

USC Upstate: A Journey Toward Improving a Learning Disability Teacher Preparation Program to Meet the Diverse Needs of Today's Classrooms

Holly Pae

*University of South Carolina Upstate
Spartanburg, South Carolina*

Susan D. Whitaker

*University of South Carolina Upstate
Spartanburg, South Carolina*

and

Walden University

Roberta Gentry

*University of Mary Washington
Fredericksburg, Virginia*

Areas of our country are headed toward significant social and political unrest if education ignores the demographic trends reshaping our schools. This article describes how one teacher training program in South Carolina examined its cultural context, accreditation standards, and course offerings to restructure its curriculum to address cultural and linguistic diversity.

Keywords: diversity, teacher training, multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher preparation.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners continue to fail in school at rates that are significantly higher than those of White students (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Chu, 2011; Kober, Usher, & Center on Education, 2012; Lee, 2006) and they are overrepresented in the high-incidence special education categories (Blanchert, 2006; Ford, 2012; Sullivan 2011). Parrish (2002) found that states with a history of racial apartheid under *de jure* segregation (i.e., Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and the Carolinas) account for five of the seven states with the highest overrepresentation of African-Americans identified with mental retardation. African-American students in the Carolinas were more than four times as likely to be identified with this label than White students. Currently, communities in the South are undergoing dramatic changes in terms of their racial, cultural, and economic profiles. Arguably, this geographical area and others in our country are headed toward significant social and political unrest if education, along with public policy, ignores the demographic trends that are reshaping our schools' identities. This article examines how the University of South Carolina Upstate is setting new priorities to restructure its special education teacher preparation program in order to promote the well being of the community it serves. We address the context for change, revisions made to the program, and suggestions for future policy and practice.

Redefining the South

In 1996, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that the population of the United States may top 300 million shortly after 2010 (Day, 1996). This prediction was achieved on October 17, 2006. While this rapid growth impacts the supply and demand of new teachers, the most important aspect to be considered is the shift in demographic trends that have occurred along with this growth during the first decade of the new millennium. The minority population grew 11 times as rapidly as the non-Hispanic White population, and the Hispanic population (of any race) more than doubled (Haverluk & Trautman, 2008; William & Casey, 2011). While the U. S. population increased by an estimated 24.8 million (2000-09), slightly more than half (51.4%) of this growth was concentrated in the South (Johnson & Kasarda, 2011; Parrado & Kandel, 2010).

North Carolina led the nation in immigration-driven population change during the 1990s (237.7% change in foreign-born population), followed by Georgia (233.4%), Nevada (202%), and Arkansas (196.3%) (Urban Institute, 2007). The top two states with the largest growth in Hispanic population between 2000 and 2010 were also in the South: South Carolina and Alabama (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In addition, this region holds the second largest concentration of Hispanics (14.5%) in the country. About 57% of the net growth in the North Carolina school system is Hispanic children (Lopez, 2006). Of the ten states (plus the District of Columbia) that had child poverty rates of 25% or higher (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia), nine are located in the region that the U.S. Census defines as the South (American Community Survey, 2011). In a 2010 Census analysis, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee had Hispanic child-poverty rates above 40% (Macartney, 2011).

Noteworthy is how the demographic changes are creating a new melting pot in states not commonly thought to experience immigration population influx. Johnson (2009) suggests that we are in a crisis, a “train wreck waiting to happen if we don't figure out how to educate the new majority” (p. 22). In addition to the alarming number of children under 18 living in families with incomes below \$30,000 a year (19% of the White population, 43% of the non-White population [African American, American Indian and Alaska native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander], and 43% of the Hispanic population), he also points out that 48% of all students live in households where neither parent has any college experience (42% of the White population, 46% of the non-White population [African American, American Indian and Alaska native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander], and 68% of the Hispanic population). Clearly, educators must equip future teachers to meet the needs of this changing population.

Accreditation's Role in Shaping the Terrain

At a minimum, the new racial diversity among children in the South has heightened the imperative for attaining appropriate policies and practices, particularly in the realm of public education. National education professional bodies that define teacher education practices have recognized this need over a decade ago. At the institutional level of accreditation, for example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) revised its 2001 evaluation criteria to include Standard Four: Diversity.

Standard 4: Diversity expects that the unit designs, implements and evaluates curriculum and experiences for candidates to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. It includes the expectation that candidates have the opportunity to interact with candidates, faculty, and P-12 students from diverse groups. (NCATE, 2008, p.34)

A focus upon multicultural pedagogy is also found at the program-accreditation level. Specialized Professional Associations have made revisions to add to the number of assessment indicators related to diversity. Indeed, whereas 13 of the 1995 Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Common Core and the Learning Disability Standards pertained to diversity, in the 2009 revisions candidates must satisfy 25 performance requirements associated with culturally responsive practices. This is virtually a 100% increase of criteria for targeting the needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The newfound emphasis placed upon diversity and pre-service teachers' ability to work effectively with all children provides institutions and teacher preparation programs with a guide for evaluating their offerings and identifying areas for improvement. Teacher educators must now verify existing practices, and in the process identify, develop, and implement measures to address weaknesses, as well as conduct evaluations of the programs' effectiveness given any restructuring. Unfortunately, although many teacher education programs have attempted to address the issues of multicultural education, and for the most part culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education have not truly been integrated into the curriculum in a thorough, comprehensive manner (Eunhyun, 2011; Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). Research indicates, however, that teacher candidates who have learned culturally responsive pedagogy are less likely to embrace culturally deficit views and are more confident in their ability to teach a culturally diverse student population (Gay, 2010; Harmon, 2012; Irvine, 2003; Rychly, & Graves, 2012).

Contextual Factors for Change: The University

The University of South Carolina Upstate is a senior comprehensive public institution of the University of South Carolina (USC) system. The University is located in Spartanburg, South Carolina and serves the Upstate (an area defined by school districts along the I-85 corridor between Atlanta, Georgia and Charlotte, North Carolina), and adjoining regions. It has a minority enrollment that exceeds 30%, and 71 nations are represented among the student population.

The School of Education has NCATE accreditation and is fully approved by the South Carolina Department of Education and the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education. It has an enrollment of nearly 1,000 students, with 21 full-time, tenured, and tenure-track and six full-time, non-tenure-track faculty members. USC Upstate first offered the Learning Disability (LD) Bachelor of Science degree in the Fall, 2000. The LD Program specifically prepares candidates to meet the South Carolina certification and highly qualified requirements for licensure in Learning Disabilities (K-12). The program of study consists of 123 credit hours of coursework, 44 hours of general education requirements, 15 hours of educational foundation and support

courses, nine hours of a content concentration in psychology, and 55 hours of professional education courses in the areas of learning disabilities and literacy.

The LD Program is in full compliance with CEC Standards, with no weaknesses cited. Given this context, faculty members saw the LD Program as being well situated to take an aggressive stance in improving training practices to alleviate service gaps and weaknesses in the field. With the help of the Monarch Center, a federally funded technical assistance and dissemination center established to support special education and related service faculty from minority institutions of higher education, the LD Program submitted and received a 325T Program Improvement Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in 2009. During its first year, the LD Program Improvement Project established a 13-member Curriculum Committee of College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and School of Education (SOE) faculty members, as well as one public school special educator, to assist in the planning and oversight of the LD Program's curriculum. Individual members within this body were paired with another based upon shared expertise. One set of SOE and CAS faculty members contributed knowledge of multicultural education. All members received a grant-funded stipend to support the work completed together toward identifying the current practices of each discipline's curriculum, sharing the bodies of standards used to guide respective instructional orientations, and establishing teaching approaches proven effective in the field. This endeavor served as a guide for revising the LD Program curriculum.

The Committee's efforts became the catalyst in recognizing the need to revise the LD Program's course offerings to include culturally responsive pedagogy, an instructional aspect found conspicuously absent in its curriculum. The clarity used to articulate the necessity of this change was supported by the literature extolling multicultural perspectives (Banks & Banks, 2006; Garcia, 2000; Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Nieto, 2004, 2006) and was promoted by the Project members' recognition of how the community's demographic profile warranted a pedagogical shift in preparation.

Contextual Factors for Change: The Community

Recognition of the South Carolina teaching force, special education needs, and student profiles, guided the restructuring of the LD Program toward achieving a multicultural curriculum. The following demographic data were identified from the South Carolina (SC) Center for Educator Recruitment, Retentions and Advancement (2009) and the U. S. Census Bureau (2012).

- SC teacher diversity is higher than that of the national population (20% vs. 14%)
- The highest numbers of employed SC special educators teach in the area of Learning Disabilities (35%)
- Among SC students in special education, 42% receive services for learning disabilities
- Spartanburg County minority population is 35%, the University is 38%, and the School of Education is 26%

- Minorities account for approximately 45% of students enrolled in SC public schools, while 76% of teachers are White
- Only 16% of SC teachers are identified as African-American and the percentages of SC teachers from other ethnic groups (Hispanic, American Indian and Alaska native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander) are less than 1 each; and
- Among the 74 students currently enrolled in the LD Program at USC Upstate, 23% African American, 1% Hispanic, and 76% Caucasian

Restructuring Program Guideline

Establishing a conceptual framework. Prior to the program restructuring, candidates completed one course that specifically focused upon cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives in teaching before Program admission. To strengthen this preparation, three options were considered: (a) a stand-alone Program-level diversity course, (b) a programmatic diversity integration, and (c) a combination of the two. The second (programmatic integration), systematically embeds culturally responsive teaching practices across course offerings, was deemed to be the most effective role. This approach allows for achieving a deep restructuring of the LD Program’s curriculum. Subsequently, the goal to establish a philosophy of teaching that affirms and responds to each student’s unique culture (Aldridge, 2003; Gay, 2000) was recognized as a necessary condition to underpin all practices. To this end, coursework and clinical offerings now include assignments that target how issues of race, ethnicity, class, and family roles can be used in creating productive classrooms conducive to meeting all students’ needs (Sampson, 2005; Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

The revisions to the LD Program’s coursework were also driven by the theme that candidates must be nurtured to explore their beliefs and critically reflect upon them (see Ball, 2000; Ball & Lardner, 1997; Ball & Muhammad, 2003; Pajares, 1992). Course readings, assignments, and field experience projects were selected in terms of opportunities to engage candidates in critical literacy, “a method used to enable readers to view how texts [and actions] are socially situated” (Wake & Modla, 2008, p.182). Candidates are now urged to question the status quo, challenge prevailing ideas, and rethink the world from multiple perspectives (Freire, 2005; Shor, 1999). Finally, practices associated with culturally responsive classrooms were identified and included in the curriculum based on a review of the literature (e.g., Au, 1993 [literacy]; Brown 2002 [urban perspective]; Cochran-Smith, 2000 [racism]).

Redefining the coursework. The LD Program was originally designed to ensure that candidates gain knowledge to be applied in public school classrooms in a recursive developmental manner. Keeping this model’s perspective, Project members categorized the instructional focus into three areas (a) content, (b) skill-subject specific and skill- theory, and (c) field experience (see Table 1). This framework served as a structure for identifying how to best infuse multicultural perspectives and practices throughout the Program. In addition to assuring that the *content-based courses* targeted corresponding CEC Standards (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and 9) to establish the candidates’ knowledge in those areas, they also were revised to establish bodies of knowledge regarding multiculturalism, child advocacy, and diversity. In the skill-based classes, improve-

Table 1

Multicultural Topic areas and Culturally Responsive Practices Infused in the Course Types: Content, Skill-Theory and Skill-Subject, and Field Experiences by Stage in the LD Program

	Content	Skill	Field
Stage I	<p>Characteristics of Students with LD</p> <p>Multicultural perspectives, • Schools as change agents • Diversity • Values, languages, and customs—differences between home and school • English Language Learners • Discrimination</p>	<p>Methods for Students with LD (Behavioral Theory)</p> <p>Alternative and authentic assessments • Equity and excellence through mastery learning • Cultural variation needs (motivation, morale, and engagement)</p>	<p>Practicum in Disabilities</p> <p>Special education as a model for empowerment • School cultures and social structures • Child advocacy • Inclusion and LRE • Social-economic status • White privilege • Barriers</p>
Stage II	<p>Assessment of Students with Disabilities</p> <p>Bias • Identification issues and trends • Validity • Test modifications and alternatives • Parent communications • Ethical practices • Language barriers • Case studies w/ cultural dimensions</p>	<p>Curriculum for Students with LD (Cognitive Theory)</p> <p>Universal design • Content integration • Equity pedagogy • Differentiation • Cooperative learning • Alternative learning styles and modalities</p>	<p>Instruction Practicum in LD</p> <p>Classroom interaction designs • Culturally relevant materials • Diversity decor • Multicultural content • Active participation • High expectations • Scaffolding • Applied learning</p>
Stage III	<p>Behavior Management in Special Education</p> <p>Social Skill development—gender and ethnic considerations • Mutual respect • Positive and diverse role models • Proactive discipline • Socio-cultural consciousness • Dispositions of care</p>	<p>LD Reading Methods</p> <p>LD Language Methods (2 courses)</p> <p>Responsive instructional content Resources for cultural and linguistic differences • Diverse language needs • Language-based strategies</p>	<p>LD Reading and Language Practicum</p> <p>Growth and development-- effects of cultural and linguistic differences • Progress-monitoring for all student success • Strategies individualized for diverse needs • Interconnections</p>
Stage IV	<p>Issues and Trends in Exceptionalities</p> <p>Accountability • Cultural identification and biases • Special educator as a change agent • School culture and social structure empowerment • Impact of the dominant group • Multiculturalism goals</p>	<p>←- 15 Credit Hours -→</p>	<p>Directed Teaching of Learners with LD</p> <p>Multiple assessment strategies • Parent and community involvement • Student confidence builders • Communication and collaboration • Proactive behavior management</p>

ments included field-based assignments in which candidates apply multiple CEC Standards (e.g., 3, 4, 6, 7) through applications of culturally responsive practices. Two additional *skill-based classes* require candidates to apply principles of behavioral and cognitive theories and examine the research regarding different perspectives toward effectively meeting diverse student population needs. The *field-based experiences* were revised to encompass activities involving collaboration (CEC #10) in terms of building positive student-centered supports and all-inclusive learning environments

Bridging the content with field experiences. Many individuals have suggested that there should be congruence between the on-campus classes and the field experiences, and that the field experiences should be closely connected to the program goals and to the individual course components (see Cochran-Smith, & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Mason (1999) found that learning the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom was not enough, but that when the field experience was added, the information about culture and ethnicity and the implications for planning and teaching were made much more meaningful to the candidates. Thus, it became evident that there was a need for a field experience each semester that was closely tied to the on-campus classes to transfer the on-campus learning to the real-world setting. Courses were examined at each program stage to identify relevant skills, attitudes, and concepts for every course and then integrated into the field experience for that stage.

A further issue was ensuring that each teacher candidate had field experiences in a variety of settings. A database was developed listing all student and school characteristics (i.e., socioeconomic status, ethnicity, English language learners [ELL], and disabilities) as well as information regarding the school's size, location (urban, suburban, rural), and school report card data (including achievement and adequate yearly progress for No Child Left Behind reporting). The development of this database revealed that additional field placements were needed to increase the diversity required to meet the revised Program goals. Placement selection was also based upon identifying field-based teachers who could serve as role models and have a thorough knowledge of culturally responsive education. Moreover, placements need "strong principals, small student/teacher ratios, fair discipline policies, high teacher expectations for students, and programmatic efforts to include parents in the educational process" (Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Richards, 2006, p. 10). As additional sites were identified and added to the first database, a second one was generated to monitor candidates' placements across the LD Program stages to ensure that they were placed in appropriately diverse settings.

Programmatic Integration Model: An Example

To understand how the integrated approach works, consider the following CEC Common Core and LD Standards:

ICC1K10 Potential impact of differences in values, languages, and customs that can exist between the home and school;

ICC6K1 Effects of cultural and linguistic differences on growth and development;

ICC6K2 Characteristics of one's own culture and use of language and the ways in which these can differ from other cultures and uses of languages;

ICC6K3 Ways of behaving and communicating among cultures that can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding;

ICC6S2 Use communication strategies and resources to facilitate understanding of subject matter for individuals with exceptional learning needs whose primary language is not the dominant language. (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009)

Candidates are introduced to these practices in the 412: LD Characteristics and 410: LD Methods courses (Stage I). In 483: Assessment of Students with LD/ADD course (Stage II), candidates additionally learn about due process, non-biased assessment, and factors leading to misidentification of students. During the following semester (Stage III), in the 445: Language Disorders and Language Arts Methods course, these concepts are expanded upon and directly applied to language arts. Requirements for this class include numerous readings on cultural diversity and language differences. Candidates gain a knowledge base related to the Standards through in-class presentations and discussions. After viewing video clips of various students, candidates discuss language in terms of linguistic difference or disability. Given the scenarios, they identify possible attitudes others may take based on the students' language and how that would impact planning for assessment and instruction. This activity provides guided practice in application of the knowledge.

The instructor assesses the candidates' performance in the class using a case study focusing on a CLD student. Candidates have to examine the relevant cultural and linguistic differences, analyze the impact of the teachers' attitudes, and make decisions regarding the identification of a student with a disability, as well as formulate recommendations for further assessments and instructional planning. Furthermore, throughout the semester, as the candidates learn about teaching various aspects of language arts, such as vocabulary, phonological awareness, composition, etc., they are given case studies where they plan lessons to teach specific skills to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Candidates are required to discuss the relevant factors related to diversity and explain how they will meet diverse student needs.

Finally, the candidates have a field experience course associated with the language arts and the concurrent 415: Reading Disorders and Reading Methods course where they are required to plan a unit of instruction. They must discuss contextual factors (socioeconomic levels, disabilities, ethnicities, gender, etc.) for their field experience placement and explain how those factors impact their planning. Upon completion, candidates write a reflection that again questions how the cultural background, primary language, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability impacted their planning, assessment, and instruction in their unit. During the field experience, candidates are observed teaching their unit and evaluated on numerous CEC Standards. Candidates' teaching reflections explore how they created environments in which diversities are valued, and how they cultivate settings for all to retain and appreciate their own and other's language and cultural heritage. They also examine how they fostered an appreciation of diversity

and use resources that respond to cultural, linguistic, gender, and other differences, in addition to accommodating varied learning styles.

Assessing Candidates' Competencies Related to Diversity

In addition to the assessments used in each course and field experience, the LD Program uses a Dispositions and Professional Conduct Survey Self-Assessment as another means for assuring that all candidates endorse and demonstrate the desired dispositions and practices related to diversity. Candidates complete and submit this self-assessment at each stage of the Program. Faculty members also complete a survey to evaluate the candidates (Stage II) and field experience host teachers complete one during the candidates' student teaching experience (Stage IV). The recurrent use of this instrument in the Program's assessment system not only reinforces the candidates' knowledge of the behaviors expected of them, but also serves as a mechanism to monitor their professional growth across all stages of the Program.

At each LD Program stage, candidates develop a portfolio to demonstrate teaching competencies, including meeting diverse student needs. Candidates write statements explaining the philosophical, theoretical, and practical principles underpinning each section. Additionally, the portfolio includes artifacts, the candidates' justification for the selection of the artifacts, and a reflection on their learning and growth as a potential teacher. These written descriptions, rationales, and reflection statements are used as a foundation for evaluating the candidates' culturally responsive pedagogical knowledge across the Program stages in a recursive, developmental manner. Subsequently, this instrument is used as both a formative and summative assessment tool for providing candidates with routine feedback toward improvement. In order for candidates to advance beyond (Stage II) in the LD Program, apply for student teaching in (Stage III) and then complete the Program (Stage IV), they must attain a rating of satisfactory.

Recruitment Initiatives

LD Program members devised a recruitment plan designed to increase recruitment of candidates from underrepresented groups, including African-Americans, Hispanics, and individuals with disabilities, in order to supply greater diversification in the special education workforce. The Plan specifies four activity categories (a) dissemination of electronic and printed recruitment materials, (b) attendance at campus recruitment events, (c) participation in two off-campus recruitment events, and (d) creation of a website for the LD Program. (The Website continues to be developed.) Additionally, the Program members have engaged in formulating a new school-wide recruitment initiative that was implemented in 2011. Through the Teaching Man Program, the School of Education makes efforts to attract males into the teaching profession as one measure to increase the diversity of the South Carolina teacher population (16% SC teachers are male; 2% of these males are African American). Those participating engage in leadership activities, serve as a mentor to a public school student, and attend additional education opportunities. The male candidates in turn are assigned a mentor to assist and guide them throughout their studies.

In the third year of implementing recruitment plan activities, the LD Program's student enrollment increased by 17 students, or 30% in comparison to the baseline enrollment

established at the beginning of 2009. The LD Program student diversity also increased. Twenty-five students, or 34% of the LD Program majors, represent a diverse pool of candidates in terms of race, disability, and gender.

Future Directions

The LD Program will continue to refine its offerings based upon candidates' performances and feedback from its school partnerships. Although the initial phase of revising the Program syllabi was a time-consuming process, it was a worthwhile undertaking. All classes have been implemented as planned. Credit for this feat is attributed to the fact that the members who revised the coursework are also the courses' instructors. In response to recent reform efforts, such as the *No Child Left Behind's* performance-based highly qualified standard and the *Race to the Top Competition* incentive, Program members are now placing an emphasis upon revising candidate observation instruments to gauge their performance in relation to student-learning outcomes and classroom culturally responsive practices. The challenge is to clarify observed actions of multiculturalism, pluralism, and culturally responsive practices and capture these behaviors on a one-two page evaluation form that is feasible and user-friendly.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice

If teacher education programs are truly going to promote the well being of the communities they serve and provide leadership in these reform initiatives, they must be willing to review and revise their programs in terms of the changing demographics of the population their candidates will teach. To achieve this aim, the following suggestions are provided:

- Establish the demographics of the communities that candidates will serve
- Review program offerings to verify coursework alignment with professional standards and community characteristics
- Restructure programs to provide candidates opportunities to demonstrate competencies in instruction for CLD students in both coursework and field experiences
- Identify diverse field-based placements with mentors who are good role models that implement culturally responsive pedagogy
- Offer training for school and University personnel to mentor candidates in the field
- Provide multiple and varied field settings that allow candidates to practice the knowledge and skills taught in coursework each semester
- Conduct multiple evaluations of candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions in both coursework and field experiences throughout their program
- Recruit diverse faculty and candidates who represent the communities in which they teach.

Kozol (1981) raises the question of what teaching and schools are for - maintaining an inequitable status quo or achieving a vibrant democracy in which all students (and teachers) feel they participate. Unquestionably, higher education and its teacher education programs must play a key role in promoting schools as one of the few social enterprises well positioned to change the society it mirrors. When we view schools and teachers who work in them as change agents, teacher preparation will value the necessity of achieving pluralistic, democratic, and equitable practices through culturally responsive pedagogy. If we do not, the bifurcation of American society will widen in terms of student opportunity and the ability to achieve the American dream. Shifts in demographic trends make the transformation of schooling a comprehensive, on-going, systematic process. It is a responsibility that teacher education programs and public schools share in making the changes necessary for meeting the needs of today's classrooms.

AUTHOR NOTES

Holly Pae, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of South Carolina Upstate. Her research interests are in the areas of accreditation, alternative routes to certification, teaching evaluation, and minority recruitment. **Susan D. Whitaker, Ed.D.**, is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education at the University of South Carolina Upstate and Walden University. Her research interests are in the areas of mentoring and reading instruction. **Roberta Gentry, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Foundations, Leadership, and Special Populations at the University of Mary Washington. Her research interests are in the areas of mentoring, bug in ear, pre-service teacher education.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Holly Pae, Learning Disability Program Coordinator, University of South Carolina Upstate, 800 University Way, Spartanburg, SC 29303; (864) 503-5556; hpae@uscupstate.edu

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