Chapter 16
Using Virtual Book Clubs to Elevate Discussion and Diverse Voices

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ABSTRACT

Preservice teachers in educator preparation programs (EPPs) are rarely cognizant of programmatic structures outside their own EPP. This lack of awareness isolates preservice teachers within their own programs and university cultures. As teacher educators, the authors wondered: How might interacting with peers in other EPPs bolster our preservice teachers' disciplinary literacies, praxis, and cultural competency? How might cross-institutional virtual interaction expand preservice teachers' pre-professional networking opportunities? Virtual book clubs offer a structured way for preservice teachers to experience peer interaction across institutions and cultural contexts. These book clubs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to explore a diverse array of cultural, societal, and professional perspectives as they prepare to enter teaching as young professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) provide preservice teachers with a pedagogical framework for teaching methods and instructional strategies in as close an approximation of "real world" praxis as is possible. While gaining foundational skills and pre-professional experiences within the context of the EPP, however, preservice teachers are usually unaware of the programmatic structure at neighboring institutions, and are especially unfamiliar with the structure of programs at schools across the state or in other parts of the country. This lack of awareness can create a silo effect, which isolates preservice teachers within their own institutional and programmatic cultures (Trust et al., 2017). When preservice teachers move from the institutional program setting and into the "real world" of classroom teaching practice, they often face situations and circumstances for which they feel unprepared. While this perception may be intensified by programmatic isolation, it can be lessened or ameliorated by creating connections across programs and institutions at the pre-professional level.

One-way to address this disconnect between EPPs and "real world" classroom experiences is to provide cross-institutional opportunities for preservice teachers to connect and engage in authentic literary praxis (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013). Within the elementary classroom, teachers routinely use children's literature to support instructional content and topics, and diverse children's books are an essential resource for curating opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in their classroom libraries (Tschida et al., 2014). Such reflection was popularized by Bishop's (1990) notion of *windows, mirrors,* and *sliding glass doors* as a means for students to connect to literature personally (mirrors), secondarily (windows), and collectively (sliding glass doors). Such opportunities allow teachers to generate purposeful lessons in which students engage in conversations about underrepresented topics within the classroom.

Book Clubs, as utilized by the authors, provide a structure for preservice teachers to interact with peers enrolled in EPPs at other institutions. The framework for each Book Club includes preservice teachers from each EPP reading targeted articles (see references for examples of suggested additional readings) related to the Book Club topic (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005; Loeffelholz, 2017; Tschida, et al., 2014) in preparation for literature circle activities and virtual discussions. Focusing on diverse texts during these Book Clubs enables teacher educators to illustrate how authentic classroom libraries full of rich, diverse books can serve as a catalyst for student discussion. Our intention was for inter-programmatic contact to bolster students' cultural competency, disciplinary literacies, and ultimately, their praxis. In this chapter, authors from each participating university share vignettes highlighting their Book Club experiences in order to document how preservice teachers' interaction with diverse books at the EPP level can build confidence, increasing the likelihood of their utility in future classrooms. We also provide a timeline for this multi-year, multi-institutional project, and explain how it is situated within our theoretical framework. Finally, we examine student perceptions of the Book Club, discuss current findings, and explore implications for future iterations and research.

BACKGROUND

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) often use diverse children's books as a primary tool to support and model culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2002). While conversations about diverging issues can be challenging due to a lack of confidence or experience with certain topics (Hollie, 2017), recent

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