

# The Permutations of Multicultural Literature as a Tool for Teacher Preparation

## A Systematic Review of the Literature

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### Introduction

The economic, technological, and social effects of the contemporary globalization era have spurred new challenges in education and teacher preparation. As the tapestry of American society shifts and technology rapidly evolves, teachers and teacher educators are finding themselves faced with the pressing need to prepare students for a more tolerant and globally diverse society. Methods for increasing preservice teachers' (PSTs') awareness of—and preparation for—these issues in their classrooms have yet to be widely researched or established in the field (Gorski, 2009). However, a gradual increase in literature related to *multicultural education* and *multicultural teacher education* has emerged in recent years, suggesting this reform movement is gaining more attention in the United States as this era progresses.

Since the conceptual paradigm for a “new multicultural teacher education” has yet to be widely accepted by the field, multicultural education and multicultural teacher education strategies vary significantly across the country (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2003, p. 964). After examining 45 syllabi from multicultural education courses at

institutions of higher education across the United States, Gorski (2009) found a wide spectrum of instructional approaches employed by teacher educators. This signifies a need for further research into the effects of these various approaches in addition to the specific practices that incorporate multicultural education topics in teacher preparation programs. The systematic review presented here seeks to broaden the field's knowledge of multicultural teacher education by exploring one specific multicultural education practice: the employment of multicultural literature in teacher education courses.

### Definition of Terms

In an effort to clearly communicate the issues presented in this systematic review of research, three seemingly nebulous terms are defined for the contexts of this article: *multicultural education*, *multicultural literature*, and *multicultural teacher education*.

There are various perceptions of multicultural education in the field; however, education scholars tend to agree that multicultural education is comprehensive, an education that is beneficial for all students, and politically necessary to ensure social justice for all (Gorski, 2009). According to Banks (1999), a preeminent scholar in the field of multicultural education, “multicultural education is needed to help all of the nation's future citizens to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to survive in the twenty-first century” (p. 34).

In this article, *multicultural literature* is defined as literature that “provides a window to ethnic and global cultures through in-depth inquiries into a particular culture and the integration of multiple cultural perspectives into every classroom study” (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short, 2011, p. 215). Multicultural (and urban) literature typically feature people from “traditionally marginalized and minoritized communities” as main characters or protagonists (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Finally, multicultural teacher education is simply viewed as the preparation of teachers to become effective and equitable educators, requiring lessons intentionally designed to address diversity awareness, cultural competency, and critical issues related to power and privilege.

### Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Education

The majority of PSTs in the U.S. are categorized as European American (White) and female. One of today's greatest challenges in teacher education, and a goal of multicultural teacher education, is expanding PSTs' cultural competences to effectively teach today's students, who are increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse (Gay, 2010). This can be a challenging endeavor for teacher educators whose students have minimal experience critically analyzing their own attitudes toward diversity. Guiding students in self-evaluation exercises on controversial and personal

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topics requires strong faculty–student relationships and a learning environment built on trust. Even so, Gay cautioned teacher educators to prepare for PSTs who will superficially engage in self-reflection and others who may dismiss the exercise entirely.

For these reasons, a great deal of research has investigated the attitudes and development of multicultural knowledge of PSTs (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). According to Gay (2010), “[an] important need in preparing teachers for cultural diversity is understanding how beliefs about race, class, culture, ethnicity, and experience affect instructional behaviors” (p. 147). Multicultural literature has been identified in previous research as a tool for developing these understandings of power and privilege and preparing PSTs to be more culturally competent, moving them away from harboring culturally deficit perspectives of others (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

### Multicultural Literature

The increasing diversity in today’s schools is concurrently promoting a greater need for teaching cultural tolerance and social justice. Additionally, students from culturally and linguistically underrepresented groups become more interested and engaged in reading when offered texts that reflect their culture (Lawrence, 2017). As a result, multicultural literature, or culturally responsive text, is becoming a more prominent fixture in contemporary education environments (Lawrence, 2017; Malcolm & Lowery, 2011).

Multicultural literature provides windows into other cultures different from one’s own and opens dialogue for issues related to diversity, which are critical components for teaching in a pluralistic society (Colby & Lyon, 2004). For multicultural literature to become an integral part of the classroom, however, teachers must be made aware of the value of such texts and supported in selecting them for their students.

Previous research suggested a critical need for PSTs to increase their awareness of multicultural literature (Brinson, 2012). According to Brinson’s study, PSTs generally have a limited awareness of literature featuring characters from African American, Asian

American, Latino American, and Native American heritages. Gay (2010), a distinguished scholar in the field, specifically incorporates multicultural children’s picture books in her courses for PSTs to examine their own feelings about using similar texts in classroom instruction with students from various ethnic backgrounds.

If PSTs are not intentionally exposed to the power of multicultural literature, they may never realize the adversity it creates for students of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups when their access to appropriate and culturally diverse books and materials is restricted (Colby & Lyon, 2004).

The purpose of this literature review is to identify common themes in the employment of multicultural literature as a tool for preparing teachers to implement multicultural education in their own professional practices. The research question driving this systematic review of literature is, *In what ways is multicultural literature being utilized in teacher preparation programs?*

### Method

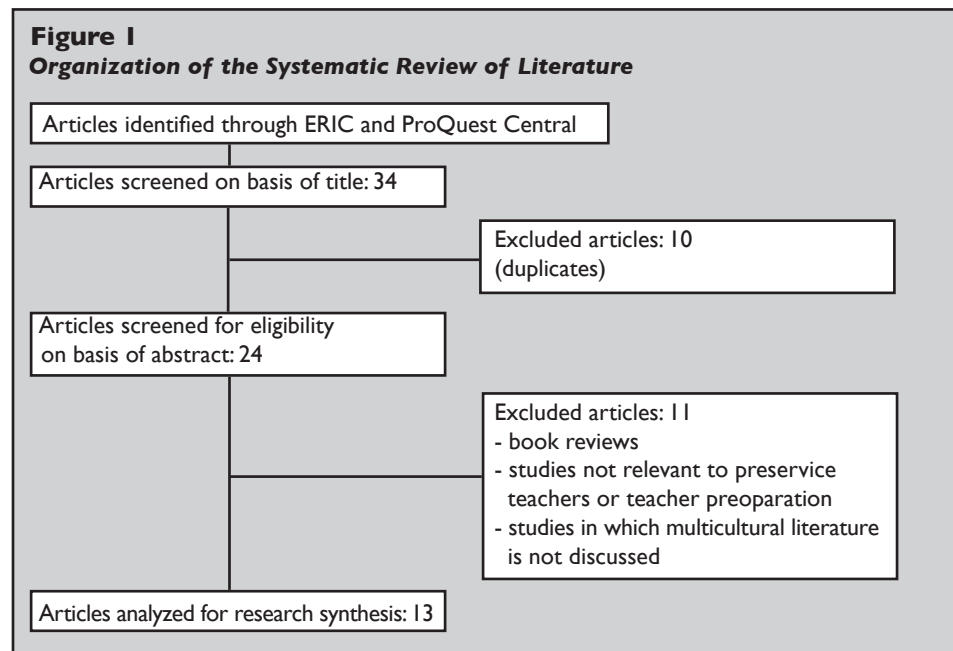
After the purpose of this research was established, a systematic review of literature began by selecting search databases and identifying the key terms that would be used as searchable keywords. Two predominant databases in the field of education (ERIC and

ProQuest Central) were systematically searched using similar search strategies. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles written in English and published during a 20-year time span, from 1999 to 2019.

Initially, this review was focused on multicultural literature used in elementary teacher preparation; however, upon the primary search, it was determined that an insufficient number of studies had been published on this topic in elementary grades. Therefore the criteria for the search expanded to undergraduate teacher preparation of all education levels.

Journal abstract search terms were used to locate journal articles on teacher preparation programs and multicultural children’s literature. Separated by the Boolean term “AND,” the search terms were as follows: “preservice teachers” OR “teacher preparation” OR “teacher candidates” OR “teacher education” and “multicultural children’s literature” OR “multicultural children’s books” OR “multicultural literature.”

The research flowchart illustrated in Figure 1, adapted from Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, and Benbenishty (2017), illustrates the organization of how articles were included in the research. Thirty-four articles were originally located in the ERIC and ProQuest Central databases. Of those 34 articles, 10 were duplicates and were excluded from further analysis. A spreadsheet



was used to organize the remaining 24 articles, whose abstracts were screened for eligibility based on two criteria: the participants (PSTs or undergraduate students enrolled in a preservice teacher program) and the explicit use of multicultural literature in teacher preparation. Studies containing both empirical and anecdotal evidence were included in the review to glean information from the greatest sample of literature on this increasingly important topic in the field of education.

### Findings

The use of multicultural literature in teacher preparation programs is a relatively new phenomenon. Colby and Lyon (2004) were the first to report their use of multicultural literature in a teacher preparation program. Twelve other peer-reviewed studies have been added to the corpus of literature since then, signifying an increasing trend in multicultural teacher education. (Summaries of the relevant findings in each study are included in the Appendix.)

This synthesized review of literature reveals a range of methods utilizing multicultural literature in teacher education programs. Three themes emerged as a result: reading and responding to multicultural children's and young adolescent (YA) literature, incorporating multicultural literature in clinical assignments and service-learning projects, and multicultural literature authorship.

### Reading and Responding to Multicultural Literature

Across many teacher education courses—including elementary methods, middle grades methods, secondary English methods, children's literature courses, and graduate teacher education courses—the multicultural teacher education strategy most commonly encountered is the “reading-and-response” of multicultural literature. Although the specificity in the assignment details varied, each of the following studies highlighted PSTs' encounters with specific multicultural children's books and YA literature in teacher preparation courses (Gibson & Parks, 2014; Glenn, 2015; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005; Jiménez, 2014; Lowery & Sabis-Burns, 2007;

Szecsí, Spillman, Vázquez-Montilla, & Mayberry, 2010).

To begin, we review Jetton and Savage-Davis's (2005) study, which was conducted in a middle grades teacher education course. It explicitly detailed PSTs' exploration of issues related to multicultural education and diversity by reading and responding to multicultural YA literature. While reading a novel, which was randomly assigned to them, the PSTs were encouraged to empathize with the main characters to critically examine the issues of diversity that the characters faced. They were required to free-write about their feelings and views of the characters. Next, in peer reading groups, the PSTs shared their interpretations, personal reflections, and reading experiences. To conclude this lesson, PSTs planned a presentation of their novel to the whole class, including a synopsis and an overview of the issues of diversity in the novel. In conclusion, the PSTs “understood that multicultural literature, like the more Eurocentric literature that they studied in school, conveys a powerful and compelling story that enables the reader to enter and experience another world” (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005, p. 34).

Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) examined the experiences of preservice English teachers while reading urban and multicultural fiction in a graduate course on adolescent literature. The books selected for the multicultural literature reading exercise were intentionally selected to stress the importance of teachers having an understanding of the kinds of texts that their students might be reading. During the course, the teacher educators used the books to launch critical dialogue on issues related to race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic class with the intention of altering PSTs' perceptions about students with culturally different backgrounds. Students participated in online blog discussions while reading and in small group discussions, and they completed several critical reflective activities to support their critical thinking of the texts. By offering various modalities in which they could share their thinking, the teacher educators increased PSTs' opportunities to access a critical dialogue on the difficult or uncomfortable issues presented in the texts.

In a few studies, multicultural literature was part of a larger project that spanned multiple courses (Byker, Good, Miller, & Kissel, 2018; Gibson & Parks, 2014; Szecsí et al., 2010). In the study conducted by Szecsí et al. (2010), multicultural literature was utilized in a culminating project in two teacher preparation courses related to second language acquisition, culture, and family and school relationships. PSTs participated in an in-depth exploration of concepts about the diverse cultures encountered in multicultural literature at three different levels: young children, teenagers, and adults. They journaled as they read the texts and wrote a reflection paper at the end. Their reflections revealed an increased awareness of the cultural elements that can impact learning in their future classrooms. Their understanding of multiculturalism, according to the authors, went beyond the surface level as the PSTs “seemed to internalize the information from the books at various levels, linking it to their future profession” (p. 47).

Like the study by Szecsí et al. (2010), Gibson and Parks's (2014) study was also unique, as it studied PSTs across *three* undergraduate teacher preparation courses: Literature for Children, Multicultural Education, and Multicultural Education Materials. Multicultural literature was gradually introduced in a sequence of lessons throughout these undergraduate teacher education courses, which reviewed topics such as the criteria for selecting quality literature and selecting multicultural books that are relevant to their students and reflect cultural diversity. Upon completion of these three courses, PSTs' reflections revealed three key conclusions: an increased awareness for acknowledging culture in their future classrooms, an increased appreciation for selecting high-quality multicultural literature, and an awareness of the challenges associated with establishing a socially just curriculum.

Multicultural literature was also identified as a tool for multicultural teacher education in the study conducted by Jiménez (2014). While this study did not focus on multicultural literature as a tool, the author shared practices employed in a multicultural literature elective course in a teacher

education program. During the course on multicultural literature, PSTs were acquainted with a diverse perspective of the world by sampling literature featuring underrepresented races, ethnicities, and cultures. The author noted that the books selected for the course on multicultural literature intentionally reflected a multitude of races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations. However, unlike the findings presented in other studies (Gibson & Parks, 2014; Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005; Szecsi et al., 2010), Jiménez noted that her PSTs' reading responses reflected a resistance to understanding literature outside of the Eurocentric, heteronormative perspective that reflected their own lives. This is significant because it aligns more closely to the evidence in the field that suggests many PSTs are resistant to engaging in controversial or political topics (and texts) related to diversity, power, and privilege (Gibson & Parks, 2014; Glover & Stover, 2011).

### Scholarly Readings

In some studies multicultural literature was the main focus of the lesson(s); however, multicultural texts were not the main vehicle of instruction. For example, in the study conducted by Colby and Lyon (2004), PSTs read a scholarly article titled "African American Children's Literature That Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grades K-3" (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Then, they were presented with high-quality books with African American contexts and reflected on the importance of selecting books reflective of their students' cultures.

Assignments requiring PSTs to read scholarly texts about multicultural literature were found in two additional studies. In one article (Casciola, 2014), the instructor of a children's literature course engaged PSTs in a discussion about critical literacy by assigning a series of scholarly readings on multicultural literature. Then, PSTs reflected on the use of multicultural literature in an online discussion board. While this mode of instructional delivery in multicultural teacher education seems simplistic, PSTs' reflections revealed a new appreciation for multicultural literature in the classroom and the importance

of exploring multiple perspectives and viewpoints with elementary students. Furthermore, the PSTs "realized the significance of approaching children's literature with a critical lens" (Casciola, 2014, p. 86).

In a study conducted by Glenn (2015), preservice English teachers were immersed in activities designed to increase and apply knowledge of two unfamiliar ethnic literary traditions. First, PSTs read and reflected on two articles to increase their understanding of Latinx and African American literature: "Art, Activism, and Community: An Introduction to Latina/o Literature" (González, 2009) and "Way Down in the Jungle Deep, the Lion Stepped on the Monkey's Feet': An Introduction to African American Literature" (Atkinson, 2009). This lesson went one step further, however, as the students then developed a series of lesson plans for their choice of a multicultural YA novel: *We Were Here* (de la Peña, 2009) or *After Tupac and D Foster* (Woodson, 2008).

### Clinical and Service-Learning Assignments

Two of the studies in this review discussed the utilization of multicultural literature in PSTs' clinical assignments, while a third study specifically addressed multicultural literature as a tool for service learning. Lowery and Sabis-Burns (2007) studied a children's literature course that had received an increased emphasis on multicultural literature to increase PSTs' understanding of diversity cultural awareness. One of the assignments of this course required PSTs to read multicultural novels and picture books and develop reader response literature circles in a low-income school of ethnically and racially underrepresented students. The PSTs then reflected on how much they had learned throughout the semester as they investigated their own and other cultures in the U.S.

In Lawrence's (2017) study, multicultural literature was utilized in three PSTs' capstone experiences in an urban teacher preparation program. During their student teaching assignments, PSTs working with culturally and linguistically underrepresented students employed action research to create

standards-aligned lessons that employed multicultural literature to increase their students' access to diverse and culturally relevant texts.

Similar to clinical observations and practice in teacher education, service learning provides authentic opportunities to link academic coursework with community-based service. According to Wright, Calabrese, and Henry (2009), service learning creates opportunities through which students can construct more meaningful and relevant experiences. In their study, PSTs were assigned a service-learning project in which they read age-appropriate multicultural books to young children in culturally diverse inner-city schools and facilitated a classroom activity based on the reading. PSTs engaged in a self-reflection activity in class following the project to increase their awareness of diversity and multicultural education.

### Multicultural Literature Authorship

A third and final thematic strategy identified for increasing PSTs' awareness of multicultural texts and issues related to diversity is multicultural literature authorship. Two studies in this synthesized review employed this strategy in teacher education programs. Wyatt's (2017) study was the first to provide insight into using an authorship activity to increase cultural responsiveness in a teacher education program. As part of this assignment in a teacher education program in Hawai'i, PSTs were required to write a children's story that was meaningful and reflective of the lived experiences of the Hawaiian children in their clinical observations. As a part of this assignment, the PSTs conducted ethnographic research of the students whom they taught, thus gaining more cultural awareness of the diversity among the island.

Byker et al.'s (2018) study investigated a multicultural children's literature text project assigned across two elementary methods courses (social studies and literacy) to increase PSTs' knowledge of cultural diversity and equip them with "a greater awareness of the creation and inclusion of multicultural texts in their future teaching practice" (p. 24). According to the authors, this project also prepared PSTs to integrate content from

different subject areas in a multicultural lens through the creative authorship of children's literature.

### Discussion

Teaching courses on sensitive topics like cultural diversity, the identification of racist or heteronormative opinions and behaviors, and multicultural awareness to predominantly White females is as challenging as it is necessary in the era of contemporary globalization. Since PSTs traditionally lack experiences of interacting with people of diverse cultures, multicultural teacher education is necessary to improve their future relationships with diverse students (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005). As demonstrated, multicultural literature is one tool that has created an entryway for teacher educators to embark upon sensitive multicultural lessons with their students.

Although multicultural literature has been successfully employed in the past, a tendency to resist authentic classroom conversations about books steeped in controversial issues such as racism and prejudice still exists (Gibson & Parks, 2014). Resistance to controversial texts may reveal an unconscious acceptance of the deep-rooted hegemonic societal beliefs that have prevented PSTs from previously engaging in thought-provoking and challenging discussions (Glover & Stover, 2011). However, PSTs need to be made aware that the American tapestry is changing and their role in acknowledging such change is needed in a socially just education system. According to Newling (2001),

certainly the White experience is part of the fabric of society and deserves to be in the patchwork quilt, but it is no longer the whole cloth. . . . How adept the nation's students become at dealing with difference and interacting with other human beings who do not look, speak, or act like them is an assignment that can be made or broken in the classroom. It is a task that can succeed or fail, depending on what passes in school for multicultural literature and education or the absence thereof. (p. 10)

Researchers, such as Jiménez

(2014), involved in the instruction of multicultural teacher education have documented numerous firsthand accounts of PSTs' resistance to multicultural literature in teacher preparation courses. Yet research has suggested that discussions of multicultural literature have strong potential in transforming teacher education practices (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Therefore the authors posited that it is an ideal moment in time to share the most successful strategies employing multicultural literature to improve multicultural teacher education far and wide.

It should be noted that the list of studies included in this review is not exhaustive, thus contributing to a primary limitation of this review of literature. Although they were not included in the systematic literature searches, other studies potentially fitting the scope of this research were identified during the synthesis of literature. Therefore future reviews of this topic are warranted using different search parameters, including key terms and databases.

Furthermore, this study was focused on the instructional practices in teacher preparation courses and did not synthesize the impact of multicultural literature on PSTs' multicultural education. I believe that additional research is needed to identify the impact of multicultural teacher education instructional practices on PSTs' development of diversity awareness, cultural competency, and understanding of critical issues related to power and privilege.

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#### Appendix Summary of Multicultural Literature Use by Author

Authors	Year	Use of multicultural literature in teacher preparation
Byker, Good, Miller, and Kissel	2018	A multicultural children's literature authorship project was employed in elementary literacy methods and elementary social studies methods courses. Teacher candidates investigated the features of multiple genres of texts to write their own children's literature books with multicultural themes over the course of a semester.
Casciola	2014	The instructor addressed the topic of multicultural literature in a children's literature course by assigning scholarly readings related to critical literacy, including a chapter on multicultural literature in Charlotte Huck's <i>Children's Literature</i> (Kiefer, 2010). Preservice teachers then reflected on the use of multicultural literature in an online discussion board.
Colby and Lyon	2004	Preservice teachers enrolled in an elementary language arts methods course were asked to reflect on an article by Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001): "African American Children's Literature That Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grades K–3." In summary, this article discusses the "importance of children relating to characters and situations found in books reflective of their own culture" (p. 24).
Gibson and Parks	2014	Multicultural literature was gradually introduced in a sequence of undergraduate teacher education courses: <i>Literature for Children</i> , <i>Multicultural Education</i> , and <i>Multicultural Education Materials</i> . The instructors placed emphasis on the criteria for selecting quality literature, guiding students in an intentional practice of selecting multicultural books that are relevant to their students and that reflect cultural diversity. Scaffolded instruction in multicultural lesson planning was then implemented to create lessons with multicultural books.
Glenn	2015	Multiple assignments in an English methods course were designed to increase multicultural literature awareness. First, they read and reflected on "Art, Activism, and Community: An Introduction to Latina/o Literature" (González, 2009) and "Way Down in the Jungle Deep, the Lion Stepped on the Monkey's Feet": An Introduction to African American Literature" (Atkinson, 2009). Then, the students developed a series of lesson plans for their choice of multicultural YA novels: <i>We Were Here</i> (de la Peña, 2009) or <i>After Tupac and D Foster</i> (Woodson, 2008).

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## Appendix

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<i>Authors</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Use of multicultural literature in teacher preparation</i>
Haddix and Price-Dennis	2013	To prepare middle- and secondary-level English PSTs, multicultural and urban children's and YA literature were read and discussed. The literature selected dealt with diverse, urban, and multicultural perspectives, which served as "entryways for preservice teachers to problematize situations they are likely to encounter in their own classrooms or field placements" (p. 254). PSTs read five texts that would fall under the category of urban YA fiction and then participated in online discussion boards about the readings as well as critical reflective activities about the texts.
Jetton and Savage-Davis	2005	PSTs explored issues of multicultural education and diversity by reading preselected high-quality multicultural YA literature in a middle-education teacher education course. PSTs examined the issues of adversity and prejudice facing the fictional characters in the novel. Through written reflections, literature circles, and book presentations with peer groups, the PSTs engaged in multiple discussions on the issues of diversity.
Jiménez	2014	A multicultural literature course, designed to promote the reading—and developing appreciation for—the diversity of experiences presented in multicultural literature, acquainted students with a sampling of literature about underrepresented races, ethnicities, and cultures. The books selected for this course reflected a multitude of races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations.
Lawrence	2017	Multicultural literature was used as part of three student teachers' capstone experiences in an urban teacher preparation program. During their student teaching assignments, PSTs working with culturally and linguistically underrepresented students employed action research to create standards-aligned lessons that employed multicultural literature to increase their students' access to diverse and culturally relevant texts.
Lowery and Sabis-Burns	2007	An increased emphasis was placed on multicultural literature in a children's literature course. Assignments related to multicultural literature included self-inventories of PSTs' cultural backgrounds, research of other cultures, reading multicultural novels and picture books, and a field component to develop reader response literature circles in a low-income school of ethnically and racially underrepresented students.
Szecsí, Spillman, Vázquez-Montilla, and Mayberry	2010	A multicultural literature project was employed in two teacher preparation courses related to second language acquisition, culture, and family and school relationships. PSTs participated in an in-depth exploration of concepts about diverse cultures in multicultural literature at three different levels: young children, teenagers, and adults. They journaled as they read the texts and wrote a culminating reflection paper at the end.
Wright, Calabrese, and Henry	2009	PSTs were assigned a service-learning project in which they read age-appropriate multicultural books to children in culturally diverse inner-city schools and facilitated a classroom activity based on the reading. PSTs engaged in a self-reflection activity in class following the project.
Wyatt	2017	As part of a cultural responsiveness component of a teacher education program in Hawai'i, PSTs were required to author a children's story that was meaningful and reflective of the lived experiences of Hawai'i's children. PSTs were encouraged to write their stories using notes from clinical observations and their students as fictional audience members.

Note. PST = preservice teacher. YA = young adult.