Editors

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THE MULTICULTURAL FAIR: A CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Students in a teacher education program developed and participated in The Multicultural Fair, an innovative approach to instruction. Students selected topics in diversity awareness, collaborated with peers, and created resource handouts and constructed interactive displays. This paper describes the need for alternative approaches to teacher education and the evolution of a project that culminated in celebration of diversity and children’s literature. Students’ written vignettes revealed perceived outcomes of their experiences with this alternative approach. These include growing awareness of issues of diversity, gaining knowledge of teaching resources, working in a community of learners, and anticipating classroom applications of teaching ideas.

“I was surprised to discover how a fairy tale could reveal so much about cultures... when we actually found and read the same basic story from a variety of cultures... it was proof of the similarities that all cultures share... the differences... provided the means of appreciating the various cultures.”

“Discover” was a key word as students engaged in self selected inquiry into topics of diversity while preparing for and participating at The Multicultural Fair. The process of developing a fair may be one innovative approach to teaching that effectively prepares students and teachers for the diverse “villages” of the twenty-first century. Many issues emerged through reflective writing as students in two teacher education courses produced vignettes describing personally significant moments they had experienced while preparing for and participating in The Multicultural Fair. This paper will discuss the need for alternative approaches in teacher education, the evolution of the project that culminated in an event of celebration, and themes that emerged from students’ vignettes which recount their perceived outcomes of this innovative, alternative teaching approach.

The theme “It Takes a Village to Raise a Reader” is a particularly powerful concept as our villages, our schools and our communities are becoming increasingly diverse. Children of color in our schools are anticipated to increase from 25% in 1980 to 42% by the year 2000 (CMPEAL, 1988) and comprise 49% by 2020 (Cushman, McClelland, & Safford, 1992). Research suggests that incorporation of students’ language and culture into the school program is a significant factor in student academic success (Cummins, 1986; Diamond & Moore, 1995). Students’ application of their life experiences and cultural backgrounds influences comprehension and reading development (Mason & Au, 1990). To facilitate learning and heighten student engagement, curricular materials and methods should reflect the diversity of students’ cultures. Higher levels of reading and writing performance are attained and self-esteem in learners is improved as students encounter characters, settings and themes in multicultural literature that connect with their prior experiences (Bishop, 1987; Diamond & Moore, 1995).

Yet many of our preservice and inservice teachers have had limited exposure, either through literature or personal experience, to cultures outside of their own (Haberman, 1990). These are the teachers who will be in classrooms daily with a diversity of “villagers” into the next millennium. How can we develop meaningful experiences in our teacher education programs that encourage teachers to explore their own heritages and broaden and deepen their exposure, appreciation and understanding of diverse experiences and cultures? How can we better prepare teachers to meet the needs of the diverse students and readers who will be in their classrooms?

Teacher Education

Diversity and multicultural education, with ideological foundations in principles of pluralism, democracy, equity, civil rights, social justice, and global interdependence, have been subject to discussion about how to be actualized. Teaching and learning that challenge bias, intolerance, and social domination have been established as core precepts and ultimate intents (Barry & Lechner, 1992; Hildago, Chavez-Chavez, & Ramage, 1996; Lynch, 1989; Sleeter, 1993). However, preservice teachers may have had very little previous exposure to these notions of critical pedagogy and may need to spend time
developing familiarity with these concepts and determining an individual sense and degree of personal commitment to these principles.

Lynch (1989) typifies multicultural education as a process of increasing sophistication. It begins by adding content about diverse cultures to a standard curriculum and broadens to include folkloric education where customs, foods, music, dress, and holidays are explored. Then multicultural education moves to a permeative phase where culturally diverse content, materials, and teaching approaches are infused across a learner-centered curriculum that promotes social cohesion and educational reform.

Preparing preservice teachers involves multiple processes that facilitate the phases of discovery proposed by Lynch (1989). This may include:

1. Preservice teachers begin to participate in scholarly discourse that enhances their knowledge of why and how information about diversity is included in school curricula. Introducing preservice teachers to large numbers of quality children's novels, picture books, and informational books can help them understand the concepts, issues, themes and problems inherent in affirming diversity in educational settings. Published guidelines for selection of quality materials (Dudley-Marling, 1997; Norton, 1990; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 1996) can assist preservice teachers in finding resources that promote cultural awareness, with the implication that curricular diversity is a means to enrich learning experiences.

2. In a constructivist learning paradigm, learners are encouraged to work together to develop a sense of community and joint purpose and are invited to learn about themselves while learning about a subject area. The teacher guarantees intellectual freedom and has unlimited expectations for learners' potential. Hildago, Chavez-Chavez, and Ramage (1996) have elaborated on the model of constructivist inquiry posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and suggest that preservice teachers may participate in learning activities that provide a means for "gaining realistic perspectives on cultural groups and their social contexts ... respecting the histories, perceptions, and practices of these groups ... valuing multiple sources and interpretations of knowledge ... [and] understanding other cultures as complex [and] dynamic" (Hildago, Chavez-Chavez, & Ramage, 1996, pp. 770-771.). Preservice teachers are guided to reflect on their own backgrounds, beliefs, and repertoires of learning and teaching behaviors and assess how this uniqueness contributes to their own perspectives on diversity education.

3. Preservice teachers' active learning experiences may allow them to transcend views of multicultural education as a part of diversity education that merely carries on, as Lynch (1989) noted, additive ethnic studies and/or celebratory, "safe", "oversimplified", and "quaint" views of culture as ethnic manifestations (Hildago, Chavez-Chavez, & Ramage, 1996, p. 764). To attempt to orient preservice teachers to the position that educators need to permeate all aspects of school life with a sense of cultural responsiveness, preservice teachers need to have lived-through experiences that will promote, as Zimpher and Ashburn (1992) recommend, (a) an appreciation of diversity, (b) a belief in the value of cooperation, and (c) a belief in the importance of a caring community (Hildago, Chavez-Chavez, & Ramage, 1996). Although these qualities are difficult to promote, Zimpher and Ashburn (1992), Garcia (1996), and Hoffman (1996) suggest that a personal investment in multicultural and diversity education, modelled by university faculty and lived-through by teacher educators and preservice teachers in the context of the teacher preparation program, may motivate the genuine integration of teaching with respect for diversity when these preservice teachers assume teaching positions.

The Multicultural Fair

Two professors seeking to make assignments personally relevant to students and to build an awareness and appreciation of diversity, particularly multiculturalism, informally chatted only to discover that they had developed similar projects and goals. They concluded that students from the two classes should share their products. Students in the College of Education courses Survey of Children's Literature and Teaching the Culturally Different Child self-selected topics for diversity studies that then broadened to include ethnicity, language, class, gender, religion and exceptionality. They gathered resources and teaching ideas to use in the classroom. Their challenge was to create an interactive display that engaged an audience to consider issues of diversity as well as how these are portrayed in children's literature. Additionally, preservice teachers would make it possible for other teachers to implement the ideas in the classroom by developing a written handout that included background information on the topic, a description of the display, and activities and materials needed to recreate the display. The handout would also include a list of resources, print and nonprint, such as related children's literature, teachers' books and articles, Internet sites, community agencies, and contacts. Hence, a celebration and sharing of coursework at the end of the quarter became The Multicultural Fair.

This fair, open to the public, university students, and faculty, was held in a central location at the University. Native American dancers performed and talked about their culture as part of the culminating event. Over time a third professor joined the project, and internal funding was obtained to support the project from process to product. Assistance was made available to
help students locate resources on the Internet. Students took field trips to
the public library and visited the children's literature and foreign language
departments, and an assistant was hired to create a resource manual, which
was a compilation of all of the handouts developed by students. From this
emerged a web page (http://prometheus.ed.csuohio.edu/mcf/mcweb2.html)
which makes the ideas more broadly available. Students had an audience
for the work they were doing. And as the fair grew year by year additional
performers joined in the celebration. An African-American storyteller shared
the oral history of her family's migration from south to north, a Latino percus-
sionist shared the sounds and history of a variety of instruments, and an
Irish dancer stepped the rhythms of her culture.

After self-selection of topics, students collaborated in small groups,
meeting in and out of class to do research and to organize findings to pre-
pare a handout and an interactive display. They read children's literature,
searched the Internet, collected artifacts, interviewed people, and developed
activities and lesson plans to support study and understanding of their as-
pect of diversity, including, in some displays, multiculturalism.

From this work a variety of interactive displays were created for the fair.
Selected examples include the following:

1. Participants were exposed to the Cinderella story motif that can be found
   in traditional literature across cultures, and they were invited to read
   the literature to match and create cultural artifacts.

2. Participants created their own Kente cloths as they read The Black
   Snowman (Mendez, 1989), and they studied the symbolism of colors
   in the cloth.

3. A study of Korean culture was presented by interacting with a CD ROM
   on LC display using a lap-top computer.

4. Participants were exposed to African-American artists, musicians and
   authors as they listened to music, viewed art work and browsed re-
   lated children's literature. They were challenged to check their knowl-
   edge through a matching game and were encouraged to refer to the
   materials presented.

5. An activity for building background knowledge of World War II was
   developed on Hypercard to extend the reading of Lois Lowry's (1989)
   Number the Stars.

6. Participants were invited to compare two versions of a popular story,
   Hill's (1987) Where's Spot? written in English and Arabic, as they took
   a "Journey Through the Middle East;" to read Heide's (1990) The Day
   of Ahmad's Secret to compare marketplaces; and to sample humus as
   they read about a family picnic in Heide's (1992) Sami and The Times
   of The Troubles.

7. Participants at a display about Nightjohn (Paulsen, 1993) engaged in
   simple but powerful response to the question, "If you could write only
   one word, what would that word be?" "Freedom," "love," "God," "Jesus,
   and other similar sentiments were their thoughtful responses.

8. Participants at a display on homelessness based upon Monkey Island
   (Fox, 1991) entered a refrigerator box with some newspapers and old
   blankets inside. Its "door" was closed. Sitting in this dim space, they
   completed a short questionnaire on their knowledge of and attitudes
   toward homelessness.

9. At "Breaking the Chain of Domestic Violence" participants were given
   strips of paper and asked to confidentially write down a situation of
domestic violence that they knew. The strips were added as links in a
   paper chain strung across the front of the display. Near the conclusion
   of the Fair, the group held a "break the chain" ceremony, cutting the
   paper chain down in front of a group of cheering visitors.

Method
A Look at Students' Perceived Outcomes

To gather anecdotal information on how participation in The Multicultural
Fair contributed to students' awareness of diversity issues, the vignette method
of program evaluation was used (Jochums and Pershey, 1993). In the vignette
method, a participant in a professional development program writes about a
specific event or episode during the program that has contributed to his or
her growth. The participant is asked to describe the episode and explain
why it was important. The vignette method reflects a constructivist approach
to learning, as the participant is invited to share how he or she acquired his
or her own understanding of the area that has been studied (Lincoln & Guba,
1985). This method is useful in identifying experiences that contribute to
professional growth and allows the evaluator to gain an informed under-
standing of the workings of a professional development program.

Data for two consecutive summer programs have been combined. Of
the sixty-three participants most were preservice teachers, however a few
were certified teachers enrolled in summer coursework. Most students were
females; less than one-fifth were males. Most participants were white, although
African-American students comprised about one-fourth of the students. A
few Asian-American students were also in these classes. No student partici-
pated more than one summer.

Participants in The Multicultural Fair were asked to respond anonymously
to this prompt:

A vignette is a short piece of writing that chronicles or describes
an event or occurrence that someone has personally experienced. It
can be likened to an anecdote or a brief story of what has occurred. Vignettes are told to reveal how an event, incident, circumstance, or occurrence was a meaningful or important personal experience.

Please take a few minutes to write a vignette about the most meaningful, educational, or thought-provoking event or occurrence that you have experienced in this class. Please focus your comments on something important that you experienced related to The Multicultural Fair, either before, during, or after the event.

Results

The process of inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) was used to glean categories and themes from these student-generated vignettes. The following themes and selected comments emerged from analysis of the vignettes.

Emerging Themes

Issues of Diversity.

"When Allison presented her grandmother's African dress to me, I felt honored. Even though I'm not African when I put on that dress I felt important and proud. This piece of African culture brought me closer to this whole project and purpose."

This statement captures the essence of many students' experiences at the fair expressing increased awareness of diversity, and in this case, multiculturalism. It is no surprise that two-thirds of the vignettes particularly described (a) cross-cultural experiences, (b) experiences where a student felt that his or own culture was affirmed, and (c) development of a broadened definition of diversity that moved beyond issues of culture and ethnicity.

"The fair . . . made me understand my Korean neighbors, especially adolescents who don't speak their parents' language—who I often criticized. I didn't try to understand their problems in two cultures before, but now I will change my attitude toward them."

Several students described becoming more sensitive to different viewpoints, as in the above example. This was also evident in the description of a conversation that took place at the fair. A student wrote that he "actually got a chance to sensibly talk to someone who had a little bias in their heart" as he had the opportunity to explain to the visitor why it is important to have cultural sensitivity when teaching Puerto Rican children in public schools. Additionally, students became aware of close relations between African-Americans and Italian-Americans in turn of the century New Orleans due to common family values and musical interests, despite Jim Crow laws. One student "was surprised (at) how many different countries ate rice pudding."

Several wrote about expanded experiences such as sampling new foods. Many wanted to continue learning more and were surprised and appreciative of the diversity of peers in their own university classes.

"Hearing the stories made me want to sit down with my aunt (who is somewhat the family historian) and hear stories about my family."

Students described increased interest in their own experiences and culture. One student shared her mother's experiences as an immigrant learning English as a second language, another "rekindled my love for African-American history," while another reflected on "how important my religion is to me as a culture." Students were reminded of previous opportunities: one reconsidered the possibility of teaching in Africa while another, on seeing a photo of a cafe in a remote part of Italy, realized he had been there and "... that we live in such a small world."

"Prior to the fair I found myself categorizing all Native Americans into one culture. How wrong I was. . . . Each tribe has its own unique characteristics."

Students wrote about their own limited awareness, about broadening their definition and clarifying their understanding of diversity as including multiculturalism and as being more than "different ethnic and cultural groups, but of different lifestyles and experiences." Several came to view having "a different sexual preference as a different culture" while others addressed the "culture" of adopted children and of families without fathers in the home.

Resources: Print and Nonprint. "I really did not realize how many multicultural books are on the shelves of every library . . ." was a statement typical of one third of the students who addressed increased awareness of resources available and an emerging critical view of these resources. They became familiar with specific guides such as MacDonald's (1982) The Storyteller's Sourcebook: A Subject, Title, and Motif Index to Folklore Collections for Children. They discovered children's literature written in other languages and read folk tales, traditional literature, and popular stories that can be found in many languages. They became committed to providing diverse literature in their classrooms. As one student articulated "everyone needs to feel validated and sometimes it comes through literature. It helps to see yourself in a book."

"When I visited libraries to find books about Korea, [they] were published over 10 years ago. I came to realize why people have misunderstandings about Korea."

Students began to think critically about the resources related to their topics. "I have learned not to take all multicultural materials at face value." Another
students expressed mixed feelings, wondering "how much positive material could [be] found to present about such a war torn area" as the Middle East. As she further explored her resources she "found a recurrent activity that surprised" her, that visiting family and friends was described as a favorite recreational activity in the literature. She concluded, "That would explain how the children survive. They have a strong support system."

"I feel the most meaningful personal experience was when I went into the home of the family of another culture and 'connected'. I had the opportunity to visit several times... After I returned the materials the family allowed me to borrow her son was there to interpret and he told me that his mom was so proud of me for learning about their culture. She said most people don't care about them... She gave me a big hug with tears in her eyes."

Students discovered human resources for broadening their own perspectives, as in the example above. Another student who interviewed a Nigerian man learned that this culture wore masks because it was taboo to see a king's face. Many exchanges took place in preparation for the fair and at the fair as one student commented, "... I had an opportunity to share an enlightening conversation with one of the Native American dancers."

**Community of Learners.**

"One of the most meaningful events was when my group got together and brainstormed the questions for our display... the whole group had to cooperate and work together."

Nearly a third of the vignettes addressed issues of collaboration. Some experienced shared labor positively, saying "if we could share ideas successfully our project was successful." Several commented on the enjoyment of working together and the process of negotiating varying ideas to achieve consensus, being "impressed by everyone's creativity and surprised by my own." Others viewed it as "a personal lesson in working with others. Always trying to see the positive of a given situation can be challenging..." Several students commented on the need to remember that not all students like to work collaboratively and they must consider this in classroom planning.

"I saw there were quite a few people that were truly interested in the subject we presented. It was heartening to see this. I was proud to be a part of this experience."

Many students described this sense of community at the fair event. "I felt a warmth at the fair of people sharing their culture and ideas with others." They were "engrossed with everyone's projects," had "underestimated the interest that would be generated," were delighted at the subsequent conversations their projects evoked, and generally felt "it was wonderful to interact with the other displays."

**Classroom Applications.**

"After seeing the Multicultural Fair come together, I began to think about what a great idea this would be to implement in my own classroom or even school-wide."

One-fourth of the students commented specifically about applying their experiences to teaching. They could now conduct useful literature searches, they could use specific activities and resources, and they themselves might even teach in other settings or countries. They expressed being "anxious to use [a display idea] with my students" and wanting to "become more expressive in my own oral reading" as a result of hearing the professional storyteller. They related the importance of addressing diversity in their own classrooms and across cultures and grade levels, acknowledged the importance of diversity awareness in building self-esteem in learners, and repeatedly expressed the need to understand the cultural ways of their own students.

"It struck me that multiculturalism is so easily intertwined with almost any topic. From the environment to fairy tales to food, educators have the opportunity to provide their students with meaningful multicultural experiences."

**Discussion**

The vignettes reveal that students have variously realized the three phases of multicultural awareness described by Lynch (1989). Students have begun to participate in scholarly discourse, have learned about themselves while they learned about multicultural education, have worked together in groups, have constructed their own research questions, and have met the high expectations set by their instructors, their groups, and themselves. Students also reported new understandings of the histories of cultural groups and gained awareness of differing perspectives. They have also come to see cultures as complex and dynamic.

Many of the vignettes reveal that these preservice teachers have reached the third stage described by Lynch (1989), which is to believe that educators need to permeate all aspects of school life with a sense of cultural responsiveness. Their personal investment in The Multicultural Fair has helped them discover the value of integrating multicultural teaching and teaching for diversity awareness.

Delpit (1995) suggests that university courses in teacher preparation be reorganized to allow for students' own thoughts to be explored, to enable the voices of diverse cultures to be heard, to teach preservice teachers to be
aware of the practices of students' home cultures, and to inspire preservice teachers to work towards a school culture that honors diversity in all aspects of school life. These vignettes reveal that the students who participated in this innovative approach, The Multicultural Fair, had a thought-provoking experience that may influence their perspectives and behaviors when they assume teaching positions. In the students' words,

"In our democratic society we are made to believe that we teach all people and include all people—we haven't gotten there yet."

"I have always felt that experiencing another culture makes us more 'worldly' and more understanding of our foreign neighbors. This Fair is a great way for students to gain a sense of this responsibility."

References