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Perceptions of Preservice Elementary Teachers on Multicultural Issues

Cover Page Footnote

Slippery Rock University

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This paper reports an exploratory study of preservice teachers' knowledge of multicultural education and preparedness for literacy instruction with diverse populations. We conducted the study across a variety of college and university contexts. Results showed that preservice teachers did not feel well prepared to teach children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. We also found evidence that these preservice teachers had not developed a strong knowledge base about multicultural education, despite the fact that they had all been introduced to multicultural topics in their teacher education coursework. This study demonstrates that there is a need for examination of current methods of preparing teachers for providing literacy instruction that addresses diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH, it is probable that today's preservice teachers across their careers, will teach large numbers of students who are linguistically and culturally unlike them (Au, 1993; Bruner, 1996; Delpit, 1991, 1993; Devine, 1994; Gee, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perez, 1998). It follows that there is a need for literacy educators in elementary teacher preparation programs to address linguistic and cultural issues in the context of literacy instruction (Perez, 1998).

One approach to addressing linguistic and cultural differences in classroom literacy instruction receiving much attention in recent years is using multicultural literature (Radencich, 1999). In children's literature courses for preservice teachers, students are typically introduced to a great deal of literature representative of many cultures. The thinking has been that it is essential for preservice teachers to have an extensive knowledge base about books representing a variety of cultures, and an understanding of the rationale for including these titles in the delivery of literacy instruction (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; Radencich, 1999). Multicultural literature is viewed as one of the most effective means of teaching children about their world and its peoples and cultures (Au & Scheu, 1996; Ferdman, 1991; Ogbu, 1991; Perez, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Radencich, 1999; Reyes, 1992).

Like children's literature courses, most elementary language arts courses address multicultural issues. Many instructors address multicultural issues related to approaches to teaching writing. In addition, it is common for language arts instructors to include in their course sessions and readings consideration in the use of dialect in student writing and spelling (Alton-Lee, Nuthall & Patrick, 1993; Delpit, 1993; Dyson, 1993; Fox, 1990; Oldfather, 1993; Perez, 1998; Schor, 1987; Willis, 1995).

The examination of multicultural issues has also become a common element in preservice courses in reading. Reading instructors commonly deal with multicultural issues as they relate to the selection of reading material for children, teacher response to children's reading development and second language acquisition, and teacher planning and instruction

(Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1988; Atwell, 1987; Bernhardt, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995; Morrow, 1992; Perez, 1998; Prawat, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Stuckey, 1991; Teale, 1986; Willis, 1995).

There is abundant literature that addresses the importance of and suggested methods for including a multicultural focus in elementary literacy teacher preparation, and there is much evidence of a solid movement in literacy teacher education toward multicultural education. The impact of this movement on preservice teachers has not been thoroughly assessed. In this study, as a beginning step in an examination of the impact of addressing multicultural issues in the context of preservice literacy instruction, we examined preservice teacher perceptions across a variety of college and university contexts. We performed this study to:

- investigate preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to work with multicultural populations
- examine preservice teachers' general knowledge of multicultural education topics

Method

Population

Instructors at seven colleges and universities surveyed groups of preservice teachers currently taking literacy education courses. A total of 223 students participated in the study. All of the students were undergraduates with the exception of one group, who were Master's level students. The Master's level population was from a state that requires that preservice teachers complete a Bachelors in a content area and a Masters in Education in order to obtain teaching licensure; thus it was not possible to examine a population of undergraduate elementary education students in this state. Divisions of numbers of students by institution are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Locations, context, and numbers of students participating

<u>Location</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u># Students</u>
Florida, USA	Urban, High MC	25
Louisiana, USA	Urban, High MC	21
Illinois, USA	Suburban, Med. MC	11
Illinois, USA	Urban, High MC	10
Ohio, USA	Rural, Low MC	65
Wisconsin, USA	Rural, Low MC	52
New Brunswick, CAN	Rural, Med. MC	14
California, USA	Urban, High MC	25

(High MC = 30 percent or more of the local population is non-Caucasian in linguistic and cultural background, Med. MC = 15-30 percent of the local population is non-Caucasian in linguistic and cultural background, Low MC = 15 percent or less of the local population is non-Caucasian in linguistic and cultural background.)

Instrument

Janet Richards developed the open-ended survey instrument used in the study. She began by pilot testing an instrument that used a Likert-type scale. She found the instrument to be of very limited value; students knew what the "politically correct" answers should be and provided them. Using similar concepts to those addressed in the pilot test, Peter Fisher revised the survey using an open-ended format.

Survey questions focused on preservice teacher perceptions of their preparedness to work with multicultural populations, their ideas about appropriate methods for addressing diversity in the classroom, and their knowledge of multicultural literature and scholars. The survey questions are included in Appendix A.

Many of the students who completed the survey found it "too difficult." Numerous students made this comment after completion of the survey. Also, students did not respond to some of the questions. All but three students responded to the question on preparedness. For the other questions, we saw a response rate of 60-95 percent across all of the students for each question. Student discussions with researchers indicated

that they answered if they thought they knew an appropriate response and left no response if they could not think of a possible correct response.

Analysis

In examining preservice teacher perceptions across a variety of college and university contexts, we compiled student responses to each of the survey questions and looked at percentages of responses where appropriate. We analyzed open-ended questions qualitatively. We categorized responses according to emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Results and Conclusions

Perceptions of Preparedness

Within this population, 95 of the students (43 percent) felt that they were prepared, and 125 (57 percent) felt that they were not prepared to teach children with linguistic and cultural differences. It appears that, in general, the work of teacher educators in the area of multicultural education is not inspiring confidence in preservice teachers. However, we found a great deal of variation in these figures.

More than 80 percent of the respondents in the Master's program felt prepared. These were the only master's level students participating in the study, and their responses to other parts of the survey demonstrated higher levels of knowledge than responses from the other colleges and universities.

Field Experiences

The survey included questions asking students to identify:

- the number of field experiences in which they had worked with children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- the number of university-related community experiences that had provided experience with children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds

Table 2. Student perceptions of their preparedness to work with multicultural student populations

<u>Location</u>	<u>Not Prepared</u>	<u>Prepared</u>
Florida	7	18
Louisiana	14	7
Illinois (suburban)	7	2
Illinois (urban)	4	5
Ohio	28	37
Wisconsin	7	45
New Brunswick	7	7
California	21	4
Totals	95	125

The majority (85 percent) of the students indicated that they had completed either one or two field experiences, and less than 10 percent of the students reported being engaged in community-based experiences with children.

Perceptions of Preparation for Working with Children of Diverse Backgrounds

Participant comments about their preparation for working with children of diverse backgrounds focused on field experiences. This response can be considered a result of wording on the survey. Question 5 asked that participants describe the kinds of "experiences" they need to prepare them for work with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Because we asked for "experiences," they naturally described field experiences as opposed to other possible learning approaches in which they might gain more knowledge.

We found a relationship between student responses to Question 3 and Question 5. If preservice teachers had been involved in teaching experiences in which they had worked with children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, they tended to think that these experiences had prepared them for future teaching experiences with such children. If they

had not worked with children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in teaching settings, these students viewed themselves as unprepared to work with such children in the future. Similarly, almost all student recommendations for improving their preparation for working with multicultural populations in the future centered on the need for actual teaching experiences with these populations (or more of these experiences).

Some participants focused on language differences in discussing reasons for not being prepared to work with children of diverse cultural backgrounds. Seventeen students said that they were not prepared to work with multicultural populations because they spoke no languages other than English. Several stated that they would need to learn another language in order to teach these children.

Helpful Literacy Experiences for Children of Diverse Backgrounds

All students in the Master's program proved capable of answering the question on helpful literacy experiences for children of diverse backgrounds (question 2) in some manner, while 107 of the 198 students from other institutions did not do so. The participants who responded to the question provided many different kinds of possible learning experiences. The experiences noted by five or more students were:

- the use of the students' background experiences
- reading aloud
- the use of visuals
- shared reading
- group work
- use of good literature representative of many cultures
- journaling
- discussion
- the study of other cultures
- personal writing
- reading and writing in one's own language
- hands-on experiences
- the use of hand gestures

The most common response among the Master's students was the use of hands-on experiences. The most common response among other students involved the use of multicultural literature. The vast majority of suggestions would be appropriate for any children in any classroom. These results left us wondering whether these students understood that good literacy instruction can apply to all children, or whether they lacked knowledge of specific strategies for students of diverse backgrounds and therefore provided responses based on their general knowledge of literacy instruction.

Relevant Literature for Children of Diverse Backgrounds

Of the 223 students who participated in the study, 85 responded to the question about relevant literature for children of diverse backgrounds. Many students contributed more than one idea (total of 134 ideas). The categories that emerged through our analyses were:

- descriptions of types of literature or comments about literature
- names of authors
- titles of children's books
- titles of books related to teaching

Descriptions of types of literature included topics such as African American literature, immigrant literature, politically correct literature, and informational literature. One response provided sixteen times was "literature that relates to 'their' culture."

Of the 12 authors noted by the participants, six could be considered authors who write about and/or represent varied cultures and whose works are appropriate for elementary children (Mildred Taylor, Ezra Jack Keats, Eloise Greenfield, Lawrence Yep, Patricia Polacco and Tommie dePaola). Two students listed Eloise Greenfield; thus a total of seven students identified names of authors of children's books that are multicultural. The students provided a total of 33 book titles. We found some titles unfamiliar, and they did not appear upon conducting a literature search. We deemed other titles inappropriate for elementary children (for instance, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Don Quixote*). We identified 11 book titles as appropriate for elementary children and

relating to multicultural topics (*Tar Beach; Cinder-Elly; Little Lil and the Swing Singing Sax; Honey I Love; For the Love of the Game; Amazing Grace; Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters; Brother Eagle, Sister Sky; The Rainbow Fish; Stلالuna; and Journey to Jo'burg*).

Taken together, of the 223 students, 17 identified either an author of multicultural children's books or a title of a multicultural children's book (7 percent). The majority (over 70 percent) of the students had completed courses in children's literature that centered on multicultural titles and were at the time of the study taking reading courses with a focus on multicultural issues in literacy and the use of multicultural children's literature.

Student-Identified Scholars Who Write about Multicultural Issues

The students provided a total of 75 names in response to a question that asked them to identify scholars who write about multicultural issues. The 47 students identified 14 "legitimate" scholars. (We defined "legitimate multicultural scholars" as being individuals who had published journal articles or scholarly books dealing directly and primarily with multicultural issues). Within the 47, 23 students identified legitimate scholars who were also their professors. The complete list is included in Appendix B.

We did not consider the majority of students' responses identifying as legitimate scholars those who write about multicultural issues. We understood how students might list Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes as scholars. It surprised us to see the numbers of names of professors, media/political personalities, and authors of children's books. Some students listed the same names for both the question on relevant literature and the question on scholars.

Writing Activities for Children of Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

There were 55 responses to item 8 on the survey, with the majority of students providing no response. About 75 percent of the students had completed language arts courses that centered on writing and dealt with cultural and language issues as they relate to language arts instruction. It

may be that the students found the survey to be so difficult that they had given up by the time they reached this point. Again, the Master's students had a higher percentage of responses than the undergraduate participants.

More than one student identified twenty-three activities or ideas. The activities identified by more than five students included:

- letter writing
- oral dictation
- creative writing
- personal writing
- writing about the students' own cultures
- journaling

Twenty-seven respondents suggest journaling, making it by far the most popular response. Only one of the suggestions was an activity that was specific to culturally diverse populations - "using their primary language." Otherwise, all of the suggestions were for appropriate activities for all students in elementary classrooms.

Discussion

The results indicate that the majority of these preservice teachers do not feel well prepared to teach children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In all seven universities, we saw a strong focus within children's literature courses on multicultural titles; yet these students remembered few authors and titles. Despite our reported required readings and discussions of authors such as Delpit, Kozol, Banks, and Au, these preservice teachers did not remember their names. Instead, they provided names of authors and personalities like Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Oprah Winfrey, and Jesse Jackson. These findings imply that preservice teachers are not gaining a useful and memorable knowledge base relative to literacy education for diverse linguistic and cultural populations. These students are simply not learning and remembering what we would have them learn and remember.

These preservice teachers indicated that they most needed experience working with children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in order to be prepared to work with these children. This perception proved consistent across institutions where students had numerous experiences in schools with majority, culturally, and linguistically diverse populations and institutions where students had not been exposed to such populations. If preservice teachers do not remember the recommended research-based strategies or the authors and books that have been presented to them as being supportive of educating multicultural populations, it is illogical to think that additional experiences with these populations will lead the students to successfully use proven strategies and multicultural literature in field experiences with these children.

This study did not lead us toward understandings of ways of improving our approaches to preparing preservice teachers for work with diverse student populations. In terms of approaches to enhancing preservice programs, our immediate recommendation is for research involving situated tasks that engage students in in-depth examinations of multicultural issues, and simulations of strategies and tasks that are appropriate for children of diverse backgrounds. Specifically, we recommend investigations of case methodology and biography and/or autobiography for the examination of multicultural issues, and literature response simulations that use multicultural children's literature (Radencich, 1999). Engagement in activities of this kind may lead to more powerful constructions of knowledge; however, this research is likely a first step in a continuing process.

In designing this study, we knew that scrutiny of our students' knowledge and perceptions about multicultural issues (using difficult questions and an open-ended format) could prove to be disappointing. Yet, as individuals, we did not foresee the result. When the surveys were completed, they were mailed to one of the authors. The envelopes full of surveys came with explanatory notes. One researcher commented at length on her disappointment in the results. Another stated that after scanning the surveys, she felt that she and her department needed to take a fresh look at their elementary education program and what it was accomplishing with regard to multicultural education. In truth, we were

all embarrassed for others to see the data our students had provided; we felt that the data made us, our universities, and our teacher preparation programs look weak. Upon realizing that we all had similar results, we felt strongly that a great need for further inquiry exists.

It is possible that these preservice teachers could not provide strong evidence of their levels of knowledge as a result of our method of data collection. The survey used in this study was problematic. The participants found it to be very difficult. In designing the study, we had not predicted that the open-ended survey would be so difficult. Given the multicultural focus within the programs in which we taught, we expected that all of the preservice teachers would have the ability to provide responses for all of the questions. The students viewed the survey as being much like a "pop test," and some felt compelled to assure us that they had done well on tests of this content and activities dealing with these topics in their classes. Some of the students commented that they knew where to find this information, and would be able to locate it and make use of it when they started teaching. We wondered why it had not been memorable to them, and whether or not they would choose to look for information on these topics when they started teaching.

Despite our knowledge that students are not blank slates upon which we write, we felt personal disappointment that the students reproduced so little of what we thought we had taught well, and what we thought students should have learned in memorable ways. Did students learn the material for as long as they thought they needed to know it to take a test or complete a project? Students make their own choices about what is essential knowledge and what is not, and these decisions impact which knowledge is retained in more and less enduring ways. Teacher education students have already developed perceptions and values about the world in which they live and the world in which they believe they are going to teach, and their own cultural insights ultimately control what is retained and what is not. Could there be a certain resistance to gaining multicultural understandings in some students? If such resistance exists, chances are that it could be addressed within the context of teacher education prior to or as a part of the development of knowledge of multicultural issues. Research is needed to examine the possible

existence of resistance to learning about multicultural issues related to literacy education.

Further research on preservice teacher perceptions about multicultural literacy education and their preparedness for working with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds should involve alternative data collection methods. For instance, preservice teachers might be able to provide greater evidence of their knowledge and insights in an interview or focus group setting, as opposed to a perceived "pop test" made up of survey questions.

This study demonstrates a need for examination of current methods of preparing teachers for providing literacy instruction that addresses diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The participants in this study were all taking part in preservice teacher programs in which there was a strong focus on preparation for multiculturalism and diversity within the context of literacy instruction. They had all completed courses that included instructional threads designed to assure that students gain knowledge of instructional approaches for cultural and linguistic diversity. As researchers who also taught these students, we had personal feelings of embarrassment about their lack of knowledge and insight.

As a group, we concluded that we had been too centered on assuring that students had been introduced to these topics in the context of literacy instruction, and that our assessments of student learning had been too centered on insuring student demonstrations of surface knowledge of topics. Introductions to topics and assessments of knowledge do not provide the depth of understanding that is needed, particularly for candidates whose teacher preparation occurs in regions where experiences with diverse children are rare and whose backgrounds do not include significant contact with people from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds. There is a need for the development of very in-depth constructions of knowledge, and preservice teacher preparation programs need to look far beyond introductions and surface knowledge. Teacher educators must begin to consider approaches that will engage students in constructing knowledge of multicultural education that will be of such value that it will be both useful and unforgettable.

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Appendix A

Multicultural Survey for Preservice Teachers

Please respond freely and anonymously to these open-ended statements. Your personal perceptions will help us examine and, if appropriate, to restructure course experiences that will enhance future teachers' abilities to meet the literacy-learning needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Answers may be continued on the back.

1) I am (prepared) (not prepared) to teach reading and language arts to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds because

2) The following kinds of literacy-learning experiences are especially helpful to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds

because

3) I have participated in _____ (Write in a number) field experiences where I worked with students from diverse cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds.

4) I have participated in _____ (Write in a number) university related community experiences where I worked with students from diverse cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds.

5) I need the following experiences to help prepare me to work with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds:

6) The following literature is especially relevant for students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds:

because

7) I am familiar with the work of the following scholars who write about multicultural issues:

8) The following writing activities are especially beneficial for students who speak variations of standard English:

because

11) Name of your college/university

Please write your comments below. How do you think that we, as literacy teacher educators, can enhance your abilities to meet the literacy learning needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

Appendix B

Student-Identified Relevant Literature for Children of Diverse Backgrounds*

Descriptions of literature or comments about literature

- African American literature (4)
- Immigrant literature
- All literature (2)
- Literature relating to "their" culture (16)
- Literature written by authors of "their" own culture (3)
- Literature in the primary language (3)
- Books they can connect/relate to (8)
- Literature that represents a variety of cultural backgrounds (10)
- Literature based in different countries
- Literature that has different cultures interacting with each other
- Literature that connects students rather than divides them (3)
- Books about cities, children living in cities
- All of the classics (2)
- American Literature
- Historical literature (2)
- Politically correct / multiculturally correct literature (3)
- Fiction and Nonfiction
- Informational literature
- Folk tales (5)
- English books
- English Dictionary or Thesaurus (2)
- Anything not of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture (2)
- Easy to read and patterned books (2)
- High interest/low vocabulary books
- Picture books (4)
- Big books (2)
- Silver Burdett Ginn Literature books
- Trade books
- "I have a list at home"
- "I'm not sure of titles, but I know that such literature exists"

Authors:

Mildred Taylor
Ezra Jack Keats
Angelou
Alik
Hughes
Carlsen

Silverstein
Eloise Greenfield (2)
Sheila Hamanaka
Lawrence Yep
Tommie dePaola
Patricia Polacco

Titles:

Tar Beach
Cinder-Elly
The True Story of the Three Pigs
Little Lil and the Swing Singing Sax
The Moon Came Too
Moon Soup
What a Wonderful World
Go Away Monster
Sad Monster, Glad Monster
Arthur series by Mark Brown
Honey I Love
For the Love of the Game
Amazing Grace
Journey to Jo'burg
Les Miserables
Of Mice and Men
Grandfather

Tangrams
Anne Frank
To Kill a Mockingbird
Don Quixote
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters
Eagle Brother, Sister Sky
Who's the Beast
Stellaluna
The Rainbow Fish
Follow My Leader
Scorpions
A Country Far Away
Verdi
Just Adrian
Mrs. Rhumfias
Heckedy Peg

Books about Teaching:

The Art of Teaching
Multiple Paths to Literacy
Resources for Teachers

* Note - Where only one student provided a given response, no number was noted. Numbers are noted in parenthesis representing the total number of students providing like responses.

Media/Political persons:

Oprah Winfrey (3)
Jesse Jackson
Gloria Steinem

Authors of adult literature and poets:

Richard Wright (2)	Toni Morrison
Langston Hughes (3)	Chaim Potok
Maya Angelou (9)	Chinua Achebe

Authors of children's books:

Ezra Jack Keats	Robert Munsch
Mildred Taylor	Eric Carle
Brian Pinkney (3)	Hamilton
Jerry Pinkney (3)	Patricia Polacco
Faith Ringgold (4)	W. Nikola-Lisa
Lois Lowry	John Steptoe
Judy Blume	Verna Aardema
Avi	Allen Say
Eloise Greenfield (3)	Walter Dean Myers

* Note - Where only one student provided a given response, no number was noted. Numbers are noted in parenthesis representing the total number of students providing like responses.