

**Investigating the Cultural Competence of Preservice Teachers: Comparisons and Considerations**

Suzanne Elizabeth Macqueen  
University of Newcastle, Australia

Ruth Reynolds  
University of Newcastle, Australia

Kate Ferguson-Patrick  
University of Newcastle, Australia

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**Abstract:**

Cultural competence is an important skill for 21st century teaching and learning, and as such, it features in various international teacher standards and accreditation documents. Teachers must be culturally competent so they can cater for diversity in their classrooms and prepare their students to live and work in a global economy/environment. Preparing preservice teachers for this role is not a particularly easy task, made more difficult given that diversity among teachers does not always match diversity of students in schools; furthermore, cultural competence is a contested concept. In this paper, we consider issues in the assessment of cultural competence from the research literature and focus on findings from one survey with preservice teachers at a regional university in Australia. Comparing these data with findings from an earlier study of American preservice teachers, we discuss significant differences from the two cohorts in responses to some survey items. Some findings raise issues around the suitability of cultural competence instruments across different contexts.

**Key words:** cultural competence, assessment, preservice teachers, diversity, teacher education

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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### **Introduction**

There are essentially two reasons why scrutiny of teachers' ability to develop cultural competence in their students has been seen as a 21st century educational necessity. The first reason is that classrooms (that is, teaching environments) are increasingly becoming more diverse in terms of teachers and students in a time of unprecedented mass diaspora internationally. The second reason is because we are increasingly engaged in global connections where what happens in one part of the world directly affects other parts of the world, and so to be unaware of (and uninvolved in) these connections is to be unprepared for the problems and opportunities they afford (Reynolds & Vinterek, 2013).

As teacher educators, we wanted to determine answers to the following research questions:

- How culturally competent are our preservice teachers?
- How does the cultural competence of our preservice teachers compare to preservice teachers elsewhere?

### **Defining cultural competence**

There is a multitude of different terms associated with global competence and especially with education designed to develop global competence. Most recently, the Asia Society and OECD joint publication *Teaching for Global Competence in a Changing World* (2018) and the OECD/PISA global competence framework *Global Competency for an Inclusive World* (2018) are indicative of the increased use of the term global competence. This is in contrast to terms such as intercultural understanding (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017), intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), global education (Tye & Kniep, 1991), intercultural education (United Nations Educational, 2006), and, broadly speaking, multicultural education (Banks, 1993). These terms offer slightly different perspectives on the issue of addressing classroom diversity and diverse worldviews locally, as well as the need for a global worldview. This highlights the fact that there are substantial issues associated with assessing such a complex concept as cultural competence.

Deardorff (2006) coined the definition of intercultural competence most often cited: "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" (p. 247). Diller and Moule (2005) explain cultural competence as the ability to self-reflect on professional beliefs and expectations of minority cultures and translate this reflection into actions that ameliorate social

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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injustices. Cultural (often termed “intercultural”) competence requires “...an openness, a willingness, and an ability to collaborate with those people who [are] different from oneself, which is underscored by enhanced intercultural skills and competence” (Cushner, 2011, p. 612). It involves the ability to “interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures” (Perry & Southwell, 2011, p. 455). The goal of cultural competence is to reduce prejudice and discrimination against oppressed groups, to work toward an equitable distribution of power among the stakeholders in education, and to enrich equal opportunity and social justice for all groups (Grant & Sleeter, 2006). A useful summary definition of teacher cultural competence comes from He (2013):

Teachers need abilities to recognize their own world views, to understand and embrace the cultural diversity of their students, and to confront their potential biases and assumptions in their interactions with diverse students and their families. (p. 56)

Cultural competency is acknowledged as a vital skill (Cushner & Mahon, 2009) and is evident in Australian and international curriculum documents and teaching standards (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2015; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2013; Department for Education, 2013; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training & Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). Despite this, it seems to be destined to remain at the margins in teacher education programs unless more consistent programs of planning and assessment are instigated.

### **Diversity in classrooms**

School students represent an increasingly diverse groups of cultures, languages, and beliefs (Keengwe, 2010). In Australia, for example, there has been an 11.8% increase in the number of foreign students enrolling into schools (NSW Department of Education, 2016), while young people report that two-thirds of negative intercultural interactions occur in schools (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Figures from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2013) indicate that internationally, the number of students who might experience being the cultural minority in the classroom is rising due to a steady increase in migration. The percentage of non-white children in U.S. classrooms is expected to reach 54% by 2024 (Kena et al., 2016). Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) showed that 49% of Australians either had been born overseas (first generation Australian) or one or both parents had been born overseas (second generation Australian). After English, the next most common languages spoken

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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at home in Australia were Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese, and Vietnamese, while the percentage of people identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin was also rising. In Australia, 2017 data for the state of New South Wales (population over 7.5 million) showed that just over a third of government school students came from homes where languages other than English were spoken, with that figure having increased since the previous year (NSW Department of Education, 2018). The statistics quoted here relate primarily to macrocultural elements of diversity and not to other aspects such as socioeconomic status or range of literacy standards, which also require differentiated approaches from teachers.

### **Preparing preservice teachers for cultural competence**

The increased diversity of cultures in our classrooms (Santoro, 2015; Vass, 2017) means that there is an increased need for teachers of the future to understand how to work with diverse groups of cultures, languages, and beliefs that may be present in any classroom (Keengwe, 2010). When a teacher displays cultural competence, they demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and take action accordingly. Educators therefore require skills in a number of areas in order to truly teach for cultural competence. As an initial step, preservice teachers require a heightened awareness of the diverse cultures they will be teaching and a disposition that demonstrates they are aware of, sensitive to, and able to respond to these diverse students. Certainly, a local cultural competence as well as a global cultural competence is required to “examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being” (OECD, 2018, p. 4).

The increased diversity in classrooms makes it vital that cultural competence is incorporated in Teacher Education (TE) courses internationally, particularly because diversity in schools is not mirrored in the teaching population or TE cohorts of countries including the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and in Europe (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). Despite the evident diversity in school students, the teaching population has been overwhelmingly Anglo-Australian and mostly middle-class (Allard & Santoro, 2004, 2006). Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2000) noted that in the U.S., teacher education students also tend to be cross-culturally inexperienced and spend most of their time with people of their own ethnic and racial group. Cushner (2015) states that in England, between 90-95% of teachers are white, and in New Zealand, about 80% are European/Pakeha. Even in international schools, where there is often a more diverse group of nationalities represented, the teachers have often been trained in the norms and practices of their own national—often Western—culture (Pearce, 2013). When serious attempts to increase

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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diversity in the teaching profession are undertaken, for example as suggested by the new U.S. standards for teacher preparation (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2015), many of the targeted preservice teachers are first-in-family (FiF) to attend university. FiF students are often limited in opportunities to develop their own intercultural experiences through travel (including overseas study opportunities), field trips, or professional experiences in varied locations due to lack of funds, paid work, or family commitments (Macqueen & Ferguson-Patrick, 2015). Mills and Ballantyne (2010), noting that dispositions for increasing multicultural awareness develop in a sequential fashion, argued for the provision of appropriate instruction about diversity over a period of time. We cannot simply recruit diverse groups of teachers and assume they will be good at developing cultural competence, particularly when it is obvious that cultural competence is a complex notion. Preparation of preservice teachers in a structured manner to be culturally competent is needed to adequately address the student diversity in our schools and reduce prejudice and discrimination.

### **Programming for and assessing preservice teachers' cultural competence**

There are many different facets to developing cultural competence. In order to display cultural competence within the teaching profession, pedagogical tools and methods must be adapted to accommodate and enhance the learning styles of individual students within the classroom. Developing cultural competence is difficult with teachers who may have "very limited experiences with people and cultures different from their own" and who also often "lack a sense of personal connectedness with global issues and others in the world" (Cushner, 2015, p. 9).

Many research studies come from a perspective that assumes that most teachers entering teacher preparation programs believe that society is just and schools are fair and equitable. A key starting point for teacher educators in programs for primarily white, monocultural preservice teachers is to clarify some of the inequity in the "system" and develop critical awareness of the privilege they have in racially, ethnically, and linguistically dominant cultural groups. Challenging the cultural deficit mindset in preservice teachers, school students, and teachers is also essential (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Sleeter, 2018). Preservice teachers can then hopefully learn to value diversity and look for assets in such diversity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2015).

Bustamante, Skidmore, Nelson, and Jones (2016) argued that intentional planning and assessment is required to equip preservice teachers with the requisite skills to respond appropriately with the diversity in their classrooms. However, as Vass (2017) notes, assessing school students, preservice teachers, and teachers as to the extent to which they are culturally

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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competent is a demanding business. As well as limited curriculum opportunities for teachers to address issues of value for developing cultural competence (He, 2013; Macqueen & Ferguson-Patrick, 2015), there is also the problem of establishing the need to do so. Teaching pedagogies need to be responsive and relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people, but they must also “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Thus, teachers must “foster cultural competence, emotional awareness, and leadership skills to facilitate not just interactions, but meaningful interactions and relationships” (Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe, & Terry, 2013, p. 133). Once a program of work is developed, the question of assessment emerges.

Currently, there is a plethora of instruments and approaches that can be used to assess cultural competence in teaching. Intercultural competence is generally related to four dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors (Perry & Southwell, 2011). There is a need to teach and display these four factors when immersed in “appropriate and effective interaction in a variety of contexts” (Cushner, 2015, p. 12), including in instances associated with racial prejudice and stereotyping. Thus, appropriate assessment for cultural competence must encompass these factors.

Popular tools to assess cultural competence include tests of teacher self-efficacy, tests to clarify empathy, and interview or observational data to clarify values and beliefs and cross-cultural interactional capacities. Many tests of self-efficacy—mainly survey-based—for teachers and preservice teachers have been developed with a view that if teachers feel capable of culturally responsive teaching, they are more likely to enact this teaching (Siwatu, 2007). Empathy developed from a systematic process of perspective-taking has also been seen as a useful tool to build culturally responsive teachers. This involves field experience, critical classroom discourse, and exposure to literature that addresses cultural issues and social justice (Warren, 2018). Empathy requires some degree of sensitivity and may possibly be assessed through quantitative instruments such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The IDI, often used to assess the impact of study abroad experiences, provides a ranking of how culturally sensitive participants are and then provides ideas for educators to address the educational needs of these learners. It is a developmental tool focusing on the idea that there is a sequence involved in developing these skills. This has implications for the sequence provided in teacher education programs, which may be quite disjunctive (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Thorough assessment, however, would also ideally include some self-reflective journals or group discussions (Chiu et al., 2017; Siwatu et al., 2016). Primarily qualitative methodologies have been used to assess changes in values and beliefs of teachers and preservice teachers, but Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) argue that few of these have clarified useful pedagogies to affirm diversity and/or to enable beliefs to be put into practice to ensure better learning outcomes for students. It is also rare to find powerful cognitive approaches to teacher education which address beliefs and dispositions with reflection on the ensuing action/practice and then link that to student outcomes in terms of developing cultural competence (Cochran Smith et al., 2015).

In this research, we were trying to find useful tools to assess the progress of our programs of cultural competence, and we made the decision to use the survey devised by Liang and Zhang (2009) and scrutinized by Bustamante et al. (2016) as a starting point for considering our preservice teachers' cultural competence. Bustamante et al. (2016), along with other researchers, stressed the need to test instruments as well as develop them in order to "assess preservice teacher program effectiveness and make evidence-based program improvements" (p. 308). Liang and Zhang (2009) drew on many studies when establishing their initial model, with Garmon's (2004) work appearing to be particularly influential. Garmon (2004) emphasized the importance of self-reflection on beliefs and intercultural practices of cultural sensitivity and then positive interaction with students to focus on social justice. We felt that this would be a suitable tool to clarify the success of at least some of our interventions to promote the cultural competence of our preservice teacher cohort.

### **Method**

The authors work at a regional Australian university (for the purposes of this paper, we will refer to it as Regional University) with a history of equity initiatives, which is a large provider of TE programs. One of our goals has been to develop the cultural competence of our preservice teachers, who we hope will utilize their skills in their future classes, thereby also developing the cultural competence of their own students. Much of our focus has been on qualitative research clarifying beliefs and critically scrutinizing practices students have used and seen during their professional experience sessions along with some use of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer et al., 2003) in Study Abroad programs. Regional University's TE program cohorts include a high percentage of students who are First in Family (FiF) to attend university and students from low SES backgrounds. There is little cultural diversity among the TE cohort, as is the case with many teacher education programs in Australia (Allard & Santoro, 2004, 2006) and

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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elsewhere (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). This makes it an interesting setting in which to assess preservice teacher cultural competence.

To determine our preservice teachers' levels of cultural competence, the researchers invited preservice teachers enrolled in courses we taught to complete a minor adaptation of Liang and Zhang's (2009) cultural competence quantitative survey at the conclusion of their courses. Liang and Zhang's (2009) 17 item survey, a reduction from their original 49 questions, is based on item analysis and evaluation by an expert panel. The remaining 17 items cover four factors deemed by Liang and Zhang to be important for teachers in teaching for intercultural competence:

- (a) believing that all students can learn;
- (b) self-reflective and critical examination of one's own behaviours working with students of diverse background;
- (c) setting up high standards and communicating these high teacher expectations to students;
- and (d) standing up to challenge and ameliorating prejudice and discrimination. (p. 19)

The survey authors established reliability and validity within their own research context—a large regional university in the U.S. with similarities to our Australian context—and the instrument has been used by others (Bustamante et al., 2016). Our adaptation replaced a reference to “U.S. public schools” with “Australian public schools.” All other items were unchanged from the original.

Anonymous surveys were completed voluntarily by 597 preservice teachers in the second, third, or fourth years of their four-year primary and early childhood undergraduate degrees. Participants rated their agreement or disagreement to each of 17 statements with a Likert scale type response, from *1=strongly disagree* through to *7=strongly agree*. As per Liang and Zhang (2009), certain items in the instrument are reverse coded, so that for all items, after coding, a higher number indicates higher cultural awareness. The survey items were grouped into four scales, being related to: Professional Belief, Self-reflection, Teacher Expectation, and Action to Challenge. Liang and Zhang (2009) suggested that preservice teachers' cultural competence evolved from understanding to feeling before reaching the point where they would take action. The survey incorporated the broad definitions including various sociocultural categories of cultural competence used by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002, cited in Liang & Zhang, 2009, p. 17) as described above. It should be noted that there are additional dimensions of cultural competence that are not measured by this instrument, as indicated below. Liang and Zhang (2009) acknowledge that results attained through use of this survey are:

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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...constrained by the narrow focus of the instrument developed ... the 17 items were designed to measure only four dimensions of cultural competence. Other important dimensions of cultural competence discussed in the current multicultural education theory such as personal experience, intercultural experience and teaching experiences in diverse classrooms, etc., were not embedded in the original instrument design, thus could not be included in the model specification and testing in this study. (p. 28)

Data were uploaded and analyzed using SPSS. Mean results for each survey item were determined, and means for our cohort were compared with those from Liang and Zhang's (2009) U.S. study. Further details about their participants are available in that paper. Participant information for both cohorts is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant details

	<b>Midwestern USA</b>	<b>Regional NSW, Australia</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	489	598
<b>Female</b>	369 (74.5%)	456 (76.3%)
<b>Male</b>	120 (24.2%)	141 (23.6%)
<b>Age</b>	Under 25: 359 (73.2%)	Under 24: 411 (68.7%)

### **Analysis and Discussion**

There were similarities between the two samples on most survey items across the U.S. and Australian cohorts, as shown by the mean results presented in Table 2. We have noted in the table below, by shading, the areas where means for the Australian cohort differed significantly from those of the original U.S. cohort in research by Liang and Zhang (2009).

Table 2. Cultural Competence Survey Results

	Mean (U.S.)	Std. Deviation (U.S.)	Mean (Australia)	Std. Deviation (Australia)
<b><i>Teacher beliefs</i></b>				
*(U.S.) Australian public schools provide an equal education to all students regardless of their economic level	3.44	1.93	3.53	1.595
*Schools should treat gender putdowns as a normal and acceptable part of childhood	3.80	2.16	6.39	.989
First language other than English should be included in school, not just at home	5.09	1.39	5.04	1.313
Religious differences should be acknowledged at school, not just at home	4.52	1.45	5.67	1.341
<b><i>Self-reflections</i></b>				
I must examine own cultural beliefs and attitudes to determine how they might impact my interactions with students	5.84	1.13	6.15	.957
My lack of knowledge of students with different religious background from mine may negatively impact their learning experience	4.63	1.88	4.97	1.713
I know I will treat all children equally despite their race, culture, and language differences	3.20	2.34	6.61	.844
*I don't need to learn about diversity because I will treat all people the same	2.93	1.69	5.19	1.628

Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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As a teacher, I must consider the advantages or disadvantages I have experienced because of my race	5.35	1.26	5.32	1.373
<b><i>Teacher expectations</i></b>				
*I realize that I can't expect high achievement in students from low economic backgrounds	5.62	1.78	6.32	1.101
Achievement among minority students is related to the teacher's academic expectations of these students	4.90	1.52	4.59	1.607
Achievement among female students in science is related to teacher expectations	4.48	1.54	3.73	1.743
Achievement among students with disabilities is linked to teacher expectation	5.18	1.28	4.70	1.589
<b><i>Actions to challenge social injustice</i></b>				
I will address stereotypes of males and females when they occur in instructional materials or educational settings	5.23	1.57	5.49	1.521
I will challenge my students' treatment of children who do not speak good English	5.43	1.25	5.71	1.381
<b>*Students will not be permitted to use poor English to communicate in my classroom</b>	<b>4.30</b>	<b>1.47</b>	<b>4.59</b>	<b>1.734</b>
I must challenge stereotypes of gays and lesbians when they occur in educational settings	5.57	1.10	5.40	1.741

\*Denotes items that were reverse coded (as in Liang & Zhang, 2009).

Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Education and other social systems across the two Western nations are similar, and the specific contexts (predominantly Caucasian TE students in two non-elite universities) are also quite similar. There are, however, significant differences for three items, which cannot be accounted for by the standard deviations. The three items, indicated by shading in Table 2, will now be discussed in turn. They are:

- Schools should treat gender putdowns as a normal and acceptable part of childhood (6.39 AUS in comparison with 3.80 U.S.)
- I know I will treat all children equally despite their race, culture, and language differences (6.61 AUS in comparison with 3.20 U.S.)
- I don't need to learn about diversity because I will treat all people the same (5.10 AUS in comparison with 2.93 U.S.)

There is an additional item which draws interest (shown in bold in Table 2) despite providing similar responses across the two contexts and which will also be discussed:

- **Students will not be permitted to use poor English to communicate in my classroom (4.59 AUS in comparison with 4.30 U.S.)**

The results indicate that the preservice teachers generally understood the importance of teacher expectation for student outcomes and had strong intentions to take action within school settings to challenge stereotypes and discrimination. We discuss some of these themes below, but before we do so, we should also point out that a paper by Bustamante, Skidmore, Nelson, and Jones (2016) also scrutinized this survey tool. They, like us, found that the 17 items were sufficient to assess some level of cultural competence and, like us, they found that some items were poorly worded. For example, some were asked from first person and then later from third person perspectives, colloquial and then non-colloquial, and thus were confusing and in need of adjustment. The latter research group, however, provided a different interpretation of the meaning of the loaded factors tested even though they, too, identified four factors. The factors they found were instructional strategies, teacher attitudes toward student learning, stereotypes, and organizational cultural competence, and while some items were common to the factors identified by Liang and Zhang, others were not. Once again, issues associated with the complexity of the theme under scrutiny are evident.

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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### **Gender put-downs**

Australian preservice teachers agreed substantially less than their U.S. counterparts that “schools should treat gender putdowns as a normal and acceptable part of childhood.” This demonstrates a notably different approach to gender differences, which may emanate from cultural differences across the two research sites. The two contexts may have different tolerance levels for gender discrimination (as for gun laws): Midwest U.S. to regional Australian city. The “Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations in 1979, with the U.S. one of the member nations that has still not ratified this. Seen as an “international bill of rights for women” (Bunch, 1990), it argues to end discrimination, establish equality, and fight against violence. Nearly all 193 member states of the United Nations have ratified it, including the United Kingdom and Australia. This demonstrated variance in societal values might explain the discrepancy in the gender differences, even though teaching standards in the U.S. and Australia mention the importance of catering for the needs of all students and for catering for diversity, which would also assume equitable or fair representation among genders.

According to the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017) the “Australian community continues to hold onto gender stereotypes and accepts the impact of inappropriate behaviour as a norm. Speaking out can mean facing abuse and backlash” (p. 12), so Australia is certainly not free of negative stereotypes, suggesting that there is more that can be done to overcome these stereotypes in schools by teachers. The response from Australian preservice teachers in our survey is thus most welcome.

### **Equal treatment of people**

Two items in the Self-reflection scale of the instrument received significantly different means across the U.S. and Australian cohorts. Both related to treatment of students/people. Australian preservice teachers agreed much more strongly than U.S. counterparts that they would “treat all children equally despite their race, culture, and language differences.” According to the instrument design, this suggests a stronger commitment by the Australian students to principles of equity and social justice. Australian preservice teachers agreed substantially less than their U.S. counterparts that they “don’t need to learn about diversity because I will treat all people the same.” In the case of this item, the Australian preservice teacher participants appear to have a better understanding that catering for diversity requires different approaches. Certainly, it is promising that the Australian cohort indicated an awareness that they need to learn about diversity, and we concur.

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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A number of factors may have contributed to the difference in responses to these two items across the two cohorts. As noted earlier, the Australian curriculum is founded on values of equity and excellence for all (MCEETYA, 2008). Through this emphasis, the Australian Curriculum requires that intercultural understanding is integrated as a general capability throughout learning in all subject areas of the content that our preservice teachers are learning how to teach (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014). Likewise, the AITSL Professional Teacher Standards, against which Australian preservice teachers are assessed during their in-school professional experiences, require them to demonstrate that they will be “responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds” (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2012, p. 8). There are, however, similar inclusions in relevant U.S. accreditation documents. CAEP Standard 1 states that teachers should be prepared to develop inclusive learning environments, and Standard 2 requires teachers to use “understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards” (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2015).

Another possible influence on the Australian students is the NSW Quality Teaching (QT) model (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003b). A research-based pedagogical model aimed at informing teacher practice and thereby improving student outcomes at all levels of schooling, the QT model was designed by NSW researchers but built on other models including Authentic Pedagogy from Newman and Associates in the U.S. (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003a). The QT model has been widely used in NSW schools since its inception; because of this, it is incorporated into many TE courses at Regional University. The model recommends the design of teaching around three dimensions, each consisting of eight elements, including Problematic Knowledge (in the dimension of Intellectual Quality) and Cultural Knowledge (in the dimension of Significance) (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003b). The literature underpinning these two elements in particular acknowledges the social construction of knowledge, which may therefore change across time, culture, and context, and encourages the inclusion of knowledge specific to a wide range of sociocultural groups.

The two survey items discussed here include similar terms of wording and approach, yet one is reverse coded, indicating that agreement with one suggests high cultural competence, but agreement with the other suggests low cultural competence. Treating “children equally” is coded positively, while treating “all people the same” is coded negatively, although there is more to each statement. While maintaining that preservice teachers’ intentions to treat all students

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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equally is a positive indicator of acceptance of difference, it should be noted that *equal* treatment may not equate to *equitable* treatment (Fraser, 1997, 2009). Indeed, children from diverse backgrounds may have different requirements that need to be met in classroom contexts in order to have the same opportunities for success as their dominant-culture peers. We posit that this is a weakness in the language choice in the survey rather than a negative indicator of cultural competence. This thesis is supported by the fact that the following question in the survey, also about treating “all people the same,” is reverse coded. Wording along the lines of “I will consider all children as equal” might be more appropriate. Likewise, the second item under discussion here could, as one option, simply omit the second part of the statement, leaving “I don’t need to learn about diversity.” In any case, the wording and coding of these two items requires revision.

### **Use of poor English**

A fourth item showed no significant difference between the cohorts but is nevertheless worthy of consideration given that it presented difficulty for some of our Australian respondents. The item is:

- Students will not be permitted to use poor English to communicate in my classroom (4.59 AUS in comparison with 4.30 U.S.)

All but one measure on the Action to Challenge scale had a mean result greater than five on a scale of one to seven. The remaining item, about students being permitted to use poor English in classrooms, had a mean of 4.59, indicating a more ambivalent response. In the Australian data, but not the U.S. data, this item had one of the highest standard deviations in the survey data, indicating a wider range of responses from Australian preservice teachers than for many other items. While this could be considered to show a wide range of attitudes, another conclusion is possible. We know that some of our Australian respondents found this a difficult item to respond to, as there were some written comments on the surveys about this question, and also oral comments to research assistants collecting the surveys. It appears that the wording of the question raised issues for some respondents. Comments suggested that poor language use was a complex issue with no universal answer, as it would depend on individual factors related to students’ backgrounds and the context. For example, one respondent wrote, “Depends if it is based on their background or because of laziness.” Another wrote, “Define poor - my standard may culturally differ from my students,” and another, “could be because they have English as a second language.” These responses demonstrate problematic thinking by the preservice teachers, which is a positive attribute demonstrating their critical approach to developing cultural

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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understandings. Rewording the item in future surveys may alleviate this difficulty and provide more definitive results. It is evident that this item is problematic, at least in our context, and we intend to hold focus groups in the future to better illuminate the arising considerations.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, we are pleased with the cultural competence levels demonstrated by our preservice teachers in this survey. There remains room for improvement, and we will continue to investigate pedagogies and experiences that might enhance this during their teacher education programs. It is apparent from analysis of the survey used in this study that assessment of cultural competence itself is a cross-cultural issue, and this must be considered before we even begin to try to assess in which aspects teachers need to improve cultural competence and how teacher educators can implement effective programs to develop such competence. Agreement on the definition of cultural competence is important, yet consensus on that issue does not ensure the transferability of instrument reliability. Even an instrument with proven validity such as that designed by Liang and Zhang may not be transferable across contexts and can therefore be problematic (Bustamante et al., 2016). Cultural competence itself can be seen as being contextually based. A quantitative instrument such as the one used in this study does not allow for detailed examination of the nuances and problematic nature of the “complex construct” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 259) that is cultural competence.

A recent study investigating the perceptions of preservice teachers’ intercultural responsiveness (Jones, Mixon, Henry, & Butcher, 2017) used literature previously developed in 2015 by Jones and Mixon which argued that as one moves along the cultural continuum, the goal of being interculturally responsive is achieved. This idea of moving along a continuum is evident in the work of Liang and Zhang (2009) as well as the IDI literature (Hammer et al., 2003), and in line with findings from Mills and Ballantyne (2010) about the development of dispositions for social justice. This provides an indication that teacher educators should be working developmentally toward cultural competence with preservice teachers as they progress through their degrees. This might make assessment more manageable, as increments could be addressed each year, but it has implications for the development of teacher education programs that allow for such progressions (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In tandem with assessment, we concur with Morettini, Brown, and Viator (2019) that teacher educators must also continually reflect on their own cultural competence and determine effective pedagogical strategies to use in TE courses to improve preservice teachers’ cultural competence.

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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It is likely that, in order to make a valid and reliable assessment of preservice teacher cultural competence, and acknowledging that this is impotent unless it leads to teacher action in the classroom and in the wider community, more than one type of assessment must be conducted. Surveys may be useful in indicating areas which need to be addressed in TE programs, but additional evidence through authentic assessment is necessary to determine the level of cultural competence at the end of a TE program. We need to go further than Liang and Zhang's (2009) "propensity to act" in a culturally competent way so that we have evidence of such action. Qualitative studies are needed in order to fully understand the mind-set of preservice teachers. Assessment of cultural competence may benefit from observation of teaching practice during professional experiences (Siwatu et al., 2016) as well as self-analysis by teachers, preservice teachers, and school students. Anecdotal evidence such as reflective diaries can be a guide to attitudes and beliefs about cultural competence and student perceived capacities in culturally challenging situations (Chiu et al., 2017). It will be time-consuming, onerous, and costly, but valuable and manageable if integrated with assessment for additional outcomes, if we are serious about having culturally competent teachers, students, and citizens.

#### **Limitations and future directions**

The current study, like the original study by Liang and Zhang (2009) on which it was based, included participants from a single university. Further studies are needed in a variety of contexts to determine whether findings are generalizable, although our findings suggest that that is unlikely for reasons explicated throughout the paper. Future research intentions of the authors are to explore this survey (with amendments based on our findings about the survey) in other teacher education programs in a number of different contexts, including additional countries, to explore differences in responses from students in these cohorts.

A limitation of this research, as Liang and Zhang also acknowledge, is that the instrument is narrow. It does not allow for oral / written responses from students (although, as we stated in the results, some of our students did provide written responses to confusing questions).

Our further research, using this instrument, will be strengthened by including focus group interviews with preservice teachers to discuss their responses and allow for exploration and elaboration about their own personal experiences, intercultural experiences, and teaching experiences in diverse classrooms. It is also necessary to study the pedagogies used in TE programs and schools to determine effective approaches to developing cultural competence. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in tracking the development of cultural competence as

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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preservice teachers progress through their university courses, professional experiences in schools, and life experiences during their university studies.

“Educators must therefore move beyond thinking ‘about’ the cultural backgrounds of their students, to think deeply about the implications of teaching and learning taking place in and through culture, and recognize that caring ‘for’ students requires being responsive to the cultures that students arrive at school with” (Vass, 2017, p. 10). For teacher educators, this means considering carefully the teaching and learning taking place in our TE programs.

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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#### **About the Authors:**

**Suzanne Macqueen** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research focuses on issues of social justice in education. She is a member of the Global Education Research and Teaching (GERT) team, focusing on the promotion of and research into teaching for the development of global citizenship. She has published several journal articles and book chapters from her work with GERT as well as her own individual research into equity in education.

**Dr. Ruth Reynolds** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Arts at the University of Newcastle, Australia where she has been a program convenor in Social Education in Early

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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Childhood, Primary and Secondary teacher education for twenty years. She has 118 officially certified academic publications to date including nine books in teacher education and primary teaching pedagogy, and eleven books for teachers in teaching Social Education as well as numerous refereed articles, chapters in books and conference papers in the areas of pedagogy, humanities and social science curriculum and pedagogy, peace education and social justice issues. She is team leader of the Global Education Research and Teaching group (GERT) at the University of Newcastle, a group which focuses on teaching global education across disciplinary areas and on researching the success of their various initiatives.

**Kate Ferguson-Patrick** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research focuses on cooperative learning as a culturally responsive pedagogy and democracy classrooms in an intercultural world. She is a member of the Global Education Research and Teaching (GERT) team, focusing on the promotion of and research into teaching for the development of global citizenship. The team's latest research focus is on the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge integration in preservice teacher programs. She has published numerous journal articles and book chapters from her work with GERT as well as her own individual research. Her latest book published for Routledge in 2018 was 'Cooperative learning for intercultural classrooms: case studies for inclusive pedagogy.'

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Corresponding author: [Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Suzanne.Macqueen@newcastle.edu.au)

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