

Article Critique: Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World

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This article is concerned with the high potential for culture clash that could occur when a population of predominantly White teachers is entrusted with the education of students who come from diverse non-White backgrounds. It focuses on the second year of a five year project that involved the participation of twenty-eight preservice teachers—26 females, two males, and one participant of non-White heritage.

The authors (Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, & Stallworth, 2005) contend that, unless future teachers develop a sense of cultural responsiveness and learn to embrace cultural differences between themselves and the students they will be teaching throughout their careers, the American education system—with 90% of its teachers being White—runs the risk of putting non-White students at a major disadvantage.

Furthermore, the authors claim that past teacher training efforts to promote multicultural awareness among preservice teachers have failed. They cite sources that appear to support this, describe work that teacher educators have been doing to redefine multicultural education, mention some research conducted between 1994 and 2002, and state that a promising “change in directions” has occurred.

Lenski et al. make reference to two particular studies that strongly suggest that new teachers need to understand their own cultures first—before they can begin to understand and accept the cultural differences that many of their future students will be bringing to the classroom. From there, the authors launch into their rationale for using ethnographic research as the primary methodology for their *Beyond Awareness Project*.

Before and during the project, all 28 teachers underwent continuous training on how to conduct ethnographic research; they also participated in biweekly meetings led by their ethnography instructors—an anthropologist, a literacy educator, and an on-site teacher. When not in formal training sessions, the preservice teachers were gradually developing their

ethnographic skills by observing and taking field notes as they immersed themselves into various community and school contexts. This helped them to eventually overcome discomfort, develop trust, confidence, and a sense of purpose that enabled them to transition from being merely “uncomfortable observers” to effective “participant observers.”

Data were collected on seven levels, including neighborhood and school observations, field notes, school bus rides, interviews, and student papers. Because this process took place over the course of one year, the authors were able to observe some gradual and important changes in how the participants viewed themselves—and others—as cultural beings. Their attitudes about the role of ethnography in their own preservice training appeared to become more positive as the project progressed and their initial tendency to jump to premature and unwarranted assumptions eventually evolved into a more reflective process that gradually began to embrace others’ cultural diversities. This all occurred while their ethnographic endeavors enabled them to simultaneously develop more complete understandings of their own cultural identities. Furthermore, the participants allegedly moved beyond mere cultural awareness into more active roles, strategizing specific plans for actually inviting students’ communities into their classrooms.

Lenski et al. conclude their article by suggesting that, because there are not enough teacher educators who can effectively train preservice teachers to develop what they regard as correct “habits of mind” towards cultural diversity, a crisis is developing in the American school system. They claim that the results of their project strongly suggest that an ethnographic approach needs to be integrated into teacher training and they recommend that this approach be tested in a larger arena.

I believe that the *Beyond Awareness Project* is valid—but only as a preliminary feasibility study. It is flawed in some key areas and does not warrant widespread

implementation of extensive changes in teacher training until after further, more detailed research has been conducted, as the authors admit.

I am particularly concerned about the inadequate explanation that was given regarding the subset of only six participants being engaged in the interview process. Aside from citing Lecompte and Preissle for their brief references to “key informants,” “specialized knowledge,” and “issues of diversity,” the authors provide few details on how this subset was chosen and deemed to be representative of the larger group.

A similar lack of detail is evident in their description of the triangulation and “open coding” systems that were used and, given the importance of accuracy and thoroughness in educational research endeavors, I feel skepticism towards the project as I consider these flaws. Hopefully, any future qualitative/ethnographic research that is done in the area of preservice teacher training will include a much larger set of demonstrably representative interviewees and much more thorough documentation.

References

- LeCompte, M., & Priessle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Lenski, S. D., Crawford, K., Crumpler, T., & Stallworth, C. (2005). Preparing preservice teachers in a diverse world. *Action in Teacher Education*, 27(3), 3-12.