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Considering Pluralism in Education: An Article Critique of a Preservice Teacher Program

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In *Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World* (Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler, Stallworth, 2005), the researchers argue that using ethnographic research to bring awareness around culture and cultural differences in the preparation of preservice teachers would be beneficial to them. The aim of this study was to help preservice teachers consider pluralistic approaches, which acknowledge the value of their students' cultures, and recognize the need to think carefully about these concepts when teaching.

The study focused around The Beyond Awareness Project (BAP), which presented the findings from year two of a five-year program, and included 28 preservice teachers who attended a Professional Development School (PDS). Preservice teachers were given training in the methods of ethnographic research. Participants immersed themselves in the neighborhood and the school by becoming participant observers, taking field notes, and making observations and reflections to gain experience in ethnographic tools. Participants wrote a final paper and made presentations to fellow classmates to complete the ethnographic study. Although all 28 preservice teachers were participants in the study, only 6 were chosen to be interviewed. Over the span of one year, three formal interviews and five informal interviews were conducted with each of them. A research team met frequently to discuss their overall perceptions of the data, which led to the identification of four themes. Researchers reevaluated the themes and created questions that guided the next stage of data analysis. Codes were developed by each of

the four researchers based on the analyzation of data, and four ways in which participants addressed their assumptions about culture were identified:

1. Participants grew in their understanding of themselves as a cultural being.
2. Participants expanded their ideas of diversity.
3. Participants positioned themselves as ethnographers and learned about a cultural group without making judgments.
4. Participants learned how to apply the knowledge of their experiences and learning to future classroom instruction.

The researcher's concluded "participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements in developing more effective ways to address culture and cultural diversity in teacher education", and that "by having preservice teachers use ethnographically informed methods to learn about the community, they began to interact with perspectives different from their own" (p. 440).

I believe that this study is a valid ethnography as it followed the ethnographic research process and included key characteristics of ethnographic research described by Gay, Mills & Airasian (2011). Although I agree with the argument and main points presented by the researchers in this article, I also have a few concerns about this research.

This study was done over five years and only data from the second year was used. The researchers do not explain what the other years of study entailed, nor do they

explain why they only chose specifically the second year of research. In my opinion, I believe the research would have had a greater impact and credibility had all five years of the study been published.

This study focused on interviews from 6 out of 28 participants. The researchers do not share how and why these participants were selected. I also question whether 6 participants are enough to support and generalize the conclusions being made by the researchers. The participants in this research were in a teacher-training program and relied on their instructor's evaluation and feedback to successfully complete the training. In my opinion, these teachers knew the path they had to take and perhaps the results were skewed, as the participants understood what was required of them.

The data collected through this research were mainly interviews, field notes, observations and evaluations. I believe this report lacked in sharing other details and alternative presentations pertaining to data collection and analysis (i.e., interview questions, tables and figures). The researchers developed a code using a system of "open-coding". This system was not explained or presented in an appendix for readers to further understand the process.

As an educator, it is important to understand and learn about students' backgrounds and cultures in order to inspire and create meaningful learning experiences for them. The BAP met its goals by using ethnographic research to educate preservice teachers about diversity. This research is premature but has the potential to encourage

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inclusive education and educate more teachers about the value of pluralism in education if implemented in more university programs.

References:

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