

Considering the Role of Participant Characteristics in  
“Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World”

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ETEC 500 65C: Research Methodology in Education

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January 25, 2013

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In “Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World”, Lenski, Crawford, Crumpler and Stallworth (2005) examined the use of ethnography in helping preservice teachers become more aware of cultural differences. The authors’ purpose was to more adequately prepare teachers by helping them understand and value their students’ cultures and recognize the need to consider those cultures when teaching.

The study’s twenty-eight participants were preservice teachers attending university and spending time in schools. They received theoretical and hands-on training in the methods of ethnographic research. Participants completed multiple visits to community sites where they observed, took field notes, and became participant observers. They wrote reflections which were discussed with their instructors and other participants. Their ethnographic studies were completed by writing final papers and developing presentations. Instructors collected data from these sources and also completed in-depth interviews with six participants. This data was given to the researchers with transcriptions of the interviews. The researchers identified four themes, reframed them as questions and reanalyzed the data. A code for examining data was developed and tested by the researchers.

The researchers identified four ways in which the participants addressed their assumptions about culture and the need to consider culture when teaching. They reported participants:

- grew in their understanding of themselves as cultural beings
- expanded their ideas of diversity
- learned to observe without making judgments
- generated principles about teaching and learning

The researchers concluded “the data from this study suggest that participant observation and ethnographically informed approaches embedded within teacher preparation courses could be key elements in developing more effective ways to address cultural diversity in teacher education” (p. 10).

The design features of this study correlate well with the characteristics of qualitative research (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p. 15). The researchers demonstrated a responsive approach to research, collaborated with participants and stated their results provisionally. However, a study’s results are only as good as its methodology and there are some concerns with this study.

The study’s participants were students in a teacher training program; this makes sense given the study’s focus. It also means participants were dependent upon their instructors’ opinions to successfully complete their ethnographic studies and obtain good marks. Given the requirement of full disclosure and the collaborative nature of qualitative research, I believe the participants understood what was required “to get it right”. Sharing reflections, completing interviews, and working in groups with instructors added additional pressure. Aware of this, the researchers minimized their influence by not interacting directly with participants (p. 9, para. 2). Even so, I believe students were invested in the success of this study and that this is reflected in the lack of contradictory data presented by the researchers.

The authors reported their results and conclusions with appropriately flexible language. However, I question their validity given a lack of baseline data. Not typically associated with qualitative research, I believe pre-study information about the participants’ cultural beliefs, attitudes, and experiences should have been completed. The researchers provided anecdotal examples of how particular participants grew, expanded, and learned but failed to demonstrate

that this growth resulted from participation in the study. A pre-intervention interview, coded after the fact using the system developed by the researchers, would have supported more reliable pre and post study comparisons. I believe this would have strengthened the validity of the researcher's conclusions.

“Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World” is a good example of qualitative research. Future research into the use of ethnography to promote teachers' understanding of cultural issues should carefully consider the characteristics of its participants, specifically their role as students and their pre-existing beliefs, when collecting data and reporting results. This is key to drawing valid and useful conclusions.

## References

- Gay, L.R., Mills, G.E., & Airasian, P.W. (2012). Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Lenski, S.D., Crawford, K., Crumpler, T. & Stallworth, C. (2005). Preparing Preservice Teachers in a Diverse World, *Action in Teacher Education* , 27(3), pp. 3-12 Manassas, VA.