

Diversity in Literacy Education:



How Are Literacy Teacher Educators Preparing Teacher Candidates?

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Abstract

K-12 classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse. In order to address the literacy learning needs among all students more effectively, literacy teachers must be sufficiently prepared to address diversity in literacy education. This study explored current preparation practices among literacy teacher educators in one state located in the Southern United States and used sociocultural theories as a lens to better understand reported practice. Qualitative data were collected from 57 responses provided to an open-ended question included on an electronically disseminated survey. Data were analyzed with coding and constant comparison techniques, which resulted in three major themes: coursework, authentic contexts, and resource materials. Findings emphasized a strong need for literacy teacher educators to examine

and evaluate their current preparation practices and identify ways to strengthen them to address multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy more explicitly. Limitations for this study were addressed, along with recommendations for future studies.

Introduction

Researchers have examined the extent to which teacher preparation programs prepare teacher candidates with the necessary skills to teach literacy (Binks-Cantrell, Washburn, Joshi, & Hougen, 2012; Clark, Jones, Reutzler, & Andreasen, 2013; Hoffman et al., 2005; Moats, 1994; Salinger et al., 2010; Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011). In order to teach literacy in the pre-K-12th grade levels effectively, classroom teachers must have experienced high-quality literacy teacher preparation (Hollins, 2017). To address this notion, the International Literacy Association

(ILA) established criteria in the form of professional standards that delineate the dispositions, knowledge, and skills required among literacy practitioners (ILA, 2017b; International Reading Association [IRA], 2010). These professional standards address the multiple facets of literacy and provide teacher preparation programs with an evidence-based guide for high-quality literacy teacher preparation.

A specific area that has been at the forefront of ILA's mission is ensuring that classroom teachers are prepared to implement literacy practices that are "culturally sustaining and academically rigorous" (ILA, 2017a, p. 2). To that end, ILA has also emphasized the value of diversity within its professional standards (see Table 1). Attending to diversity in literacy education during teacher preparation is of utmost importance because classroom teachers must know how to select and use a variety of instructional tools and strategies to teach increasingly diverse student populations well (Algozzine, O'Shea, & Obiakor, 2009; Bennett, Alberton Gunn, Gayle-Evans, Barrera, & Leung, 2018; Collins, 2006; Nichols, Rupley, Webb-Johnson, Tlusty, 2000).

Table 1
Standard 4: Diversity

<i>Standards for Reading Professionals— Revised 2010 (IRA, 2010)</i>	<i>Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017 (ILA, 2017)</i>
Candidates create and engage their students in literacy practices that develop awareness, understanding, respect, and a value of differences in our society.	Candidates demonstrate knowledge of research, relevant theories, pedagogies, essential concepts of diversity and equity; demonstrate and provide opportunities for understanding all forms of diversity as central to students' identities; create classrooms and schools that are inclusive and affirming; advocate for equity at school, district, and community levels.

During the past ten years, research findings have shown that the nation's teaching force fails to reflect the cultural diversity represented among students (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; King, McIntosh, & Bell-Ellwanger, 2016). Considering that the majority of classroom teachers and teacher candidates are White, middle-class, female monolingual English speakers who have had few substantive experiences with culturally diverse students, it is evident that many future and practicing classroom teachers do not share the same cultural backgrounds, experiences, and values of their students (Kahn, Lindstrom, & Murray, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Wood, 2009; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Moreover, as novice teachers enter the classroom, they are too often provided with scripted, standardized, and uniform curricula that promote "sameness," rather than "equity" (Timberlake, Burns Thomas, & Barrett, 2017, p. 50). Thus, classroom teachers are not afforded opportunities to develop an appreciation for cultural differences represented in their classrooms or learn how to affirm these differences through pedagogical practices. This phenomenon is quite alarming as "culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process" (Gay, 2002, p. 114). Along with cultural differences between teachers and students, research has also illustrated long-standing literacy achievement gaps between students by ethnicity, gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Potter & Morris, 2017; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012).

Howard (2003) acknowledged that teacher educators must consider ways to prepare teacher candidates more meaningfully to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. Howard asserted that teacher candidates "must critically analyze important issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture, and recognize how these important concepts shape the learning experience for many students" (p. 195). With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore current preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates.

Review of the Literature

ILA identified professional standards to address the knowledge and skills necessary for literacy

education (ILA, 2017b; IRA, 2010). At the time of this study, ILA's standards included the following six areas: (1) Foundational Knowledge, (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Assessment and Evaluation, (4) Diversity, (5) Literate Environment, and (6) Professional Learning and Leadership (IRA, 2010). Literacy is the foundation for all learning, and ILA's standards identified specialized knowledge for administrators, classroom teachers (i.e., pre-kindergarten through elementary teachers, middle and high school content teachers, middle and high school reading teachers), education support personnel, specialized literacy professionals, and teacher educators.

The focus of this study was the extent to which literacy teacher educators prepare teacher candidates as culturally responsive classroom teachers who skillfully address diversity in literacy education within the context of today's classrooms. As classrooms become increasingly more diverse, classroom teachers are faced with meeting a wide range of student learning needs (Nichols et al., 2000). Thus, teacher preparation programs must offer carefully structured and well-designed learning experiences that prepare teacher candidates to teach culturally diverse students effectively (Kim, Turner, & Mason, 2015). The following review of literature provided an overview of key concepts that underpin diversity in literacy education and described challenges and recommendations for related teacher preparation practices.

Multicultural Education

In the early 2000's, the United States entered an era characterized by the largest influx of immigrants and a rising number of U.S.-born ethnic minorities (Banks, 2001; McFarland et al., 2017). Estimates have suggested that by the year 2050, African American, Asian American, and Latinx students will comprise nearly 57% of all students in K-12 classrooms (Day, 1996). With such cultural diversity represented, it is imperative that teacher candidates are well-prepared to teach students whose cultural backgrounds will, more often than not, be unlike their own (Clayton, 2011; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Therefore, teacher preparation programs must provide learning experiences that address multicultural education and prepare teacher candidates to work with culturally diverse students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Nieto, 2010; Nieto & Bode,

2012; Sleeter, 2001).

Multicultural education ensures educational equity among all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Banks, 1995). Multicultural education is concerned with social justice and aims to mitigate educational inequities by valuing and affirming diversity (Nieto, 2010). According to Banks (1995), multicultural education relates to the pedagogical strategies and techniques that classroom teachers use to (a) illustrate content-based understandings through representations of diverse culture groups; (b) help students recognize the knowledge-creation process and how it is influenced by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; (c) promote democratic attitudes and values towards race; (d) facilitate academic success among all students; and (e) restructure school systems to address diversity effectively.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is rooted in critical theory and refers to systems of actions and beliefs that are focused on social justice (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Critical pedagogy challenges inequitable, oppressive, and unjust practices and strives to transform them. According to Freire (1973), critical pedagogy requires the development of critical cultural consciousness, a process in which an individual uses critical thinking skills to examine their situation; develop deep understandings about the inequitable, oppressive, and unjust practices associated with their situation; and design, implement, and evaluate solutions to transmute social injustices. Despite the fact that classrooms are becoming more diverse, school curriculum materials are still heavily ensconced in European and European American cultural norms, experiences, and contributions (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Similarly, Nash (2018) and Pezzetti (2017) have recently brought to light a juxtaposition of explicit and implicit discourses about culturally diverse students among teacher candidates who are predominantly White, middle-class, female monolingual English speakers. Although teacher candidates from the Millennial and Post-Millennial generations have adopted discourses that "eschew racism and value diversity" (Pezzetti, 2017, p. 132), they continue to exhibit "problematic, persistent binary and deficit discourse" that hinders the adoption of critically-oriented pedagogies (Nash, 2018 p. 160).

For example, Nash (2018) emphasized the need for teacher educators to move teacher candidates beyond colorblind discourse (e.g., “I see students, not color”) and develop discourse practices to candidly talk about cultural differences with students.

In literacy education, critical literacy aligns with critical pedagogy and engages students who are marginalized in social action (Shor, 1999) to face, question, and challenge the status quo (Lee, 2011; Stevens & Bean, 2007). Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that teachers must transcend the teaching of basic literacy skills and focus instead on developing the knowledge and skills that promote students’ ability to critically examine historical and social concepts associated with ethnicity, gender, race, and socioeconomic class. Additionally, Lee (2016) clarified that critical literacy practices should be accessible to all students, invite students to critically analyze the social construction of power relationships, and empower students to be agents of social change.

Teacher Preparation Practices

According to Gay and Kirkland (2003), teacher educators encounter a number of obstacles that interfere with their preparation efforts related to diversity in literacy education. For example, teacher candidates often possess poor understandings about self-reflection and lack knowledge of how critical reflection has the potential to influence praxis. Additionally, teacher candidates have limited opportunities to engage with guided practice in self-reflection during enrollment in their teacher preparation programs. Moreover, teacher candidates tend to possess erroneous notions that teaching is “the mastery of technical components that are applicable to all teaching contexts and student populations,” rather than “a personal performance, a moral endeavor, and a cultural script” (p. 182). Gay and Kirkland also acknowledged that some teacher candidates intentionally avoid developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection skills by averting, avoiding, or abating the value of diversity-related topics.

Alismail (2016) asserted that teacher preparation programs must provide sufficient training that prepares teacher candidates to be “critical multiculturalists” who recognize “education as a way of addressing social inequalities shaped by differences in race, ethnicity,

and social class” (p. 144). Teacher preparation programs must employ transformative preparation practices that push teacher candidates to go beyond merely articulating what they learned about cultural diversity (Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah, & Ringlaben, 2016) and hold teacher candidates accountable for enacting what they learned as culturally responsive teachers (Nash, 2018). Similarly, Bartolomé (2004) contended that visiting, observing, and engaging with field experiences in diverse school settings in and of itself fails to provide teacher candidates with the “political and ideological clarity” needed to “instruct, protect, and advocate for their students” (p. 119). Instead, teacher candidates must be afforded frequent opportunities to examine, reflect, and engage in critical discourse regarding the relationship between ideology and power in educational practices, as well as with their own perceptual lenses (Bartolomé, 2004; Milner, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the concept of culturally relevant/responsive teaching as a theoretical lens to explore current teacher preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009). Gay (2000) defined culturally relevant/responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Teachers who use culturally relevant/responsive teaching practices consider the strengths of culturally diverse students and design instruction according to these strengths. By affirming and validating the cultural heritage of students (Gay, 2000, 2010), teachers make learning more accessible to all students (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

According to Gay (2000, 2010), culturally relevant/responsive teaching is a pedagogy that: (1) recognizes the legitimacy of cultural heritage and how culture affects learning; (2) establishes meaningful connections between home and school experiences; (3) draws from a repertoire of instructional strategies that address different learning styles; (4) instills the importance of knowing and respecting the cultural heritage of self and others; and (5) integrates

multicultural information, material, and resources seamlessly throughout the curriculum. Implementing a culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy is of great benefit for culturally diverse students and enhances their academic performance, cultural competence, interpersonal relationships, self-worth, and social consciousness (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b).

For the past 50 years, researchers have emphasized the importance of teacher preparation programs ensuring that teacher candidates are sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of culturally diverse students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). A common way teacher preparation programs have addressed this need is by integrating multicultural education components throughout their preparation program, such as in literacy coursework and field experiences (Dooley, 2008; Iwai, 2013; Kim et al., 2015). However, Ladson-Billings (1995b) cautioned against using “add on versions” of multicultural education components because they “exoticize diverse students as ‘other’” (p. 483). These understandings about culturally relevant/responsive teaching and teacher preparation provided us with a way to better understand current preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates.

Methodology

Context

This study was part of a larger cross-sectional study that we conducted in one state located in the Southern United States. The goal of our larger study was twofold: (1) to elicit ratings for how literacy teacher educators viewed teacher candidates’ preparedness with ILA’s professional standards for classroom teachers (IRA, 2010); and (2) to identify ways in which literacy teacher educators cultivated teacher candidates’ understandings with each of these professional standards. We designed an electronic survey instrument in Google Forms and conducted a pilot test among a group of 20 teacher educators in disciplines other than literacy to gain feedback and ensure appropriate functionality. After pilot testing concluded, we made a few minor edits with wording and disseminated the finalized survey instrument by email. We kept the survey period open for five months and sent monthly email reminders to

encourage participation.

Participants

In order to develop a participant pool of potential survey respondents, we created a database of literacy teacher educators by accessing publically-available information on the Internet. First, we accessed the state education agency’s website to obtain a listing of all state-approved, university-based teacher preparation programs. Next, we consulted each university’s website and searched for the names and email addresses of faculty members who teach literacy courses affiliated with the university’s teacher preparation program. Our efforts resulted in a participant pool of 457 individuals from 67 teacher preparation programs.

Data Collection and Analysis

When the survey period closed, we had collected 65 completed surveys. To achieve the purpose for this study, we retrieved relevant survey data that described preparation practices respondents used to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates. We held an initial meeting to review concepts related to culturally relevant/responsive teaching and establish a systematic way to manage the coding process (Fernald & Duclos, 2005). After the initial meeting, we uploaded data in Dedoose, a qualitative web application, and analyzed data collaboratively using two levels of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the first level, open coding was used to identify initial categories that appeared in the data. In the second level, axial coding was used to identify connections between categories. Throughout both levels of coding, we constantly compared data to refine categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and kept analytic memos to record reflections, thoughts, and understandings (Saldaña, 2016). During the coding process, we held regular meetings to debrief and discuss coding schemes until intercoder agreement was reached (Fernald & Duclos, 2005).

Findings

Among the 65 completed surveys received, 57 respondents described preparation practices they use to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates. Respondents included 52 females and five males who teach literacy coursework in university-based teacher preparation programs affiliated with private ($n = 21$) and public ($n = 36$) higher education

institutions. A total of 2,436 words were retrieved and analyzed, which generated three major themes: coursework, authentic contexts, and resource materials. A description of each theme, along with excerpts, is provided below.

Coursework

Respondents acknowledged the importance of addressing different types of diversity, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and race, through literacy coursework because many teacher candidates have limited understandings of diversity. One respondent explained that they begin every course with “a discussion about what makes up diversity.” This respondent further explained that the university’s close proximity to the United States-Mexico border often creates narrow understandings of diversity, as “many individuals merely think of language or ethnicity.” Broadening preconceptions about diversity among teacher candidates helped respondents support preparation program frameworks for “diversity, equity, anti-racist pedagogy, social justice work, and critical literacy.” One respondent asserted that their goal was for teacher candidates to understand that “culturally relevant teaching, social justice, and democratic classrooms” were not singular concepts for addressing diversity in literacy education, but instead were “a personal stance on how we walk through life.”

In addition to class discussions, respondents identified other coursework components that they use to address diversity in literacy education. These components included “critical literacy discussions,” “readings,” “examinations,” “presentations,” “reflections,” “lectures,” and assignments geared towards “how to validate and honor diversity in the classroom.” Respondents also disclosed that they use modeling to demonstrate instructional practices and create awareness among teacher candidates concerning cultural diversity. One respondent shared:

I am from a minority, specifically, Asian culture. I model for my [teacher candidates] the value of respect for diverse cultures in the way treat each person with dignity and respect. If appropriate, I also share my own culture with them, and they know they are free to do the same in my class.

Authentic Contexts

Beyond the university classroom, respondents

reported that teacher candidates gained much experience with diversity in literacy education through learning experiences held in authentic prekindergarten—12th grade school settings. Respondents emphasized the significance and value of field experiences and classroom observations, as one respondent contended that teacher candidates “need to experience diversity before they can address it.” Respondents reported that teacher candidates spent several hours “in schools with high populations of linguistic, societal, and cultural diversity.” For instance, one respondent described how their teacher preparation program ensured all teacher candidates experienced diversity in literacy education as a result of strategic field placements in schools with diverse student populations:

During their junior year, all [teacher candidates] have a field placement in a bilingual or ESL [English as a Second Language] classroom and work directly with those learners in various instructional settings. They are also placed in primarily urban low-SES [socioeconomic status] educational settings for their field placements.

Although 20 respondents indicated that teacher candidates completed field experiences and classroom observations in diverse school settings, they did not provide further information concerning the nature of required field experiences or classroom observations, such as corresponding assignments.

Some respondents raised specific concerns about how field experiences and classroom observations prepare teacher candidates for diversity in education. For example, one respondent confided:

I’m not sure our [teacher] candidates are prepared for success with student populations unlike our own local school populations. There’s a sense that our institutional task is to only prepare future teachers for our community, rather than for the schools and students of the state or nation.

Another respondent acknowledged that while teacher candidates completed field experiences and classroom observations “in very diverse schools,” they were concerned that “literacy teacher educators continue to do as much as we can specifically linking equity and diversity issues to reading instruction.”

Resource Materials

Respondents referenced several resource materials that they use to address diversity in literacy education with teacher candidates. These resource materials included research reports, “classroom scenarios,” “videos of exemplary precision [teaching],” “flip books,” and “word walls.” Yet, respondents overwhelmingly identified children’s literature as the primary resource material they used to prepare teacher candidates for diversity in literacy education. Respondents explained that they use high-quality trade books in stand-alone children’s literature courses and “integrate literature throughout the curriculum, not just on special days.”

Respondents also described three specific ways in which they use literature with teacher candidates to promote understandings related to diversity in literacy education. First, respondents shared that they use “a variety of good solid literature” to demonstrate and model how to reinforce literacy practices that respect and value cultural differences represented among students. Respondents also explained that they may use specific texts to create awareness about diversity-related topics, such as disability, ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic class. Lastly, respondents affirmed that they design course assignments requiring teacher candidates to “select, read, and respond to a diverse collection of children’s literature.” One respondent provided a broad overview of such an assignment:

In my course, [teacher candidates] complete a classroom library organization project where they categorize books and identify gaps, such as the limited number of books that may address diversity. They also brainstorm ideas for how to increase culturally and linguistically diverse materials in their own classroom libraries.

Discussion

As classrooms become increasingly more diverse, it is imperative that classroom teachers know how to implement “culturally sustaining and academically rigorous” literacy practices (ILA, 2017a, p. 2). Literacy teacher educators have the privilege and responsibility to provide teacher candidates with the training needed to address diversity in literacy education in their future classrooms effectively. With this in mind, this study sought to explore current preparation practices for diversity in literacy education among a group of experienced literacy teacher educators who were

affiliated with university-based teacher preparation programs. We used the concepts of culturally relevant/responsive teaching and teacher preparation as theoretical lenses to better understand reported practices (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009).

Our findings revealed that literacy teacher educators primarily address diversity in literacy education through coursework, authentic contexts, and resource materials. It was evident that participants in this study valued cultural diversity themselves and sought to engender awareness about diversity among teacher candidates enrolled in their respective teacher preparation programs. Similarly, these participants reported using a variety of preparation practices to instill, within teacher candidates, ways that they may value cultural differences represented among students in their future classrooms. Although participants expressed great confidence with preparation practices they implemented within the university classroom, they seemed less confident with preparation practices that occurred in genuine school settings. In addition, the extent to which participants explicitly aligned their preparation practices with concepts associated with culturally relevant/responsive teaching was not at all clear. Likewise, it was unclear as to whether reported preparation practices were part of a well-designed and well-implemented teacher preparation program or were mere add-on components.

Our findings echo previous concerns that researchers have expressed regarding teacher educators and their role in preparing teacher candidates to work with culturally diverse students. Like teacher candidates, many teacher educators are White, monolingual English speakers who “are limited in cross-cultural experiences and understandings” (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998, p. 89). As a result, teacher educators may feel uncomfortable, unprepared, and unskilled to address topics related to diversity and implement preparation practices that prime teacher candidates to be culturally relevant and responsive teachers (Ellerbrock, Cruz, Vásquez, & Howes, 2016). Moreover, there are currently no mechanisms in place to ascertain teacher educators’ assumptions, beliefs, and commitment to culturally diverse students nor a systematic way to support continuous professional learning about culturally relevant/responsive teaching (Jacobs, Czop

Assaf, & Lee, 2011). “Quality teacher preparation depends on quality teacher educators” (Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, Miyata, & Beck, 2013, p. 524), yet very little attention has been given to literacy teacher educators, particularly upon their entry into the world of teacher preparation. Preparing teacher candidates to adopt culturally relevant/responsive teaching practices begins during their enrollment in teacher preparation programs and under the direction of knowledgeable and skilled teacher educators (Baumgartner, Bay, Lopez-Reyna, Snowden, & Maiorano, 2015). However, Kosnik et al. (2013) contended that closer scrutiny is warranted to identify the exact kinds of knowledge that literacy teacher educators need to prepare teacher candidates effectively, as well as any necessary institutional supports.

Our findings have suggested a strong need for literacy teacher educators to evaluate how their respective teacher preparation programs prepare teacher candidates to address diversity in literacy education. During these evaluations, literacy teacher educators should work collaboratively with colleagues to carefully examine preparation practices used during coursework, as well as during field experiences and classroom observations. All program requirements should be aligned with professional standards and address key concepts associated with diversity in literacy education comprehensively and systematically. Most importantly, literacy teacher educators must ensure that teacher candidates learn meaningful ways to use culturally relevant/responsive literacy practices “to strengthen a literate society, making it more productive, more adaptable to change, and more equitable” (IRA, 2010, p. 24).

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Every research endeavor yields limitations. Within this study, there were methodological limitations that impacted generalizability of our reported findings. As such, the number of respondents in this study was small and included only literacy teacher educators from one state located in the Southern United States. Since this study was intended to be exploratory, future studies should replicate these procedures and include larger groups of literacy teacher educators that span multiple geographic areas. Future studies may also consider utilizing research designs that provide a more comprehensive understanding of individual

preparation practices in relation to the overall design of a preparation program.

Conclusion

Preparing teacher candidates for diversity in education is a tremendous responsibility. Literacy teacher educators must ensure that their preparation practices cultivate future literacy teachers who implement culturally relevant/responsive teaching practices effectively. It is imperative for literacy teacher educators to recognize that culturally relevant/responsive teaching practices go well beyond addressing student differences. Instead, literacy teacher educators must strengthen how future teachers are prepared to employ high-quality teaching practices that enhance educational equity among all students.

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