Wrestling with Issues of Diversity in Online Courses

Kristine S. Lewis Grant and Vera J. Lee
Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA

This manuscript provides an overview of the findings of an ongoing qualitative exploratory study that examined how preservice and inservice teachers in two different online education courses (ED 600 and ED 500) developed an understanding of the multifaceted issues that affect diverse learners. The study also investigated the instructors' reflections about their courses through their individual journals. An analysis of the study participants' Discussion Board posts and interactions online revealed how the Discussion Board forum was used as a critical, reflective space for participants' to engage in self-reflection and to exchange and challenge one another's ideas. The journals also revealed the instructors' overall aspirations for the course, and their role in cultivating an online community in their courses. Keywords: Practitioner Research, Multicultural Education, Online Courses, Preservice/Inservice Teachers

Introduction

The rapid rise in the number of education programs and degrees that are being offered in fully online formats (Kitsantas & Talleyrand, 2005; Licona, 2011) has raised questions about how well these programs are preparing preservice and inservice teachers to work effectively with diverse learners in K-12 settings. In particular, questions remain about how preservice teachers are demonstrating growth and change in asynchronous courses, in terms of shifting perspectives, assumptions, and attitudes about working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The concerns about teacher education programs developing culturally responsive educators are significant in light of the fact that the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students will continue to increase in the future (Goodwin, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Teacher education programs recognize the significance of addressing student diversity in the preparation of future educators. Nieto and Bode (2012) define diversity as "one's identity frames [or] how one experiences the world" that can be connected to language, culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, socioeconomic status, and other "social and human differences" (p. 5). A number of studies have examined how preservice and inservice teachers are reflecting about issues of diversity in traditional face-to-face courses; however, there is still a lack of research about the ways in which preservice teachers are thinking about issues of diversity in asynchronous courses (Kitsantas & Talleyrand, 2005; Merryfield, 2001).

Reflective practices in teacher education programs have been established and incorporated into many courses as a desired learning outcome and a professional standard for preservice teachers (Loughran, 2002; Ramirez, et al., 2012; Rocco, 2010). Reflection is a critical, recursive process that encourages preservice and inservice teachers to "better understand what they know and do as they develop their knowledge of practice through what they learn in practice" (Loughran, 2002). While research is emerging from the field that investigates reflective practices in asynchronous courses (cf. DeWert et al., 2003; Rocco, 2010; Ryan et al., 2012; Whipp, 2003), there is a significant gap of knowledge about how

online teacher education courses are using reflective practices to develop and prepare preservice teachers into culturally responsive educators.

Related to this, there is also a gap of knowledge about the ways in which teacher educators who instruct courses focused on diversity and multicultural education are thinking about their own teaching experiences in an online course. College and university faculty in face-to-face classes have implemented practitioner inquiry to examine their exploration of diversity and educational inequities with preservice teachers (Berghoff, Blakewell, & Wiseheart, 2011; Spatt, Honigsfeld, & Cohan, 2012). Similar research is needed to understand how online instructors approach and improve upon preparation of culturally responsive educators.

In this article, we present the findings from a larger exploratory qualitative study that investigated preservice/inservice teachers' personal reflections and discussions about diversity-related topics on the Discussion Board of two different online courses (ED 600 Culture, Language, and Learning and ED 500 Introduction to Multicultural Education). In addition, the article considers the instructors' critical reflections about issues of diversity that emerged from their individual journals.

Integrated Framework

There are three theoretical frameworks that are important to the present study: practitioner inquiry, multicultural education, and Community of Inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) conception of practitioner inquiry privileges the emic perspective of teachers in K-12 and higher education settings as knowledgeable experts, and presents the idea that meaningful changes in practice must come from the "inside out" led by teachers. Informed by qualitative research, our approach emphasizes the centrality of reflexivity to practitioner inquiry. Multicultural education, the second framework, is a political and pedagogical tool that is both anti-racist and anti-biased (Sleeter, 1996). Multicultural educators work towards equity and justice for all students (Nieto, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2012). As teacher educators, we endeavor to create spaces for our students to engage in critical reflection. Lastly, the "Community of Inquiry" framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003), offers an important way of understanding the elements of student identity, collaborative learning, and instructor facilitation that are necessary to cultivate an online community.

Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner research, as developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), has several fundamental premises:

a) using inquiry as the basis for how research is conducted individually or in collaboration with others;
b) utilizing one's own professional context as the research setting;
c) embracing practitioner knowledge as generative and valid; and,
d) deconstructing boundaries between research and practice (p. 39)

Furthermore, it is grounded in the work of Dewey who "emphasized the importance of teachers reflecting on their practice and integrating their observations into their emerging theories of teaching and learning" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 9), and Schön (1983) who characterized practice as a process of "posing and exploring problems as identified by teachers themselves" (p. 9). The dual process of inquiry and reflection produces meaningful knowledge for teachers in transforming and informing their practice.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) discuss the work of university professors within their concept of "dialectic of inquiry and practice" who are concerned with addressing and investigating specific questions and problems directly connected to the researcher's professional setting (p. 94). A "dialectic of inquiry and practice" pertains to the idea that learning communities of practitioners can collaborate to understand a set of questions or issues and gain new insight that can change institutional or classroom practices (p. 94). These dimensions of practitioner research were evident in the present study in terms of what our preservice/inservice teachers were learning about diversity-related topics as captured in their Discussion Board posts, and in our individual reflections about our students' learning processes.

Our approach to practitioner inquiry was rooted in qualitative methodology. As the primary instruments of research in the investigation of our teaching, we – as both educator and researcher – were reflective and reflexive (Wilhelm, 2007). To be reflective, we drew upon "personal values, experiences, and habits" to make meaning (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 57) and to understand our practice. Being reflective also required us to identify our subjectivities, recognize our blind spots, and consider how assumptions influence our inquiry (Watt, 2007; Wilhelm, 2013). To be reflexive, we managed our beliefs and assumptions in order to see and understand teaching and learning in our courses from multiple perspectives (Peshkin, 1988; Wilhelm, 2013). Embarking on a collaborative practitioner inquiry bolstered the critical interrogation and interpretation of our course data (Merriam, 1998). Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "Constant Comparative Method" was particularly useful with the reduction, analysis, and interpretation of our data. By looking within and across our courses, we located themes that were relevant to our individual and collective experiences with teaching and learning about diversity.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is a critical framework that informs our understanding of diversity, and our belief that teacher educators need to prepare their students to become culturally responsive educators. While multicultural education has developed into various conceptual camps, we align ourselves most closely to multicultural education as defined by Sleeter (1996) who describes it as a political movement that represented the larger sociopolitical struggle of minorities who wanted to receive equal "power and economic resources" (p. 137), and Nieto and Bode (2012) who state that it "challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism…that students, their communities, and their teachers reflect" (p. 42). The fact that the majority of the teaching field continues to be comprised of European American preservice and inservice teachers makes it more of an imperative for teacher educators to address how race, social class, and gender continue to provide unequal education to culturally and linguistically diverse students in schools, while advancing the interests of other groups that have more access to wealth and power (Sleeter, 1996).

Nieto (2000) also argues that one critical aspect of multicultural education is its dedication to social justice for all students so they are receiving an equitable education. In order to foster an ethic of care within preservice teachers for students who have been historically disenfranchised in the school system, teacher educators must be willing to "challeng[e], confron[t], and disrup[t] misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences" (Nieto, 2000, p. 11). Teacher educators need to examine their course syllabi, required assignments, core readings, and discussion questions by using multicultural education as a lens to raise questions about how their courses are leading preservice and

inservice teachers towards embracing a multicultural stance and developing them into more culturally responsive educators.

Community of Inquiry

A third framework that is vital to our research is called "Community of Inquiry" developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) which provides critical insights into the ways in which learning is fostered in interactive online communities. The concept of "Community of Inquiry" emerged from the research of Lipman who argued that teachers need to encourage students to become "directors of inquiry" (Pardales & Girod, 2006) where the focus of the discussions emanates from the questions and interests of the students. Lipman also believed that learning within the context of a community provided optimal conditions for higher order thinking and learning to occur for each student (p. 115).

There are three main tenets of the "Community of Inquiry" framework: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Social presence relates to the idea that learners are free to express themselves as "real people" (p. 115) in an online community. Teaching presence relates to the idea that the instructor is thoughtful about course design, instructional strategies, and facilitating discussions that lead to "educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (p. 116). Finally, cognitive presence refers to the inquiry process learners experience in an online course "[in] which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry" (p. 115). The learner will explore and exchange new ideas that emanate with other learners (Garrison, 2007).

Taken together, these three theoretical frameworks construct a dynamic lens to jointly consider:

a) how preservice and inservice teachers students are developing views and beliefs about issues of diversity in connection to teaching ethnically and linguistically diverse students in K-12 settings; and,
b) how teacher educators facilitate learning about diversity in an online context.

Literature Review

The next section will review literature on fostering collaborative learning in online courses, cultivating reflection in online courses, and the integration of multicultural education in asynchronous courses. We will discuss some of the factors that are needed to create effective online communities that include the role of the instructor in scaffolding reflective practices in an online course, and facilitating collaborative learning. We will also review research on asynchronous courses that focused on multicultural education and some of the affordances and limitations of discussing sociopolitical issues within an online format.

Fostering Collaborative and Reflective Learning in Online Communities

Research about the collaborative nature of online learning suggest that online communities offer a supportive environment for students to grow and learn; learners need structure and guidance for interacting within an online context; and the instructor's role in an online course is critical in supporting meaningful learning experiences for students. For instance, DeWert, Babinski, and Jones (2003) created a statewide online network for new and experienced teachers and education faculty that offered peer mentoring and support (p. 312).

Upon surveying the participants about their experiences in the online project, about 88% of the new teachers indicated that exchanging professional experiences with veteran teachers in an online community helped them to become more aware of their actions in the classroom, and to adopt a more critical stance towards policies and practices in their schools (p. 318). In Ramirez, Allison-Roan, Peterson, and Elliott-Johns' (2012) self-study, they used Blackboard (an online platform) to offer support to one another as new faculty members in different institutions, and to exchange individual journal entries (p. 112). The findings of their research revealed that the process of sharing their challenges, questions, and reflections with other teacher educators helped them to develop into more effective instructors (p. 119). Moreover, Palloff and Pratt (2001) argued that students are able to "achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning-making" (p. 32) when they are engaged in learning collaboratively versus in isolation.

While the nature of the Discussion Board allows for open collaborative learning and reflection to take place (Palloff & Pratt, 2001), it is still vital for instructors to offer guidance to students so they understand how to reflect meaningfully and critically within an online discussion forum. Ryan (2012) contended that "reflection and reflective practice is not a clear-cut process or route with a fixed end; it is instead a recursive process" (p. 711). Ryan helped both experienced and inexperienced online students move towards deeper reflectivity within a threaded discussion by drawing their attention to important ideas present in the posts and guiding them in the development of analytical responses (p. 714). In Whipp's (2003) research on preservice teachers' online discussions, in the courses in which the researcher gave specific guidelines for constructing critical discussion board posts, the students demonstrated higher levels of reflection compared to courses in which no guidelines were given. Moreover, in Rocco's (2010) research of the online letter writing practices of preservice teachers, the instructor initially allowed students to select their own partner and students tended to select a classmate who shared similar perspectives and beliefs that resulted in superficial reflections that were "cursory and complimentary" (p. 311). Rocco redesigned the online activity so students paired up with someone they did not know, and this resulted in reflective dialogues that were substantive and critical (p. 311). The research of Zydney, deNoyelles, and Seo (2012) also examined the use of protocols or a structured Discussion Board prompt to facilitate discussions in two graduate online courses. Their study revealed that when protocols were given to students, they exhibited greater learning as a result of exchanging ideas with their classmates around a structured Discussion Board activity. An important implication from all of these studies is that the instructor's design of the Discussion Board can lead to heightened or limited levels of reflective practices for students. Learners in online courses need to be shown what reflective practices look like, and instructors need to design Discussion Board activities that will generate thoughtful collaborative learning.

The presence of the instructor in an online course is another critical factor in developing an effective online learning community. Zydney et al. (2012) suggested that when instructors were "frequently present but did not dominate" (p. 79) discussions in their courses, this increased student interaction. Palloff and Pratt (2001) also stated that instructors are supposed to "model good participation by logging on frequently and contributing to the discussion" (p. 30). In Shea and Bidjerano's (2010) study of 3165 students in online and hybrid courses in which they investigated the relationship between student self-efficacy and their experiences with online learning, their findings suggested that the instructor's presence in online courses increased student engagement and motivation, and conversely, the lack of interaction with the instructor diminished student interest and participation in the course.

The Convergence of Online Learning and Teaching and Multicultural Education

There is limited research on asynchronous courses that focus on multicultural education (Hinton, 2007; Kitsantas et al., 2005). In the past, multicultural education and educational technology were treated as separate endeavors (Damarin, 1998). Studies about the teaching experiences of instructors who teach multicultural courses revealed two benefits: improvement in the quality of responses from instructors and possibilities for greater equity and participation from students. Akintunde (2009) shared stories of successfully teaching a course on multiculturalism and racism in both on campus and asynchronous formats; however, with the latter, the researcher was more attentive to students' assignments and emails that often revealed personal struggles with the sensitive issues covered in the course. Merryfield (2001) also taught multicultural education courses in both formats and the researcher discovered an increase in participation from students of color in the online courses compared to face-to-face courses in which the students took greater risks and exhibited more vulnerability (p. 294). Akintunde (2009) also contended that an online format is beneficial for courses that focus on discussions of race and racism because it lessens the fear of being directly and negatively confronted. Finally, in discussing the benefits of merging multicultural education and technology together, Damarin (1998) cited the promises of technology in its connection to emancipatory pedagogies that foster shared knowledge among online participants and support diverse learners and learning styles.

The constraints of using an asynchronous platform to teach a course on multiculturalism have been documented as well. Despite the wonderfully candid and honest interactions that occurred in Merryfield's (2001) online course on diversity and equity, the students also felt that technology prevented them from building authentic relationships with their classmates (p. 295). The lack of real time interaction can make it harder for students to know their classmates on a more personal level. There are also questions about the quality of the learning experience for students who take a course focused on multicultural topics, and if online courses have the potential to "trivialize or exoticize cultural differences" (Hinton, 2007) without careful facilitation and planning. Furthermore, Licona (2011) raised the concern that when instructors choose not to participate in online discussions, students can project deficit perspectives and negative assumptions (p. 6) about race, class, disabilities, and gender, and other learners can be negatively impacted by those comments.

The research on collaborative learning and student reflectivity in online courses and utilizing online platforms to teach courses on multicultural education demonstrated the tremendous potential for learning that can occur. However, the research also cautioned that learners need guidance and support from the instructor in developing reflective practices, and this is particularly important for the types of issues that are explored in multicultural education courses. Learners are also more engaged and interactive when instructors are present in the course. Despite the promises of online learning, there are still questions that remain about the limitations of online courses in building authentic relationships between learners and the long-term impact that online courses will have on changing the practices of preservice and inservice teachers.

Method

The study is part of an ongoing exploratory qualitative research project that started in the Fall 2011. The purpose of the study is to examine how preservice and inservice teachers develop a critical understanding of the range of issues that affect ethnically and linguistically diverse students, and teacher educators' critical reflections about their students' learning development as well as their teaching experiences in online courses. The main research

questions that are explored in the study are: What do the Discussion Board reflections of preservice and inservice teachers reveal about the ways in which they are developing an understanding about issues of diversity in online courses? What do the reflective journals of teacher educators reveal about issues of teaching and learning that emerge in instructing online courses focused on diversity and education?

Research Site

The two online courses, ED 600 and ED 500, are offered through the teacher education program of a large private urban university located in the northeastern part of the US. The first course, ED 600 Culture, Language, and Learning, is required for undergraduate and graduate students who seek ESL certification in the state. According to the course description published through the University's online program website, the purpose of the course is to "explor[e] the needs, experiences, values, and beliefs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners." The second course, ED 500 Introduction to Multicultural Education, is an elective for all graduate students in teacher education. According to the University's course catalog, the class "explores major issues related to the increasing diversity of students in elementary and secondary classrooms in the United States."

Participant Information

A total of 10 preservice and inservice teachers participated in this study in Fall 2011: three participants from ED 500 and seven participants from ED 600. Of the ten participants, there were nine women and one man. The majority (9) self-identified as White, and one participant identified herself as "White/Hispanic." Seven of the ten participants were inservice teachers with teaching experience from two months to sixteen years at the time of the study. The remaining participants (3) were preservice teachers. The participants were enrolled in different BS/MS, MS, and certificate programs. Table 1 offers a description of participants:

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Course	Gender	Race	Status	Tenure
Theresa	500	Female	White	Inservice	6 years
Heather	500	Female	White	Inservice	3 months
Gretchen	500	Female	White	Inservice	2 months
Jane	600	Female	White	Inservice	2 months
Ericka	600	Female	White	Inservice	16 years
Charles	600	Male	White	Preservice	0
Gail	600	Female	White	Preservice	0
Tiffany	600	Female	White/Hispanic	Preservice	0
Charlotte	600	Female	White	Inservice	4 years
Christi	600	Female	White	Inservice	8 years

Data Collection

Primary data was drawn from the students' weekly Discussion Board posts that were required for both courses. The students had to post written reflections about the course readings, videos, or other materials to each course's Discussion Board site on Blackboard. Secondary data consisted of required course assignments and relevant email exchanges

between the instructors and students around course topics and objectives. However, this chapter will focus solely on the Discussion Board reflections of the participants in the study. Another set of primary data came from the weekly or biweekly journals of the instructors of the two courses. The instructors used the journals to reflect on interactions with students through the Discussion Board in their courses, and as a way to unpack other challenges or issues around teaching the course that arose for them.

Data Analysis

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "Constant Comparative Method" was used to analyze the data collected. Seale (1999) states that the constant comparative method is divided into "four stages" (p. 96). The first three are the most relevant stages to the present study. During the first stage, the researchers compare "different incidents" that have been grouped and categorized during the "coding process" (p. 96). From comparing the incidents, the researchers are then able to construct various characteristics or "properties" (p. 97) of each category. The second stage connects categories with their respective properties, and notes how the "properties interact" within a single category (p. 97). The third stage is described as "theoretical saturation" (p. 97) in which all properties and categories have been exhausted to the point where the researcher does not find anymore. All data are "thoroughly exhausted," and all possibilities for alternative properties and categories have already been considered (p. 97).

Kristine and Vera analyzed the Discussion Board posts from the participants in their specific course for preliminary themes. In January 2012, Vera constructed an initial list of properties after reading the Discussion Board posts from both courses. In February 2012, Kristine developed a list of codes and collapsed the properties into meaningful categories and sub-categories. The categories were revised as needed to accurately depict the main ideas and concepts that emerged from the participants' Discussion Board posts across the courses. We met and revised the coding sheet again in August 2012.

In order to ensure validity, the participants from our courses were given an opportunity to read how their Discussion Board posts were analyzed and interpreted for the study, and to provide further input in terms of the researchers presenting an accurate representation of his/her ideas in the final "write up" of the study. We also did multiple re-readings of the data to ensure accuracy and agreement upon the categories and major themes that we found after careful analysis and frequent discussions about the data.

Kristine and Vera shared their reflection journals with one another and with two other researchers who were a part of the larger study during biweekly research meetings. The research team met biweekly throughout the study. We read each person's journal in advance. During the meetings, we presented our responses, questions, and insights about key ideas that appeared within and across the journals. Members of the research team would then discuss the journals – offering individual encouragement and recommendations, as well as identifying shared experiences and themes across our journals. The research meetings were recorded and transcribed to maintain accurate records of the conversations that transpired around the journals. The transcriptions of the meetings and the individual journals were revisited and reviewed by different members of the research team. In July 2012 and July 2013 (following each data collection period), Kristine and Vera individually coded and developed a list of categories that appeared in the journals. These coding schemes were discussed with the research team in order to achieve consensus.

Findings

In this section, we explore the ways that preservice and inservice teachers wrestled with issues of diversity in online teacher education courses. By analyzing student posts and exchanges, we see how the Discussion Boards served as spaces for active learning and communities of inquiry. Two primary themes that emerged from the data centered around the idea of "collaborative learning" in which the participants engaged in critical self-reflection, challenged one another's ideas, and championed one another's development as teachers. In addition, the data also suggested that the participants wrestled with the idea of "becoming multicultural educators" as they unpacked the roles and responsibilities of teachers and envisioned the kind of teacher they hoped to become. They also described how course readings informed the pedagogies and practices they would employ to support the diverse students in their classrooms. After examining the students' experiences, we direct attention to our experiences as online instructors. Drawing on reflections from our journal reflections, we focused on our roles as online facilitators and our ongoing professional development as multicultural educators.

ED 600: Preservice and Inservice Teachers' Development, Perspectives, and Reflections

As noted earlier in the chapter, the purpose of ED 600 is to "explor[e] the needs, experiences, values, and beliefs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners." In this online course, the Discussion Boards were vibrant spaces for students to engage the text and one another as they worked to make sense of what it might mean for them to teach English Language Learners (ELLs).

Becoming multicultural educators

The participants imagined their role as teachers of English language learners. They dissected the assumption that all Spanish-speaking students are Mexican. They also disputed the presumption that ELLs should be spoken to and taught in English. The participants explored the loss of language and culture that immigrant students often experience, and considered the role of a teacher in the academic and social development of ELLs.

In ED 600, preservice and inservice teachers grappled with their own assumptions about immigrant students. For example, many students held the popular assumption that all Spanish-speaking immigrant children hail from Mexico. Christi, an experienced elementary school teacher, confronted this assumption with her classmates: "Teachers cannot think of their students as 'Hispanic', they are Dominican, Columbian, or Puerto Rican, etc. Just because they speak Spanish at home, we cannot assume they are Mexican!" Christi challenged herself and her classmates to move away from the dominant narrative in the United States that all Spanish-speaking immigrants are Mexican.

She argued against this assumption and countered: "Teachers must be better prepared to evaluate each student individually. We must continue to educate ourselves about cultures and religions." Instead of blindly grouping students together and making assumptions about their backgrounds, Christi called on teachers to understand each student's experience. She envisioned the role of the teacher as someone who appreciates the student's individuality. Importantly, Christi stated that it is the teacher's responsibility to continue learning about students' cultures and religions.

Gail, a preservice teacher in the class, tackled what she described as a major misconception in the education field when it comes to teaching ELLs: "the practice of

teaching and communicating with ELLs in English only." Gail attributed her insight to the course readings:

> After going through the readings this week, I realized that teaching an English proficient student versus teaching an ELL student are two completely different issues, and need to be treated as such. How are these students supposed to learn the English language (and as a result, truly understand the content being discussed during class) if their language isn't used to help explain how the language works and what things mean? Without the use of their own language, ELL's will have an extremely difficult time transitioning into the American school system, which could snowball into other issues such as lack of confidence and frustration.

Prior to this online class, Gail believed that to treat all students fairly, they must be treated the same, regardless of their differences. However, she changed her position on this when she "realized that teaching an English proficient student versus teaching an ELL are two completely different issues, and need to be treated as such." Drawing on the course texts, Gail identified the paradox in teaching ELLs in English. She discussed the challenges with facilitating student learning as well as their transition to the American education system.

Gail reassessed her thinking about the role of teachers in the acculturation process of ELLs. She emphasized: "It is extremely important that educators understand this concept [that ELL students not be taught in English only settings] because without this understanding, ELL students will rapidly fall behind, which could (and most likely will) cause long-term damage to that student's life experience in the United States." For Gail, the role of teachers is to be a help not a hindrance to the education of immigrant students.

Ericka, a veteran teacher with 16 years of experience, concurred with Gail's position that teachers must be understanding, and expanded on this by considering the role of teachers as preservers of students' language and culture. Ericka reflected:

> It is as if there is an unavoidable death of culture for all of the families who leave their home countries to a certain extent; a loss of language, a loss of tradition, a loss of identity…As a society, the loss of culture is a tragedy, and as teachers, we are in a great position to encourage individuals to hold on to their cultural identities, rather than "giving them up."

Ericka contributed to the class' collectively constructed role of the teacher by explicitly citing characteristics associated with multicultural education. She spoke forcefully: "we must … validate who they [ELLs] are and the experiences they bring into the school building each day." Ericka inspired her classmates, "we are in a great position to encourage individuals to hold on to their cultural identities, rather than 'giving them up.'" Ericka identified the power and unique position that teachers occupy in the lives of immigrant students. She encouraged herself and her classmates to act on this power and use this advantage for the benefit of their students.

Collaborative learning

Tiffany, a self-identified White/Hispanic, bilingual preservice student, illuminated the class' consideration of the teacher's role by reflecting on her lived experiences. In this passage, Tiffany explained how the assigned reading resonated with her and her experience as an ELL:

> I found Dr. Cummins' (2001) article to be very compelling and informative. I grew up as a bilingual, though I was less proficient in English than in Spanish until I moved to the States and was forced to make rapid improvements…Children cannot truly internalize/interpret information in a language in which they are not proficient. I also agree completely with his statements about the loss of the native language because in less than 2 years of living in the States, I lost my ability to speak Spanish comfortably. I understood it, and still do, but I simply stopped being able to use the language verbally. I had no support or encouragement in my school setting.

Tiffany's account brings to life the class' consideration of the experience of an ELL student and the teacher's role. Had Tiffany encountered teachers that possessed the qualities and characteristics described by Christi, Gail, and Ericka, her loss of language could have been minimized and her cultural identity would have been validated.

Tiffany generated an exchange with her professor and her peers. Vera wrote this response:

> This was quite a powerful reading experience for me to learn about your experiences growing up as an ELL. You are correct in understanding how language and identity are intricately connected. When an ELL makes negative associations with his/her native language, that sense of "alienation, difference, and ambivalence" towards his/her L1 and perhaps even his/her culture, but at the same time, the ELL's identity is not wholly American either so they are caught in a tension between two cultural spaces.

Tiffany replied:

> Thank you I think that I was certainly caught between cultures and languages and that it went on for a very long time. As a teacher I am going to keep…in mind…add to the existing culture but don't change them, don't take anything away.

In this exchange between professor and student, Vera affirmed and amplified Tiffany's experience of being "caught in a tension between two cultural spaces." Tiffany appreciated the way that Vera paraphrased and described her experience. After thanking her, she adopted the new vocabulary: "I was certainly caught between cultures and languages..." Tiffany expressed that she would learn from her experience and her course readings. She declared that she would not imitate her former teachers. Instead she would "add to the existing culture but don't change them [ELLs], don't take anything away."

Tiffany drew on her experiences as an ELL and shared strategies that teachers could use to support ELL's maintenance of their native language while they are learning English:

> I moved here in 1981 (I was 9) and my suburban school had no system in place…There were no other students at my school that spoke another language so I was definitely treated as "different"…Under the circumstances, I would have really benefited from having a teacher that saw the good in cultural richness and diversity. She could have invented an activity such as having everyone write and draw (journal) to tell about their heritage…She could have…given me a few different buddies to help the others get to know me and

> give me a chance to meet the kids…She could have made the others see that being bilingual is very special and that it is better to know 2 languages or more than 2 instead of just one. And I would have felt so much better about myself if the people around me would have let me know that it was a good thing that I spoke Spanish and English.

According to Tiffany, it is the teacher's role to see "the good in cultural richness and diversity." Tiffany's suggested learning activities require all students to share their cultural heritage, to get to know one another, and to create a class community where members are expected to help and give advice. Moreover, such activities would serve to validate each individual student. In Tiffany's case, she imagined that, had her teachers employed such activities: "I would have felt so much better about myself if the people around me would have let me know that it was a good thing that I spoke Spanish and English."

ED 500: Inservice Teachers' Development, Perspectives, and Reflections

The purpose of ED 500 is to "explore major issues related to the increasing diversity of students in elementary and secondary classrooms in the United States." In this course, study participants reconsidered their assumptions and worldviews. They openly reflected on their past teaching experiences in light of the coursework and conversations with one another.

Becoming multicultural educators

In the Discussion Boards, study participants thought critically about how the achievement gap is defined and framed, as well as the factors that contribute to its existence. They also considered the role of teachers, and more specifically how they, as teachers, would work to ensure the academic achievement of every student in their own classrooms.

Gretchen, a first year teacher, considered the use of standardized tests to measure the achievement gap:

> Again, from a multicultural perspective, these students are not being asked to embrace their cultures and accept diversity, they are engaged in rote learning of facts so they can pass standardized tests… By continuing to measure "the gap" by using these traditionally repressive forms of assessment, what are we really doing to close it?

Gretchen interrogated how standardized tests influenced teaching and learning. "Teaching to the test" led to students learning through the rote memorization of facts. She observed that references to students' cultural diversity were also excluded. Gretchen referred to this practice as a "repressive form of assessment," then wondered aloud about what teachers are doing to close the achievement gap.

Theresa, an experienced teacher with six years of classroom experience, concurred with Gretchen. Theresa challenged the way that "achievement gap" is defined:

> Given the work we have done so far on multicultural education and education for social justice, I feel compelled to be critical of the way the "achievement gap" is being measured. As I see it, the way the gap is being measured is one of the major factors actually contributing to the gap and its persistence.

She continued:

> The case for multicultural education is again strengthened because the achievement gap will start to close when student background and diversity are embraced and valued as part of a multicultural curriculum… We cannot change a student's economic background, we cannot change their race, we cannot change their family or their upbringing. However, we can change our approaches to helping these students see that their experiences and cultures are valued, and realize that no matter where they come from, what languages they speak, who they live with, and what jobs their parents do, everyone can learn.

Like Gretchen, Theresa asserted that including students' cultural diversity in the curriculum is part of the answer to closing the achievement gap. In place of a deficit-oriented focus to explain why the achievement gap persists, Theresa passionately called on her fellow teachers to "change our approaches to helping these students" feel valued and have confidence in their ability to learn.

Study participants also became more sensitive to omissions in the curriculum. After considering the implications of the absence of cultural content in the curriculum, Theresa ended her weekly post: "Without knowing [their cultural heritage], how much can we really understand about the generations of immigrants who live in America today?"

Heather, a first year teacher, provided a second to Theresa's query:

> I couldn't agree more with you when you said "how much can we really understand about the generations of immigrants who live in America today?" I think that the personal stories of immigrants, their journeys, struggles, and living conditions have been kept quiet for far too long. If we do not explore these stories we cannot truly understand where people came from and why they are the way they are.

For Theresa and Heather, limited knowledge of immigrants' cultural heritage placed them at a disadvantage as educators. They asserted that the lack of information compromised their ability to understand their students and cultivate their students' development.

Collaborative learning

In ED 500, the participants engaged in self-reflective practices and examined their own assumptions individually and collectively as a class. Colorblindness is a particularly difficult concept for preservice and inservice students to unpack, in part, because it seems fair to treat all students equally. To assist the participants with interrogating this position, they viewed a video in which the principal's leadership of an ethnically diverse elementary school was based on his adoption of a colorblind approach. Students were then assigned sides, and asked to debate the merits of the school as an example of multicultural education on the Discussion Board.

Heather had a difficult time with the assignment. Despite being assigned to the "con" side of this debate, she wrote a very enthusiastic argument for the "pro" side and championed why the school was an example of multicultural education. She concluded with the following statement:

> Part of my assignment was to oppose the concept of [this] school being a good example of a multicultural school. However, I find it hard to oppose this when I feel so strongly that [it] is indeed one of the best examples of a multicultural

> school. I hope I don't lose points for this, but I feel so strongly about them being an excellent example that I cannot wrap my head around any other thoughts.

So aligned was this school with her own vision of multicultural education, Heather referred to it as "one of the best examples of a multicultural school." She drew this conclusion despite the fact that the reading paired with the video disputed the school's classification as an example of multicultural education. At the risk of her grade, Heather could not bring herself to see the flaws in this elementary school.

After considering a post on the "con" side of this debate, Heather replied:

> I must say that I agree with your findings of how [this school] is not an example of multicultural education; however, I had trouble separating my personal opinion from that of textbooks because I felt so strongly ... and couldn't separate personal from factual at the time. I do feel that [this school] is a prime example of multicultural education, but I can see now there are instances that they may not be perfect in that sense, but what school is. :) Thanks for opening my eyes a little bit.

When presented with an alternative perspective, Heather began to look more closely at her evaluation of the school. She also began to look more closely at herself. Heather admitted that "she felt so strongly" that she "couldn't separate personal from factual." While she does not renounce her original position, Heather appreciated that this learning experience helped with "opening my eyes a little bit."

As the instructor of the class, Kristine directed Heather to take a closer look at the principal's colorblind stance. After further consideration, Heather wrote in response:

> Dr. Grant, now it's my turn to say thanks to you because I was not looking at [the principal's] perception as you were. Although, I still see it as I first did, I now see it in another aspect which sheds light on this topic for me because now I realize that the principal does not see each child as unique and individual, but as a whole who deserve every academic chance as everyone else does. And, as you stated, multicultural education does acknowledge these differences. Thanks for opening my eyes and helping me to see all of this in a different light as well.

Like the principal in the video, Heather had taken a color-blind stance when it came to students. She was challenged by a peer and her professor to see how colorblindness creates the very inequitable treatment that she is trying to prevent. She struggled with the reconciliation of her deeply held beliefs about colorblindness and new insights about multicultural education. Heather thanked her peer and professor for "opening her eyes" and for helping her "to see all of this in a different light."

The participants also openly examined inner thoughts that they knew were not politically correct. In a separate discussion board, Heather expressed her concern about how a family's socioeconomic status can impact their children's academic achievement. In particular, she was concerned about students who came from what she described as "dysfunctional families":

> Another factor that ties into children's economic situations is dysfunctional families. I feel that if a family does not operate in a 'normal' fashion (and

> forgive me for that term, but it is for lack of a better term to describe families) with communication, regular meals, advice-giving, caring, attentive parents**…**then this can be detrimental to students as well. Students who feel they have a support system at home thrive on that type of home-life, but those who have parents who are usually absent (physically, mentally, or emotionally) and do not communicate with their children tend to achieve at a much slower rate.

Theresa challenged Heather by raising a series of questions:

> Whilst I identify with your point about "dysfunctional families," I worry a bit about the implications of this. Do you think the students themselves think that their family is "different"? Is it possible that our own lack of understanding about student and family differences makes these students feel like outsiders and therefore makes them believe that they are not "normal"? Is it this that leads to problems with behavior and performance? I know from my own experiences (even as an adult) when I feel like I am a bit different or don't fit in, it causes me to do some crazy things - do these children react in the same way?

Theresa was both skillful and thoughtful in the way that she strategically challenged her classmate. She accepted Heather when she opened her post with "I identify with your point." She then raised her critique, not by judging or attacking Heather, but by stating "I worry a bit about the implications." Theresa raises a series of thought-provoking questions to encourage Heather to think about her position. She ends by explaining that even as an adult she has done "some crazy things" because she felt like she did not fit in. By making it personal, Theresa gave Heather another perspective from which to consider her position. After some thought, Heather responded:

> I definitely think we, as educators and peers, probably hold some of the responsibility and blame for "dysfunctional students" feeling as if they are different, or not 'normal'. I feel that we do classify them into another group, although not meaning to do so, but because it is human nature to judge and then act accordingly.

Notice that Heather did not use the quotes around dysfunctional in her original post. Interestingly, after reading and considering Theresa's post, she does. Also, upon reflection, Heather acknowledged that teachers do "hold some of the blame" for making students feel different. While holding herself and other teachers accountable for such conduct, Heather allowed that "it is human nature to judge."

Heather continued and described how she has changed her behavior in light of this realization:

> Since about the second week of this class I have made a concerted effort to ensure I am not doing that [judging and labeling students as dysfunctional], and while doing so, I have realized how much I probably did do that before. I have also spoken to others with whom I work, and they too have noticed how they may react in certain ways or judge without meaning to... it's something we all need to be aware of, and not only that, but to be active in changing the way we react so these students do feel included and 'normal'.

In these examples, Heather engaged in critical self-reflection and collaborative learning. Her classmates, like Theresa, were catalysts in reforming her judgments about students and their families, and the way that she treated them. She also recognized that other teachers practiced similar behaviors. Not only did she change her behavior, but she also talked to her fellow teachers about how they judge and differentially behave with their students. As a result, both Heather and her colleagues have become more aware of their behaviors and "active in changing the way we react."

Instructors' Reflections

The analysis of the two instructors' reflection journals that they kept throughout the Fall 2011 term revealed three major themes: (a) both instructors shared certain challenges they encountered from students in their respective courses; (b) they reported that some of their students transferred the knowledge they gained from the course and applied it to personal and professional spaces; and, (c) both instructors held common goals for their students in preparing them to become culturally responsive, multicultural educators. The first theme related to challenges that both instructors faced in their online courses resistance they felt from students who did not agree with certain ideas discussed in the class, or feelings of fear that emanated from being criticized by certain students in their previous classes. The second theme refers to the instructors' observations of students who demonstrated growth in the way they applied what they learned in their courses to their personal lives and/or professional settings. The final theme connects to another important idea that emerged from their journals in which they articulated certain goals for their courses and aspirations for their students in adopting the principles of multicultural education in their current/future work with diverse students.

Experiencing challenges in our courses

In a journal written on September 28, 2011, Kristine wrote honestly about emotional and intellectual challenges she experienced in teaching diversity courses at different institutions. Because ED 500 requires her students to confront difficult issues around gender, race, socio-economic status, religion, and other social issues, some of her students have a harder time talking about these topics than others, and Kristine has had to wear "different hats" to make her course a safe place for these conversations to take place:

> As an Instructor of Introduction to Multicultural Education, I must be teacher and counselor. I teach my students about diversity and equity in US Education. I help them to consider the implications for their future and current practices as educators. I support my students as they negotiate their varying responses to multicultural education.

Kristine alluded to how difficult the "emotional and intellectual" work can be for her students that requires her to be both teacher and counselor. She validated students' feelings, while simultaneously challenging them to interrogate some of the beliefs and attitudes they might harbor about diverse learners. She supported students who struggled with specific aspects of the course because they were asked to confront hard truths about themselves and their communities/groups. After helping students interrogate their assumptions, Kristine assisted them in shifting perspectives about issues of race, equality, and a number of other social dilemmas.

In the same journal entry, Kristine discussed another type of challenge she has faced in teaching diversity themed courses at different institutions. As an African American professor, she is keenly aware of the ways in which her students have positioned her in these courses, and have misunderstood and misrepresented her goals for these courses:

> As an African American woman teaching these courses, I must be cognizant of the ever-shifting power dynamics in my classes. While I have power and authority in my classes, I sometimes feel at the mercy of my students…In an on campus offering of Introduction to Multicultural Education, I had several students boycott my class after a lesson on white privilege…each time that I teach diversity-based courses, I enter with some fear and trepidation.

Kristine's past experiences in facing resistance from students who questioned her decision to teach a class on topics they either did not understand or did not agree with such as, white privilege, are ones that other faculty of color at other institutions with predominantly European American students have experienced as well (Stanley, 2006). Both McGowan (2000) and Stanley (2006) in their research on faculty of color, assert that these instructors have shared experiences around students challenging their authority in the classroom (McGowan, 2000; Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey 2009); presenting negative reports about faculty of color to a University administrator (Evans-Winter & Twyman, 2011; McGowan, 2000); or experiencing more resistance from students who are enrolled in course focused on multicultural education (Perry et al., 2009; Stanley, 2006). Kristine's experiences resonate with what the limited research on faculty of color suggests, in that faculty of color experience challenges within their institutions, departments, and classrooms that are unique and require further exploration (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002).

In one of Vera's earlier journals dated October 5, 2011, she talked about a particularly challenging group of students she taught one term in her Culture, Language, and Learning course. Most of the students were European American women preservice and inservice teachers. Vera recalled feeling shocked and upset over one student's course evaluation that suggested that she was presenting lectures and materials about ELLs in a biased and negative manner:

> I wouldn't have my students read anything that puts ELLs in a deficit light, if anything they interrogate problematic images and assumptions schools might have about them or and their parents…The student's anonymous evaluation shook me to the core…and I strongly believed that s/he did not understand my course goals/purposes in the ways that I had hoped. But I also wondered if she was pushing back because I had my students challenge their own preconceived assumptions, stereotypes, and ideas about ELLs…Is it possible that the course 'hit a nerve' for this person and s/he wanted to take it out on me as the instructor?

In many ways, Kristine's experience with facing criticism from some of her students were shared by Vera in her ELL-focused courses as well. Vera shared openly with students about her Korean American upbringing in connection to the cultural acculturation process that immigrant families often undergo when they transition to living in the US. She found the course evaluation particularly shocking because of the deeply felt advocacy she felt for ELLs and their families that stemmed from being a child of immigrants, and from her experience of growing up in a bilingual home. It is difficult to ascertain all of the intentions behind a negative course evaluation since they are anonymous and there is no way to gain clarification

from a student about specific comments s/he made. On the one hand, what Vera experienced could be indicative of the kinds of criticism faculty of color endure from students across other institutions (Perry et al., 2009; Stanley, 2006). This incident is also reminiscent of Cochran-Smith's (2000) experience facilitating conversations about race and racism in her teacher education classes, and her realization that while the European American teachers agreed with her approach to these conversations, the students of color were frustrated and upset by it. Even though Cochran-Smith is coming from the perspective of a European American faculty member, her story also encouraged Vera to look more closely at how she is presenting course materials to her mainly European American students so meaningful conversations can transpire that lead to desired learning outcomes.

Encouraging signs of growth in students

Towards the end of Fall 2011 term, Kristine wrote a journal on December 7, 2011, in which she wanted to track the growth of two study participants, Cynthia and Sharon. She looked specifically at their Discussion Board reflections on the topic of parental involvement in week 7 and then in week 9 and saw important changes occur in these students during that time period. In her Discussion Board post during week 7 of the class, Cynthia, a new preschool teacher expressed her frustration with parents that did not check the schoolwork of their children:

> I am beginning to believe that parents do not care when they show no interest at home with their child's schooling. I only have four year olds, but I send homework 2-3 times a month. When parents can't take 10 minutes out of the week to complete it with them, I am frustrated.

However, Kristine observed a change in Cynthia's perspective about parents who do not appear engaged in their children's schoolwork by week 9 of the course. The course readings gave her different perspectives to consider as she reflected on the issue of parental involvement:

> One of the most eye-opening sections was about parental involvement. When we read different ways that parents do participate, even if not physically at meetings or attending concerts, I realized that teachers need to give these opportunities and suggestions to parents.

The shift in Cynthia's outlook about parental engagement between weeks 7 and 9 was noted in Kristine's journal in which she remarked:

> Cynthia appears to recognize that teachers are responsible for engaging parents. She no longer characterizes parents as uncaring when they do not assist their child with homework or sign off on student work. Instead, she recognizes that conforming to school-sanctioned forms of involvement may not work for all parents.

Through interacting with the course readings, participating in activities, and dialoguing with students and the instructor in ED 500, the change in Cynthia's perspective about parent involvement is quite remarkable. She was initially frustrated with parents who appeared disinterested and disengaged with their children's schoolwork to broadening her views about "what counts" as engagement that differ from traditional models. Her perspective about

parents has changed as well. She admitted that she characterized certain parents as "uncaring" because they did not take up certain practices at home that indicated engagement. She realized that there are many factors that prevent parents from being engaged in the ways that schools expect, and that schools need to understand what those challenges are and to reconceptualize the ways in which parents are expected to be involved.

Another inservice teacher, Sharon, showed in her Discussion Board post for week 9, how the course readings and lectures challenged her taken-for-granted assumptions about engaging parents in their child's education:

> I have often, and I think most of us have, thought that a parent didn't have any involvement in his/her child's life because I never see him or her at school functions. However, I have realized there are more ways that parents can be involved than just school activities.

In her journal, Kristine reflected about Sharon's honest disclosure of her previously held belief that parents who are not present for school functions are not involved at all in their child's life, and how her perspective shifted in week 9 of the course:

> Sharon confesses that she has characterized absent parents as parents who do not care about their child's education. However, in week 9, she shares her epiphany that parents who do not participate in school functions may very well care for their children 'just in a way we cannot see.'

Kristine saw encouraging signs of growth in both Cynthia and Sharon's posts from weeks 7 and 9 that indicate critical shifts in their understanding of parental involvement that interrogates commonly held assumptions about what counts and what does not count as true engagement in a child's education. Villegas and Lucas (2002) posit that a culturally responsive educator "is socially conscious, that is, recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one's social location in the social order" (p. 21). In ED 500, Kristine's students were asked to step outside of their own realities to understand what parental involvement means from families who are from markedly different backgrounds and experiences from their own. Furthermore, Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that part of the role of teacher education programs is to develop our students into "agents of change" who "believe that schools can be sites for social transformation even as they recognize that schools have typically served to maintain social inequities" (p. 24). One example of such inequity is ascribing a "one size fits all" model of parental engagement, and criticizing parents who do not fit the mold or model of involvement that schools expect without fostering understanding or awareness of how parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds understand the notion of involvement differently from mainstream families.

Vera also noted in a journal written on December 8, 2011, how her students were wrestling with the topic of school-based programs for immigrant parents during week 8 of ED 600. The students were asked to review several descriptions of school-based and community-based programs located in McAllen, TX and Arlington, VA and to discuss the positive or problematic aspects of the programs. In her journal, Vera wrote about Jane's Discussion Board post in which she described a seminar she used to facilitate for parents in her community, and she did not previously consider the implications of offering the programs to minority families from "lower SES communities":

> It was a great program that was designed not only as parenting classes though it did qualify as far as DYFS (Division of Youth and Family Services) was concerned, but it was just to reinforce the importance of family communication, quality time, and pride. What I noticed in my time with the program is that it tend[ed] to cater towards minority families in lower income areas…if you only offer these types of programs to certain groups…you are sending a message that they need these 'parenting lessons' more than others.

In her journal, Vera observed that Jane recognized the positive features of the parent seminar she facilitated for several weeks in helping parents foster better communication and quality time with their children. However, after engaging in conversations with her classmates on the Discussion Board about the potentially problematic aspects of school-based or community-based programs for immigrant families that may treat them in deficit ways, she wondered if the seminar she led sent a similar message to the minority families who attended the program, that they needed help with their parenting skills more than families living in affluent communities.

Aspirations for students in ED 500 and ED 600

As a teacher educator, Vera realizes that her courses asked preservice and inservice teachers to wrestle with issues related to teaching ELLs. She engaged in practitioner research to better understand how her students learn about diversity in her class, and to use this increased understanding to improve her practice as an online instructor. In an early journal reflection written on October 11, 2011, Vera described her goals for student learning in ED 600:

> One of the assumptions I try to problematize with my students is how diversity is often implemented in schools as a multicultural day, Cinco de Mayo, an international food and fashion festival, or teachers might talk superficially about cultural differences with K-12 students. Diversity is, in many cases, a daily, lived experience for students of diverse backgrounds, and it is not reduced to one calendar day for them. I want my students to understand this idea in their work with ELLs that for children who recently moved to the States, they are going through myriad transitions that impact them socially, emotionally, psychologically, and academically.

In order to develop preservice and inservice teachers into multicultural educators, the instructor needs to create opportunities for students to unpack taken-for-granted and common assumptions about diversity. In ED 600, Vera assigned readings and Discussion Board prompts "to problematize … how diversity is often implemented in schools." Such learning opportunities can be observed in the way that a veteran teacher, Christi, wrestled with the assumption that all Spanish-speaking immigrant students come from Mexico and how another preservice teacher, Gail, grappled with the general practice of teaching ELLs in English only in classrooms and schools. Vera tried to foster spaces for preservice and inservice students to reflect on the role of the teachers, and the kind of teacher that they aspire to become. Nieto and Bode (2012) contend that part of the process of becoming a multicultural educator and person involves "not only learning new things but also unlearning some of the old" (p. 392). The journey of confronting beliefs and ideologies that are contrary to principles of multicultural is often fraught with discomfort and difficult realizations, but it

is a necessary one for preservice/inservice teachers to take in order to effectively embrace and work with diverse learners.

Like Vera, Kristine also realized the responsibility of preparing teachers to work effectively with diverse students and families through an online class. To that end, she sought to improve her practice by participating in this practitioner research study. She was largely concerned with strategies to create an online community for her students. She believed that such a community would provide the context for students to engage in both individual and collective examination of critical issues in education. Kristine's journals were a space for her to imagine the kinds of learning experiences that she hoped to create for her students.

In her first journal entry written on September 28, 2011, Kristine expressed her aspirations for students in the course. Drawing on her past experiences teaching this course, she described goals for her students' intellectual development:

> Intellectually, students are introduced to the role of school in society. They critically examine the sociopolitical context of schooling in the United States. They interrogate the persistent disparities in academic achievement based on race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexuality, religion, and other significant social markers. Students learn about research, theories and practices in multicultural education. Ideally, this new knowledge will inform their educational philosophies and their emergent teacher identities.

Kristine did not want to sacrifice the "hard conversations" that take place in face-to-face classes. She devised ways to recreate and create new courageous conversations about difficult topics in US education. These "hard conversations" are illustrated in the earlier posts of first year teachers like Heather, who appeared to struggle with their assumptions and preconceptions. She aspired to create a safe, courageous space where all of her students can seek the input of their peers and professor to help them make sense of new insights, and reevaluate their assumptions about diverse learners. Kristine also understood that her students were in different places on their path to becoming a multicultural person and that the journey takes time (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Discussion

This article explored how preservice and inservice teachers wrestled with a range of issues that affect ethnically and linguistically diverse students, and teacher educators' critical reflections about their students' learning development as well as their teaching experiences in online courses. The study participants' posts demonstrated how they were critically "unlearning" previously held beliefs about ELLs, families, and other diverse learners. The participants openly "challeng[e], confron[t], and disrup[t] misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes" about culturally and linguistically diverse children (Nieto, 2012, p. 12) with their professors and classmates. This step is crucial in their development as culturally responsive educators. The Discussion Board data from both courses suggested how the participants reflected upon their previously held assumptions regarding families from diverse backgrounds, multicultural practices, or children who are ethnically and culturally different. The participants also "posed and explored problems" (Schön, 1993) related to issues of multiculturalism in connection to their professional contexts and lives, and demonstrated critical shifts of thinking as a result of reflecting on these issues individually and collectively.

The study also revealed how the authors created communities of inquiry (Garrison et al, 2003) around the organizing theme of the diversity in education. In these online communities of inquiry, students demonstrated cognitive presence as they collectively

interrogated their assumptions and co-constructed new meaning (p. 115). They also demonstrated "social presence" (p. 115) in presenting themselves as "real people" full of contradictions: complicated people who wanted to teach and make a difference in the lives of children, while holding some "politically incorrect" views and assumptions about the very children and families that they hoped to serve. Yet, the students respectfully contributed to the growth and development of their classmates, and thoughtfully considered the positions of peers resulting in "deeper knowledge generation" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Moreover, the instructors displayed "teaching presence" (p. 115) by actively engaging students in critical dialogue on the Discussion Board with the goal of extending their learning and reflection about important course topics (Rocco, 2010). With the support and cultivation of their instructors, students within these online communities of inquiry exhibited growth in their journey to becoming effective teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The study illuminated how practitioner research fostered a similar space of inquiry as their students around teaching and praxis for Kristine and Vera. First, their journal entries displayed certain challenges they experienced in teaching diversity themed courses from students who were resistant or upset by the course topics, the fear of being misunderstood or criticized by students in the course, and helping students to navigate difficult conversations that occur within these courses. Akintunde's (2006) research on students in his online multicultural education course also revealed that courses like these often highlight the "frustration, emotion, volatility, evolution, and ultimate paradigmatic shifting that can and should take place" (p. 43) with students enrolled in these courses. Second, their journals also revealed how students were expanding their perspectives about diverse students and families and adopting alternative views about various educational issues. Third, the instructors uncovered the learning aspirations they had for their students in terms of looking at teaching and learning through sociocultural and sociopolitical lenses. These lenses often informed their responses to students' posts on the Discussion Board. Finally, the journals were used to explore specific issues/problems that arose in the course (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), open new lines of questions about their practice, and reflect meaningfully about student learning. As a result of insights gained from engaging in their own "dialectic of inquiry and practice" (p. 94), they continued to grow as practitioners in improving their practice in an online course, and develop as multicultural educators committed to preparing the next generation of culturally responsive teachers.

While the findings from the study show the promises of online courses in cultivating authentic learning experiences for preservice and inservice teachers in the area of multicultural education, studies conducted over an extended period of time are needed to assess the efficacy of these courses in sustaining long-term changes in the ways in which new and veteran teachers work with diverse learners. Implications from the study include considerations of how inservice teachers could develop online communities within their local contexts so "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983) continues to happen throughout their professional careers, and in learning communities with other educators. In addition, questions remain about how online educators can mentor preservice and inservice teachers from afar, and how mentoring can be done in meaningful, authentic ways particularly in online diversity themed courses that often elicit "personal and emotional" (Akintunde, 2006) reflections from students. Furthermore, more research is needed that explores how teacher educators can continue to use and evaluate the range of technologies that are available to foster the growth of preservice and inservice teachers into critical multicultural educators.

References

Akintunde, O. (2006). Diversity.com: Teaching an online course on White racism and multiculturalism. *Multicultural Perspectives, 8*(2), 35-45.

Berghoff, B., Blackwell, S., & Wisehart, R. (2011). Using critical reflection to improve urban teacher preparation: A collaborative inquiry of three teacher educators. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education, 8*(2), 19-28.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1993). *Inside outside: Teacher research and knowledge.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cummins, J. (2001). Bilingual children's mother tongue: Why is it important for education? *Sprogforum, 7*(19), 15-20.

Damarin, S. K. (1998). Technology and multicultural education: The question of convergence. *Theory into Practice, 37*(1), 11-19.

DeWert, M. H., Babinski, L. M., Jones, B. D. (2003). Safe passages: Providing online support to beginning teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education, 54*(4), 311-320.

Evans-Winters, V. E., & Twyman Hoff, P. (2011). The aesthetics of white racism in pre-service teacher education: A critical race theory perspective. *Race, Ethnicity & Education, 14*(4), 461-479.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2003). A theory of critical inquiry in online distance education. In M. G. Moore & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 113-127). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Garrison, D. R. (2007). Online community of inquiry review: Social, cognitive, and teaching presence issues. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 11*(1), 61-72.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* New York, NY: Aldine Publishing Co.

Goodwin, A. L. (2002). The teacher preparation and the education of immigrant children. *Education and Urban Society, 34*(2), 156-172.

Hinton, S. (2007, March). *Multicultural education online for graduate teachers: Some challenges*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference for the Comparative and International Education Society, Baltimore.

Kitsantas, A., & Talleyrand, R. M. (2005). The use of online resources to promote multicultural competencies among K-12 preservice teachers: A model for self-regulatory learning. *Education, 125*(4), 627-637.

Licona, M. M. (2011). Online multicultural education: Asynchronous discussions in online multicultural education. *Multicultural Education*, 19(1), 2-8.

Loughran, J. J. (2002). Effective reflective practice: In search of meaning in learning about teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(1), 33-43.

McGowan, J. M. (2000). Multicultural teaching: African-American faculty teaching experiences in predominantly White colleges and universities. *Multicultural Education, 8*(2), 19-22.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Merryfield, M. M. (2001). The paradoxes of teaching a multicultural education course online. *Journal of Teacher Education, 52*(4), 283-299.

Nieto, S. (2000). Placing equity front and center: Some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*(3), 180-187.

Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2012). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Pardales, M. J., & Girod, M. (2006). Community of inquiry: Its past and present future. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *38*(3), 299-309.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom: The realities of online teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Perry, G., Moore, H., Edwards, C., Acosta, K., & Frey, C. (2009). Maintaining credibility and authority as an instructor of color in diversity-education classrooms: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*(1), 80-105.

Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity: One's own. *Educational Researcher, 17*(7), 17-21.

Ramirez, L. A., Allison-Roan, V. A., Peterson, S., & Elliott-Johns, S. E. (2012). Supporting one another as beginning teacher educators: Forging an online community of critical inquiry into practice. *Studying Teacher Education*, *8*(2), 109-126.

Rocco, S. (2010). Making reflection public: Using interactive online discussion board to enhance student learning. *Reflective Practice*, *11*(3), 307-317.

Ryan, T. G. (2012). The facilitation of reflection within an online course. *Reflective Practice, 13*(5), 709-718.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Shea, P., & Bidjerano, T. (2010). Learning presence: Towards a theory of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the development of a communities of inquiry in online and blended learning environments. *Computers & Education, 55*, 1721–1731.

Sleeter, C. E. (1996). *Multicultural education as social activism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Spatt, I., Honigsfeld, A., & Cohan, A. (2012). A self-study of culturally responsive pedagogy and reflective practice. *Teacher Education and Practic*e, *25*(1), 52-67.

Stanley, C. A. (2006). Coloring the academic landscape: Faculty of color breaking the silence in predominantly White colleges and universities. *American Educational Research Journa*l, *43*(4), 701-736.

Turner, C. (2002). Women of color in academe. *Journal of Higher Education, 73*(1), 74-93.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(1), 20-32.

Watt, D. (2007). On becoming a qualitative researcher: The value of reflexivity. *The Qualitative Report*, *12*(1), 82–101. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR12-1/watt.pdf

Whipp, J. L. (2003). Scaffolding critical reflection in online discussions: Helping prospective teachers think deeply about field experiences in urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *54*(4), 321-333.

Wilhelm, J. D. (2013). Opening to possibility: Reflectivity and reflexivity in teaching. *Voices from the Middle*, *20*(3), 57–59.

Zydney, J., deNoyelles, A., & Seo, K. K-J. (2012). Creating a community of inquiry in online environments: An exploratory study on the effect of a protocol on interactions within asynchronous discussions. *Computers & Education, 58*, 77-87.

Author Note

Kristine S. Lewis Grant, PhD, is Associate Professor of Multicultural and Urban Education at Drexel's School of Education. Her research includes family involvement in student achievement, and teaching/learning about diversity in online courses. She may be contacted at Kristine S. Lewis Grant, Ph.D., Drexel University School of Education, 3141

Chestnut Street, Korman Room 211, Philadelphia, PA 19104; Phone: (215) 895-6088; Email: ksl33@drexel.edu

Vera J. Lee, EdD, is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Literacy Studies at Drexel's School of Education. Her research includes inservice/preservice teachers' development as ESL instructors, and the professional experiences of K-12 teachers of color. She may be contacted at Vera J. Lee, Ed.D., Drexel University School of Education, 3141 Chestnut Street, Korman Room 211, Philadelphia, PA 19104; Phone: (215) 571-3827; Email: vjw25@drexel.edu

Article Citation

Grant, K. S. L., & Lee, V. J. (2014). Wrestling with issues of diversity in online courses. *The Qualitative Report, 19*(12), 1-25. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/grant12.pdf