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Children's literature, Multiple perspectives, Cultural relevance, Teacher education

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Influences on Diversity in Teacher Education: Using Literature to Promote Multiple Perspectives and Cultural Relevance

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Abstract

It is not uncommon for students in a teacher education program to bring with them a lack of experience in working with diverse populations. This culturally insular perspective often leaves them ill-prepared to face the highly diverse classrooms they will soon encounter. This study describes a context created for 120 students in an undergraduate Literature for Children course to critically analyze selected literature and participate in varied group discussions in order to better understand the diverse classrooms they will likely face as teachers. This qualitative study examines themes extracted from student journals and discussions in order to show the influence literature can hold in promoting multiple perspectives and cultural relevance.

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Introduction

Today's elementary and middle school classrooms are challenging microcosms of the rapidly changing world. Disappearing in most regions of the United States are classrooms filled with students who have grown up as neighbors, sharing more commonalities than differences. Diversity in race, culture, language, socio-economic status, abilities and educational needs creates learning settings fraught with new teaching challenges. While teacher preparation programs recognize and address these challenges as much as possible, it is decidedly more difficult when undergraduates bring with them a broad spectrum of ideas, attitudes and beliefs about teaching those who are not exactly like them—or not anything at all like them. It becomes even more complicated when the teachers in training are predominantly White, predominantly female and predominantly lacking in exposure to diversity. What can teacher education programs do to more effectively develop future teachers who understand the broad spectrum of diverse populations they will face?

Undoubtedly, the better prepared preservice teachers are to work with diverse populations, the more effective their teaching can be.

Becoming competent and caring mentors for a broad range of students...means developing specific skills and competencies for teaching students who speak languages other than English and whose cultural and racial backgrounds differ from their own. But these competencies are not acquired out of the blue; they need to be developed and nurtured. Teachers and prospective teachers, especially those who have not had extensive experience with students of diverse backgrounds, need to learn to understand human differences in order to tap into the intelligence and capacity of all students. (Nieto, 2010, p. 215)

While more on-site, practical learning field experiences in diverse settings are an ideal means of preparing future teachers, that option is not always available. Another very real opportunity for exposing education students to issues of diversity is through carefully selected literature. For the purpose of this work, it means carefully selected Contemporary Realistic Fiction. This literary genre has the potential, when combined with in-depth discussions and meaningful activities, to help education students develop a more open-minded, accepting attitude toward, as well as a deeper knowledge base about, such differences.

Contemporary Realistic Fiction (CRF) is defined by Kiefer (2007) as imaginative writing that accurately reflects life as it was lived in the past or could be lived today. In contrast to fantasy-based books, everything in CRF can conceivably happen to real people in the natural physical world. "A well-written contemporary story should do more than just mirror modern life. It should take children inside a character and help them understand the causes of behavior; at the same time, it should take them outside themselves to reflect on their own behavior" (Kiefer, 2007, p. 469). If such literature is meant to provide insight to readers, the potential in helping shape ideas, attitudes and beliefs of teachers-in-training should be explored.

Theoretical Frame

Literature provides for a unique interaction between the reader and the text. Early research by Louise Rosenblatt (1969) introduced the importance of the transactional nature of such interactions. In further exploration of these interactions, Rosenblatt (1978) contends that the act of reading involves transactions between reader and text and that reader and text continuously act and are acted upon by each other. Readers will respond to literature in different ways and will react differently to the text if read again. Readers bring their own backgrounds to each reading, interpreting text through their own personal history, knowledge and systems of beliefs. This schema theory of reading comprehension considers two sources of information interacting with each other—the personal processing of the text and the reader's experiential knowledge. Both sources interact and modify one another (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert & Goetz, 1977).

Education students may not have the kind of experiences in their preparation programs that will expose them to every type of diversity they may eventually face, but a greater exposure to quality CRF may provide an opportunity to interact with a text and become more aware, open-minded, and it is anticipated, more accepting toward new situations they will face. Ladson-Billings (1995) highlighted the importance of providing future educators with examples of culturally relevant teaching in theory and practice through her work with young, middle-class, White women. Other studies have shown strong support for presenting cultural diversity issues in preservice programs to better prepare students to establish their beliefs about equity and social values associated with diversity (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006; Brindley & Laframboise, 2002). It is not unusual for preservice teachers to arrive with "culturally insular perspectives" and for them to "not experience the cognitive dissonance necessary to reexamine their cultural beliefs" (Brindley & Laframboise, 2002, p. 405). Acquiring new knowledge feels uncomfortable—particularly because it challenges an individual's previously held assumptions and biases (Wolf, Ballentine & Hill, 1999). It is that very discomfort that accompanies discovery that may serve as impetus for education students to consider new ways of thinking.

Education students are not unaware of the need to be prepared for diverse classroom populations (Taylor & Sobel, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000). They believe all students, regardless of background and abilities, are entitled to an equitable education and that teachers have a responsibility to address all their education needs. It is the education students' lack of exposure to experiences with diverse populations that proves challenging to them. Although literature depicting diverse races and cultures is only one part of a culturally responsive classroom, it can be a powerful tool for challenging a wide range of stereotypes (Singer & Smith, 2003). The potential for literature to engage readers toward new discoveries about the world and their varied roles in that world should not be underestimated; however, simply reading the literary selections does not automatically guarantee new insights for the reader. Reader response opportunities must also be provided. The types of negotiations that occur in peer-group discourse create opportunity for future teachers to discover new insights, solidify or question beliefs and create new meaning. Rosenblatt (1978) notes that several factors affect the meaning readers take from a book, including the story itself and how the author tells it, the way the reader draws on personal experiences that help him or her make sense of the story, and the way the reader approaches the text. Reader response theorists contend that readers generate meaning through the interaction that occurs between the reader's personal experiences and text. Providing opportunity for students to read specified texts, engage in peer group discourse, and create written reflections, provides an outlet for the generation of new meaning.

My teaching challenge became evident to me while working with my Literature for Children students: How could I help the students in my classes who come from predominantly homogeneous, culturally insular backgrounds and experiences be better prepared to teach in the extremely diverse classrooms that are becoming the norm rather than the exception in contemporary schools? There is ever-growing support for and ongoing conversation about the potential of literature to help teacher education students develop a broader spectrum of ideas, attitudes, experiences and beliefs about teaching those who are not exactly like them. Diversity in race, culture, language, disabilities, socio-economic status and educational needs create new teaching challenges for these future teachers. This study investigated the role of CRF in aiding education students to challenge their previously held beliefs and attitudes in order to become better prepared for their future classrooms.

Method

The Course

Literature for Children, part of the Educational Leadership program offerings at the Midwest university where I teach, is one of a number of courses that meets completion requirements for undergraduate students in early childhood, elementary, and middle school regular and special education teaching licensure programs. Sections accommodate 25-32 students, with both full-time faculty and adjunct staff teaching the three to five sections offered each semester.

The primary purpose of the course is to help students grow in their understanding of children's literature, how to evaluate its quality, and the varied roles of literature in the classroom. Ultimately, students develop a repertoire of ideas and materials through some type of annotated resource collection. Specific requirements in regard to the number and types of books students read are meant to broaden their experiences and repertoire. Additionally, students in the class are introduced to critical readings, and actively participate

in literature circles, genre studies, small discussion groups and literature-based lesson plan development. Throughout the semester, students read a wide variety of carefully selected literature, listen to varied viewpoints on issues of power and privilege, censorship, social justice, and sensitivity to differences, and they develop reflective writings. Students participate in these many activities to better understand the experiences they can meaningfully incorporate into their own future classrooms.

Participants

This study included data collected from five sections of the course over a two-year period. The 120 students in these combined sections enrolled 19 males and 101 females, with four fitting the category of "non-traditional," having initially begun an undergraduate program after age 25. Students represented a balance of early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescent, adolescent, and special education majors. Typical of class make-up at this predominately White university, all but three students were Caucasian; one student was Native American, one Hmong and one Japanese. English was the first language of all except for the international student from Japan and, although third generation, the Hmong student. Further, five of the students were of sophomore, 80 of junior and 35 of senior standing.

Literature, Discussion and Reflective Response

Students in Literature for Children engage in reading and discussing a variety of literature for children and young adults. Issues of diversity, social justice, power and privilege are infused throughout the course. Although freedom is given to students for exploration of a multitude of titles of their choosing, some titles are required readings. These titles have included *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995), *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000), *The Road to Paris* (Grimes, 2006), *Heat* (Lupica, 2006), and *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998). See Fig. 1 for details of these selections. It is important to have some common readings to draw upon specific examples and discussion points as a class. Students are encouraged, however, to also draw upon the readings they are completing individually for the annotation, discussions and reflective writing assignments. In selecting these particular titles, I sought books that include characters from different parts of the country and who elicit empathy. It was imperative I create a context where my students participate in discussions, using such strategies as literature circles, peer response groups, and large group discussions, as well as reflective writing activities in order to critically view literature from multiple perspectives. Reading in isolation of other activities would likely have little impact in changing students' belief systems, creating cognitive dissonance, or allowing them in-depth connections to the characters and situations within the literature. Thus the critical readings were combined with discussion and writing opportunities to help students negotiate their belief systems in the safety of our classroom setting as their emerging teaching selves developed.

Title/Author	Literary Quality	Brief Summary
<i>From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun</i> by Jacqueline Woodson	ALA Best Books for Young Adults & Coretta Scott King Honor Book	Melanin Sun is a thirteen year old boy who finds that his mother is in love with another woman. The story is told through his eyes. He fears what others will think of his mother's relationship and is drawn apart from her as he struggles with the situation. Not only does he have to deal with the relationship his mother is involved in, but he is also beginning to discover girls and agonizes over the stirring feelings he is having about Angie. He begins to come to terms with the relationship that his mother has with the other woman, Kristen, but continues to worry about what other people will think and how he will deal with them.

<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> by Terry Trueman	ALA Best Books for Young Adults	<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> is the heartbreaking tale of a young boy, Shawn, who has cerebral palsy and is profoundly developmentally disabled. However, inside his broken body, Shawn believes himself to be a genius due to his ability to remember everything he has ever seen or heard. Shawn is unable to prove this power to anyone around him as he is unable to communicate, and is unable to even focus his eyes where he wants them to go. Shawn also cannot protect himself when his father decides the best thing he can do for him is kill him.
<i>The Road to Paris</i> by Nikki Grimes	Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book	Paris has just moved in with the Lincoln family, and isn't thrilled to be in yet another foster home. She has a tough time trusting people, and she misses her brother, who has been sent to a boys' home. Over time, the Lincolns grow on Paris. But no matter how hard she tries to fit in, she can't ignore the feeling that she never will, especially in a town that's mostly white while she is half black. It isn't long before Paris has a big decision to make about where she truly belongs.
<i>Heat</i> by Mike Lupica	ALA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults	Michael Arroyo is a 12-year-old boy with big dreams, especially for a poor Cuban refugee. He dreams of pitching in the Little League World Series and ultimately of playing in the major leagues like El Grande, his hero and fellow Cuban immigrant. But Michael is facing difficulties in his life. He lost his mother to cancer at a young age, and his father died of a heart attack just a few months after coming to America with Michael and his 17-year-old brother Carlos, leaving the boys to fend for themselves.
<i>The Skin I'm In</i> by Sharon Flake	Coretta Scott King John Steptoe Award for new authors.	Maleeka Madison is a strong student who has had enough of being teased about her "too black" skin and handmade clothes. So when she starts seventh grade, she decides to adopt a sassier attitude and a tougher circle of friends. The last thing she expects is to get "messed up" with another "freak," but that's exactly what happens. After a new teacher, whose face is disfigured from a skin disease, enters her life, Maleeka learns to love the skin she's in.

Figure 1. Summary of literature selections

Analysis of Themes

For the purposes of this study, comments from students' reflective writings were examined. While quality discussions were part of each class meeting, these exchanges were not analyzed specifically, but supported the students' written comments that were examined as part of the study.

Analysis focused on the themes that emerged from the assigned writings. Themes were extracted through a Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a qualitative research method aimed at deriving theory through the use of multiple stages of data collection and interpretation. An initial coding and categorization was completed first wherein units of meaning—in this case several lines or a short paragraph—were identified during an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This resulted in 1076 identified units. Once scrutinized for commonalities that could become categories, the axial coding step, interconnections were made among categories with the focus on determining more about each one in order to refine the initial list. During this step, 23 specific categories of

students' thoughts, feelings, knowledge construction, questions, and multiple perspectives exploration emerged. As the list was even more specifically refined in the selective coding step, further sorting for evidence of conceptual and emotional engagement progressed until a set of key categories was extracted.

Close analysis of the key categories showed that students were consistently reflecting on three significant areas. Discussion follows on these highly interrelated themes that eventually emerged during this process: 1) The expressed fears, insecurities and uncertainties associated with a lack of experience with and exposure to different types of people and the change in thinking that helped them better understand their developing teacher self; 2) the impact of course readings and discussions centered on the chosen literature and how the ideas meshed or clashed with students' current thinking; 3) the establishment of goals for future teaching including means of incorporating quality literature as well as advocating for all students.

Analyzing the Emergent Themes

Data were collected from five sections of the course. The group dynamics in each class were very different, of course, and the content of the course was refined over the two-year period. However, when placing a numerical value on each theme, it was evident that regardless of these differences in class make-up and content, the identified themes were prevalent in each section. Although students spent a considerable amount of class time in small and large group discussions on topics, the analysis was completed from individual written reflections. Students clearly developed a comfort level in sharing personal beliefs and the implications of their new discoveries on their future teaching. Some of the sharing went beyond the parameters of the assigned reflection topics. The reflective writings gave me various insights into my students' perceptions of themselves and their developing knowledge and meaning building. Several interesting patterns were framed within their writings and extracting those patterns would help me understand the impact of reading and discussing quality CRF within a judgment-free environment in an effort to help students explore the sometimes difficult topics inherent in issues of culture, community, and relating to the world. Quotations are used extensively to demonstrate the common strands of thinking that appeared in these reflections and to bring a strong voice to the analysis.

Fears, Insecurities and Finding Meaning

A recurring theme in the reflections was that of relating what students did or did not experience in their backgrounds and how that led to their current thought processes and perceptions. Forty-four of the 120 students (36.6%) reflected in writing about their discomfort, lack of real experience, or outright fears in working with the diverse populations awaiting them in future classrooms. While a handful of students experienced diversity through travel, military experience or living abroad for a short period, the majority had experienced a homogenous, culturally insular background. Many, like the student quoted below, noted schooling experiences that lacked exposure to differences.

My experience with people of a different race has been very limited so I am less comfortable when it comes to teaching them. I don't understand many of the cultural influences and social pressures of being a minority. Often I find myself frustrated because I don't feel I can relate to these students very well. These feelings also hold true for students who come from a family with a low socioeconomic status because I was raised by an upper-middle class family. I have been very

privileged and I don't know what it is like to go without basic needs such as ample food, shelter, and clean clothes.

Some students were clearly disturbed by their lack of exposure to individuals who were not like them in regard to culture, race, socioeconomic standing or physical ability, and noted the discomfort. Their perceived and expressed comfort level was a common topic of discussions and written reflections.

Inclusion was not an issue that ever came up while I was in school. In high school, the disabled students were taught separately and out of plain sight. I had very little exposure to those students unless I saw them passing in the hall. Sadly, I always felt somewhat embarrassed to make eye contact with them or any other disabled person I saw outside of school. However, in my defense, I am positive that is a common reaction from anyone who is not exposed to such diversity. I am now far more aware of the situations that individuals face. My feelings have changed in that I am not so oblivious and do not feel the need to turn a cheek to these individuals in fear of embarrassment.

Many admitted their first real experience with any type of diversity was found upon arrival at the university. The culture shock of moving from a small sheltered setting to a larger university town was frequently noted. One student commented, "I shocked a few of my college classmates when I was clueless as how to classify different people and their backgrounds."

Students do not generally disclose feelings of discomfort immediately, but as they become more comfortable in the classroom setting, the ability to open up and share some of those difficult to accept self-evaluations become more prevalent. Fears, insecurities and uncertainties were commonly expressed in a number of ways throughout the students' reflections but they also worked through these feelings in discussions and conversations as noted in their reflections. One student commented, "The discussions I had with other classmates made me realize that it is possible to work with students with disabilities and feel completely normal." Additional comments follow:

The class discussions have also eased some of my fears because my classmates have reassured me that I will fall in love with all my students and the differences they have seem to melt away.

Coming into this semester I was nervous about working with students different than I am. I was nervous because I was not sure how I could handle certain situations that might arise or how my teaching style would affect the students differently.

Many people in the classroom had a lot of stories and experiences to share about working with people who had a handicap. Although I do not feel very comfortable working with students who have severe handicaps yet, people in class that were comfortable gave me hope that with more experience, I will also become more comfortable.

Knowing others shared their insecurities was comforting to students, helping them to open up even further in their reflections as the semester progressed. A student wrote, "I found it enlightening that I am not the only one who felt scared and unsure when dealing with levels

of diversity.” She additionally notes that after talking with others in the class she found “those who also came from a more ‘sheltered’ home environment felt similar.” Another commented:

Hearing my classmates’ opinions and insights was encouraging. I was reassured that other people had some of the same concerns and uncertainties that I did. But it was also comforting to hear that this is natural and that the more experience I get, the more comfortable I will become.

As students worked through feelings of discomfort, they also wrote more about the impact they would soon have on students in their own classrooms. They began to read the literature with an eye toward not only better understanding those future students but also determining the important role literature would one day have for their students.

The Impact of Course Readings and Discussions

Students generally do not have a positive reaction to learning on day one of class that they will be required to read and critically respond to a minimum of thirty books during the semester. It therefore surprises them just how engaged they become in the readings. Their engagement is evidenced by the animated conversations during the varied classroom activities. Their writings reflect how their thinking developed through the semester and the strong impact literature had on them. Without question, the selection with the greatest impact is *Stuck in Neutral* with almost every student noting some new insight about themselves, family members, and/or future students after reading this novel. Some comments included, “*Stuck* makes me want to learn more about children with disabilities,” “*Stuck* will make me forever view disabled children differently,” “*Stuck* gave me more confidence than I had before” and “*Stuck* gave me valuable insights about empathy.” In general, students found value in required readings in regard to developing their teacher self and in wanting to learn more about diverse populations through exposure to literature. Of the 120 students in the sections under study, 99 (82.5%) directly referenced the readings and/or discussions specific to the readings having a powerful impact on their thinking and/or actions. Several representative comments follow:

As comfortable as I thought I was, I have some growing to do. Reading *Stuck in Neutral* and *The Skin I’m In* helped me realize this. I also realized that it’s important to have books like these for my future students to read. Books can help open their eyes as they have different experiences in school.

Broadening my literature choices with multicultural books has been another beneficial asset in increasing my awareness as well as my appreciation for the differences among people. Along with the books, grand conversations and small group discussions have also helped me to become more comfortable with and accepting of differences. In addition to gaining awareness and appreciation, I have developed an understanding of the importance of embracing these differences among my students and making them feel safe and welcome in the classroom.

I have realized that you cannot just ignore culture in the classroom. Before this, I had views that there would be no differences no matter what the culture. I thought that I wouldn’t see a color difference in my classroom. Everyone would be equal. When in reality, having that view on culture means I would just be ignoring the differences in my students and treating them all the same. I have to recognize

cultural differences in my classroom in order to give the students the education needed...I will need to get to know the students personally. I will need to know their customs, their learning preferences, and their home background in order to know how to instruct them.

This class really helped me understand how books can truly help me be prepared for all students that will be in my room. Books have given me extra knowledge about different types of students, which helps me feel more comfortable because I have some ideas of how to deal with some situations and a more general idea about a variety of cultures and other differences.

From this class, I have changed my ideas about working with people different than me. In the past, I felt comfortable working with others but I was not necessarily comfortable discussing differences unless the students brought it up. In this class, I learned an excellent way to be open about differences in class. I realized how reading a book could open up a discussion about differences without hurting someone's feelings. Literature can show that even though we all have differences, we are also the same in many ways. I thought this was a great realization for me because there are so many genres of books that would introduce this topic and be easily incorporated into the classroom.

As students commented on the value of the literature, they also identified an extensive repertoire of activities they could use to promote multiple perspectives in their classrooms. This is further developed in discussion on the third emergent theme, the establishment of goals for future teaching.

Goals for Teaching and Advocating

A primary goal of the course is to help students critically evaluate literature. It is important for me to create a context where students participate in activities which allow them to critically view literature from multiple perspectives. Students have little difficulty taking experiences in this course and using them to set goals for teaching. For 73 of the 120 students (60.8%), this meant giving clear, specific statements in their reflections related to how they will approach teaching with a critical eye on the issues raised in this course. Many noted the need to learn more about the backgrounds of their students in order to give them better opportunity to succeed. A number discuss ways they will build a sense of community so the same types of discussions they had in class can be replicated in their future classrooms. "Teachers should create an open and accepting classroom environment in which these issues can be discussed," was commonly stated.

Students noted a desire to provide opportunities for students to become knowledgeable and aware of diversity. One noted, "My vision for my classroom reflects my appreciation for the diversity I am likely to see in my future classroom. I learned that it is okay to take some risks and expose my students to new and somewhat controversial topics and provide them with the tools and mindset to form their own opinions." Reflections frequently noted the use of literature across the curriculum to achieve goals related to helping children "think critically about stereotypes they hold and/or stereotypes they see portrayed in literature, textbooks, and the media."

Another common thread was understanding the need to advocate for students. "I want to teach my students that skin color, ethnicity, socioeconomic differences, physical differences

or anything else that may be different from student to student does not limit the things they can achieve," one young woman noted. Another stated,

After the readings and conversations, I have found myself to be more accepting and even a bit more welcoming of children with differences. I want to challenge myself to help my students overcome their differences and the hurdles they may face because of them.

It was not uncommon for students to write about their role in the larger school community, expressing a need to be a change agent for the sake of all in the school. As one noted, not everyone will have the same feelings about advocating for change so it may be her responsibility to serve that very role, even teaching other teachers as needed. "In my role as a teacher, I must represent a change agent in a democratic society." Another stated, "As a future teacher I feel it is my duty to help my students become caring and accepting individuals. Children have the capacity to be very accepting individuals if given the chance—and appropriate role modeling."

Based on the quality of written reflections, the content and required readings resonated with most of the students. Only a couple of students did not reach the same level of understanding, evidenced by comments such as, "I know I'll have students from a wide variety of backgrounds, but is it really my responsibility to teach foreigners English or disabled more than they could possibly need?" While frustrating, these displays of personal feelings still reflect the comfort students had in thinking and discussing freely—even when it went against the grain of popular thought. The quality of "debate" resulting from such expressions went far in further instilling in the majority the need to educate children and adults alike to advocate for those who may otherwise be marginalized.

Discussion, Reflections and Summary

Early in the semester, students are asked to think about their experience and comfort level with those who are not like them in terms of culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability. The first days of class it is common for students to speak without giving much thought to their answers. Some will provide an example of spending time with a friend, relative or acquaintance fitting one of the "different" categories instead of delving into the real issue of comfort level. Students provide a response meant to show they know that individuals with varied backgrounds will be part of their classrooms. As the semester continues, students become comfortable sharing on a deeper level, even challenging their previously stated beliefs.

Each semester brings a new set of students, different in make-up, of course, but other differences become readily apparent. Some are far more comfortable than others in readily sharing their insights, fears, and concerns than others. This seems to be the case when students have experienced a number of pre-professional courses together. It becomes evident fairly quickly when students have not shared such a history, whether because of taking courses in a very different sequence, transferring from another institution or having returned to the university after a break of one or more semesters. Providing opportunity to explore uncertainties in a judgment-free setting allows students to explore their thought processes, ask each other questions, and critically analyze what core perceptions they hold that could interfere with their ability to teach all students.

It must be noted that not all aspects of students' changes in thinking or increased ability to reflect are the result of this single course; however, exposing students to quality literature

provides impetus for more in-depth discussions about teaching all students. This becomes evident in the change in responses from admissions of fear to excitement about future teaching situations.

The transformation in perceptions as noted in reflections was similar each semester. Students developed a comfort in sharing that allowed them to travel from feelings of self-doubt to an ever-increasing level of comfort with the idea of teaching diverse populations. Finally, they developed a stronger teacher identity as they explored CRF. Literature served as an important tool in working through this progression as confirmed by this representative comment:

I have no doubt that my classroom will be diverse no matter where I decide to teach. I will need to make sure my students understand these differences and one of my key tools to that understanding will be literature. Quality literature like the texts we have been reading for class allows students to look at topics through a different perspective, gain insight about others as well as their own lives, and become more familiar and comfortable with people of different ethnic, socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

My purpose in conducting this study was to examine how reading and reflecting upon literature helps teacher education students come to a better understanding of themselves and the students they will teach. Clearly, there is a place for quality Contemporary Realistic Fiction to provide what students may not have directly experienced or been exposed to, and more importantly, to guide students toward greater reflection as they look toward becoming teachers of highly diverse classrooms of children. Providing access to quality literature, a judgment-free setting and opportunity for discourse allows students to find a comfort in being able to admit their discomfort so they can then negotiate a path toward greater awareness, acceptance and advocacy.

It is difficult to measure the extent to which the students' reflections established a long-term pattern of thinking, but this researcher believes the experience has the potential to be transformative for future educators. This assumption is based on three frequently addressed concepts in the students' reflections. One recurring strand of comments centered on self-realizations or revelations. These comments, 87 in all, usually started with "This class changed me" or "This class changed the way I think." Student comments admitting fears and uncertainties accounted for 73 of the coded comments. What makes this researcher more confident in calling the semester's activities transformative is the movement away from introspective reflective comments toward actions students believed they would take in their future classrooms to provide an improved learning experience. The 223 comments falling into this category showed that students were willing and able to address fears, concerns, uncertainties and personal confessions of bias and prejudice, yet they were also able to move beyond those to address how to be an effective teacher for all learners. Student discussions at semester end were focusing more frequently on how they would promote greater understating in their future classrooms opposed to focusing on issues of self. Louise Rosenblatt's (1969) Transactional Theory of reading alone does not guarantee such transformative thinking. She notes, "The transactional view is especially reinforced by the frequent observation of psychologists that interests, expectations, anxieties and other patterns based on past experience affect what an individual perceives"

(p. 44). While this theory demonstrates the important role of interaction with a text, also important is the opportunity for students to engage in critical conversations about the text in connection to their current way of thinking and their perceived teacher self of the future. This more expansive approach has the potential to be transformative for future teachers.

The reader is an active participant in the act of reading. "...the intrinsic value of a literary work of art resides in the reader's living through the transaction with the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 132). Students in Literature for Children are given time and opportunity to read, reflect and respond to literature. They learn that meaning drawn from a text is a personal experience located in human practices of communication, actions and relations. Critics of Rosenblatt posit the educational relevance of the theory for contemporary education is that it provides a powerful critique of classroom approaches that promote shallow readings with little opportunity for critical reflection. This researcher **begins** with the transactional theory of reading but positions it in a broader scope of reading theory, critical analysis and quality classroom discourse. Beginning with the transactional relationships to the text, students are able to see themselves in relation to the characters and actions of the text. Through further reflection and opportunity to intelligently question, challenge and appreciate values and ideas within the text, students begin to form a position. This is further developed by application of critical perspectives, an element not inherent in Rosenblatt's theory but necessary for the transition from the process of reading to the process of thinking critically. The discussions and activities centering around the application of critical lenses, while not inherently part of Rosenblatt's theory, provided my students deeper discussions, deeper ways of looking, and deeper ways of knowing. Rosenblatt's theory is a theory of reading that "explores how readers read, interpret, evaluate and criticize literature...it does not teach a certain critical perspective..." (Cai, 2008, p. 213). It was this researcher's responsibility as the course instructor to provide the critical perspectives, the opportunities to explore, question and challenge, and the forum for the articulation of what students believe to be their truths as they continue on their journey to become effective, caring teachers.

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