

## PREPARING PRESERVICE TEACHERS IN A DIVERSE WORLD

Susan Davis Lenski  
Portland State University

Kathleen Crawford  
Wayne State University

Thomas Crumpler and Corsandra Stallworth  
Illinois State University

### *Abstract*

*This study was designed to develop more effective ways to address culture and cultural differences in the preparation of preservice teachers. Its purpose was to provide a more adequate preparation for working in high-need schools by assisting educators in the development of “habits of mind” that incorporate an understanding and valuing of students’ cultures and a recognition of the need to consider those cultures in teaching practices. This paper reports data from the second year of a five-year study that examined the experience of six preservice teachers. The data indicate that using ethnography as an observational tool helps preservice teachers become more aware of cultural differences.*

The teaching force in the United States is becoming increasingly White during a time when the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. The percentage of preservice teachers of diverse races ranges from 7% to 68% per state while the national percentage of White teachers remains over 90% (Hodgkinson, 2002). Because of the disparities between the backgrounds of teachers and those of students, multicultural education in schools is essential because the “classroom is a meeting ground of cultures where the worlds of the students meet the worldview of schools and teachers” (Cumrot, 2002, p. 14). The meeting of cultures in schools, however, can result in a cultural clash when the culture of students is different from that of the teacher. Since the way that teachers address cultural differences can influence student learning, it is imperative that preservice teachers learn to become culturally responsive to students from diverse backgrounds (Garcia & Willis, 2001).

Teachers need to become culturally responsive whether the teachers themselves are White or from other cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000). Over the course of their careers, teachers can expect to teach students who come from dozens of different cultural groups, so it is unrealistic to expect teachers to have a deep understanding of all of the cultures that are represented in their classrooms (Nieto, 2002). Instead, teachers need to learn new ways of thinking about cultural differences, and this learning should begin in teacher preparation programs. According to Darling-Hammond and Garcia-Lopez (2002), “it is impossible to prepare tomorrow’s teachers to succeed with all of the students they will meet without exploring how students’ learning experiences are influenced by their home languages, cultures, and contexts; the realities of race and class privilege in the United States; the ongoing manifestations of institutional racism within the educational system; and the many factors that shape students’ opportunities to learn within individual classrooms” (p. 9).

Past efforts at preparing future teachers to become culturally responsive through traditional multicultural courses have shown mixed results. Some researchers have indicated that preservice teachers in multicultural courses had improved racial attitudes (Delany-Barmann & Minner, 1997; Ross & Smith, 1992) while others reported few or even negative changes (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Haberman & Post, 1990; McDiarmid & Price, 1993;

Zeichner et al., 1998). On the whole, multicultural courses have tended to reinforce the idea of “difference blindness” which suggests that a neutral image of students promotes equality (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Recent research, however, has indicated that teachers who believe that they are “color blind” and treat all students equally, actually privilege mainstream students in subtle but important ways (Lewis, 2001; Reeves, 2004).

Because preservice coursework in multicultural education has not made enough of an impact on future teachers, teacher educators have recently been working to redefine multicultural education (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Vavurs, 2002). In an outline of a new curriculum for multicultural education, Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that preservice teachers need to become socio-culturally conscious. In order for that to occur, some researchers believe that White preservice teachers need to come to an understanding of their own White culture and that they should examine their identity in relation to other cultures (Johnson, 2002; Howard, 1999; Tatum, 1994). This change in directions has shown promise. Studies conducted by Schmidt (1998) and Xu (2001) indicated that asking teachers and preservice teachers to examine their own cultural beliefs and compare them with the beliefs of someone outside their cultural group helps them become more aware of cultural differences.

Studies for preparing future teachers to become culturally responsive have not previously taken into account the observational tools ethnographers use to learn about new cultures. Ethnography is sometimes discounted in educational circles because it is traditionally a long-term, labor-intensive activity. However, some ethnographers believe that ethnographic practices can be used in short-term projects (Handwerker, 2001) since ethnography is “a way of seeing” the community and the cultures of students’ classrooms (Wolcott, 1999). For example, Moll and Gonzalez (1994) used ethnography to help practicing teachers learn about the funds of knowledge of families of their students. Other studies indicate that student teachers and practicing teachers can become ethnographers in order to learn about their students (Dixon, Frank, & Green, 1999; Frank, 1999; Frank & Uy, 2004). These studies influenced our work as we developed a project that would help our preservice teachers become culturally responsive teachers.

### Beyond Awareness Project

The Beyond Awareness Project was a five-year program designed to move preservice teachers from being aware of cultural differences to the development of “habits of mind” that incorporate an understanding and valuing of students’ cultures and recognition of the need to consider those cultures in teaching practices. As we developed the program, we decided to implement an ethnography project for preservice teachers thinking that ethnography would help preservice teacher become aware of the cultural complexities of the school communities where they would student teach. The goals of the ethnography were to promote the constructivist dispositions necessary to work with diverse populations and to move beyond awareness of other cultures to a real sensitivity toward differences. During the ethnography project, we repeatedly discussed the numerous non-visible types of diversity such as gender issues, religious diversity, and socioeconomic (SES) influences to bring about an awareness of the complexities of the populations that would constitute their future classrooms of preservice teachers.

### Method

Before and during the ethnography the preservice teachers were instructed how to conduct ethnographic research. This process was based on Spradley’s book (1980) *Participant Observation*. During the fall semester, an anthropologist, Rob, a literacy educator, Susan, and an on-site teacher, JoNancy, instructed the preservice teachers in the steps of ethnography. The steps in the ethnographic process included learning about ethnography, conducting participation observation, making descriptive observations, analyzing the data, and writing a report.

Every two weeks the preservice teachers held information sharing discussions with Rob, Susan, and JoNancy. During these sessions, the steps of ethnography were discussed and modeled. During the yearlong project, Susan also completed an ethnography and used her work to illustrate the ethnographic process. Before beginning their projects, however, the preservice teachers practiced their observation skills in a school setting. They completed walks around the neighborhood and the school, took a school bus ride, made observations in their schools, and wrote reflections. The goal of pre-ethnography activities was to increase the preservice teachers' confidence in ethnographic tools.

After the preservice teachers grew comfortable with their role as observer and were adept at taking field notes, they formed groups to choose a community site for the ethnography. Community sites were chosen with the help of an advisory group composed of community members, teachers, and administrators. The preservice teachers were encouraged to make at least 10 visits to their site, first observing and taking field notes and then becoming participant observers.

During the data-gathering period the preservice teachers continued to receive instruction on ethnographic research. The project was designed with the assumption that to learn to conduct ethnographic research it is necessary for individuals to develop into a researcher while simultaneously grasping how the process evolves. The preservice teachers took field notes and wrote reflections throughout the year and discussed them every week in class. Upon completion of the fieldwork, the preservice teachers wrote a final paper and prepared presentations for their classmates and for a state reading conference.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were enrolled in an elementary education program at a large Midwestern university. The group included 28 preservice teachers, 26 females and 2 males. Of the participants, 25 were of European American background and one was Hispanic. All of the participants attended a Professional Development School (PDS) that was located in a suburb of a metropolitan center. The PDS was a partnership between the university and a school district that has a large number of students from diverse backgrounds. During the PDS year, the preservice teachers took courses from university faculty on site, and they also spent two or three days each week in schools.

### *Data Sources*

Over the course of this five-year project, an ethnographically informed approach to data collection was used (Lecompte & Priessle, 1993). The first year of the project was a pilot year. We collected and analyzed data and learned how to tailor the project to better serve the preservice teachers (See Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, & Stallworth, in press). Data from the second year of the study were collected on multiple levels. Data sources included 1) neighborhood observations, 2) reflections of a school bus ride, 3) observations of school sites, 4) observational field notes and reflections of community sites, 5) interviews of six preservice teachers during the project, 6) student papers describing ways to address cultural issues in classrooms, and 7) final ethnographic papers. The data from the second year of the project will be described in this paper.

### *Data Analysis*

All twenty-eight of the preservice teachers were participants in the study. However, after a preliminary analysis of the neighborhood observation and school bus ride, a sub-group of six students were chosen to be interviewed. This group was chosen as representative of the larger group of preservice teachers and was viewed as a variation of the concept of "key informants"

(Lecompte & Preissle, 1993). While they did not have “specialized knowledge” that is often attributed to individuals who are members of the community where research was conducted, as members of the community of preservice teachers, they did provide researchers access to more in depth information about issues of diversity ” (Lecompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166). The interviews spanned the year and included three formal interviews and five informal interviews.

The data from these participants were separated from the larger data set. Interviews were transcribed and copies of all of the data were given to the research team. At bi-monthly meetings, the researchers discussed their overall perceptions of the data. Discussions led to the formulation of four non-overlapping themes indicative of patterns that surfaced throughout the review of the data. In each of the four areas, sample comments were selected to illustrate the pattern of responses. The themes were then reformulated into questions that framed the next stages of data analysis. The questions were:

1. How do participants view themselves as cultural beings?
2. How do participants view issues of diversity?
3. In what ways do participants “step into the community,” or actually become a participant observer?
4. How do the participants use the experiences they had in the ethnography project to represent themselves as an emerging teacher?

The researchers used these questions to delve back into the data and to analyze it more thoroughly. The multiple data sources were used as triangulation for validity and reliability purposes (Yin, 1994). Based on this analysis, codes were developed by each of the four researchers independently, using a system of “open coding,” and then the research team met, compared and refined these initial codes to arrive at consensus (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using these revised codes, the researchers re-examined the data to ensure theoretical rigor and to ground their analysis in conceptual precision.

## Results

One of the primary goals of this study was to look at ways that preservice teachers view themselves as cultural beings. Since examining one’s own culture is a prerequisite for understanding differences, we were interested in knowing whether our students were able to understand their own privileged position as future teachers in a diverse community. One way we approached the data was to look for ways students were able to confront their assumptions of culture and to look at the ways in which they could be open to new ways of thinking.

### *Views of Self as a Cultural Being by Confronting Cultural Assumptions*

One of the purposes for asking students to conduct ethnography was to help them sharpen their observation skills and learn about communities before jumping to conclusions. The data indicated that the students in our study had made a variety of assumptions while during their observations. One of the activities that illustrated the assumptions students automatically made was during their walk around the neighborhood. As students observed houses, stores, and people, they tended to make unwarranted assumptions. For example, Inez (all names are pseudonyms) observed a school neighborhood that was near a bus station and power lines, so she concluded that the neighborhood was low income. She also assumed that the neighborhood was violent after seeing “neighborhood watch” signs. Inez wrote, “I thought that you don’t need a neighborhood watch unless your area had some violence or vandalism.” Another assumption Inez made about the neighborhood was that it had “many elderly people living in it along with a new crowd that moved there within the last couple of years.” The basis for her assumption was that many houses

were older and were neatly kept while other houses looked “run down.” Inez, therefore, used brief snatches of observation to make assumptions and draw conclusions about the community and the people in that community.

Although the assumptions students made about a community may be benign, other assumptions they made could be potentially damaging to the students they would teach. For example, Taylor recorded, “most bilingual-Hispanic homes are single parent or combined households.” She also wrote, “many teachers have a narrow mind when it comes to diversity.” These comments seem to indicate that Taylor, like many other preservice teachers, tend to over generalize information. The school where Taylor was observing had a large Hispanic population in an area of low-cost houses and apartments where the parents of some of the students from her class were living. Taylor met some of the parents from her class who did not live in traditional families and she heard teachers denigrating these families. From this small sample of information, Taylor concluded that many Hispanics lived in the same situations and that teachers tended to be narrow-minded.

After reading these comments, we were concerned that the ethnographic process was leading students to use small bits of observations and making assumptions about people based on limited information. Therefore, we began examining students’ assumptions in class and holding discussions about ways in which previous beliefs color observations. We also emphasized that ethnography was not intended to have investigators draw conclusions quite as rapidly as our students seemed to do. As we worked with students, we saw rapid growth and understanding.

By the time students had spent two or three visits at their community sites, they began viewing themselves in a different light. Taylor, who spent her time observing an after-school program, stated, “This project is making me aware of my own culture and that of other students. Before this, I didn’t think of myself as having a culture.” Like many people, Taylor had previously considered herself “just an American.” Lynch and Hanson (2004) have found this lack of cultural understanding to be common among White teachers. They also suggest that not understanding one’s own cultural background is an obstacle to understanding the cultural backgrounds of their students. As the project progressed through the year, the preservice teachers continued to grow in their understanding of themselves as a cultural being.

### *Issues of Diversity*

The preservice teachers learned to expand their ideas of diversity through this project. In classroom conversations, they focused on race as the only aspect of diversity. As students visited a variety of community sites, however, they found that diversity can be found in other areas. Bob, for example, stated, “Teachers need to be aware of gender, ethnic, and socio-economic differences.” This statement was a major breakthrough for him; he had described diversity in an earlier class as ethnic heritage.

An example of ways students learned to expand their internal definition of diversity was illustrated by the students who visited an Asian Mexican grocery store. In the store, they found many religious icons for sale. Jodi, who was observing at the store, wrote, “This informed us how important Catholicism is to the Hispanic culture.” Another student visited a Hebrew Saturday school. During class discussions, the discussions of religion as a component of diverse cultures helped some of the preservice teachers expand their views of diversity to include issues of religion, gender, and socio-economic status.

Near the end of the project, the preservice teachers wrote about diversity in their final papers. Jodi wrote, “Diversity is far reaching...It’s not just race/ethnicity. My classroom will be full of children who are diverse and I want to be aware and sensitive of all kinds of diversity (race, gender, academics, economics, etc.) to be an effective teacher.” In group discussions of the ideal classroom, Taylor said, “It calls to mind a classroom of different genders, race, religions, cultures, and all kinds of different people; all the things that make people unique.”

### *Becoming a Participant Observer*

The preservice teachers voiced concerns throughout the project about being asked to conduct ethnographies. One of the concerns of the researchers was that the preservice teachers would see the project as one more teaching activity, where they, as student teachers, would find themselves in situations where they were considered an “authority.” Instead, students were encouraged to make observations as researchers or ethnographers. We thought that by asking students to position themselves as ethnographers, they would be able to distance themselves from their role as teachers and actually learn about a cultural group.

Most of the students found that it took some time to learn how to observe community sites without making judgments. However, they found that stepping into the role of participant observer helped them look at their students differently. For example, Bob said that observing students on the bus “brought back a lot of memories and reminded me of when I was in school.” Bob continued, “I have a better idea of where the students live and what their neighborhoods are like.” As Jodi began her ethnography of an Asian Mexican store, she said in her interview, “I began to feel very comfortable in the store, even helping other customers find items.” Jodi moved from being an uncomfortable observer to a participant observer.

Although it was difficult for the preservice teachers to “step into the community,” time at the site helped them feel comfortable. Other studies support this notion. Kid, Sanchez, and Thorp (2004) found that having preservice teachers learn about family stories helped them become more culturally aware, and Garmon (2004), in his study of a White preservice teacher, hypothesized that learning about a different culture can be the basis for potential change about views of diversity. In our study, we found that all six of the preservice teachers moved from being mildly afraid in their new surroundings to becoming enthusiastic champions of the people at their site.

### *Emergence as Teachers*

One of the strongest areas of the ethnography project was the preservice teachers’ ability to apply the knowledge of their experiences and learning to future classroom instruction. In every area of the project, students attempted to make sense of the activity through the lens of a teacher. We encouraged this kind of thinking. In the first year of the ethnography project, we asked preservice teachers to think like “researchers.” The preservice teachers, however, could see little value in looking at teaching as a researcher and balked at the entire notion (Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, & Stallworth, in press). Learning that preservice teachers believed they needed to apply every activity in their methods courses to teaching, we emphasized applications to teaching during the second year of the project.

We found that our preservice teachers were able to apply their experiences to teaching easily. For example, as Jodi spent time in the Asian Mexican grocery store talking with the owners and patrons, she concluded, “The traditions of the Filipino culture we learned will aid us in giving our students the best experience possible, by carrying on some of the traditions in school. This knowledge we have gained will help us to be more culturally sensitive teachers.” In this case, Jodi realized that they had little knowledge of the Filipino culture before spending time interacting with people with Filipino heritage. She realized that learning about the culture of their students in one of the prerequisites of becoming a culturally responsive teacher (Gay, 2000).

Our data were replete with such specific examples, and we also found that students were able to generate their own teaching principles about teaching and learning. For example, Inez wrote, “we must connect learning to personal experience for all students to comprehend what’s happening.” In their final papers, many students used language similar to Inez’s by discussing the ways to connect curricula to students’ lives, to help students apply their background knowledge, and to differentiate instruction. Some of the practical applications of these principles included

learning words in students' native languages, researching authors from the students' culture, having books read in students' native language, posting students' native language alphabet in the classroom if it's not the Roman alphabet, and valuing students' funds of knowledge (e.g., Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Perhaps the most telling comment from the preservice teachers, though, was Jennifer's comment: "I don't want to see them as a group of children; I want to see them as individuals."

## Discussion

Analysis of the data indicated three trends. First, while the preservice teachers valued the ethnographically informed work, there was a tension between looking for specifics and using the observations as a way to learn how to see. In other words, the preservice teachers seemed to want to be told specifically what to look for while the researchers were interested in the preservice teachers opening themselves to the dynamics and interactions of the chosen observational site. While this could be viewed as part of the challenge of the "dual purposes of participant observation" (Spradley, 1980, p. 54), it also suggested how ethnographic work in diverse settings might help faculty in teacher education courses encourage preservice teachers to examine their own views about diversity education. Second, data indicated that all six preservice teachers concluded that as they prepared to pursue teaching jobs in schools, participating in this project had shifted their thinking about diversity. Individuals described how they had moved beyond being aware of the need for dealing with diversity to actually planning strategies for bringing students' communities into their classrooms. This shift from general concern to specific plans suggested that the project impacted these preservice teachers' views about instruction. We hypothesize that the process of learning about people from different backgrounds and becoming personally engaged in their culture was one reason for this change. Third, preservice teachers reported that the writing component of this project was a burden, given the challenges of their methods coursework. We are committed to continuing participant observation in this project; however, as our larger goal is reforming aspects of teacher education, we must be sensitive to how we build this approach into an already full curriculum for preservice teachers.

## Conclusions

Many teacher educators recognize that recruiting and preparing teachers who can be effective to work with preservice teachers from diverse backgrounds is at a crisis level. Haberman (2003) argues that securing and retaining effective teachers is of utmost importance because conditions in education are becoming increasingly more challenging for students in urban centers. Effective urban teachers believe they are focused on their students' learning and development. "They do not stay in teaching because they want to function as educational change agents, community organizers or system reformers," (Haberman, p. 21) but instead they stay for their students. Effective teachers need to continually examine the relationships between students and the curriculum. "Being a critical multicultural educator is as much a philosophy and way of life as it is implementation of quality curriculum" (Page, 2004, p. 8). As teacher educators have learned ways to teach preservice teachers about cultural differences, new ideas for multicultural education have been developed. In keeping with this new movement in moving beyond multicultural education to influencing preservice teachers' habits of mind, we developed the Beyond Awareness Project.

The data from the second year of the study suggest that participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements to developing more effective ways to address culture and cultural diversity in teacher education. By having preservice teachers use ethnographically informed methods to learn about the community, they began to interact with perspectives different from their own. From this

interaction the six preservice teachers that we studied moved “beyond awareness” of cultural differences to thinking about ways to effectively teach all students in their classrooms -- especially those who have been overlooked because of their cultural background. The preservice teachers in our study learned to be problem posers through real life experiences within ethnographic inquiry. They learned to examine more critically the situations they observed and question their beliefs and understandings of the community.

The data from this study suggest that participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements in developing more effective ways to address culture and cultural diversity in teacher education. However, this study has taken place in one PDS with preservice teachers who self-selected into the site so cannot be generalizable to other groups. Our findings, however, indicate that an ethnographic approach could have the potential to impact views of diversity and needs to be tested in a larger arena.

Our goal for the future of this project is to take the knowledge gained from this project back to the main campus program with the hope of transforming the methods courses and experiences for a larger number of preservice teachers. We will continue our research in this broader context to progressively refine our approaches to educating preservice teachers about diversity. Such an approach may allow more insights into preservice teachers’ “habits of mind” about diversity and that lead to even more effective ways to encourage inclusive and transformative teaching for a wider audience in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Susan Davis Lenski is a professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University where she teaches graduate courses in literacy. She is currently conducting research on ways teacher educators teach for social justice.

Kathleen Crawford is an associate professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Wayne State University where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy.

Thomas Crumpler is an associate professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Illinois State University where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. He also is the doctoral program coordinator.

Corsandra Stallworth is an assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Illinois State University where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in multicultural education and social studies.

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