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Learning to Use Diverse Children's Literature in the Classroom: A Model for Preservice Teacher Education

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Abstract

The ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication is a model intended to help teachers become culturally sensitive, so that they will begin to think about ways to communicate and connect with students and families of diverse backgrounds. Using a modified version of the model, undergraduate students' work was examined to illustrate how culturally diverse children's literature could be used in the students' future classrooms.

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Culturally Diverse Literature and the ABC's Model

In an effort to support educational equality, many educators suggest the importance of teachers being equipped with knowledge and understanding of the diversity among their students in terms of attributes including race and cultural background, class, gender, and ability (see, e.g., [Banks, 1999](#); [Bennett, 1995](#); [Grant & Sleeter, 1997](#)). Such knowledge can help teachers foster learning more effectively.

In the United States, as elsewhere, teachers are now educating an increasingly diverse student population. However, the U.S. teacher population itself will continue to be white, monolingual, and mostly female for the foreseeable future ([Florio-Ruane, 1994](#); [Grant & Secada, 1990](#); [Ladson-Billings, 1994](#)). Additionally, preservice teachers have limited interracial and intercultural experiences ([Zeichner, 1993, online abstract](#)). Despite this demographic profile among teachers and students, teacher education programs in the United States have done little to deal with the complexity of difference in today's schools ([Grant & Sleeter, 1997](#); [Hinchman & Lalik, 2000](#); [Lewis,](#)

2001). Hence, the learning of preservice teachers is mismatched to the diverse settings in which they may one day teach.

The use of culturally diverse children's literature in the classroom can enhance students' learning and teachers' instruction. Such literature is also a vehicle for creating lessons that suit the needs of individual students, allowing them to use strategies such as inquiry, reflection, and discussion that increase learning (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Drajcik, Guzdia, & Palincsar, 1991). Haberman (1991, online document) states that students need to be taught to "compare, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, generalize, and specify in the process of developing thinking skills" (p. 294). He further asserts that good teachers involve students in activities that are meaningful to them, and argues that good teaching occurs when students are taught to see major concepts and general principles rather than being exposed to isolated skills or facts. Willinsky (1990) describes such approaches as relying on "strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the students; literacy is promoted in such programs as a social process with language that can from the very beginning extend the students' range of meaning and connection" (p. 8). This form of teaching and knowledge construction helps students connect what they learn in school with their out-of-school lives and the lives of others.

Such teaching can occur when culturally diverse children's literature is used in classrooms. Hoffman (1997) asserts that the "best teaching about cultural difference comes from in-depth study in which students are given a wide range of materials and information about a culture and [are] allowed to come to their own conclusions" (p. 387). Culturally diverse literature allows "individuals to share in the lives of others. It can also provide an avenue of multicultural understanding" (Wham, Barnhart, & Cook, 1996, p. 2). This form of literature represents and explores the lives of individuals from a wide range of groups (Bainbridge, Pantaleo, & Ellis, 1999). It allows readers, including teachers, to share vicariously the emotions and aspirations of those from cultural groups other than their own (Metcalf-Turner & Smith, 1999) and passes on not only cultural values, but social ones (Sims, 1982). More specifically, reading fiction about various cultures allows one to see other people's stories and their history (Bishop, 1993).

However, as asserted by Harris (1994), teachers require training to feel comfortable using diverse children's literature in their classrooms. The "ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication," a model developed by Schmidt (1998), offers one way to provide pre- and inservice teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to work within the diversity that exists in today's society. It aims to make home-school connections that help students achieve literacy and to create classroom environments where opportunities for new perspectives and possibilities are provided. The ABC's model is intended to help teachers become more culturally sensitive, so that they can begin to think about ways to communicate and connect with students and families of backgrounds different from their own.

The model contains several tasks. Students write an in-depth **autobiography**, a **biography** of a person from outside the students' culture, and a **crosscultural analysis** explaining students' thoughts about the similarities and differences discovered -- the A, B, and C from which the model takes its name. It is through this analysis that teachers begin to construct awareness of their own perceptions regarding race, class, gender, and related social issues.

Using a modified version of the ABC's model, the study described in this article examined the work of preservice teachers enrolled in an undergraduate children's literature course. The purpose was to illustrate how the model could assist the students in introducing and using culturally diverse children's literature in their future classrooms. The questions that guided the study included

- How do preservice teachers perceive and intend to use culturally diverse children's literature in their future classrooms?
- How can the ABC's model facilitate the use of culturally diverse children's literature in their

future classrooms?

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Method

Study participants were 14 female students and 1 male student at a small university in southern New Jersey, USA. The group contained little cultural diversity of which I was aware: Students were predominately white and of western European ethnicities; one student identified herself as Jewish American. The majority of the students were undergraduates pursuing degrees in elementary (kindergarten to grade 8) education; three were considered post-baccalaureate and were in their first year of teaching elementary school. All were enrolled in a reading elective course that focused on using children's literature to teach literacy methods and techniques. During the course, students read and responded (through, for example, written response journals, e-mail discussions, in-class literature discussion groups, and author studies) to children's books about cultural diversity.

Data collection. Data were collected in the reading elective course over the 16 weeks of the fall 2001 semester. Data sources included

- Transcripts of audiotaped course teaching
- Copies of students' responses to children's books
- Detailed autobiographies of students' life events
- Biographies of a children's author considered to be culturally different from the individual students
- Crosscultural analyses of similarities and differences between the autobiographies and author biographies
- Analyses of discussions in which students explored their individual discomfort with and admiration of different cultures
- Transcripts of audiotaped course discussions and written explanations about the students' communication plans for the use of children's literature in their future literacy instruction

Data analysis. Data were analyzed following the constant comparative method of [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#). This consisted of reading and rereading the students' written and transcribed oral responses and assigning them broad codes. As the data were read and reread, these codes produced categories that supported answers to the research questions.

Written responses to the selected books were read first and were categorized according to whether the students were supportive, hesitant, or averse to using each book in the classroom. Next, I looked for reasons students offered to support feeling the way they did. The written responses were then examined to determine patterns and categories that emerged in the students' thoughts about this literature.

The students' written responses to their ABC's tasks (autobiography, author biography, crosscultural analysis) were read to determine whether they planned to introduce and use increased amounts of culturally diverse children's literature in their classrooms. I examined the responses to determine patterns and categories that emerged in the students' thoughts about their teaching plans for the future.

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Findings

Perceptions of culturally diverse children's literature. Throughout the course, I read children's books aloud to the students. I identified the books read as rich examples of literature that grappled with ethnic and cultural diversity. The selected books confronted social assumptions and values about family, ethnicity and color, disability, gender, and war and conflict. The students needed to split their focus in responding to the books, considering not only their impact on themselves as listeners and readers, but also the effects they might have on children. After each reading the students were asked to write a response indicating whether they would use the book with elementary children and explaining the reasoning behind their decision.

Students categorized some of the books as emotionally powerful or socially provocative. The most emotionally powerful books were those pertaining to the Holocaust, drugs, and parental neglect and abuse. For example, in response to Clark Taylor's *The House That Crack Built*, students wrote about how the story could be connected with a popular drug-abuse prevention program introduced in upper elementary classrooms in their area. Several students identified this book as a way to illustrate to children the negative effects of drug abuse. As one student noted, "It shows children exactly how cocaine has an effect on people...gives students a real world example of the effects of drug use...[and] to spark a discussion on why not to use them." Another student commented, "Some students joke around about drugs and don't quite comprehend how they can affect them and society as a whole."

The House That Crack Built was also considered to be socially provocative -- so much so that nearly half the students said they were unsure or would definitely not use the text with elementary children. One commented that "this book would be quite controversial in a school where children don't have exposure to drugs. Parents may see this as providing too much information." Another wrote, "It depicts a dark and upsetting theme due to using crack." "This is too hot a topic," said a third student, "and it would not necessarily be understood by elementary children."

All the students indicated they would use Eve Bunting's *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* in the classroom. This story uses animals as characters to explain the horrors of the Holocaust. Several students shared ways that they would use the book. One student wrote from a political point of view: "This book could be used to spark discussions on responsibility and loyalty to any community and its members. The community could be a family a classroom, a school. There is power in numbers -- working together for the common good is better in the long run than looking out just for yourself."

During the in-class discussion of this book, several students mentioned how powerful it could be for high school students. However, one student also shared how the book could be used in a primary classroom:

I actually thought it would be very good for primary. If we could bring into their world - the playground bully.... Well, you know, "He's not picking on me so I'm not going to worry about it; that's so and so's problem." So if all the students were to get together and stand up to this bully, then chances are he'll go find someone else to pick on and leave them alone. So there's a lesson to be learned even for the very young. You don't have to take it as far as the Holocaust. I also felt there is a responsibility or loyalty to the group. That we're not all individuals; we all live in a community whether it's our family, our town, our school, our state, our country. It just depends on how globally you want to look at it. But that we all have a responsibility and that we can never just stand back and say it's not my problem.

Similarly, another student wrote how the book could be used for teaching about more than the Holocaust:

I think this book is a great way to teach about prejudice. I think it would help kids to understand that it is not right to exclude someone because of the color of their skin or the way they look and the fact that it sometimes can only take one person to help make a difference.

During the in-class discussion, several students began to question what is appropriate for the younger grades in terms of teaching about prejudice. One student was very adamant in her statement:

I don't think it's necessarily too early to teach kids about prejudice and I think that by talking about the differences between the animals you can relate that to differences in skin color, differences in hair color, people with glasses, braces, stuff like that. I mean, I think you can incorporate that into every age level.

Students were beginning to see the power of literature that deals with diverse social and cultural groups and how this genre can be used to explain and discuss social issues and injustices.

However, an unexpected pattern emerged in the data. Although I thought the books would evoke strong personal responses, the students often responded cautiously and impersonally. Specifically, they revealed very little about their own attitudes and values surrounding social differences stemming from ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. Responses often followed the same pattern: Students more or less rated whether they liked or disliked a book and then discussed their reasons for the rating. For example, several responses began with statements such as "I think this was a good book," "I like the book very much," "Awesome book," or "I thought this book was sad." Reasons for the ratings usually took on an impersonal stance, often suggesting what others might do with the book. For example, one student indicated that *Terrible Things* was a "very interesting book" and went on to say, "I could see many teachers using this book at many levels.... If their [students'] parents, teachers, or anyone else has never brought up the subject of prejudice or discrimination, [the students] may think nothing of it." This student did not share how the book made her feel or whether she had ever experienced or known someone who had experienced any form of prejudice or discrimination. These preservice teachers' responses, like those of many school children, lacked personal connections to out-of-school lives or experiences.

Of all the responses, only eight could be described as personal. One of these pertained to *Be Good to Eddie Lee* by Virginia Fleming, which discusses disability. After this book was read aloud, one student revealed her personal experiences with this issue: "I have a cousin who has Down Syndrome. I know as a child I didn't feel comfortable around her because I never allowed myself to get to know her."

In addition, two books pertaining to gender relationships elicited personal revelations. *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* is William Miller's account of the famous African American writer's early years growing up in the south. One student wrote, "My grandmother in the early 1900's defied her parents and refused to marry the man they had chosen for her." The second book, *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne, is a humorous story about gender roles in one family. In response to this book, one student commented, "I didn't have a 'traditional household' as they do in the book." Another wrote, "I think I will share [the book] with my daughter."

Students also made more personal revelations about their attitudes toward animals than toward issues of social justice. After listening to *Faithful Elephants* by Yukio Tsuchiya, a book about war in which zoo animals are deliberately killed, two students indicated their love for animals and how uncomfortable they felt with the book. "I get very sensitive when it comes to animals," wrote one student. And another said, "I am an animal lover." Such personal points of view did not appear in responses made after the students listened to the books about ethnicity, war, and parental abuse

of children.

When the students perceived a book as emotionally powerful or socially provocative, they were less likely to indicate that they would use it in the classroom. On occasion, the students did reject a book because of its close connection to their own lives or to the life experiences of their students. For example, students wrote that they would not use *Faithful Elephants* because they loved animals and the book was too emotional for them. In response to Candy Boyd's *Daddy, Daddy Be There*, in which a father's alcoholism and abandonment of family is discussed, students indicated they would not use the book because they thought it might be too close to children's actual lives.

There was some indication in class discussions that, as the semester progressed, students became more willing to consider using emotional and provocative literature in the classroom. As a whole, however, the students' written responses conveyed a sense that they needed to protect children from the harsh realities of everyday living.

Identifying one's culture: Writing a literacy autobiography. In addition to the oral readings, a modified version of the ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication was used. Students were first required to discover their own cultural identities by writing an in-depth autobiography that identified (at minimum) their ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, language, education, and religion traditions. In addition, in a modification of Schmidt's original model, the autobiography took on a literacy focus, in which students were required to describe how their membership in particular sociopolitical groups contributed or hindered their literacy development. Finally, students were to use their knowledge about their own literacy education to discuss implications for today's children. Students were encouraged to give as much detail as possible.

As the autobiographies were analyzed, the issue of cultural identity began to emerge. Some students identified their cultural identity only by ethnicity; others recognized culture as multifaceted. Some discussed how they felt they lacked culture, while several saw themselves as being "part this and part that." As stated by one student,

I associate myself a little bit with the Italian because on my mom's side of the family, she's full Italian...but my dad was just everything. When I asked my Ma Ma [grandmother] she just says "you name it and I'm some of it." So yeah I just say I'm half Italian and half whatever.

Some students identified their culture based on ethnic stereotypes. For example, one student stated,

I grew up in a family that is very much you know the code of arms, County Cork Ireland, Irish Catholics guided the upbringing. A lot of alcoholism throughout genetics that is in the Irish culture. It's nothing you're proud of but it's part of it. So all of those areas I can identify with the Irish part of my family.

Some students viewed culture as having multiple layers. For example, one student identified herself as Jewish American in her autobiography. However, during class discussion she indicated that she felt she was more American than Jewish. As she reanalyzed her cultural identity, she also realized that she could not place herself in one culture, but saw herself belonging to smaller "microcultures." She began to identify herself not only as an American who was Jewish, but also in her role as a woman. She stated,

Well, I think I define my culture as being Jewish American, but I'm not really Jewish American, I'm American but I'm Jewish. In the same respect a male who is also Jewish is part of my culture yet I think it's different because of the perspective of gender. So I think there are definitely differences in perspectives and a whole lot of things between

males and females, so that is a whole different culture within itself.

Then there were students who could not identify themselves in a culture at all. One student felt that if she had to identify a culture, it would just be American:

I've always felt in a sense that I lacked culture. Um, I am your average Joe American. Yeah, my family came over in the 1700's from Holland, but I have none of that. I just have a date, I have names, but I'm just average Joe American, white Protestant, middle class.

After this statement was made, the student who considered herself Jewish American said,

I think most of us can relate to our ethnicity. However, I think if you ask anyone of us the first response would be American. You're not an Italian American, you're not an Irish American, you're American and whatever else you are. And I also think that as the generations go on, it becomes even more of a focus and they are more of the average Joe American. Because I know, I'm Jewish, was raised Jewish, both my parents are Jewish. However, my mom is now remarried and I did every holiday in both religions.... I know my children, when I one day have them, will be introduced to them [both religions], so I believe it's more of a melting pot and diverse backgrounds will not necessarily be a thing of the past but will become more of a nonissue versus what our ancestors were. I mean, they were really more distinct groups.

Several of the students agreed with this statement. I believe that it was because of this in-class conversation that the students chose authors for the biography component of the project based primarily on author ethnicity. This is discussed in further detail in the next section below.

Learning from differences: The author biography. The next phase of the assignment consisted of the students selecting a children's author and writing a biography of him or her. The author selected had to be considered to be from a culture different from the students' own. Students were required to tell in detail why they felt the author's culture was different and to provide pertinent information about the author (e.g., education, life events). Students were also required to examine three books by their chosen author and tell how the books related to the author's culture.

The students chose the subjects for their biographies based on several factors, including the authors' race or ethnicity, religion, gender, and socioeconomic class. Race or ethnicity and religion were the main differences students identified between themselves and their biography subjects. Many students shared that discovering differences between their selected authors and their own cultural group helped them identify how children's literature could be used as a tool to teach issues of sensitivity, respect, and appreciation.

The student who had identified herself as Jewish American and had discussed American society in terms of a "melting pot" said that she felt that using diverse children's literature was a necessity for addressing differences. Interestingly, she stated further, "Everyone's life is different no matter how similar you may think you are. This type of literature helps students understand someone else's anger or grief. This literature will hopefully help students become more sensitive to others." The apparent change of opinion indicated by this statement came as a result of the student's preparing a biography of author Yoshiko Uchida, an American of Japanese origin. In the biography, she compares Steven Spielberg's *Shindler's List* to Uchida's children's book, saying that the director and writer created stories so that others would learn about the wartime atrocities endured by both Jews and Japanese Americans. This student made a personal connection between Japanese Americans and herself as a Jewish American.

Another student shared that "culturally diverse literature raises children's awareness of other

cultures...perhaps dispelling stereotypic thinking and/or fear of people who are different -- appreciate what diversity does for our society." This student had researched African American writer Faith Ringgold and discovered how her "story quilts" taught about African traditions of storytelling, dance, and music.

Another student explained, "Culturally diverse literature allows students to see that not everyone is from the same culture [and] not everyone handles things the same way. Students need to learn to respect one another for who they are and what they believe in." This notion of how people handle situations appeared in a response from another student, who felt that diverse children's literature exposes readers to other perspectives and allows them to see that people may experience similar situations regardless of race or ethnicity.

Based on the knowledge the students acquired from studying culturally different authors and their writings, they began to recognize their own development of sensitivity and respect toward culture. The students began to think more critically about how authors' experiences are embedded in their work. Students began to notice similarities across cultures and the types of experiences that characters were going through in various books.

Learning to communicate: The crosscultural analysis. As described in Schmidt's third phase, the next task required students to chart the similarities and differences between their culture and that of their biography subject. Students were to do an in-depth examination of the chart so that they could discuss their intentions for implementing culturally diverse children's literature in the classroom.

Some students found that the ABC's model improved their communication with others. The biography component of the assignment allowed them to learn about certain aspects of another culture. The students believed that this new knowledge would help them to communicate with particular groups of children, because they believed they had developed a better understanding of those groups' cultures. Further, one student stated that by reading diverse children's literature, "you can learn about interesting traditions and so on that you can ask your students about, which in turn makes them feel good because they're teaching you something" about their culture. This student also believed that learning about different cultures could motivate reading: "[Diverse children's literature] can foster an interest and give them [children] a purpose to read more about their culture or about another culture." This student had written her author's biography on Faith Ringgold and during the class discussion she had shared how many of Ringgold's book showed much about her cultural background. The student was excited about incorporating Ringgold's books in her future classroom.

A similar experience occurred with another student. As part of a course assignment, students were required to read and respond to *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* by Sook Nyul Choi. This book tells the story of ten-year-old Sookan, who with her family must endure the cruelties of the Japanese military occupation of Korea during World War II. This particular student, the Jewish American woman, shared that reading Choi's book was "an excellent history lesson." (She had not been fully aware of the Japanese concentration camps.) She made a personal connection to the book, sharing that "the Jews are the ones thought of when people hear the word 'holocaust,' what about the Koreans?" Reading *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* prompted her to prepare her author biography on the Japanese American writer Yoshiko Uchida.

Identifying differences also helped one student think more deeply about diversity. This student had selected a biography subject based on an appearance of difference. By the end of the project, she was more open in her thinking, stating, "I now know that it is extremely important to go beyond the obvious physical appearance and stereotypes. We need to look at people for who they are, not what they look like."

Devising a plan for using diverse children's literature. During the final class meeting, students completed a fourth task. After re-examining their crosscultural analysis charts, they picked three of the most important similarities and differences they had noted, along with three points of admiration and discomfort. They then told how this information could be used to help them become more culturally aware, communicate more effectively with diverse students, and assist in the introduction and use of diverse children's literature in their future classrooms.

Students then were asked to think about the role that the experiences and works of the author they selected for their biographies had played in helping them design plans for using diverse children's literature in the classroom. Finally, students explained what they could take from the ABC's project to adapt for their own classrooms, and how the project might lead to an increase in their use of diverse children's literature.

In their responses to these tasks, students indicated that they saw using culturally diverse children's literature as a way to activate and build children's **background knowledge**. For example, as the subject of her author biography, one student chose Tomie dePaola, who has written several books about growing up with his grandparents and his relationship with them. The student believed that dePaola's books would connect with children in her future classroom who may have special relationships with their own grandparents, providing a means for them to share their experiences and compare them to those described in books.

Another student, who had researched Nicholasa Mohr, shared how many of Mohr's stories deal with issues of poverty and racism. This student stated, "In reality, many students face these problems and it [the use of culturally diverse books] would enable others who do not face these issues to get a better feel of how others live."

Several students discussed how the culturally diverse children's literature helped them learn about a particular ethnic group -- learning they could share with their future students. One student who had conducted her research on Virginia Hamilton indicated she could identify with this author's depiction of the richness of African American culture and strong family structure. She further noted that Hamilton's stories reach out "to those who are not educated about the culture to allow them [African American students] to appreciate their values and beliefs."

Finally, one student was able to connect with Gary Paulsen, whose stories she felt involved characters and situations that would resonate with the lives of the children she would one day teach:

The themes of his stories are mostly about the will to survive between either man vs. man or man vs. nature. The children I plan on working with are mostly kids from low socioeconomic families, broken families, and families of alcoholics and drug addicts. Paulsen's stories cover a lot of these situations that come out of real life experiences.

This student was seeing the power of diverse children's literature. She saw how children's literature could help her own students make connections to their personal lives.

Several students also mentioned how diverse children's literature could be used as **supplemental material**, noting particularly that historical fiction could be incorporated in the social studies curriculum. For example, in response to *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, one preservice teacher noted that this form of historical fiction could teach her future students about a cultural group that history textbooks might not cover in detail. A student who prepared her author's biography on Scott O'Dell saw using this author's books in a similar way:

One thing I love about Scott O'Dell's books is that they go into such detail about the Native American experience. I think that using books such as his to supplement other

classroom textbooks provides students with a better learning experience.

Students saw the use of culturally diverse historical fiction as being an effective means of addressing misconceptions and omissions from many of history textbooks. In one class assignment, students compared and contrasted how history was presented in a textbook versus a piece of children's literature. The students felt that the discrepancies revealed through the assignment could be easily dealt with by using children's literature that presented varied perspectives.

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Discussion and Implications

The ABC's model is designed to help teachers develop the cultural sensitivity necessary to work effectively with the diverse students they may encounter in their classrooms. The model is also designed to facilitate the creation of a classroom environment in which new perspectives are welcomed. Moving away from the idea of constructing knowledge about literature within a mainstream perspective toward a way of positioning one's cultural identity within a range of diverse perspectives presented in texts is, in reality, a new kind of literacy that teachers may not be well prepared to teach.

[Osborne \(1996\)](#) and [Cochran-Smith \(1995\)](#) argue that teachers must identify their own biases and prejudices before they work with children from minority groups. The autobiography tasks in the ABC's model give students the opportunity to think deeply about their attitudes toward diversity. In this study, the thinking of the participating students began to change as the model was implemented in the university classroom setting. At first, students indicated they would not be very willing to use literature that appeared controversial or provocative. Students noted in their written responses and in class discussions that, as teachers, it would be their job to protect children from the harsh realities of everyday living. However, as students began to conduct the various tasks of the ABC's model, they shared that works written by their chosen authors could be used, despite their being controversial or provocative.

Reading culturally diverse children's literature offers a rich and productive means for helping teachers learn about the diversity of cultural experiences. However, an undergraduate teacher education course of the kind described here can only touch the surface of future teachers' inner thoughts and feelings about diversity. A single course is unlikely to wholly reshape ingrained attitudes and perceptions about cultural experience and social justice. Rather, courses need to be combined with other pedagogical strategies and practical experiences to broaden prospective teachers' understanding about social diversity.

It is also uncertain whether these preservice teachers will ever apply their university learning and coursework experiences to practical situations. Often new teachers are overwhelmed with mastering curricular guidelines and with everyday instructional demands, so that applying their learning and experiences to a classroom situation gets lost. Follow-ups are needed to ensure that students are taking what has been learned in coursework into the classroom.

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