

2-1-2002

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## Recommended Citation

Moore-Hart, M. A. (2002). Creating a Pathway to Multicultural Education in Urban Communities: Real-Life Experiences for Preservice Teachers. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 42 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol42/iss3/1](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss3/1)

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## **Creating a Pathway to Multicultural Education in Urban Communities: Real-Life Experiences for Preservice Teachers**

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*The classrooms within our nation are becoming rich tapestries, interwoven with people of diverse cultures and ethnic groups. In response to the evolving tapestries, many educators advocate the need to heighten preservice teachers' sensitivity to cultural issues so that they might apply this cultural knowledge within their teaching and learning. Using a reconstructionist approach, where preservice teachers become caring citizens who reach out to help culturally diverse children, is one way to address these issues. This manuscript describes an alternative tutoring program, where meaningful teaching and learning emerges within an urban community, and its' evaluation process. As a result of participating in this experience, preservice teachers learn to understand the social context within which literacy can occur. The evaluation process reveals, through the use of observations, questionnaires, interviews, and writing samples, the impact of this experience on preservice teachers' teaching and learning, as well as young children's reading and writing performance.*

DURING THE PAST DECADE, alternative pathways to multicultural education for preservice teachers have surfaced within various teacher education institutions. Even though many of these pathways recognize the existence of a culturally diverse population within our schools and the need to address this diversity, few pathways lead to the successful development of behavioral changes of preservice teachers once they enter the classroom. Holms and Nations-Johnson (1994), for example, report that preservice teachers are saturated with information about multicultural education, only to ignore it when they enter field settings. Similarly, even though Banks (2001) feels that his students begin to seriously challenge their beliefs, attitudes, values, and knowledge after taking his class, he questions whether these attitudinal and value changes transform their behavior in the classroom. Other preservice teachers artificially insert culture into the curriculum, which results in simplification, reductionism, and universalism (Banks, 1993; Erickson, 1990; Giroux, 1993; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

In order to become effective teachers in a culturally diverse society, preservice teachers need to be culturally sensitive (Banks, 2001; Bristor, Pelaez, & Crawley, 2000; Goodwin, 1994; Hoffman, 1996; Jordan, 1995) and to be able to apply their knowledge about differences among students so that they might facilitate learning of all students (Banks, 2001; Bristor, et al, 2000; Goodwin, 1994; Greenman & Kimmel, 1995; Kirk, 2001). Artificially infusing culture into the curriculum will foster stereotypical viewpoints and encourages people to think that culture can be dissected, categorized, and inserted into convenient slots. Understanding of cultural perspectives requires a holistic and comparative perspective that allows students at elementary, secondary, and university levels to draw their own conclusions and abstractions from evidence and reflection (Banks, 1993; Hoffman, 1996).

As evidence of preservice teachers' failure to apply their multicultural education knowledge increases, the search for effective training models continues. In response to this search, Hoffman (1996) advocates the need to promote more genuine forms of multicultural teaching and learning so that we might realize real transformation of the way preservice teachers conceptualize and practice education in plural societies. Other researchers state the need for teacher educators to model

various examples of learning about culture within their university courses (Ladson-Billings, 1991; Smith, 1981). According to these researchers, this model will facilitate preservice teachers' application of multicultural practices within their teaching in the classroom.

Shaw (1993) moves beyond modeling. He affirms that conceptual changes, or real growth, occur when preservice teachers engage in "powerful experiences" that involve the whole person, require mental and emotional attention, and challenge one's ways of seeing the world. Part of this "powerful experience" is addressed by Tyler (1949) and Packman (1991) who point out that learning emerges through the active behavior of the student. They affirm that students learn more from doing than watching.

Similarly, if we want to encourage preservice teachers to use strategies that reflect multicultural theories and trends in instruction, educators need to provide active experiences within multicultural settings (Bristor, et al, 2000; McDiarmid, 1992; May, 1992; Potthoff, Dinsmore, Eifler, Stirtz, Walsh, & Ziebarth, 2000). However, placement in a culturally diverse setting does not ensure that "powerful experiences" or meaningful multicultural teaching and learning is occurring. Goodwin (1994) and Haberman (1991) reiterate that there is a need to carefully select and assess the field placements.

One way to provide both powerful experiences and meaningful multicultural teaching and learning is through volunteer tutoring programs located in culturally and linguistically diverse schools or urban communities. Preservice teachers participating in these programs can construct clarified cultural identifications and become knowledgeable, caring citizens who use their knowledge to make society more just and humane (Banks, 2000; Potthoff et al, 2000; Sleeter & Grant, 1994). According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), education which is both multicultural and social reconstructionist is the least developed approach. However, they emphasize that this approach holds the most promise for social change, justice and equality. If teacher education faculty further direct these tutoring, we will simultaneously be able to monitor the selection and assessment of placements more easily (Potthoff et al, 2000).

During the past few years, I have been the Director of Project Literacy, a volunteer tutoring program sponsored by United Way and Eastern Michigan University's (EMU) Institute for Community and Regional Development (ICARD) and Department of Teacher Education. This tutoring program is an outreach program for African American children within their neighborhood community center to foster their love for reading and to help them increase their reading performance. In addition, the tutoring program is a "powerful experience" that actively involves preservice teachers in teaching and learning through modeling by a literacy professor. The program is also a way for preservice teachers at EMU to practice the strategies they have been learning in their multicultural education course and elementary reading methods course. Most important, the program is a way to promote social change, justice, and equality.

### **Helping Children Improve their Literacy**

As a result of current initiatives to help elementary students improve their reading performance so that they might read at their appropriate grade level by third grade, interest in tutoring programs for at-risk students has emerged across the nation. Current research suggests that many students improved their reading performance through these tutoring programs (Fitzgerald, 2001; Moore-Hart & Karabenick, 2000).

If tutoring programs are to be successful, they must be grounded in current theory and practice (Fitzgerald, 2001; Moore-Hart & Karabenick, 2000). For example, to help culturally and linguistically diverse students improve their reading performance, there is also a need to help them develop thoughtful, clarified, and healthy identifications and connections with their cultural heritage, history, and beliefs (Au, 1993, 1995; Banks, 2001, 1993; Kirk, 2001; Diamond and Moore, 1995). These authors further emphasize that culturally and linguistically diverse students also need to feel that the school curriculum acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural heritage and them as individuals. One effective way to foster and develop healthy connections between students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds is through multicultural literature (Au, 1998; Bishop, 1987; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Moore, Diamond, & Knapp, 2003). Daisey (1997) similarly suggests the use of storytelling and

biographies of culturally diverse scientists and mathematicians as another way to promote these healthy connections.

Kirk (2001) and Fairbanks (1998) similarly emphasize the need to immerse students in authentic reading and writing situations that evolve from students' family histories, life circumstances, and cultural roots. Writing autobiographies, poetry, journal writing, or narratives about their life experiences are examples of authentic writing situations suggested by these authors. Immersing students in authentic reading and writing events is consistent with research that recognizes the relationship between reading and writing (Routman, 1994; Shanahan, 1988; Tompkins, 1994). Kirk (2001) and Fitzgerald (1993) caution that there is a need to ignore incorrect grammar, nonstandard punctuation, and spelling at first for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. They state that rewards should evolve from students' efforts and experimentation with print rather than from their mistakes.

Even though research illustrates that instruction which integrates reading and writing reinforces and strengthens students' performance in reading and writing, few tutoring programs integrate authentic writing activities into the program. Many tutoring programs are limited to interactive reading between tutors and tutees through the use of trade books (Moore-Hart & Karabenick, 2000). Equally interesting, most tutoring programs are not structured to foster and develop healthy connections between students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds through multicultural literature, storytelling, or biographies; most programs are not structured to include authentic reading and writing experiences that evolve from tutees' family histories, life circumstances, and cultural roots.

### **Purpose of Article**

As the director of Project Literacy, I decided to restructure our tutoring program to include these multicultural principles and perspectives, as well as research on reading and writing. The following article describes Project Literacy, how I monitored and assessed the tutoring program, and what I learned from my evaluation of the program. As I evaluated the tutoring program, I wanted to explore the significance

of the tutoring program for preservice teachers and culturally diverse children. In the course of examining the tutoring program, I hoped to gain insights into preservice teachers' learning experiences within culturally diverse settings and tutees' reading and writing performance when it emerges from their families' history, life experiences, and cultural roots. The insights I gained from the evaluation would help me modify and reform the tutoring program as I continue. Specifically, the following questions guided my evaluation of the tutoring program:

1. How did the preservice teachers feel about participating in this tutoring program, located within a culturally diverse setting?
2. How did the preservice teachers feel that this experience within a culturally diverse setting influenced their understanding of multicultural education?
3. How did the culturally diverse tutees feel about participating in this tutoring program?
4. How did the culturally diverse tutees feel their reading and writing changed?

### **Project Literacy: A Description of the Tutoring Program**

#### **What is it and Who is involved?**

Project Literacy is a weekly tutoring program designed to help children who live in an urban community improve their reading and writing at their apartment community center, located centrally within a large apartment complex. Children of varying ages have a place to come to read and a place to get help with their schoolwork from volunteers at their apartment community center. The two-hour sessions are informal, providing children, who are predominately African American, opportunities to read, listen to stories being read, write poems and stories, and receive help with their homework from caring, supportive preservice teachers. The philosophy of the program is to deliver services at the neighborhood level; the mission is to help create successful reading experiences for the children.

Children (N=25) participating in the program reside within the apartment complex. Approximately 98 percent of the children are

African American, with a small population of Asian or Mexican American students. The children live in a low-income neighborhood, which has areas of urban decay and a high degree of crime and substance abuse. Many of the children live in single parent homes where their mothers who are struggling to make ends meet, have two or more jobs. The children attending the tutoring program range in ages from 5 to 13. Although most of the children are elementary students, some are teenagers seeking help or desiring to help the younger children within their apartment complex. For example, one 13 year old, Monica, explained she came because her mother thought it would be good for her. She also shared that it was fun because some of her friends are here and she can help out with the younger children.

In addition, most of the children were reading below grade level in school. They had limited opportunities to read at home with their parents or mothers. Many of their parents were overwhelmed and exhausted from working long hours. Some of their parents did not believe they could help their children because they, too, had experienced difficulties reading and writing in school. Most of the children further had limited experiences with writing at home or school.

The tutors (N=20) participating in the program present primarily female, European-American preservice teachers taking a reading methods class at a nearby university located in southeast Michigan. Three of the tutors are African American; two are male preservice teachers. Fifteen percent of the tutors were freshmen or sophomores; 85 percent were juniors or seniors. They all volunteered their time, two hours per week, in order to help these children who live in poverty. According to one tutor, Sandi, it is important that we let these children know that there are people who care about them. The tutors also share they have an opportunity to try strategies and techniques they are learning within their reading methods class. As Jennifer explains, "We get to see what really works." She also pointed out that she could practice developing her own lesson plans while working with the children.

Importantly, as director of Project Literacy, I am a learner among learners as I simultaneously extend my own understanding and



knowledge about diversity within this urban setting. Consistent with Joyce and Showers (1980), I organized our tutoring program to include five essential elements: study of the theoretical basis of the new teaching method, observation of demonstrations by a model educator, practice in simulated settings, opportunities for feedback, and coaching. As preservice teachers participated in the program, they would have additional opportunities to see multicultural literacy strategies modeled by a literacy professor. They would also have someone to guide them as they begin implementing the modeled strategies with their tutees or trying other strategies they are learning within their methods classes at the tutoring site. Importantly, they would also have someone to provide them feedback, coaching, and support as they practice the strategies with their tutees. In addition to directing the program, I recruit volunteers from reading methods classes, order and maintain supplies to be used with the program, and plan the tutoring sessions for each semester.

### **How Does Project Literacy Work?**

I organized the tutoring program to give children a chance to interactively read books with their tutors, listen to stories being read by their tutors, or do their homework with the assistance of their tutors for the first hour. During the first forty minutes, tutors interactively read with their tutees, following the techniques modeled at their workshop or within their reading methods classes. While informally reading and talking about the stories they are reading, tutors and tutees enjoyed a healthy snack provided by United Way. The books children are reading are part of the Project Literacy library, located in the apartment community center. The library, which is continually growing through funds provided by United Way, includes a large number of African American picture books, various multicultural books (See Diamond and Moore, 1995), and numerous picture books which are part of "Children's Choices," sponsored by the International Reading Association (Children's Choices includes favorite books of children and teachers determined through a survey process each year).

During the second hour, I modeled a variety of interactive literacy activities that evolved from the children's families history, life circumstances, or cultural roots for the preservice teachers. These

activities frequently began with a selection from a multicultural picture book, which I read aloud to the group while asking questions to stimulate thinking and active participation in the reading event. The selections, which included a variety of genre, were chosen to foster healthy connections between the children's cultural and life experiences. The multicultural stories also provided a context for authentic writing experiences, including poetry, narratives, biographies, and informational texts.

During this portion of the session, I further modeled the importance of prewriting activities in the writing process for the preservice teachers and students. Once the prewriting activities were completed, preservice teachers and students composed their drafts. Then they informally revised and edited their drafts together. Since preservice teachers were prewriting and drafting their own writing pieces as well, the children always had a model of how to prewrite and compose their pieces.

The sessions culminated with an opportunity for tutees to share their writing with their peers. Throughout the sessions, I continuously circulated, giving praise to preservice teachers and the children as they socially interacted and participated in these literacy experiences. I further supported the children as they used their temporary spelling, giving them words of praise for their efforts. Consistent with Kirk (2001), incorrect grammar, nonstandard punctuation and capitalization were ignored by myself and preservice teachers at this point. Our goal was that the children become confident in their ability to write. The writing pieces were later typed in a monthly newsletter for parents and put in student folders for the children by a graduate assistant. Since the writing was to be published, the graduate assistant changed the grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, as necessary, so that the pieces could easily be read.

### **A Workshop for Preservice Teachers**

To provide preservice teachers the theoretical framework for both the tutoring program and multicultural issues, I planned a two-hour workshop prior to their first tutoring session. During this workshop, I shared information about the Literacy Corps, its history, philosophy, and mission. Following this introduction, I modeled several current multicultural reading/writing strategies they could use with their tutees.

To help the preservice teachers become better acquainted with one another at the beginning of the workshop, I began by having them interview a partner using the “I AM” format. Working in pairs, the partners interviewed one another, asking for words to describe themselves, things they like and don’t like, things that they do well and not so well. Interviewees recorded their partner’s responses on their “I AM” sheets. Once interviewers completed their poem, partners switched roles and interviewees became interviewers. Upon completion of the interviews, the partners realized they had created poems describing one another. Not only did the preservice teachers have an opportunity to get to know one another better, they also practiced the interviewing process they would use with their tutees during our first session.

At this point, I cautioned the preservice teachers that many of the children might have concerns about correct spelling when interviewing. To alleviate these concerns, I encouraged them to have the children use “temporary spelling,” spelling the words the best they could, using their knowledge of sounds and letters. If tutees were unsure of how to spell a word, I modeled how to say the word slowly; stretching the word out, and having the children record the sounds/letters they knew. Using this approach, I shared, will reinforce the symbol-sound relationship so that their tutees will begin to read and write words independently. I also explained that our goal was to increase students’ confidence in their ability to write and to increase fluency. I added that all the children’s poems would later be typed and published in their tutoring folder and in a monthly newsletter for the parents. The published writing would include the correct spelling and grammatical components.

Next, I modeled strategies for reading with their tutees. First, I modeled the Directed Reading Thinking Listening Activity (DRLTA) Stauffer (1975), a strategy that can be used when reading stories aloud. While reading the story, *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe (1988), an African version of Cinderella, I showed preservice teachers how to stop and ask prediction questions as they read stories with their tutees. After reading the story, I demonstrated how to use the “I AM” format to create a poem about one of Mufaro’s daughters, using prewriting strategies (For more specific information about these strategies, see Diamond and Moore, 1995).

I AM

I am \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
I like to \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are important to me.  
I am good at \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
I am not good at \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
I love my \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
I don't like \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.  
This is me.

I finished the session by modeling various ways to read with a tutee, using the cloze procedure. With the use of overhead transparencies of multicultural stories, I showed preservice teachers how to use this procedure while they read interactively with their tutees by having the tutees help them read the story. Depending upon the reading ability of the tutee, I explained, tutors could pause at single words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. Whenever they pause, I shared; their tutees would then read the single words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. I reemphasized that they could decide whether to have the tutees read single words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs according to their reading level and ability and the difficulty of the book. Reading with their tutee in this interactive way helps tutees learn to recognize more words and learn to use appropriate phrasing and expression, which is modeled by them, the tutors. This strategy could further reduce the stress reluctant readers often experience when reading by themselves, having to stop frequently to seek assistance in the pronunciation of numerous words.

Finally, I concluded the workshop session by sharing the importance of understanding and appreciating differences among people and fostering positive human relations in a global society. I further emphasized the importance of making positive connections between children's cultural and personal experiences by integrating authentic reading and writing activities that reflect their life experiences, beliefs, traditions, history, and values. We then reflected about the various reading/writing activities modeled within the workshop and how these activities might promote successful reading and writing experiences for the African American children. We also discussed other ways we might construct authentic reading and writing experiences that evolve from the

cultural and personal experiences of these children. Finally, I congratulated them for being proactive, striving to make a difference in the lives of these children. I pointed out that this is the highest level of multicultural education striving to change the status quo of society, justice, and equity.

### **What Does the Tutoring Program Look Like?**

The following week, we met at the apartment community center for our first session of the Literacy Corps. Tutors began the sessions by introducing themselves to their tutees and then interactively reading books with them while enjoying their snacks. After about forty minutes, we regrouped. After introducing the tutors and myself to the children, I explained the interview process for the "I AM" poem and shared that we would publish their "I AM" poems and the "I AM" poems of their tutors in their parents' monthly newsletter in a few weeks. I further explained that all their weekly writing pieces would be typed and published in folders for them to keep.

Tutors and tutees eagerly began interviewing one another. While recording their responses, tutors and tutees further had the opportunity to get to know one another better, asking one another more questions. The children also experienced the joys of writing, while practicing their reading, as they shared their "I Am" poems with the whole group. As the children worked on their poems, I also circulated, giving them praise for their ideas and willingness to record the responses, using their temporary spelling. This further modeled the importance of praise to the preservice teachers. At the same time, I guided the use of temporary spelling whenever needed, supporting the preservice teachers as they applied this teaching strategy with their tutees. Children who finished early drew pictures to accompany the poem or practiced reading their poems aloud. By the end of the session, new friendships were forming; new bonds were developing. The children began to look forward to the next few weeks with anticipation.

All subsequent sessions followed this same format. Children read books with their tutors, listened to stories being read by their tutors, or did their homework with the assistance of their tutors while eating their

snacks during the first forty minutes. The last forty minutes included a variety of interactive reading and writing experiences modeled by me. At the close of the tutoring sessions, tutees always had an opportunity to share their writing with their peers. To facilitate the interactive process and model effective teaching and learning strategies during the sessions, I continuously circulated, praising preservice teachers and the children as they interacted and participated in the literacy experiences. I also used this time to coach preservice teachers as they applied various strategies or to answer questions.

### **How Did We Promote Children's Reading Through Writing?**

As the weeks continued, tutors and tutees continued to read and write together. The topics included authentic reading and writing situations that evolved from students' family histories, life circumstances, and cultural roots. They wrote autobiographies, poetry, or narratives about their life experiences as suggested by Kirk (2001) and Fairbanks (1998). During one session, for example, after reading a variety of poems about winter together, the tutors and tutees wrote winter poems. After I read a variety of poems about winter aloud to the group, preservice teachers and students took notes, in a list form; of activities they enjoyed doing in the winter as I reread the poems more slowly. Students were encouraged to use their temporary spelling as they took notes. Those who were unsure about taking notes followed their preservice teachers' model at first. Once they saw how to take notes, they continued on their own. After everyone took notes on the poems, we then dramatized two of the poems about building snowmen. The children were now ready to compose their own poems about winter in Michigan. Once again, those who were unsure about writing a poem began to see how to organize their ideas into a poem from their preservice teachers' model. Importantly, this literacy experience helped them see connections between reading and writing and their life experiences. Tessa's and Dion's poems are displayed below:

Winter  
When I think of winter  
I think of cozy clothes,  
Knitted hats, sweaters and mittens.

Tiny, cute, purring little kittens.  
Ending all my coldness with hot chocolate  
Run jump, skate and play  
Winter  
Tasha, Age 8

Winter  
Build snowmen,  
Make a snow angel,  
Have snowball fights.  
Drink hot chocolate with marshmallow and whipped cream  
Winter  
Dion, Age 7

On another occasion, I read the story, *A Weed is A Flower* by Aliko (1988), aloud. I hoped that students might form role models for their own lives as I read this story about George Washington Carver, an African American scientist. As I read this story aloud, preservice teachers and children wrote notes about George Washington Carver's life, his values and beliefs, and his accomplishments as a scientist. Once again the preservice teachers modeled the process for the children who quickly caught on and began notetaking on their own papers. The notes were then used to compose biopoems about George Washington Carver. Shakisha's (age 9) biopoem is found below:

George Washington  
Son of a slave  
Lover of flowers, weeds, roses  
Who feels curious, happy, courageous  
Who needs education, clothes, love  
Who fears slavery, shadows, dark  
Who gives peanuts, sweet potatoes  
Who would like to see freedom, snow, friends  
Resident of Alabama  
Carver

Her poem reveals the importance of courage, education, love and freedom in George Washington Carver's life. Perhaps George Washington Carver's beliefs and values will be a model for Shakisha to

pursue in her own life.

Many children like to dream about imaginary trips or events in their own lives. Just before the preservice teachers were to leave for their spring break, I read the story, *Just us Women* by Caines (1982), aloud to the group. After reading this story, which is about a young African American girl and her aunt taking a trip, I had the preservice teachers and children brainstorm a place they would like to go someday. Then I had them form a web of where they would go and what they would do on this trip. Donita (age 8) chose to go to Disney World:

Let's go! It's jump-up time. Me and my friend Katrina are going to Florida. We cannot wait to get there! The first thing we are going to do is to go check into a hotel and now we are on our way to have fun. Then we are going to spend the weekend at Disney World. When we get there I want to go on a lot of rides like water rides and rides that go high up in the air.

Now we are there, getting up on those fun and exciting rides. We have gotten really tired so we are going back to the hotel and go to sleep.

One can see how the model of the story helped her come up with a creative lead and a great ending for her story.

Desiring to help the children form healthy connections between their cultural roots and traditions, I read Maya Angelou's (1994) book, *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*, a story that depicts the life of a young girl living in Tania. As the preservice teachers and children listened to the story, they recorded notes about African traditions and customs in this African village. Once the story was read, they composed letters to a friend or relative, sharing what they had learned about life in this African village. This is a letter Dewayne wrote to his mom and dad:



Dear Mom and Dad,

To day we read a story about a girl in Africa. The girl went to school. She is an eight year old girl. She has a friend who was friends with a chicken. She had been to her friends house before. They had bikes just like us.

From,  
Dewayne, Age 7

On another occasion, I read the story, *The Talking Cloth* by Mitchell (1997). The story recounts how two children's aunt, who had just returned from Africa, told them about the African tradition of the talking cloth. After listening to the story, preservice teachers and children created their own "story cloths," using colored markers. Once they completed their story cloths, they wrote about the meaning of their story cloths. Chamiya (age 7) wrote:

#### My Story Cloth

I feel like an Ashanti Princess when I wear my story cloth. Each of the colors mean different things to me. Brown is "happy" to me. Blue is "real". Green means "special" to me and black is my hair. I like pink. This is my story cloth.

Children also continued to write about events in their lives, just as they had done with their winter poems. For example, as spring was approaching, I brought in several bouquets of flowers for children to observe. After they used their observation skills to talk about the different flowers, I had them complete webs, which built on the five senses—smelling, touching, feeling, seeing, and hearing—about the flowers. Once the webs were completed, the preservice teachers and children used these words to compose poems. Jamil and Dominique composed the following poems:

#### Spring Flowers

I hear them twinkle like the stars in the sky  
When I hear them rhyme, they sweeten my heart  
down and low  
They make me sing very slow  
Flowers smell so beautiful to me

Just how they are  
Yellow and green  
Sometimes they can be purple and yellow  
But the most beautiful color on a flower to me is  
green and yellow.  
Dominique, Age 8

Spring Flowers  
I think they smell beautiful like the wind in the sky  
The way they bloom they smell so fresh—like stars that  
twinkle  
They feel so light  
And they are pretty and tall like God in the sky  
And they look so, so sweet  
I love pretty flowers  
They are fresh  
They are yellow and green like my mom's perfume  
They feel so funny  
They are moist and dry  
They feel small and soft like a baby's feet  
Flowers are nice and cute  
I am going to have a garden  
Oh, I love flowers  
Jamil, Age 9

Then in April, children wrote poems about Easter. To help preservice teachers and students to brainstorm their ideas and thoughts about Easter, they formed lists of words, ideas, and events related to Easter on their paper. Following this prewriting activity, Melvin and Conswala wrote the following poems about Easter:

Easter  
Easter looks like a sunny day.  
Easter sounds like birds chirping!  
Easter smells like boiled eggs.  
Easter tastes like chocolate.  
Easter.  
Melvin, Age 7

Easter  
Easter looks like women dressed up in dresses and hats.

Easter sounds like kids playing, singing choirs, and church songs.  
Easter smells like barbecue and dinner cooking.  
Easter tastes like jelly beans and chocolate eggs.  
Easter feels like warm sunny breezes and furry stuffed animals.  
Easter  
Gemeke, Age 8

Thus, the interactive reading and writing activities followed the suggestions of Kirk (2001), Fairbanks (1998), and Daisey (1997). They were authentic reading and writing situations that evolved from students' family history; life circumstances; their cultural roots, traditions, beliefs, or values; or cultural models such as scientists, mathematicians, or leaders.

### **Assessing Project Literacy and Its Impact on Preservice and Student Learning**

My efforts to evaluate the Project drew on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Using these procedures, I hoped to gain insights into preservice teachers' learning experiences within culturally diverse settings and tutees' reading and writing performances when they emerge from their family histories, life experiences, and cultural roots.

Throughout the duration of the project, I was a participant-observer, recording events and interactions among preservice teachers and students through the use of field notes. Additional data included written artifacts, preservice teacher and student questionnaires, preservice teacher and student interviews, and preservice observational notes. Specifically, the preservice questionnaires provided insight into their views about the tutoring experience, what they learned from the experience, how the experience benefited them and the children, and what suggestions they had for the program. The children's questionnaires provided insight into their feelings about the program, reading and writing; how the program helped them; and what new things they learned as a result of the tutoring experience. In order to monitor the tutoring program and its impact on the children's reading and writing, I also had preservice teachers record their observations at the conclusion of each session. The format for their observations included at least one successful experience during the session, observations of their tutees' reading and writing performance, and suggestions or questions they might have. To provide a more in-

depth perspective, a graduate student also interviewed five preservice teachers and three children in April. The open-ended, structured interviews gave preservice teachers and children opportunities to talk about the experience and its benefits/strengths/weaknesses in greater detail. These interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Responses from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Patterns and themes related to teaching and learning were noted and compiled.

### **What I Learned from the Observations**

Close analysis of the interactions between the preservice teachers and the African American children revealed that bonds were developing between the tutees and tutors. Whenever one looked about the room, one saw smiling faces and children desiring to learn. If a preservice teacher or student was absent, their partner immediately wanted to know where they were and if they would be back the following week. Even though I placed the children with new partners on these rare occasions, they appeared disappointed and would inquire about their partner two or three times during the session. Similarly, preservice teachers were discontented if their tutees did not show.

Although many of the European-American preservice teachers shared that they had few prior experiences working with African American children, they became very comfortable with their partners in a short time. Andrea's comment illustrates how this experience has influenced her, "I learned a lot about the students and the families, especially in the African-American culture. I've seen how what we are doing makes a difference in the children's lives and the families they come from, the community as a whole." Similarly, Jennifer's comment shows how her feelings about culturally diverse people changed, "I've become more understanding [of people] with different backgrounds because in my school ... I never had anybody different but white kids."

The observations also revealed animated conversations between the tutor and tutees. At the beginning of each session, the two talked about informal experiences, things that were happening in their lives, or things

that happened in school or at home that day. Once the pairs began reading, they dialogued about the story they were reading, sharing their own personal experiences or feelings about the characters in the story. Frequently, the conversation revolved around the story's meaning through questioning or discussing the meaning of new vocabulary words.

Observations further demonstrated increased confidence and continuous growth in preservice teachers' use of effective teaching strategies. Before long, they became more comfortable with the "shared reading experience" as they took turns with their partner reading single words, sentences, paragraphs, or pages together. Some preservice teachers even became creative with the approach. For example, one preservice teacher became a character in the story she was reading with her tutee; her tutee became another character. These shared reading experiences repeatedly provided children a model of effective reading strategies, expression, and phrasing. With practice, their own fluency improved as they imitated their tutors' expression or phrasing.

In addition, preservice teachers began to talk more about the story and its meaning with their partners, asking higher level questions about the story, and discussing the meanings of words unfamiliar to the children. Many of the preservice teachers also began to try various strategies they were learning in their reading methods classes. For example, some tried the KWL strategy, the Venn Diagram, or the use of graphic organizers before reading. Others tried language experience stories with the younger children or journal writing. Still others made games or used hands-on learning materials such as magnetic letters or letter tiles to reinforce letter knowledge or symbol sound relationships. Several preservice teachers also began to bring some of their favorite books to the tutoring session to share with their tutees.

During the interactive reading and writing portion of the session, the preservice teachers also explained the strategies they used when taking notes, webbing, or drafting their ideas to the children. This provided scaffolding for the children as they began to attempt the same strategies with their own notetaking, prewriting, or drafting activities. The preservice teachers' model of writing also helped the children realize how to do the various genres of writing more easily. Importantly,

preservice teachers guided the children's writing through praise, encouragement, and more praise, following the model I gave them. The children's faces beamed with pride; their confidence in their own ability to read and write grew steadily.

Observations of the children's interest and motivation in the stories read aloud during this portion of the tutoring session illustrated the power of reading multicultural works that present cultures in an authentic manner. Students were motivated to read the books independently later. As they continued to read these books and stories, which were readily available for them in the Project Literacy library, children's reading performance, especially their fluency, seemed to be increasing.

The books further became catalysts for writing and valuing their own life experiences. Consistent with Kirk (2001) and Fairbanks (1998), students wrote insightful pieces that revealed significant events and experiences in their lives. For example, Dewayne discovered that children in Africa attend school just like him, and they, too, ride bikes. Shakisha realized the importance of courage, freedom, education, and love in her life from writing her poem about George Washington Carver. Others discovered the joys of imagination in their lives or the magic that each new season brings to our lives. Importantly, the writing further revealed the students' values and beliefs in their lives. For example, Gemeke and Jamil's poems illustrate the importance of God and religion in their lives. As children listened to their peers share their writings, their own experiences, beliefs, and values became validated.

As time went on, the number of children attending the sessions grew. Word had spread among the children and parents. New tutees who came to the sessions were eager to have something published in the monthly newsletters, too. They were motivated to join their peers as they interactively read, wrote poems or stories, and shared their writing together. Tracy, a preservice teacher, in fact, shared that her tutee, Ashley, did not want to quit writing when it was time to go home. Others reported that their tutees were writing two or three pieces each session.

## **What We Learned From the Preservice Questionnaires, Interviews, and Observations**

**Preservice teachers' feelings about the tutoring experience.** All preservice teachers reported that the tutoring experience was an enjoyable, rewarding experience (Question 1). Examples of their comments about the tutoring experience include:

- "I really enjoyed the experience. I liked working with the children and I learned a lot."
- "Great! What an experience!"

This represented a change for many of the preservice teachers, who were initially frightened of the experience due to Project Literacy's location in a low-income neighborhood within an urban community. As the semester continued, they were no longer concerned about the project's location. They discovered the rewards of helping others as shown by their comments:

- "I felt my time was being used for a good cause."
- "I felt children were having fun while learning to read. It was a very positive experience."
- "I realize it is very easy to make a positive influence on the lives of children."

Perhaps the experience became empowering due to the "powerful experience" that engaged them actively while simultaneously drawing upon their mental and emotional attention. These comments illustrate their feelings:

- "I'm glad I had an opportunity to volunteer."
- "I felt great helping the children—a very rewarding experience."
- "I enjoyed getting to know the children and knowing that I helped them learn."

Interestingly, some of the preservice teachers became more committed to volunteerism. For example, one preservice teacher commented, "People should volunteer their time to serve their

community, whether it be helping the kids, the homeless. I mean whatever, just anything where you're doing something to help other people instead of thinking about yourself." Similarly, Sean commented, "My attitude hasn't changed, but I just feel that I've become more aware. I always felt that community service was very important but now I just think it's really, really important. Just in more depth." Importantly, another preservice teacher shared that the experience inspired her to work in an urban setting. She shared, "I plan to continue with community service. Before I thought I'd like to work in an urban setting, but now I'm almost positive I want to work in an urban setting."

**Preservice teachers' understanding of multicultural education.**

Regarding their understanding of multicultural education (Question 2), preservice teachers gained new insights into their own understanding of multiculturalism. For many, this was their first culturally diverse encounter. They had attended schools located in monocultural suburban settings. Others had only had limited experiences with culturally diverse children. These preservice teachers explained that they were more aware of cultural differences and more open to different lifestyles of children as a result of the experience.

- "This experience should really help me since I have not had an experience with multicultural children."
- "I have become more open to different lifestyles of children."
- "It gives me more of an understanding of kids' needs/wants. I'm more open."
- "It has exposed me to a wide variety of individuals and helped me to better interact with others who are different from me."

Many preservice teachers also shared that they gained more knowledge about and insight into children of differing ages and backgrounds through the experience. Others became more confident in their abilities to work with diverse children.

- "This experience will help me understand the different living arrangements and communities that my students will be a part of."
- "I've worked with a lot of kids from diverse settings. I learned a lot about them, how to work with them."



- “I feel more confident in my abilities to work with children from diverse backgrounds. I realized how much I have to offer children.”

Several preservice teachers explained that they learned a variety of teaching strategies to use with culturally and linguistically different children.

- “I learned that every child has to be reached in a different way.”
- “I have gained many new strategies to help children learn to read and write.”
- “I learned to be more patient and give help when they want it rather than every time a minor mistake is made.”
- “It made me aware of different resources children have to learn and how to use them effectively.”

Still others added that they learned about the importance of community centers for children living in poverty, and they realized the importance of helping make a difference in the lives of these children.

- “I learned that these children won’t have the extra help if we don’t volunteer and most of them haven’t experienced much outside of their neighborhood.”
- “I learned it is important to keep working on issues of poverty.”
- “I’m a little less scared to do [community service]. I feel better about it now. I’ve gotten good by myself...a little more comfortable.”
- “I learned how to alleviate the social problems through community service and the community centers.”

**Preservice teachers’ perceptions about children’s reading and writing performance.** Regarding children’s reading and writing performance (Question 4), preservice teachers shared that the children improved their reading and writing performance, got more opportunities to practice their reading and writing, received additional support with their homework and reading, and enjoyed the support and attention they received during the session. According to the preservice teachers’ questionnaires and interviews, they felt children were improving their reading and writing:

- “It was great to see the children’s reading and writing skills improve over the 10 weeks. The children who come more often have benefited the most.”
- “The children had extra practice with reading and writing.”
- “This experience will benefit them forever.”

The preservice teachers believed that the one-on-one attention was very important. They also noticed that they were a caring adult with whom the children could experience the joy of reading and writing.

- “The children liked the one-on-one attention. They developed relationships with us and reading and writing was fun.”
- “The children have someone to read with them.”
- “The children learned that school and learning can be fun and that there are adults who care.”

Importantly, some realized they became role models for the children. For example one preservice teacher shared, “The children have role models.” Most preservice teachers added, “The children loved it!”

Preservice teachers’ observations provided additional insight into how the program specifically benefited the children. In particular, they noted that their tutees were reading with more fluency and expression through practice and role modeling. Examples of observations include:

- DeWayne is reading with more fluency and expression.
- Nikkeya is gradually improving her reading.
- Andrea is reading better than she was at the beginning.

Others noted that tutees were recognizing more words or sounding out words more easily while reading:

- Dominique is sounding out words she didn’t know before.
- Edward is sounding out the beginning and endings sounds of words easier.

A few preservice teachers also reported differences in children’s comprehension. For example, one student shared, “My tutee is asking numerous questions as she reads.”

Many observed differences in the ways children were writing. For example, several preservice teachers commented that their tutees were sounding out words, using temporary spelling more easily, and spelling more words independently. They also noted that the children were able to web or take notes more easily with practice. As time went on, preservice teachers also reported that many students were writing longer pieces, writing more notes, and writing more than one writing piece. For example, tutors commented:

- Demario is using webbing to gather his ideas for writing.
- Voneshia is sounding out her words and using temporary spelling more easily.
- Chamiya is focusing more on her reading and writing.
- Angelica is writing two and three stories or poems each session.

### **What We Learned From the Student Questionnaires and Interviews**

**Children's feelings about the tutoring experience.** Just as the preservice questionnaires and interviews revealed that the preservice teachers found Project Literacy to be a rewarding and enjoyable experience, the student questionnaires and interviews similarly indicated that all students found the tutoring experience to be lots of fun (Research Question 3). Almost all of the children explained that they come to the tutoring sessions because it's fun:

- "I feel happy!"
- "I feel very good about coming."
- "It's fun and we do lots of activities."

Many specifically stated that they came to the tutoring program because they liked reading or writing:

- "I like coming to tutoring. I like to read. I like to write."
- "I have fun! Reading is fun. Writing is fun."

Others shared that they were learning to read and write better:

- "I like to come to tutoring because I get help when I come here."

- “I feel good about learning to read.”

Still others noted that they were getting help with their reading and writing, and they were learning:

- “I feel great about coming to tutoring. I like to read about black history. I love to write.”
- “I learned a lot of things like to read better and to listen to stories.”
- “I like to learn everything.”
- “This is a good place to learn things.”

A few also reported they liked doing their homework here or they got help with their homework here. For example, Demario shared, “I learned how to do my homework.” Most of the children further commented that they loved their tutors because they helped them learn to read and write better.

**Children’s perceptions about their reading and writing performance.** When asked how the tutoring experience helped their reading and writing (Question 4), many children explained that their reading and writing was changing. They shared:

- “I can read more. I can write stories.”
- “I can read more faster and stop at the period. I know my [exclamation] marks.”
- “I can really read now. I can read a lot of words, and I couldn’t read a lot of words before.”

Others shared that they were practicing more and that helps them become better readers and writers:

- “Practicing reading has helped me read better.”

Many explained that they were getting help from their tutors and this was helping them read or write better:

- “Reading is better for me because I read better. I know more words because of the tutor.”
- “My tutor helped me to read and write.”

- “My tutor helps me with my writing.”
- “I am becoming a better reader and writer because I get help when I come here.”
- “My tutor teaches me words I don’t know. She helps me take my time.”

Several children reported that they were improving in their school work or their study habits:

- “I am doing better in school.”
- “I learned to work hard. That leads to success.”
- “I am learning and studying.”

Importantly, these responses are consistent with the observations made by preservice teachers. The children were discovering the joys of reading and writing in a nurturing environment.

### **What We Learned from Students’ Thank You Letters**

Additional insight into the children’s perceptions about Project Literacy came from letters the children wrote to their donors, thanking them for the program. These letters reveal the close bond between the tutor and tutee, ways the children are improving their reading and writing, and what they enjoy about the program. Importantly, these letters further corroborate the findings from preservice and student observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Examples of quotes that show the bond between the tutor and tutee include:

- “The tutors are very helpful to us kids. They are very nice and help us with our homework at all times.”
- “The tutors are my friends.”
- “I make friends with the tutors by talking things out with them.”
- “The tutors are like a sister or brother to kids who don’t have a brother or sister.”
- “I like the tutors. They help me with my homework. They give me a lot of attention.”
- “I like to work with my tutor.”

Examples of comments that suggest the children feel their reading or

writing is improving include:

- “I get good grades on my spelling now.”
- “I learn a lot.”
- “My tutor helps me read.”
- “I get to practice my reading.”

Importantly, the following comments show what the children enjoy about the program and how much they enjoy reading and writing:

- “My favorite things are reading books and playing games with the tutors.”
- “I like to read many different kinds of books like I Spy and Author books.”
- “We also have snacks and do fun activities.”
- “I am a better person by acting normal and courteous.”
- “The tutors are also a lot of fun to help with homework.”
- “I like that tutors help me with my homework.”
- “It is very nice that we have a place like this where we can come and spend quality time.”

### **Concluding Remarks and Thoughts**

Certainly, the findings illustrate that the efforts of the tutors were making a difference in the lives of these children. Children were learning to read and write in a supportive environment, a place where they could learn to enjoy reading and writing. This supportive environment further provided children one-on-one assistance and scaffolding from their tutors. This scaffolding helped them acquire the strategies that effective readers and writers use. The supportive environment further gave them the opportunity to practice their reading. According to Stanovich (1986), future problems in reading frequently result from the secondary effects of not practicing reading in school and outside school. Just as good readers get better because they take advantage of opportunities to read, the tutees were reading better because they were reading with their tutors.

Reports from the principals and teachers in the children’s schools validate the importance of this caring, supportive environment. They shared that many of the students were beginning to improve their reading and writing. Perhaps Project Literacy helped support the reading and

writing performance of these children, reinforcing what they were learning in school, helping them to improve their reading and writing through practice. However, what's most important, according to tutor Sandi, is that the children know there are people who care about them.

The Literacy Project is also a way to help preservice teachers develop and extend their understanding of multicultural education while receiving a model for their learning. If we want preservice teachers to become culturally sensitive and to apply their multicultural knowledge while teaching within classrooms, they will need multiple experiences in a variety of field settings to practice these strategies. According to Sleeter and Grant (1994), multicultural education is not an end in itself, but rather a way to strive toward more social justice. This can only happen through change, and change takes time. Just as "one shot" inservices do not foster instructional changes for inservice teachers (Diamond & Moore, 1995), one field experience will do little to promote cultural understanding and its application through instructional changes or curricula transformations. As preservice teachers participate in multiple experiences within a variety of settings, they will become more culturally sensitive and learn how to apply their knowledge and experiences over time. Through these experiences, they might form an evolving identity with culture and its influences on teaching and learning. These emerging understandings might influence how they encode the world around them and interpret information (Purcell-Gates, 1995). Tutoring experiences similar to Project Literacy can become one of these experiences.

Having teacher educators direct the tutoring program is also consequential. Having teacher educators model culturally responsive teaching strategies and genuine cultural learning events that evolve from students' cultural backgrounds and experiences may further facilitate preservice teachers' application of multicultural practices within their teaching in the classroom. As preservice teachers see authentic reading and writing situations that evolve from students' family histories, life circumstances, and cultural roots modeled; perhaps they will begin to create similar literacy experiences within their own teaching. The importance of modeling is emphasized by Smith (1981), who claims that the first essential component of learning is seeing how something is

done. He further adds that preservice teachers need to see appropriate instruction in practice.

Preservice teachers also need coaching and feedback as they explore implementing these literacy events. Having teacher educators continuously provide guidance and assistance might transform the way preservice teachers conceptualize and practice literacy in plural societies (Hoffman, 1996). As they see these children's responses to challenging literacy events, perhaps they will have higher expectations for all students in their classrooms.

There is also a great deal of advocacy work to do within the field of multiculturalism. We need to ensure equitable funding for children who reside within culturally diverse settings, particularly those who live in low-income areas. In their recent study, Neuman and Celano (2001) report differential access to reading and writing materials by these children early in life, suggesting the need for a number of important accommodations for improving these children's achievements. One important accommodation includes the collaboration of educators and community organizations. Through their combined efforts, we can create real, authentic literacy opportunities that are connected to real-life experiences and students' cultural, social, and personal backgrounds (Au, 1998; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Project literacy represents one model for fostering collaboration between the university and community organizations in urban settings.

Another important accommodation includes a larger number of preservice teachers willing to work in culturally diverse settings, especially in urban low-income areas. Perhaps the "powerful experiences" Shaw (1993) advocates will make this a reality. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews indicate that a few preservice teachers were beginning to consider teaching in these settings. If preservice teachers have multiple experiences within these settings, perhaps more will decide to begin their teaching careers in similar settings.

Importantly, participation in the program might further help them to become more proactive agents within their own communities, designing programs to make society more just and humane (Banks, 2001;



Potthoff et al, 2000). The impact of such efforts is illustrated in the following preservice teacher's comment: "I think we're really a positive impact and a force in the community. I know we are because the community liaison police officer will come and tell us statistics like crime has dropped since our program started and the kids are definitely excited and they keep coming!"

After reading this article, I hope that others will consider beginning a similar tutoring program within their own community. I know that this was a "powerful experience" for me, one that I will continue to pursue in the future. However, as I think about the tutoring program, I know I would like to include more time for the preservice teachers to reflect on their experiences as they work with the children. Perhaps this could be accomplished by adding another thirty minutes to the program. This way the preservice teachers and I could dialogue and reflect upon multiculturalism and teaching and learning in culturally diverse settings, either before the tutoring program begins or just after the children leave. We will have more time to consider additional teaching strategies or materials that will connect with children's cultural and personal life experiences. This will also give us more opportunities to trouble shoot and to help one another see alternative ways of helping children who are struggling with reading or writing.

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