

**They *Really* Don't Speak ENGLISH:  
Helping Preservice Teachers Experience Cultural  
and Linguistic Diversity**

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**Abstract**

The needs of urban schools are the focus of educators. Of primary concern is the lack of qualified teachers who are prepared to meet the needs of learners in U.S. classrooms. One factor of policymakers' concern is the mismatch between the experiences and backgrounds of many teachers versus those of students they will teach. Preservice teachers continue to mirror this mismatch. Preparing preservice teachers to enter the profession as culturally relevant teachers is a goal of teacher preparation programs. This article looks at one university's program to help preservice teachers develop cultural competence. The study was designed to investigate the university's efforts to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to experience cultural and linguistic diversity. This article, developed from a larger study, focuses on developing culturally relevant practice among preservice teachers.

***Keywords:* preservice teachers; multicultural education, multicultural literature, culturally relevant texts, culturally relevant pedagogy, English Language Learners**

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Public schools in the United States are becoming more and more diverse. In 2007–2008, English Language Learners made up 9% of the student population. In 2011 the percentage rose to over 15% (Feistritzer, 2011). The *National Journal* reports that “when schools reopen in August and September, (2014) Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American students will together make up a narrow majority of the nation’s public school students” (Ross & Bell, 2014). These statistics emphasize the need for teacher education programs to provide opportunities for preservice teachers to have experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Furthermore, this need is compounded by the fact that the National Center for Education Information reports that 87% of our public teachers are White females (Feistritzer, 2011; Nieto, 2002). Preservice teachers mirror these statistics. Sleeter (2001) notes that most White preservice teachers “bring little awareness or understanding of discrimination, especially racism” (p. 95) further underscoring the need for developing opportunities for preservice teachers to cultivate cultural awareness and competence. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues the importance of cultural competence as a tenant of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Using this conceptual framework, the study presented in this article looked at ways that preservice teachers were immersed in diverse experiences and their reflections. The basis of this study was not to “teach” being culturally relevant, but to provide a catalyst for the preservice teachers to make cultural competency part of their being. This idea of not “teaching” cultural competency is expressed by Ladson-Billings in her discussion of one teacher’s probing statement. She recalls a teacher commenting, “Everybody keeps telling us about multicultural education, but nobody is telling us how to do it!” (2006, p. 30). Ladson-Billings’ response was, “Even if we could tell you how to do it, I would not want us to tell you how to do it” (2006, p. 39). Thus, the premise of the intervention utilized in this project was not to tell the preservice teachers how to “do cultural competence,” but to provide opportunities for this to happen. Gay (2000) supports this stance, noting that teachers must develop a knowledge base about cultural diversity in order to

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become culturally responsive teachers. Further strengthening this overarching concept, Ladson-Billings argues that having cultural competence is much like practicing democracy—you do it. It has become part of your decision-making process, the way you live your life, and has become a state of being (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2011). Gay (2000) further states that cultural education must be comprehensive in its form, and it must be an integral part of everything that happens in the education enterprise. Although one experience cannot produce this level of being, the project was developed to address this need and is supported by Dewey's (1938) assertion that there is a "fundamental unity in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education" (p. 7). Furthermore, paraphrasing Dewey (1916) in *Democracy and Education*, learning in the schools of education should be continuous with learning in the schools of practice. Noddings (2012) underscores the need for schools of education to prepare teacher candidates for the diversity of today's public schools by involving them in diverse living experiences.

### **The Study**

The study was conducted in the summers of 2013 and 2014. Specifically, the study was designed to investigate how one university teacher preparatory program provided its mainstream preservice teachers with opportunities to experience cultural and linguistic diversity in order to develop their foundation for culturally relevant practice. The university, understanding the need to provide qualified teachers prepared to meet the diverse needs of the school populations, designed an inner city immersion experience for their preservice teachers. The intent of this activity was to address the current research stating that there is a mismatch between the experiences and backgrounds of the university's preservice teachers and those of students they will teach. While their likely future classroom populations will be more than half culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, at this university, over 90% of the preservice teachers are White and come

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from middle class and advantaged backgrounds. Knowing that the learners the preservice teachers will encounter in their classrooms will look very different from them and have not experienced the same advantages, the university undertook this project. The preparation of teachers equipped to connect with these learners and to effectively deal with the challenges in urban settings is a critical need. This requires meaningful and repeated engagement in urban contexts as part of the teacher preparation program.

Three central questions were investigated in the larger study. They were:

1. How can an immersion experience in a diverse environment impact the understanding and philosophy of a group of mainstream preservice teachers?
2. What are some of the perceptions of mainstream preservice teachers about cultural and linguistic diversity?
3. How do these perceptions impact the preservice teachers' curriculum choices?

This article will focus on the findings surrounding the preservice teachers' perceptions that guided their curriculum choices; specifically, in their choice of books or texts.

### **Framework**

The study looked specifically at one university's summer program for preservice teachers established to develop cultural awareness. This challenge of equipping preservice teachers with effective tools to meet the challenges of teaching students who have cultural backgrounds different from their own has been noted as an important element in teacher preparation (Banks, 2000; Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chin, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Riley, 1999). White female teachers are often not aware of their own culture and see themselves as "just American" (Ladson-Billings 1995; Nieto, 2002). Howard (1999) notes that you cannot teach what you don't know. According to Gay (2000) this statement applies to knowledge about both the students and the subject matter. The university summer program pushed to provide opportunities to allow

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preservice teachers to acquire real knowledge and understanding about their own culture and the cultures of their future students.

This article focuses on the data from the larger study as it relates to the use of books or texts to bridge the culture and understanding of teachers and the students. The importance of using culturally relevant texts is documented in the research (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Valdez, 1999). Ladson-Billings (2006) encourages that students using culturally relevant pedagogy can help students maintain their own cultures as they navigate the dominant culture through the use of culturally relevant texts. She also points out that the books or texts that are commonly used in the classrooms may have a negative effect on this effort. She states that “negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one’s history, culture, or background represented in the textbooks” (p. 17-18). She also adds that it is imperative that we develop a pedagogy that empowers students not only intellectually but socially and emotionally. This study expands that concept to the use of culturally diverse texts to help preservice teachers form their own cultural awareness.

The importance of providing texts with which CLD students can relate is foundational to student engagement and learning, but the availability of these texts is lacking. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin in 2013 reported that of the 3,200 children’s books published that year only 93 were about Black people. Myers (2014) referred to this as “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature.” Additionally, the ability for preservice teachers to acknowledge the need for culturally relevant texts as an important focal point in their instructional planning and teaching is lacking. The inexperience that the majority of our White, middle class preservice teachers have with CLD students interferes with the automaticity of including culturally relevant activities and texts. This study adds to the current literature by focusing on the experiences the preservice teachers had with culturally diverse students and the impact the experience has on their thoughts about their future teaching practice.

### **Methods**

The findings in this article are from the larger qualitative case study conducted in July 2013 and June 2014. The study focused on the reactions and reflections of preservice teachers engaged in cultural experiences as part of their course on teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). Yin (2009, p. 3) states that case studies offer researchers “how” questions about “a contemporary set of events” over which they “[have] little or no control.” The choice of this qualitative method matches the set of events surrounding the preservice teachers and the development of cultural awareness. Multiple sources of data were used to increase the credibility of the study. Data were reviewed by experts to insure accuracy.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were preservice teachers preparing to do their student teaching either in the following fall or spring. They were enrolled in a university course titled “Effective Teaching Strategies for English Language Learners.” As part of the course, the students spent five days living together in a highly diverse, high poverty area. The Summer 2013 course was conducted in a large urban setting with a population of more than one million residents. Participating were 11 female students and two professors, one male and one female. The professors were also the researchers. Ten of the students self-identified as White and one as mixed race, and both professors were White. All participants were given pseudonyms.

The Summer 2014 course was held in a medium size city with a population of more than 100,000 people where the university was located; students lived in a high poverty area that was linguistically and culturally diverse. They moved several times during the five days to different kinds of housing. There were seven female students and the same two professors; eight self-identified as White and one Hispanic. The university students spent time in their university classroom and time working with elementary school CLD students as well as interactions with the communities. The study was explained to all students and each submitted a participant consent form under the requirements of the Internal Review Board at the university.

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## Data

Qualitative data was collected from groups meetings, structured journals, literature circles, class assignments, and field notes. As part of the university course, students participated in group meetings every evening after their daily experiences which were audio recorded and then transcribed and studied. Using internal and external codes, the transcripts were coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Field notes were taken by the researchers during the experiences, including the literature circle discussions on a required reading, *Girl in Translation*. Final sources of data were the students' structured journals and reflections that they completed as part of the course. Using these multiple data gathering sources strengthens the credibility of the study (Yin, 2009).

Several themes developed from the coding of the data. The themes that informed the question studied in this article were:

1. The understanding of the reality of cultural and linguistic variety that exists among the students that will be the children in the chairs of their classrooms
2. The scaffolding that literature (text) provided for the preservice teachers
3. The connections that literature (text) provided for the preservice teachers and the ELL

## Findings

### Significance of Authentic Experiences

The first theme that emerged from the data was the concept that while the preservice teachers intellectually knew about linguistic and cultural diversity, they did not have sufficient practical understanding. They had studied about students with different home languages, students in the culture of poverty, and students with different ethnic and nationality cultures, but they had no first-hand experience. The professors of the courses had given multiple examples from their past, the current literature, and current events, but the information was too abstract. Their personal background did not provide a scheme for this information. For example, after the first day of working with children, one student, Karen, looked at

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the professor and said, “They **really** don’t speak ENGLISH.” And this student was not alone in her epiphany. Another student, Tara, commented that “they don’t know any English. They have only been here two weeks and they are in school.” For these preservice teachers, the authentic experiences were what made the connection between their classroom learning and the reality of the CLDs that will be in their classrooms.

Although discussed in classroom activities, the concept of cultural fatigue and poverty fatigue was made clear through this experience (Diaz-Rico, 2012; Donahue & Parsons, 1982). One student, Angela, said, “We had used public transportation so I was naturally tired. I was so tired. I was sitting on my bed in the room when I realized that this is a normal day for some people.” She continued to say that she realized that she did not understand anything about the lives some people live and she never would, but she got a little taste of how tiring it can be, and she will be watchful of this in her teaching.

Another student, Mary, focused her thoughts on how she thought all English Language Learners would have Spanish as their home language. She reported that her classroom she was in had ten different languages. Another student, Sarah, stated that working with an ELL student was a “mind-blowing” experience. She was playing jump rope with a group of children on hot asphalt at an apartment complex (The outside temperature that day was 104 degrees). Jump rope was a new game for the children. This experience of trying to teach a simple game using all her strategies was much more difficult than she thought it would be. She said, “I’m just trying to talk to them and get a little message across. I was just trying to figure out how to tell them to jump. How much harder is it going to be as a teacher to get not just the language across but the content I have to teach them?” Sarah found that it was an exhausting experience. She said, “When they’re not understanding... when I’m using all my energy just to get them to jump. What if I was trying to teach them to divide?” Karen summed up the importance of providing the authentic experiences for our student teachers to make their intellectual understanding match their true understandings when

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she said, "That (playing with the children) was probably one of the highlights. Being able to actually use what we've kinda talked about. It was harder! It's good to think that it was hard."

### **Interactions with ELLs around Picture Books**

A second theme that emerged from the data revolved around the preservice teachers' interactions with ELLs and picture books both in formal and informal settings. Before the preservice teachers worked with the students they participated in activities in their classroom settings learning about culturally relevant texts for marginalized students, including all types of diversity. When the preservice teacher had opportunities to engage with the students they were surprised at the choice of "favorite books" the students were drawn to.

In one situation a preservice teacher found the lack of English vocabulary was evident. "I loved getting to make use of my rusty Spanish and actually get a response from the children. My favorite part of the whole experience was when I sat down with the little boy in the flannel pajamas and read books with him and looked at the "I Spy" book with him." The student went on to express that she never thought "I Spy" books were good literature or appropriate for the classroom until it provided a way for her to interact with the little boy. "He would point to the picture, I would say the name, and then together we would find it in the big picture. My favorite part."

Different types of texts provide different opportunities. "I Spy" books provided a natural bridge from picture to labeling vocabulary appropriate for pre-production or beginner level students. The students found that students at higher levels were drawn to books that provided opportunities for them to make a connection between themselves and the books. Mary Helen, one of the preservice teachers, was planning an activity for a group of 4th and 5th grade ELLs that followed the activities that the students had been doing in the classroom. However, instead of using the classroom library of leveled readers, she chose to pick a book especially for each child. Even though she had only been with them three days, she felt that

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she could choose a book that each student could relate to. Mary Helen shared the experience with the group. She explained how she picked the book for one girl, Keza, from Rwanda. She noted that Keza loved putting things in her hair. Each day she had something different in her hair. Sometimes it was beads, other times it was colorful clips, and there was even one day when she had tiny ribbons tied around the end of each braid. Mary Helen chose the book, *I Love My Hair* by Natasha Tarpley. The cover picture shows an African American girl with braids that looked almost exact like the student's hair. Mary Helen said that she knew that the student would love the book, but was not ready for what happened. In her journal, Mary Helen captured the experience:

When I handed it to her the next day in class after we had explained the exercise, she just kind of looked at it the front cover. After I had passed out the other books, I came back, and she was still looking at it. I assumed she just had not understood the directions, and so I knelt down beside her and asked if she needed help. She shook her head. I asked if she was ok. She started turning some of the pages in the book, then looked at me and said, "They have books like this?" She had never seen or read a book that had a little girl in it that looked like her. We read that book together and she loved it. She pointed out all of the parts that reminded her of herself, and then wrote a sentence about how the little girl in the book had hair just like hers.

When Mary Helen shared this from her journal with the preservice teachers in her class, there was silence in the room and many tears. She went on to draw a very important conclusion. She noted, "This was a very touching experience, but it also proved to me how important it is to choose items for teaching and to teach in such a way that is diversified. One book made a world of difference to this child, and it is incredible to think about what one year could do if you were that child's teacher."

This experience confirmed what the preservice teachers had

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been learning in class about choosing culturally relevant texts in a meaningful way. Furthermore, the connection between knowing your students and knowing the literature was an important understanding that was provided by the experience. In addition, the sharing of experiences in group discussion allowed for shared learning that could follow them into their student teaching experience and future practice.

### **“*Girl in Translation* Gave Me an Experience to Pull From.”**

Not only did texts provide connections between the preservice teachers and the ELL students, they provided a scaffold for the preservice teachers to develop more understanding about CLD students and the diverse situations that are part of their life. As a class assignment, the students read *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok and engaged in literature circles. The book chronicles the story of a ten-year-old girl, Kimberly, and her mother who move to New York City from Hong Kong. The story follows Kimberly from her first day in a U.S. public school with a not-so-culturally relevant teacher to Kimberly's becoming a doctor and assimilating into the American culture. Kwok gives Kimberly a strong, personal voice that draws the students into her life. The connections from the preservice teachers' engagement with the book were varied. Ally, one of the preservice teachers, noted that she had a lack of knowledge about immigrants and the difficulties than they face. She said, “Because of this lack of knowledge I was culturally insensitive, but after reading *Girl In Translation*, I suddenly had an experience to pull from, Kimberly's experience.” She continued to reflect that “if it were not for *Girl In Translation*, I would not be able to see my students this way, and I would not be able to provide the support that I know they so desperately yearn for.”

The preservice teachers noted that the text provided opportunities for them to see the importance of the teacher through the eyes of the students, a place that they can never be. Mary Helen added, “Reading this book really humbled me as I was able to see a child persevere through something I have a hard time even imaging and succeed.” She capsulated the idea saying, “Reading *Girl In*

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*Translation* and then reading our class text and learning about the language levels really made the learning more meaningful as I was able to connect the aspects to an actual student who I had read all about.” The text provided the scaffolding the preservice teachers needed to make the information they were learning meaningful. The use of a mentor text provided the important structure that the preservice teachers needed to use as they approach their interactions with CLD students.

### Implications

The findings from the study points to several implications for teacher preparation programs to prepare preservice teachers for their future teaching practice. These implications include the need for teacher preparation programs to provide meaningful experiences with students of diverse backgrounds and the inherent educational value found in the use of culturally relevant literature.

With the fact that there is a mismatch between the cultures of the majority of the next generation of teachers and their students, preservice teachers need to have first-hand knowledge and experience with CLD students. The four-day experience of immersion into a different culture provided multiple experiences. These experiences can be within the community of the university or in nearby settings. Having professors with experience teaching or living in diverse situations offers the opportunities for students to debrief about their new learning and feelings. An example of this was when the students during the class time discussed the need for developing relationships with the families and community where they teach to develop credibility. Later that day, the students were able to see it in action when a community member protected the professor’s van because “You bring food to our kids. I got your back.” This type of experience provided the teachable moment that the classroom could not provide.

Programs that are not able to incorporate these types of experiences can look to texts to provide a scaffold for the preservice teachers to understand the concepts presented in the classroom. Jean Kwok’s *Girl in Translation* was chosen for this university’s

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ELL course with purposeful intention because it related the events of a young girl from Hong Kong—not a Spanish speaking country. This enabled the preservice teachers to expand on the expressed concept that they immediately thought an ELL's native language was Spanish. In reality the ELLs in the area of the university are diverse with more than 12 different languages in one summer school class. The literacy circles provided opportunities for the preservice teachers to share their current thoughts on CLD students and conditions. Ally commented that she had gone to Kwok's website to see when this book was set. She said, "I thought this was written about Kimberly in the early 1900s, but no, the time was much more current like in the 1990s." Providing texts that help students develop empathy with the story of ELLs can provide opportunities for connection between preservice teachers and CLD students.

A second implication of this study was the importance of providing multicultural texts for CLD students. The comment "They really make things like this?" is powerful support for the comment of Christopher Myer (2014) that there is an apartheid in children's literature. With the limited number of quality culturally relevant texts, teachers and preservice teachers must carefully evaluate available texts and choose wisely. There are several tools available for helping preservice teachers make good decisions about texts for CLD students. Lu (1998) studied the importance of multicultural books and how to evaluate these texts. She argues that a good book for children can transcend time, space, and language. She continues to count the benefits of multicultural literature to include the opportunities to see how others grow, see how there are similarities between themselves and others, develop strategies to cope with challenges, and to help them identify themselves with their own culture. This study expands on Lu's thoughts to include the power of multicultural texts for preservice teachers to learn to relate to other cultures and for CLDs to connect with texts and their new culture. Simply seeing children in their texts that "look like them" makes connections possible. Based on these concepts, Lu (1998) provides several characteristics that should be used

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when determining the quality of multi-cultural texts. Lu's qualifiers include:

1. Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group.
2. Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, since illustrations can have a strong impact on children.
3. Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as reflect the changing nature of this country's population.
4. Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America.
5. High literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization.
6. Historical accuracy when appropriate.
7. Reflections of the cultural values of the characters.

These criteria provide a precise tool for helping preservice teachers choose multicultural books for their classroom.

Another tool that can provide preservice teachers with a guide for choosing appropriate multi-cultural books comes from the work of Freeman and Freeman (2004). Their work asserts that culturally relevant literature can be the bridge between CLD students and the negotiating of their identity. Providing CLD students with opportunities to read texts that they can relate to is ultimate to providing opportunities for students to learn and develop. Cummins (2000) points out "that schools are places where students negotiate identities. Schools can either affirm or deny those identities" (p. 8). This affirmation or denial can be found in texts. One example of the power of culturally relevant texts from Freeman and Freeman's work is the story of Francisco, an immigrant from San Salvador. Francisco said, "That was the first book I ever read from the beginning to the end. It was amazing. I kept reliving my own experiences." (2004, p. 7). The similar experience in this study when the student expressed that it was the first time that she had seen anyone like her in a book provides more evidence to the importance for using culturally relevant texts. When provided with culturally

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relevant texts, the students more fully understand and they are more engaged in their reading resulting in more reading. To help students and teachers choose meaningful texts, Freeman (2000) identified a set of questions that teachers or students can use when making their choices. These questions include:

- Are the characters in the story like you and your family?
- Have you ever had an experience like the one described in this story?
- Have you lived in or visited places like those in the story?
- Could this story take place this year?
- How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?
- Are the main characters in the story boys or girls?
- Do the characters talk like you and your family do?
- How often do you read stories like this? (Freeman & Freeman, 2004, p. 9-10)

Freeman and Freeman (2004) have taken these questions and placed them on a Likert scale for students to use. Using these questions with their students in mind teachers and preservice teachers can provide meaningful texts for their students.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study described the importance of helping preservice teachers prepare to teach in diverse learning environments. Realizing that there is a mismatch between the university's preservice teachers and the children they will teach, the university implemented a course to help provide real life experiences to develop more cultural awareness. The program took the theory taught in the classroom and transformed it into practical learning. This program formed a framework to enhance preservice teachers' cultural experiences and therefore inform their culturally relevant pedagogy. Caitlyn, a preservice teacher, shared her feelings about the experiences. She said, "At first I was very uncomfortable... It is easy to live in your own little bubble and forget all of the people around you who are living life so differently from you. This experience caused me to rethink the way I see things. I gained a perspective that will help me be a more effective and compassionate

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teacher.” Another student, Becky, simply said “The concrete experiences made what we are learning in class real to me.” Through the real life experiences, using a mentor text, and working with ELLs and multicultural books the preservice teachers moved from reading about being culturally relevant to “just doing it.”

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