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Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers: Using Latino Children's Literature in Teacher Education

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The disparity between the ethnic and cultural makeup of our teaching force and the ethnic and cultural makeup of the student population demands initiatives on the part of teacher preparation programs. Preservice teachers need to learn about the various cultures of their students in order to increase communication and understanding. As preservice teachers learn about and come to understand culturally diverse students, they move toward becoming culturally responsive teachers. Through the use of ethnic children's literature and focused discussion in field experience seminars, preservice teachers increased their background knowledge about Latino children's lives and began to make connections with the students themselves.

> *Only through stories can you fully enter another's life* (Coles, 1989).

The changing demographics of U.S. public schools has been well documented over the past decade. In 1998, over 37% of the K–12 student population in the U.S. was culturally, linguistically, and ethnically different from the dominant U.S. culture. This has been called by some, *the culture of power* (Chávez Chávez, 1995; Office of Education Research and Information, 2000). In contrast, about 87% of the U.S. teaching population is White, and more than 70% is female. Only about 13% of our present teaching professionals comprise ethnically distinct minorities (Office of Education Research and Information, 2001; Rimbach & Gebeloff, 2000).

The numbers cited above clearly indicate a cultural and linguistic mismatch between members of the teaching force and many of the children they are teaching. Despite the best efforts of colleges and universities to recruit diverse populations into their teacher education programs, if present trends persist, a mismatch between the teaching force and student population will continue. Sleeter's (2001) review of research in the area of preservice education and cultural diversity describes the cultural clash that exists:

> As a whole, white preservice teachers bring very little cross-cultural background, knowledge, and experience. . . . Schultz et al. (1996) found that preservice student teachers are fairly naive and have stereotypic beliefs about urban children, such as believing that urban children bring attitudes that interfere with education. . . . Su (1996, 1997) found that White preservice teachers interpret social change as meaning almost any kind of change except changing structural inequalities (p. 2).

This cultural, linguistic, and ethnic mismatch has led education researchers and practitioners to conclude that teacher education programs must address diversity and equity when preparing teachers for the 21st century (Banks, 2001; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Banks goes beyond the idea of mere acceptance of diversity; he challenges teacher education institutions to prepare teachers as "cultural mediators who interpret the mainstream and marginalized cultures to students from diverse groups and help students understand the desirability of and possibility for social change" (p. 240). Teaching preservice teachers about both diversity and how to become effective cultural mediators is a complex process, since program designers must often decide between using specialized courses in multicultural education or infusing topics of diversity throughout classes and field work experiences.

Institutions utilizing the isolated course approach have found that preservice teachers and professors deal with diversity only in that one singular context. In other courses, such as methods classes and foundations and development classes, topics in diversity are not systematically addressed. As a result, preservice teachers come to see diversity as an aspect of curriculum content, a "minority" issue or one peripheral to the business of learning to become a teacher (Chávez Chávez, 1995; García

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& Pugh, 1992; Villegas, 1996). When efforts have been aimed at infusing cross-cultural issues across teacher education courses, they also have been open to criticism for giving isolated and sporadic attention to diversity with little or no impact on the beliefs and practices of preservice teachers (García & Pugh, 1992; Greene, 1993) or for taking time away from the stated focus of a given course.

The literature in this area further asserts that the majority of teacher education faculty see cultural pluralism and topics in diversity as curriculum content regarding minority or civil rights issues, rather than as issues relevant to the whole fabric of society (and subsequently to the core of teacher education programs). Therefore, though attempts have been made to infuse issues of diversity across the curriculum, teacher education professors may feel neither compelled nor prepared to address these issues adequately in their classes.

Moreover, an overriding myth exists in the education community, both at the K–12 level and at the university level, that the most effective way to deal with diversity is to pretend it does not exist. This "color-blindness" approach to diversity is exemplified when principals and teachers assert, "I don't look at the children at my school as ethnic labels—I look at them as whole human beings." Or, when university professors say, "I prefer to study how we are all alike rather than how we are different." This approach of dealing with diversity via color-blindness has engendered serious concerns among multicultural educators (Cortés, 1990; Grant & Sleeter, 1989; Kibler, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paley, 1979). Kibler raises the question, "Familiar platitudes such as, 'We may be different on the outside, but on the inside we're all alike' may make us feel good, but what are the implications of such a statement" (p. 248)?

Cortés (1990) adds that teachers and preservice teachers need to view universal human qualities as the basis for building bridges among people of different backgrounds. At the same time, however, preservice teachers must learn about the real and meaningful group variations in cultural, racial, ethnic, and social experience if they are to become culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Platitudes about how we are all basically alike, or proclamations of color-blindness, will never eradicate the necessity of this important awareness.

The color-blind perspective, although safe and comfortable for professors and practitioners, will not likely encourage prospective teachers to learn to see the world from different perspectives. We, the authors, as teacher education professors, are not arguing against the need for teachers to understand common human characteristics; however, we feel strongly that they must also understand that groups have unique cultural heritages and backgrounds. Rather than ignore these differences in schools under the guise of emphasizing our similarities, it is important for prospective teachers to recognize, understand, and respect differences. That our differences make us unique and valuable must be a theme running through teacher education programs and into our schools. Villegas and Lucas (2002) define "culturally responsive teachers" as those with "a high degree of sociocultural consciousness [and who] see themselves as agents of change" (p. 9) in the schools and educational systems. To that end, they identify six characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, briefly listed here:

> Such a teacher (a) is socioculturally conscious, that is, recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one's location in the social order; (b) has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, seeing resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to be overcome; (c) sees himself or herself as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students; (d) understands how learners construct knowledge and is capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction; (e) knows about the lives of his or her students; and (f) uses his or her knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (p. 2).

The overall hypothesis for conducting this study with our preservice teachers was that preservice teachers could learn about and become sensitive to different cultural groups through reading and discussing children's literature that dealt with the life experiences and folklore of those specific groups of people (Anaya, 1992; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Rasinski & Padak, 1990). We wanted to know whether reading the literature increased the knowledge base and compassion of our teacher candidates regarding Mexican and Mexican American cultures. We were further interested in knowing whether this literature impressed them in such a way that they would choose to use it in their own classrooms. Increasing their awareness about and comfort level working with Latino children might help them move toward becoming more culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Dana and Lynch-Brown (1993) propose four reasons that children's literature is a powerful tool for a teacher education program. Preservice teachers may:

1. Vicariously experience an array of cultural settings through children's literature
2. Develop understanding and appreciation for diversity of cultures
3. Gain insights into children's minds and hearts
4. Use the books to prepare children for the global society in which they live.

Despite the frustrations involved in building awareness of diversity into teacher preparation programs,

there have been efforts to infuse diversity into the entire teacher education curriculum in ways that highlight differences and attempt to help preservice teachers move toward becoming culturally responsive teachers. Many professors have used adult and children's multicultural literature as a vehicle to facilitate this change, hoping that by reading and discussing the literature, preservice teachers will learn about various cultures, become more sensitive to the situations and needs of diverse populations, and become able to respond (Ada, 2003).

In one such program, Margerison (1995) introduced the study of multicultural literature to her preservice education teachers with Anaya's (1992) article "Censorship of Neglect." She was surprised that class discussions revealed students' antagonism toward Anaya's advocacy of ethnic literature and his departure from a traditional established European-based canon. Margerison persisted, having her students study annotated bibliographies of multicultural literature and articles discussing the use of ethnic literature in teaching. She did not insist, however, that they read actual ethnic literature texts in her class. Her follow-up with five preservice teachers in their student teaching placements revealed that they were neither prepared nor willing to use ethnic literature in the schools. Margerison concluded, "We come to love a work by reading it, so we must provide more opportunities throughout the curriculum for future teachers to read multicultural literature" (p. 263).

Chávez Chávez (1995), García and Pugh (1992), and Greene (1993) argue that college courses can be effective in changing attitudes about diversity, but only when explicit attention is given to teaching about these issues. We agree and add that it is our belief that teacher education programs must place topics of diversity at the heart of the curriculum, not only in children's literature and multicultural education courses. We also believe that the use of multicultural literature can be an effective tool for facilitating this explicit attention.

THE STUDY

The study discussed below represents one attempt to include specific topics of diversity in a teacher education program through the use of Latino children's literature. The focus of our study was to create learning and teaching situations designed to develop passion and heart among teacher candidates and to foster a knowledge base about diverse cultures, especially the Mexican American culture, the predominant minority in our area. To prepare our (mostly white) teacher candidates (TCs)[1] to be culturally responsive teachers, knowledge must be supplemented with heart.

Rasinski and Padak (1990) and Anaya (1992) present eloquent arguments for creating passion and heart in teacher education through the use of multicultural literature. Rasinski and Padak assert that

> because it tells the stories of human events and the human condition, and not simply the facts, multicultural literature does more than change minds; it changes people's hearts. People with changed hearts are people who can move the world (p. 577).

Anaya (1992) adds that using multicultural literature in teacher education not only has the power to change the hearts and minds of potential teachers, but also will have a positive and powerful impact on students in schools. He states:

> Our challenge is to incorporate into the curriculum all the voices of our country. We must use the literature of the barrio, of the neighborhood, of the region, of the ethnic group as a tool of engagement, a way to put students in touch with their social reality, and to build a positive self-image. We begin this journey by teaching our teachers to use this literature in school (p. 19).

Our study developed from the belief that multicultural children's literature might be an effective tool (beyond children's literature courses), for developing both knowledge about diversity and commitment to minority communities in our teacher candidates. To that end, we examined the impact that reading Latino children's literature as part of field experience seminars (with a focus on Mexican and Mexican American literature) had on elementary teacher candidates in the preservice teacher education program at our university.

We chose to focus our study on Latino children's literature rather than to address the broader topic of multicultural children's literature for several reasons. Traditional multicultural children's literature courses include survey reading from a variety of cultural groups. While informative, reading folktales from various countries does not address structural inequalities or the realities of students in the public school system in Colorado. We intentionally chose Latino children's literature because we were interested in developing new knowledge and awareness in our TCs of issues related specifically to Latinos in Colorado.

The study took place in a large urban school district in Colorado where 49.3% of the school population was Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), up from the reported 46.3% in the *Denver Post* in 1996 (Gottlieb, 1996). Latinos compose the largest and fastest growing population of minority students in the district and the state. This population has enormous potential, but unfortunately has a history of educational neglect and underachievement. The following Colorado demographics illustrate this situation:

- Latino students have consistently scored well below white students on all measures of the five-year-old Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) exams and the gap between Latinos and other students has widened as students have progressed through the grades (Escamilla, Chávez, Mahon, & Riley-Bernal, 2002).

- The dropout rate for Latino students is higher than any other ethnic group, and approaches 50% in some schools in the district (Córdova, 1997).
- Schools in the district have become increasingly segregated by ethnicity and language over the past decade (Denver Public Schools, 2000).
- There is a large and growing sentiment in the community that educational problems for Latinos are situated within individuals and families and not in the institutional structure and practices. In November, 2002, Colorado's proposed Amendment 31 would have eliminated bilingual education and replaced it with a 1-year intensive English Immersion program. Although Amendment 31 was defeated, post-election editorials in Denver's major newspaper proclaimed that the editors had opposed Amendment 31 *only* because of its punitive aspects toward teachers and potential costs to taxpayers. The editorials also stressed that immigrants had an obligation to learn English as quickly as possible (Amendment 31 part deux, 2002; Better ways to learn English, 2003).
- According to a report to the Board of Education, there is a complete denial in the state of institutional racism as being a potential cause for gaps in Latino learning or even being existent (Córdova, 1997).
- In the greater metropolitan area, 66% of teachers were white and female in 1999 (Colorado Department of Education, 2001).

In conjunction with the above information, it is clear that there is a cultural mismatch between students and teachers in the schools. All of the teacher candidates involved in this study were doing fieldwork in three partner schools where the predominant student population was Latino (over 75% in all schools), Spanish speaking, limited English proficient, and low income. The implications of this mismatch for the children became the impetus for finding a way to help preservice teachers increase their awareness and movement toward becoming culturally responsive teachers.

In addition to the demographic realities, there were other important reasons for our decision to focus on Latino literature with an emphasis on Mexican Americans. We wanted our instructional intervention to be focused on creating culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) who could respond to a particular population rather than our taking a more universalist approach to the issue. Although many of our TCs were preparing to be bilingual (English/Spanish) teachers, the group was predominately middle-class, white and native English speaking (see Table 1). We wanted TCs to read books that reflected a culture different from their own and that related closely to the culture of students with whom they would be working.

Further, the majority of our TCs eventually teach locally, and will have many Latino children in their classrooms. It is important, we felt, for them to become familiar with literature that can be used to teach about the life and heritage of Mexican American and Latino populations and for them to become sensitive to the lives of their students.

Table 1
Teacher Candidates by Ethnicity and Gender

	Area of study		
Ethnicity	Bilingual/ESL	Literacy	Total
Latino	4	0	4
Asian	1	0	1
Black	0	0	0
Native American	1	0	1
White	14	7	21
Total	20	7	27
Gender			
Male	2	0	2
Female	18	7	25
Total	20	7	27

Note. Terms for ethnic designations are those used by the Colorado Department of Education.

Finally, the major portion of our teacher education program is field-based, and most of the program's projects are carried out in partner schools. In all schools in the study, there was a dearth of children's literature in either the classrooms or the school library, and almost no literature in either English or Spanish reflecting any Latino culture. This project, we felt, might encourage classroom teachers and librarians in our partner schools to acquire and utilize more children's literature representing Latino and Mexican American culture.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three general research questions guided our study and informed the discussion of issues. Does reading Latino children's literature help teacher candidates develop or expand their knowledge base about Mexicans and Mexican Americans and other Latino groups? Are teacher candidates able to relate Latino literature to their own life experiences? Are teacher candidates willing to utilize Latino children's books when teaching? We were aware that as preservice teachers TCs were not in control of the curriculum they provided students. Therefore, in wording this last question, we could not use stronger language since they could not prove that, without requirement, they would use the books in their teaching.

Our role in conducting this study was not limited to that of outside researchers. Both of us were assigned the role of leadership area professor—one for literacy and one for bilingual education. We spent one day per week in two of the partner schools working as direct coaches and mentors with our TCs and the teachers in the school.

METHODS AND SETTING

The study involved 27 TCs participating in their fieldwork experiences in our graduate teacher education program. These school-based experiences required TCs to be in the schools two days per week during the fall semester and four days a week for 14 weeks during the spring semester. The partner schools in this study are located in urban inner city areas. In addition, TCs attended monthly seminars after school in order to discuss issues related to instruction and school policies and procedures.

All TCs identified an area of focus in the program (e.g., bilingual/ESL, math/science, young child, etc.). Of the 27 TCs in the study, 15 were preparing to be Spanish/English bilingual teachers, five were preparing to be ESL teachers, and seven were focusing on literacy, all at the K–6 level. The TCs in the study were mostly white and female, mirroring the national demographics of college students preparing to be teachers. Residency experiences were conducted in schools that were predominantly Latino, with high free lunch percentages, and high percentages of students with limited English proficiency.

Within the monthly seminars, each teacher candidate was assigned to a literature study group of five persons. The groups read two books per month from the list of selected children's literature, wrote responses to the prompts we gave them (see below), discussed the books in their groups, and then wrote another brief response to the group discussion. Books selected represented Latino stories and authors from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and various parts of the United States. Over the course of the year, each TC read a minimum of 14 books (some chose to read more). We provided TCs with multiple copies of each book, and we encouraged them to use the sets in their teaching. This was not required but suggested, so that the TCs could observe how children responded to the literature.

After reading the books, TCs were asked to respond individually to three questions about the books for seminar discussion groups:

1. What has this book led you to think about?
2. Have you had any experiences similar to this? In what way?
3. Would you use this book with students? Why/Why not?

Question #1 was intentionally worded in a very general way. We were interested in finding out whether the books helped TCs learn more about Mexican and Mexican American culture, but we did not want to ask a specific culture-related question, out of concern that it might lead TCs to provide a response that "pleased the professor" rather than representing an honest reaction to the book. On the other hand, although question #3 could have produced such responses, we found our students were very candid in voicing their opinions about using the books. In both their writing and the class discussions, there were several books that several students felt that they would not use with students. We discuss these in more detail below.

The individual and group responses to the three questions above were analyzed for themes, concerns, and issues for future discussion. Issues and concerns raised from responses and discussions were not shared with the TCs. We allowed them to discuss the books and issues they raised, but did not contribute to the discussions or try to guide or direct them. We have since decided that explicit discussion of many of these issues is important, and now use Latino literature as a springboard for more explicit discussions of cultural issues. (We address this need for explicit discussion in more detail when we explain our findings.)

As we read the teacher candidate responses, we found them clustered around four categories. These categories were (a) cultural; (b) general or universal; (c) negative; or (d) no response or opinion.

We coded responses with a "C" (for culture) if TCs indicated that the book helped them learn or think more about Mexicans or Mexican Americans (research question #1). We also coded the responses with a "C" if the TCs said that they "connected" to the literature in cultural ways or if they identified with the culture(s) represented in the books (research question #2), although we realized later that perhaps these should have been two distinct codes. We coded the responses with a "U" (for universal) on both questions if TCs' responses indicated they made connections and thought about issues more universal and less cultural in nature (research questions #1 and #2). Universal connections often had to do with family, school experiences, travel experiences, dealing with intolerance, or a lack of acceptance on a human level that did not relate directly to culture.

We coded with an "N" negative responses that indicated the TCs made no connections with the work, or had negative reactions to it. Responses that were left blank or where TCs indicated that they had no opinion were coded with an NR. Finally, we tallied responses that indicated TCs would use this literature in their classrooms, and those that indicated they would not (research question #3).

To further illustrate our coding system, we provide an example of each type of response below. After reading the book *Carlos y la planta de calabaza/Carlos and the Squash Plant* (Romero, 1993), one TC wrote:

> The kitchen in the book reminded me of my mom's kitchen in New Mexico. Mexican Americans in New Mexico grow "calabacitas" (squash) a lot, and we grew them in our garden. We have a different recipe than the one in the book, but so does every Mexican family in New Mexico.

We coded this response with a "C" since the TC connected the book specifically with the Mexican American

culture. This particular TC was of Mexican American heritage which, of course, may have influenced her responses, a point to which we will return later.

An example of a response coded with a "C" from a TC who is not a member of Latino culture is the following from the book *El tapiz de Abuela/Abuela's Weave* (Castañeda, 1993):

> This book led me to think about traditions in Guatemala. How, in Guatemala, relationships with grandparents are so important, and that there is a lot of pride in working hard. I would use this book to teach about Guatemala.

An example of a "U" coding came from the following TC response after reading the book *El camino de Amelia/Amelia's Road* (Jacobs, 1993):

> We did move around a lot my first few years of school. I went to kindergarten, first, second, and third grades in different schools. It was tough. Academically, I missed important foundations in my education. Socially, it's hard fitting in.

A second example came from one TC's response to the book *Me llamo María Isabel/My Name is María Isabel* (Ada, 1993), in which the main character's name is changed in school:

> Because my name is Katy (K-A-T-Y) rather than Katie with an IE, people always call me Kathy which drives me insane! It's not Kathy it's Katy, and it's not Katherine, it's Kathleen . . . Irish and proud!

In the first case, the TC identified with the universal problem that children have when they have to move frequently. In the second, the TC identified with the problem of constantly having one's name mispronounced. Both TCs connected to the literature in a personal way; however, neither indicated that the book helped them to learn more about Mexican Americans. One possible cultural connection to these books could have been that Mexican American kids (particularly migrant children) move a lot, or that many Mexican Americans are migrants. Another could be the recognition of one of the most degrading historical situations for Mexican American students in the public school system, having their names anglicized (changed from Spanish to English names), with José becoming Joe and Celia becoming Cindy.

An example of an "N" (negative) response is illustrated in the following response to the book *María Molina and the Day of the Dead* (Krull, 1994):

> I would not use this book in my classroom. It deals with too many religious themes and religion has no place in a public school.

A further example of an "N" response is illustrated in the following response to the book *La llorona/The Weeping Woman* (Hayes, 1987):

> Although I am glad I'm now familiar with this folk story, I see no place for it in the classroom. It is a brutal story. It sends a negative message about women being dependent on men, shallow, unintelligent, etc. I think it is important to use literature that portrays women in a positive manner. Otherwise what kind of message is the teacher sending the class?

In each case, TCs had obvious negative responses to the books and indicated both in writing and through discussions that they would not use them in their classes.

DISCUSSION AND OBSERVATIONS

There were 930 total responses to the various literature books. The overwhelming majority of responses represented "universalist" type responses. There were very few negative responses. There were only a few books that TCs rejected outright and said they would definitely not use. Responses by category follows:

Cultural Responses (C Code)	268 (29%)
Universalist Responses (U Code)	579 (62%)
Negative Responses (N Code)	70 (7%)
No Response (NR Code)	17 (2%)

At first glance, the data may present our teacher candidates as not making very many cultural connections when reading this literature, and thus it may seem as if they were not learning much about the Latino cultures represented in the books. In one sense this was true. However, upon closer examination of our data, we found simply to report what they did not do with the literature, without reporting what they did do, would be to present an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of our teacher candidates. Therefore we will begin by discussing their universal connections.

Connecting at a Human Level

We found most of our teacher candidates to be sensitive, caring people, with poignant personal experiences that helped them to identify with the Latino literature in a universal way. For example, after reading *Amigos del otro lado/Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1993), one TC wrote:

> This book led me [to] think about many of my experiences with my wonderful brother Carl. Carl has Down's Syndrome. As a child growing up in rural Texas, I experienced firsthand many hurtful sayings directed towards Carl from unknown people and old friends. As it turned out in the book, I figured out they weren't truly my friends.

One of the responses from *El tapiz de Abuela/Abuela's Weave* (Castañeda, 1993) further illustrates this sensitivity:

> I think we've all felt discriminated against at one time or another. I felt bad for Abuelita because she was judged badly for a birthmark on her face. I have known people like this.

While many TCs did not specifically state that the books helped them learn about Mexican/Mexican American children, most said the books reminded them of children in their school. A teacher candidate, after reading *Las aventuras de Connie y Diego/The Adventures of Connie and Diego* (García, 1987), wrote:

> One student in my class told me she has no friends because she smells. I am really worried about her, she feels different and unliked.

In her response to *El sancocho del sábado/Saturday Sancocho* (Torres, 1995), another TC wrote:

> Not all of my students' families have enough money to eat nutritious meals. Sometimes their hot meals might only be the ones from the school. This is scary! If the government cuts breakfast and lunch programs, how will this affect my students?

Dealing with Controversy

Responses such as those listed above taught us that our TCs are thoughtful and insightful human beings concerned for the welfare of the children with whom they work. While we recognize the importance of connecting with the literature and the children on a universal or human level, we also recognize that this is not sufficient. To only identify with the students in a way that confirms "we are all alike" encourages teacher candidates' tendencies to want to use the educational system to make the children more like themselves. As their professors, we must provide the opportunity to explore and understand the value in how we are all different. If teacher candidates do not learn to recognize and value these differences, they will not be convinced that there is a real need to make sure the educational system values and addresses these differences. It is our obligation as teacher educators to help them see that in recognizing the differences, we can celebrate and share the wonderful variations human cultures produce, thus placing value on all cultures.

We found that our TCs, like all of us, wrestle with difficult issues such as death, racism, religion, and discrimination. They further wonder what place the discussion of these issues has in the public school and with young children. As beginning teachers, they revealed that they are somewhat reluctant to deal with such controversies. A response to the book *Pancho's Piñata* (Czernecki & Rhodes, 1992) illustrate this:

> I'm a little concerned about the religious celebration mentioned in the story. At a recent seminar, a music teacher mentioned that their school does not celebrate any holiday due to the diverse student body . . . she said that she was able to use material that was religious if it was not celebrating an event. This leads me to think that this book could be used as long as it was not during the month of Dec. The book obviously comes from a religious background that is Catholic. Can I use this book? I feel Hispanic kids can identify with it, so I might use it and pay the consequences.

Similar concerns were raised with religious content in other books. In addition, TCs were also worried about books drawing attention to "dark skin" as being potentially racist. The following examples are taken from book responses to *La tortillería/The Tortilla Factory* (Paulsen, 1995):

> The book says that in the spring the dark earth is worked by dark hands. The book depicts Hispanic people as being manual laborers.
>
> Racism—my first reaction was to think of racism with this book because the book started with working the black earth with brown hands.

Ironically, the most controversial books among the TCs were those richest in contemporary cultural content. These were also the ones that the TCs were most ambivalent about using. These books included *Amigos del otro lado/Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1993) and *María Molina and the Day of the Dead* (Krull, 1994). Group responses from these two books included the following:

> We do not feel comfortable teaching children that it is OK for a person to break the law and provide shelter for two illegal aliens. We don't like the way the book depicts the border patrol. We don't think that little children should be taught to be afraid of the "migra" (immigration). We do not think it is good for books like this to perpetuate the idea that folk medicine and "curanderas" can cure people.
>
> It seems odd to us to celebrate death and have a party. We would not teach this to little kids. This holiday (Day of the Dead) takes death too lightly. We would not feel comfortable teaching this. We think the focus on death can be scary for non-Hispanic children. Religion does not belong in school.

From these responses we learned that we need to teach more explicitly about topics dealing with controversial content such as religion in the schools. We also need to have more discussions about pressing social issues in the Mexican American/Latino community (e.g., "la migra"

[Spanish vernacular for immigration officials], and language rights). It is important for white teachers to understand that people in other cultures view the world in different ways. These differing world views are legitimate and grow out of long histories and experiences that are distinct from the histories of white European-originating Americans. The examples provided here (*Day of the Dead* and "la migra") point out the need for the educational system and the teacher candidates to become culturally responsive to the student population, who are, in this case, Mexican and Mexican American students. If we had given the TCs instruction in a broader multicultural perspective, we might not have had the opportunity to address these issues.

In addition, we realize that a universal perspective on culturally specific themes could promote the idea that everyone should, for example, approach death and mourning in the same way, devaluing and denying comprehension of the unique perspective on death that the día de los muertos tradition provides. In this instance, difference was viewed as being inappropriate. Teacher candidates who see specific cultural perspectives in this light may be motivated toward efforts to change children's cultural beliefs and practices rather than toward efforts to ensure that the educational system values and supports diversity.

It also is important, for example, for teachers to understand the place that la migra has in the lives of the Mexican and Mexican American community. It is naïve on the part of TCs to think that if books such as *Amigos del otro lado/Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1993) are not included in the school curriculum, the issues will not be a part of the children's lives. Here again, ignoring the reality of students' lives promotes an education system that is not culturally responsive to its community.

Most difficult for TCs were the portrayals of the border patrol and la migra, the act of harboring "illegal aliens," and how the community members relied on a curandera for health care and advice. It is important for us as professors to help TCs see the world in its varied colors, rather than only in black and white. We need to help TCs begin to understand and accept the realities and traditions of the Latino community, and not judge these children or their families by the middle-class values with which the majority of TCs were raised.

The book, *Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993), helped us to bring to light very real issues that TCs need to understand to value their students' culture and social reality. In this way, they can learn to respond in a manner which is supportive and comprehending rather than negative and dismissive.

Promoting Tolerance and Acceptance

Many responses indicated that TCs feel that schools need to teach young people about tolerance, acceptance, and responsibility to their communities. Most of the TCs stated their willingness to include such topics in the curriculum of their future classrooms. The majority of TCs stated that books such as *El tapiz de Abuela/Abuela's Weave* (Castañeda, 1993), *La mujer que brillaba más que el sol/The Woman Who Outshone the Sun* (Cruz, 1991), and *Las aventuras de Connie y Diego/ The Adventures of Connie and Diego* (García, 1987) would be good books to help teach about the need to accept differences, to tolerate things you do not understand, and to respect nature. Their willingness to use this literature to teach these lessons, we think, is both appropriate and positive.

Finally, and perhaps most encouraging was the realization on the part of the majority of TCs that a teacher can make a difference in the life of a child. While we generated much evidence to support this finding, it is best illustrated by a teacher candidate response to the book *El camino de Amelia/Amelia's Road* (Jacobs, 1993):

> This book made me realize how terribly important an understanding and caring teacher can be in a child's life. Just a little bit of extra attention and care can make a difference.

It is noteworthy that ethnic minority teacher candidates responded to the literature with more specific cultural connections than did white TCs. An example of this comes from an Asian TC's response to the book *Me llamo María Isabel/ My Name is María Isabel* (Ada, 1993):

> My name . . . was always mispronounced throughout my school years. In fact, it still is. It really affects how I feel about a teacher if my name is not pronounced correctly after the second or third time. Although I know teachers . . . don't do it on purpose, I sometimes feel that they are being ignorant or they don't think my culture is important if they don't at least try.

Such responses provide teachable moments about deeper equity implications. The issue is not merely mispronunciation, but the lack of attention to his name, which devalued the TC's very culture and reinforced the idea that "Anglo = good." The book, *My Name is María Isabel* (Ada, 1993), provides a tangible example of the impact changing one's name can have. The fact that Latino names become anglicized emphasizes the dominance and perceived desirability of assimilation. The historically common practice of anglicizing names of Latino children in U.S. schools is a topic that merits discussion in teacher education classrooms.

A teacher candidate who immigrated to the United States from South America wrote the following after reading *Las aventuras de Connie y Diego/The Adventures of Connie and Diego* (García, 1987):

> My brothers and I were shunned for quite some time by our peers when we first moved here. We were rejected

> because we dressed differently and spoke a different language than our classmates. I believe in time we were accepted after they realized we weren't so different after all. I think children need to be aware of different cultures and become tolerant and accepting of diversity.

Another TC who identifies herself as a Chicana from New Mexico wrote this response to the same book:

> As I grew up I was very aware that some people were inclined to see me as different. Fortunately, I did not have too many hurtful experiences, but none-the-less [sic] you would be surprised at how many times people saw me as different simply because of my physical appearance. People have certain expectations or preconceived ideas or beliefs about me just because of the way I look.

Ethnic minority TCs in the study composed a very small percentage of the teacher candidates. Their responses to the literature demonstrated that they made more specific cultural connections than did the white teacher candidates. It seemed to us that their perspectives and insights as members of minority groups enriched and extended the interpretation of the texts during group discussion time. Since many of the minority TCs had experiences similar to those portrayed in the books, they were able to help white TCs glimpse the world through another lens. This observation reinforced our view that a diverse population is critical to achieving the diversity goals of any teacher education program, and many of the cultural connections our TCs made might have been enhanced by group discussions.

In general, we noted that the teacher candidates did make connections with literature written from perspectives different from their own, and they believed school had a responsibility to teach children that prejudice and discrimination are wrong. We worry, however, that only 29% of the responses were specifically cultural in nature. The dearth of cultural connections, both with regard to text stories and illustrations, raised a new awareness. Simply reading ethnic literature will not create the knowledge base, compassion, or call to action that we desire in our TCs. More dialogue and discussion about all of the issues needs to be included in our seminars, and we need to help teacher candidates learn to look closely at their negative reactions to some of the content in the books, explore these reactions, and find ways to overcome them in order to be more culturally responsive to their students.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE CLASSES

When we began this study, we wanted to know whether or not reading Latino literature would help teacher candidates develop and expand their knowledge about Mexicans and Mexican Americans (research question #1). This question was important to us, given the research literature that says that prospective teachers must acknowledge that cultural differences exist, that some cultural conflict is unavoidable, differences need to be celebrated, and that teachers need to have a knowledge of the cultural values and attributes of students in their classrooms (Cortés, 1990; Kibler, 1996). We further wanted to know whether teacher candidates could relate their own personal experiences to the literature they read (research question #2), thereby demonstrating an understanding that all human beings are alike in some fundamental ways, connecting at a personal level in order to appreciate and value both similarities and differences (Córtes, 1990; Kibler, 1996).

We are confident from the universal responses in our findings that our teacher candidates are compassionate people. We are less confident that they know more about either Mexicans or Mexican Americans than when we began this study or that they recognize the importance of cultural differences and the systemic inequalities that plague educational institutions. We still see Latino literature as an important tool in the preparation of teachers of Mexican or Mexican American students. However, we now believe we must combine the reading of literature with more explicit teaching about Mexicans and Mexican Americans. To expand on Rasinski and Padak (1990), we must change hearts and minds at the same time.

Many of our TCs felt reluctant to deal with controversial content and to take risks voicing their opinions and working through their own biases. Through discussions and examples, we must encourage our TCs to be better risk takers in confronting culturally sensitive and controversial issues. We must help them become more comfortable leading classroom discussions on the issues that the books raise, as many of these book themes represent the real life stories of the children in our schools. We began to require that TCs use Latino children's literature to create classroom lessons following our belief that actually using the literature with children will further enhance the experience and expand teachers' understandings (for further information see Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003).

Opening Books to Open Our Eyes: Future Curriculum Plans

We wanted the TCs to learn about and begin to understand the culture and lifestyle of the students they were working with, but we did not tell them why this was important in terms of systemic equity for the students and their families. We hoped the TCs would confront their own biases and assumptions about culture, but we did not push them to examine and evaluate these biases in relation to the values expressed through the Latino culture they were studying. We also felt it was important that the TCs value the contributions of minority students and

their families in the school and larger community, but we did not confront them with the existence of systemic inequities, nor did we require them to explore these inequities and the influence they have on the students with whom they work.

During the second and third years of the study, we did require the TCs to use the literature in their teaching (Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003). This promoted more interaction with their students on a cultural level and increased teacher candidates' awareness of and appreciation for Latino culture. However, it was not enough, and in designing future curriculum that would increase preservice teachers' knowledge and appreciation for diverse cultures and help them recognize the inequalities that perpetuate an oppressive educational system, we would do things differently.

For example, many of the books we used include controversial themes that should be explored in-depth. *Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993) addresses issues of illegal immigration, immigration officials, and "curanderos" (healers). *Amelia's Road* focuses on migrant families and the obstacles migrant children face in schools. *María Molina and the Days of the Dead* (Krull, 1994) provides a chance to discuss día de los muertos celebrations as compared with Halloween, other cultures' perspectives on appropriate ways to deal with death, or more generally, issues of heritage in contrast to the adoption of new culture.

Although choice of readings is important, at regular points during the year, all of the TCs should read the same book. Using these types of books and their themes as points of discussion, the following activities and assignments would increase TCs awareness of the culture, their own biases, and the institutional inequities that exist in our schools.

Time should be made for in-depth discussions on the book's themes that would allow TCs to explore their personal biases and assumptions about the issues contained in that book. Following these discussions, TCs should be required to use the book with their students, exploring the children's experiences and responses to the themes. TCs should also do research on the book's topic, which would include talking with parents as well as academic research.

Follow-up discussion would have TCs sharing the children's responses to the book, the insights parents gave them, information gained from their academic research, and their own responses to the book at that point. Have their opinions changed? What did they learn about the influence these issues have in the lives of their students? Is there a systemic inequity involved that impacts the children and their families? What can schools and teachers do to counteract or change this inequality?

Using a journal format, TCs should track their own responses, biases, assumptions, and opinions on the various issues addressed throughout the year. Discussions in the second semester should include reflection on changes they are experiencing in their own understandings, acceptance, and approaches.

Using all of the background information, experiences, and reflections, TCs should continually be asked (and be asking themselves), "What are the implications of all this? What does this mean for learning now and opportunities in the future?" and most importantly, "What can be done to create change? What can teachers, schools, and districts do to eliminate the inequalities and stop perpetuating the status quo?"

TCs should identify the most pressing of these issues for the school they are in and create a specific plan of action to address them. What have the TCs learned from the process of investigating the children and the community? Hopefully, they will put their action plan into practice as they begin their teaching careers. Although ideally the TCs would implement the action plan they have created, nine months in a school (800 hours, averaging three days per week) is barely enough time to create the plan itself. It is our hope that they carry forward the awareness they have gained into their full-time teaching positions.

The greatest evidence that this project made an impact on our TCs is the extent to which they actually use this literature and the knowledge gained in their own schools and classrooms as they begin their first years of teaching. Since the inception of this project, many of our former TCs have asked to borrow book sets to use in their new classrooms. Further, upon the recommendation of our teacher candidates, librarians, and classroom teachers at several of our partner schools have requested copies of our bibliography so that they could purchase ethnic literature for the schools' library and classrooms. From these observations and our findings in general, we feel very hopeful that endeavors such as our ethnic literature project will help to better prepare teacher candidates to survive and thrive in diverse urban schools. We know we have much work left to do, yet we also feel we have made a good start.

NOTE

1. In order to distinguish between university preservice teachers and the children they are working with, preservice teachers in the study will be referred to as *teacher candidates* or *TCs* and the term *students* will only refer to the children.

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