origin, ability, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion or spiritual affiliation, and age. In one such activity, candidates are encouraged to examine their identities around a set of 10 social categories that society deems important, responding to prompts from the instructor asking which identity they think about most often and least often, one they would like to learn more about, and the one that has the strongest effect on how they see themselves as people. After spending some time learning about each other's unique intersection of identities, candidates are then introduced to the "cycle of socialization,"<sup>5</sup> the ways that social roles are prescribed and that status, power, and privilege are conferred or denied as social identities develop in families and institutions.

Candidates apply this cycle to their own lives and identity development and are encouraged to identify stereotypes or assumptions that they have absorbed about this identity, whether and how their ideas about their identity have changed over time, and similarities and differences between their own and their peers' experiences. This personal experience and hearing the stories of their classmates enables them also to begin to think with greater empathy and understanding about what their students may experience as a function of their intersectional identities.

Against that initial investigation of identities, candidates specifically examine their racial identity in some detail. Candidates work together to define race, racism, and institutional racism and to identify and explore some of the "landmark" events that have charted the course of their racial journey. They read racial identity development models to better understand their own and their peers' racial identities, and they write and share their racial autobiography. In the fall semester, candidates begin to examine the history of race in the United States and the persistent racial opportunity gap that exists in many schools. They learn about micro-aggressions and their cumulative effect as well as institutional racism and white privilege. In the spring semester, candidates read about a group of educators who examined issues of race in their own teaching practices,<sup>6</sup> then define a question to explore in their own practice through a 6-week action research project. Through this project, they work to surface and interrupt their assumptions and beliefs about teaching, learning, and/or children and revise their practices in order to remove their own internal barriers to students' success. These explorations set the stage for candidates to come to the classroom with greater social-emotional intelligence and understanding of their students and the context in which they will be teaching.

## Supporting Candidates' Social and Emotional Learning

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When teaching the skills of emotional intelligence, the ability to monitor our own and others' feelings and use that knowledge to inform our thinking and actions enables children and teacher candidates alike to become more effective learners and joyful human beings. Trinity's MAT program strengthens candidates' cultural competence as well as their own social development and emotional intelligence as they also develop curricular and pedagogical tools to support children to do the same. As Trinity candidates engage in conversations about race and equity, the instructor encourages them to pay attention to how they are experiencing and expressing emotions.

Trinity faculty teach candidates Cognitively Based Compassion Training (CBCT®),<sup>7</sup> a research-based program that consists of six different modules that cultivate a compassionate mindset to help manage stress and regulate emotions. Candidates also learn conscious breathing techniques designed to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and alleviate the stress response. Engaging in conscious breathing helps candidates to remain centered and calm in moments of challenge, to decrease their overall level of internal tension, and to increase mental concentration.

## Preparing Candidates to Participate in School-Based SEL Programs

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In addition to engaging Trinity candidates in CBCT mindfulness and compassion-based meditation practices throughout the 5-week summer session, faculty also introduce teacher candidates to social-emotional learning (SEL) programs used at a number of Trinity's professional development schools at which candidates complete yearlong internship placements. The two elementary campuses implement RULER,<sup>8</sup> an emotional intelligence curriculum. RULER is an acronym that defines the knowledge, dispositions, and skills associated with emotional intelligence:

- Recognizing** emotions in self and others to obtain valuable information about the environment
- Understanding** the causes and consequences of one's own and students' emotions to predict behavior
- Labeling** emotions to describe feelings precisely and accurately
- Expressing** emotions to communicate messages appropriately
- Regulating** one's own and students' emotions to harness their constructive power

RULER provides educators with four “anchors” that teach students how to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate their emotions. Trinity candidates practice the RULER tools during the summer session while faculty model their use, positioning them to hit the ground running when candidates transition to their internship placements. Moreover, studying RULER as well as SEE—the Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning curriculum<sup>9</sup>—provides candidates with models of strong, engaging curriculum at the same time they are learning about inquiry-based planning through the Understanding by Design (UbD™)<sup>10</sup> model. Candidates make use of their learning as professional development school teachers commission elementary candidates to design SEL units that address specific needs of their students. For example, PDS teachers recently requested units focusing on building the skill of flexibility, conflict resolution, collaboration, and bullying. Developing these units during the summer session builds candidates’ commitment to addressing social and emotional learning once they enter the classroom.

## Participating in School Learning Contexts Around SEL and Equity

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For the past 5 years, Trinity University and its PDS partner Lamar Elementary have systematically addressed the social and emotional learning needs of students, their families, teachers, and teacher candidates. After a yearlong investigation of growth mindset,<sup>11</sup> school leaders lengthened the school day in order to create a dedicated 30-minute block each morning for teachers to address the SEL curriculum. Creating this designated period reduced teachers’ concern that they would have to squeeze in the SEL curriculum by stealing from academic learning time. Moreover, by explicitly teaching SEL skills first thing every morning, teachers are then well positioned to revisit and reinforce those skills throughout the day.

Moreover, with support from Trinity faculty, Lamar’s teachers and administrators recently conducted a yearlong inquiry around the following question: What do we need to know, do, and be in order to create and foster an equity-centered learning community that builds alliances across differences and transforms individual practice? Trinity’s teacher candidates were able to participate in many aspects of that investigation, which created strong alignment between their graduate coursework and their field-based experiences. They observed teachers learn how to affirm students’ racial identities. They participated in difficult conversations in which educators asked hard questions of themselves and their colleagues: How does dominant white culture affect our classrooms and schools? In what ways do students and families experience those effects? Do we really believe that *all* of our students can succeed? What does our data suggest about who is being served well in our school and who is not? How do our students of color feel about their school experience?

## Conclusion

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Trinity University’s MAT program provides candidates opportunities to get to know themselves in preparation for knowing their students, to explore aspects of their own identities in considering the role of identity in schools and society, and to attend to their own and their students’ social and emotional learning while engaging in culturally responsive teaching. All of this takes place in a community that serves as both a site of learning and a model for candidates’ own classroom communities. Through this work, Trinity provides a well-rounded preparation for the classroom, and can serve as an example for other programs seeking to integrate social, emotional, and cultural aspects of learning while emphasizing identity, community, and equity.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>4</sup> School Reform Initiative. (2017). *Zones of comfort, risk and danger for youth engagement*. Denver, CO: Author. <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/zones-of-comfort-risk-and-danger-for-youth-engagement/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Harro, B. (2000). "The Cycle of Socialization" in Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W. J., Castañeda, R., Hackman, H. W., Peters, M. L., & Zúñiga, X. (Eds.). *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Sexism, Anti-Semitism, Heterosexism, and Ableism* (pp. 15-25). New York, NY: Routledge.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael, A. (2015). *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- <sup>7</sup> CBCT is a research-based tool developed by Emory University's Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics. See: CCSCBE. (n.d.). CBCT compassion training. <https://www.compassion.emory.edu/cbct-compassion-training/index.html> (accessed 10/30/19).
- <sup>8</sup> RULER was developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. See: Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. (n.d.). What is RULER? <http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/ruler-overview/> (accessed 10/30/19).
- <sup>9</sup> SEE was developed by Emory University's Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics. See: CCSCBE. (2017). *SEE learning: Social, emotional, and ethical learning: An initiative for educating heart and mind*. Atlanta, GA: Author. <https://compassion.emory.edu/SEE-learning.pdf> (accessed 10/30/19).
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