ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how beginning teachers portray their literacy experiences when teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Using data collected from individually conducted interviews, the purpose was to gain a holistic understanding of the challenges facing beginning teachers during literacy instruction. Six elementary teachers, all graduates from a major university in the Pacific Northwest, with one to three years of teaching experience, participated in this investigation. Although the instructional context varied from teacher to teacher, the results reveal four areas of concern for teaching literacy: 1) student attributes; 2) instructional setting; 3) support network; and 4) professional learning. Understanding the concerns voiced by teachers provides a framework for a better understanding of the literacy challenges for all teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Statistics reported by the last two U.S. Census Bureau reports (1990, 2000) indicate that culturally and linguistically diverse populations are rapidly increasing. These increases are being reflected within educational settings across the nation. This creates several implications for teachers because, as McBee (1998:56) notes, “...our nation’s schools are growing more diverse culturally, linguistically, and economically, while aspiring teachers remain primarily white and middle class.” It is likely that every teacher at some point in his or her career will be responsible for teaching students from diverse backgrounds and students with limited English. Au (1993) discusses prior research that shows that student diversity in the United States is increasing rapidly, and that by 2020 only one out of two young people will be European American. The state of Washington has mirrored this change and its cultural and linguistic diversity is increasing rapidly. According to the U. S. Census (1996): “Washington is expected to gain 394 thousand people through international migration between 1995 and 2025, placing it 11th largest among the net international migration gains among the 50 states and District of Columbia.”

African American, Asian American, Latina/o, and Native American students, and students from poor and working-class families, and those who speak home languages other than standard American English benefit least in our educational system. Indeed, ethnicity, social class, and primary language are consistently related to the difficulties of serving students well and bringing

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them to high levels of literacy achievement (Au, 2000). With the continuing trend to eliminate bilingual education and establish English-only programs that will mainstream non-English speaking students as quickly as possible, the role of the classroom teacher in educating culturally and linguistically diverse students will be critical to their success. Unfortunately, research suggests that many mainstream teachers are unprepared to teach these students. They are in need of better preparation, appropriate instructional resources, and a supportive environment.

Numerous research studies have identified areas that present the greatest challenges to beginning teachers. One study in particular, was conducted by Whittaker, Markowitz, and Latter (2000) in which they identified four major areas requiring attention: 1) literacy instruction; 2) instructional planning; 3) positive classroom environments and management; and, 4) assessment practices that inform instruction. Literacy is a challenging area within itself, but it is especially challenging for teachers working with students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds with their own literate traditions (see Au, 1993; and Edwards, 2004). The importance of literacy in schools, especially those that serve large percentages of diverse populations, serves as a general foundation for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beginning Teachers

Recently, researchers such as Cattani (2002) have examined the process of becoming a teacher. In her study, Cattani collected a set of thoughtful essays based on her observation of a group of six young, white, middle class female teachers learning what it means to be ahead of a classroom. The teachers faced similar problems and similar doubts on how to manage themselves and their classrooms, how to deal with parents and administrators, and how to react to a role and situations different from what they expected based on their experiences. Cattani explains with details how these teachers, who were working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, were misleadingly recruited, inadequately prepared, poorly equipped, and frequently unaided. Factors such as authority, professional identity, school culture, school administration, professional judgment, affirmation and attainment, and diversity are highlighted. Based on her findings, Cattani (2002) offers suggestions to address the challenges she identified. These suggestions include better teacher preparation and stronger and more supportive school administrations. This descriptive ethnographic study provides a foundation for this study by pointing to teacher preparation and teacher support as critical factors in the success of beginning teachers.

A second study by Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002) raises questions about whether and how teacher education makes a difference in teachers’ practice, effectiveness, entry, and retention. This study examined data from a 1998 survey of nearly 3,000 beginning teachers in New York. The survey focused on the teachers’ views of their preparation for teaching. The findings indicate that teachers who had been involved in teacher preparation programs felt significantly more prepared across most dimensions of teaching than those who entered teaching through alternative programs. These findings have led reform groups to ask university programs to: “strengthen teacher preparation by requiring more subject matter preparation, more intensive coursework on content pedagogy and strategies for meeting the needs of diverse learners, and more systematic and connected clinical experiences” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002:287). The extent to which teachers felt well prepared when they entered teaching was significantly correlated with their sense of teaching efficacy, their sense of responsibility for student learning, and their plans to remain teaching. This study supports the idea that teacher education has a big impact on the performance of beginning teachers. Simply stated, preparation is a key topic to consider when looking at beginning teachers.
Literacy Instruction in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

Au (1993) wrote *Literacy Instruction in Multicultural Settings* to acquaint pre-service and in-service teachers with issues they will most likely encounter when teaching literacy to students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. She provides an expanded definition of literacy as: “the ability and the willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from printed text in ways that meet the requirements of a particular social context” (p. 20). She defines “students of diverse backgrounds” and “culturally and linguistically diverse students” as students who may be distinguished by their ethnicity, social class, and/or language. Au (2000) focuses on presenting useful and practical advice on topics important in literacy instruction including the reading and writing abilities of students of diverse backgrounds. Moreover, she makes suggestions on how literacy can be dramatically improved if teachers make changes to typical school instructional situations. Overall, Au’s recommendations underscore the importance of creating a literate community, adjusting to cultural differences, and achieving a balance of rights.

Theoretical Framework

The underlying theoretical framework of this study is “constructivism.” Constructivist models of learning indicate that literacy learning begins in the home, not the school, and that instruction should build on the foundation for literacy learning established in the home (Au, 1993). These models are based on the assumption that students learn literacy by engaging in the full processes of reading and writing in a purposeful, largely self-directed manner (Au, 1993). Yet, research indicates that “students of diverse backgrounds, who tend to be characterized as poor readers, are likely to spend more time working on skills in isolation and less time actually reading and writing” (Au, 2000:838). They have fewer opportunities than their mainstream peers to understand and apply the full processes of reading and writing.

Bushman (1998:24), comments on constructivist theory and argues that “…a person chooses to accept or reject what they are taught depending on how what they are taught fits with, or connects with, what the student already knows or believes.” First, people must choose to learn, and second, they have to be taught in a way that allows them to process the information so they can assimilate it to what they already know. The focus of learning is on the student. If the student finds curriculum relevant, the student is more likely to learn. Constructivists believe that instruction should not be viewed as a matter of teaching skills in the abstract, but rather as a matter of engaging students in meaningful reading and writing activities that relate to students’ lives. This helps students create their own understandings based upon prior knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, their culture influences their ability or desire to learn at school. Constructivist teachers build a bridge to connect students’ knowledge and experiences to what is being taught. Au (2000) cites researchers such as Au and Mason (1981) and Lipka and McCarty (1994) who argue that teachers can improve students’ literacy achievement through culturally and responsive instruction.

The Question

As prior research indicates, most beginning elementary teachers encounter challenges with literacy instruction when teaching in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Research scholars cite lack of experience, need for adequate training, and lack of support from school personnel when working with diverse learners as possible explanations for these challenges (Au, 1993; Baullough and Baughman, 1997; McBee, 1998; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Davis and Bloom, 1998; Whittaker, et al., 2000). Using a qualitative analysis, I seek to answer how beginning teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom communities portray their experiences and challenges surrounding the literacy instruction in which they are engaged. In
answering this question, five specific areas hold importance: 1) the classroom environment; 2) instructional practices; 3) professional learning; 4) external demands and support; and, 5) advice. These topics highlight some of the concerns, issues, and interests that mattered to the participating teachers.

The classroom environment holds specific importance when teaching literacy. It is significant to consider the classroom context of the teacher and the variation of students’ levels and achievement. For example, how does the cultural and ethnic make-up of the class affect literacy instruction? How do language differences affect literacy instruction? How does the teacher facilitate literacy instruction for all students? These questions address how students’ cultural and linguistic differences impact each teacher’s response. Instructional setting takes into account the instructional practices the teachers employ. It includes questions about how the teacher may group students for literacy instruction, whether they have the necessary resources for to accomplish the task, and the type of challenges they encounter when teaching literacy.

The purpose of analyzing each beginning teacher’s professional learning is to determine how their educational background influences their perceptions. For example, does the teacher feel prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse learners in the area of literacy? In addition, it is essential to understand the environment the teachers work in. As prior research indicates, working in a supportive school is significantly important to becoming an effective teacher. A school that understands and encourages cultural and linguistic diversity will provide the teacher with support to help students achieve. Indeed, family participation and communication with the teacher can lead to a positive literacy experience for students. At the end, each teacher is given the opportunity to share additional information about teaching literacy in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. For example, what would they inform future teachers about? This is their chance to highlight other significant factors that affect their teaching.

METHODS

Participants

Six elementary teachers were selected for this study based on their teaching experience and school demographics. After requesting a list of graduates from the teacher preparation program at a research university in the Pacific Northwest, I focused on selecting teachers who had graduated with a bachelor’s degree between 2001 and 2003. These participating teachers had between one to three years of teaching experience and taught in the state of Washington. Recognizing that women compromise the vast majority in the teaching profession, I selected five female teachers and one male teacher. This ratio closely reflects the percentages of male and female teaching professionals in elementary education (Cattani, 2002).

The selection was also based on the teachers’ school demographics. Most of the participating teachers worked in urban schools; however, they were not selected based on their urban or rural location. Teachers at schools with higher percentages of students from underrepresented groups were given more consideration because it indicated that they were more likely to be teaching culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. With a new list of teachers who met these criteria and agreed to participate, I proceeded with the interviews.

Interview Protocol

The interviews consisted of a set of twelve questions related to the following five categories: classroom environment, instructional practices, professional learning, external demands and support from the school and the students’ family, and advice. An example of a question used in the interview is: “How would you describe your experiences and challenges while teaching
literacy?” I used follow up questions during the interviews to further explore the ideas they mentioned and clarify the experiences and challenges they noted.

Data Collection

A semi-structured phone interview was used with each of the six participants. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Participants were contacted at their schools during and after-school hours. Prior to each interview, each participant was asked for their voluntary participation and permission to audiotape their responses. All phone interviews were kept confidential so that the participants to feel comfortable and give honest opinions and perspectives without risking their teaching positions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in stages. After conducting and audio taping all phone interviews, each teacher was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The interviews were transcribed to writing with the help of a transcribing machine. Each interview was analyzed and coded with the use of a computer-based qualitative data analysis program, Ethno 5.0. The codes were selected based upon all the topics the teachers discussed in each interview. All twenty topics teachers discussed in their interviews were divided and combined into major categories: classroom context, instructional practices, professional development, support from school staff and student’s families, and advice. At the completion of all analysis and coding, I collapsed my analyses across participants and compared the findings between interviews. Results focus on the topics that all or most teachers mentioned throughout the interviews. These were topics that held specific importance and mattered to them when teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Limitations

Several limitations of this project’s design and implementation warrant acknowledgement. First, teachers were located all around the state of Washington. Given travel limitations, this meant that each interview had to be conducted by phone. Second, the ability to observe and record processes within the classrooms were limited. Therefore, this study focuses on the teachers’ perceptions and not their effectiveness as beginning teachers.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine and gain a holistic understanding of the challenges in literacy instruction that beginning teachers encounter when teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom communities. This study is based solely on beginning teachers’ perceptions and is not intended as a measure of their effectiveness as literacy teachers. The results are influenced by their willingness to share information about their classroom context, instructional practices, prior teacher education, and support from their school and district. The following portraits include basic information about their teaching experience and classroom dynamics. Understanding this basic information about the teachers and the teachers’ classes provides a better conceptualization of their experiences and challenges.

Angela

Angela has two years of teaching experience and teaches in an urban district in the northwestern part of Washington. She teaches two kindergarten classes of approximately 25
students each. As she explains, the demographics of her morning class consist of four White students, sixteen African American students, and a few Hispanic and Asian students. Her afternoon class consists primarily of White students with two students with a Middle Eastern background, two African American students, and four Asian students. She distinguishes her morning class as being the lower socioeconomic group as compared to her afternoon class. Her morning class is not as active and eager to learn as her afternoon class. According to Angela: “They come in without having food and not having enough sleep.” She has about seven English language learners in each of her classes who speak English fairly well. She explains that none of her students encounter any major challenges with language. This year, her school grouped all kindergarteners with little English into one classroom. Due to this, Angela has all the proficient English language speakers. All her students read at the middle of first grade or second grade level.

Lauren

With two and a half years of teaching experience, Lauren teaches grades first through fifth ESL in an urban district in the northwestern part of Washington State. Her ESL classroom consists of all Hispanic English language learners except for two new German students who joined her classroom. From her point of view, “teaching English language learners slows down the pace because it takes more time to explain things and show students what objects are.” Due to the large variation in English language abilities in her classroom, she believes that “it’s pretty difficult from time to time to actually teach how to read if they don’t even understand what it is that they are reading.” For instructional purposes, she groups students by abilities or by specific skills they need to develop.

Mathew

Mathew is the only male teacher interviewed in this study. He is a kindergarten teacher in southwestern Washington and has been teaching for two years. His classroom is one of the least culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms in this study. Although he preferred not to reveal the number of ethnic students in his classroom, school demographics show that eighty percent of his students are White, about ten percent are Hispanic, and the other ten percent are either African American or Native American. He mentioned that six percent of the students in his classroom are English language learners. As a result of the small number of English language learners in his classroom, he doesn’t modify any of his instruction for his English learners. Instead, he pairs up English language learners with other bilingual students for instruction.

Beth

Beth teaches fifth grade in a largely farming community located in the south mid-eastern part of Washington. She has three years of teaching experience. Her classroom demographics consist of “one third Caucasian, one third Hispanic, and one third multiracial.” Out of twenty-nine students in her classroom, ten are English language learners whose native languages are Spanish or Ukrainian. The reading performance of her students ranges from as low as second grade level to as high as twelfth grade level. At the beginning of the school year, one of her students was reading at a preschool level. Throughout the year, she worked extensively to help this student improve and raise his/her reading level. The student improved three grade levels up to second grade. Although over a third of her students are English language learners, Beth has no additional staff support in her classroom. Students who need additional help, specifically in reading, are pulled out for instruction.
Jamie

Jamie has been teaching for two years and is a second grade teacher in an urban mid-western part of Washington. Her classroom is very culturally diverse, but few students struggle with language. As she explains, she has “a lot of Hispanic, African America, and Vietnamese students and a couple Korean and Caucasian students.” Only three out of twenty-seven of her students are English language learners. The English language learners in her classroom have been exited from the ELL classroom indicating that they have learned enough English to function in a mainstream classroom. She has two students who are reading at a kindergarten level and other students who are reading above the fifth grade level.

Kim

Kim teaches a first and second grade combination class. She has two years of teaching experience and is currently teaching in a large urban district in the northwestern part of Washington. Kim teaches the most culturally and linguistically diverse class in this study. She has twenty-seven students. In her words, she has “four Hispanic, two Russian, three Somalian, four Vietnamese, several Punjabi students, several Cambodian, and a couple of students from other ethnic groups.” Twenty-four of her students are English language learners representing eight different languages out of fifty-eight languages in her school. Only three of her students come from native English-speaking families. Due to the large variation in languages and English language levels in the school, students with little or no English enter the ELL sheltered instruction classroom when they first come to the school. After achieving an adequate level of proficiency in English, which is about one grade level behind their actual grade level, students are mainstreamed into a regular classroom. She has no additional staff in her classroom.

The Classroom Environment

Students’ educational needs, cultures, and the languages reflected in the classroom help guide instruction. In this study, teachers did not express that they were concerned about cultural diversity in their classrooms, but did provide descriptions of their classroom context. Most teachers had a wide array of cultures and languages represented in their classrooms. For example, Kim had eight languages represented in her classroom and fifty-eight in her school. Cultural and ethnic groups mentioned in their interviews included Hispanics, African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Somalian, Punjabi, German, Cambodian, and Indian.

In addition, all teachers mentioned having English language learners in their classrooms; although, the number of students varied from teacher to teacher. Lauren taught all English language learners; she is an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor at her school. Kim mentioned her school gets so many newcomers from other countries “that are put into the school and have no English abilities.” In Jamie’s school, all English language learners go through ESL instruction until they learn enough English to function in a “mainstream” classroom. English language proficiency varied between English language learners in each teacher’s classroom; some students were proficient English speakers and readers while others spoke and understood very little English. For Angela, language was not an issue because all of her students spoke English to some degree.

Five teachers discussed struggling readers in their classrooms. One important thing to acknowledge is that not only do English language learners struggle with reading and writing, but so do many native English speakers. In their classrooms, the teachers classified their English language learners among the struggling readers. They provided additional help to English language learners before, during, or after school. Kim mentioned: “We have before school interventions and after school interventions for readers that are below grade level, and we do
vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Whatever they are low in we have a group for them.”
When students really struggle in reading in Jamie’s class, they are sent to special education
teachers. In specific situations, this may be necessary but in other situations this may be unfair to
students because they may not necessarily need special education.

**Instructional Practices**

Instructional practices varied from teacher to teacher. All teachers grouped their students for
literacy instruction. Grouping students by ability worked best due to the large variation in
abilities. Some teachers felt overwhelmed by the amount of materials available to them. They
expressed no need for additional instructional materials. Kim stated: “I almost feel like we have
too much curriculum sometimes. We’ve got it to teach everything.” On the other hand, Lauren
felt the need for more instructional materials in her students’ native language, Spanish. She had
sufficient materials in English, but sometimes that was not enough. She stated that: “You end up
making it all on your own. You make your own flash cards. You translate stories. You write your
own kind of stories. You basically make everything yourself.” Reading programs in their schools
provided an abundant amount of literacy instructional materials for most teachers. Other
materials came from their school libraries and grant money. Overall, teachers felt satisfied with
the availability of instructional materials at their schools.

Mathew has a reading program targeted directly at kindergarten so the content didn’t need to
be modified at all. In addition, he had few English language learners in his class. In Kim’s case,
the entire curriculum was given to her in a big box. In order for her to become familiar with it
and really understand what she’s teaching, she took the teacher’s manual home every day and
studied it while modifying some of the lessons. As she mentioned: “I took it home and I read the
teacher guide and I was just shocked. Everything was in there. You don’t even have to think. You
just have to look at what it says to do.” However, she modified it to fit the needs of her students.
Beth and Kim describe their strong focus on vocabulary and comprehension with English
language learners since it is an instructional area in which they felt their students struggle. From
all the interviews, Angela, Lauren, and Kim thoroughly discussed how they support their
instruction with an abundance of visual aids, explanations, and act to assist their students to stay
focused and learn better.

When teachers were asked about their challenges when teaching literacy to culturally and
linguistically diverse students, their responses varied greatly. Part of it depends on their particular
situation or setting. For example, Jamie found that her district’s curriculum was challenging
because it was above average for her students. She had to modify most of the content to fit her
students’ needs. According to Beth, variations in levels and difficulties with language were
challenging for her. Kim’s major challenge as a beginning teacher was meeting her students’
needs in vocabulary and comprehension development, especially English language learners.
Lauren’s biggest challenge is getting parents involved.

**Professional Learning**

Professional learning in the field of education usually begins in the classroom of a teacher
preparation program and progresses throughout one’s teaching career. Since education is
constantly developing in order to serve our changing population of students, professional
learning and development is necessary. All of the teachers in this study had received similar
teacher preparation since they all graduated with a K-8 teaching certificate. None of the teachers
received additional supporting endorsements. Four out of five teachers who discussed their
preparation felt prepared by the program to teach literacy and enter the real world of teaching.
Nevertheless, their preparation to teach literacy didn’t come directly from their coursework and
direct focus on lesson planning. Rather, it came from their practical experiences. The actual
experience of working with children and having a guiding master teacher who they observed and taught with was the best preparation they received. Kim comments on her personal experience: “I had the most wonderful master teacher for student teaching that just taught me so much about writing that I didn’t learn anywhere else and my students are great writers because of her.”

All the schools the teachers work in offer professional development training by providing classes and workshops in areas that are a main focus to the schools. An area in which teachers received a vast amount of training is reading. This was due, in part, to the fact that most schools have reading programs that provide additional instructional materials. As Angela explained: “With the FFA [reading] program we get tons of books, thousands of books that they give us to read.” In addition, some teachers are working on their master’s degree. Beth, Kim, and Lauren are currently working on their master degrees in areas of high need such as culture and language, literacy, and ESL/Bilingual education. Angela plans to continue with her master’s degree as soon as she finishes the culminating seminar of professional certification. Professional development training is essential to continue to learn and develop as a professional.

Support Network

All teachers feel greatly supported by their schools and districts. School and district support adds to their success as beginning teachers by providing necessary professional development and assistance. The support comes through a variety of school and district programs, learning opportunities such as observations and feedback, instructional materials, money, resources, and additional staff assistance in the classroom and school to help their students. Four teachers received staff support from their principals, instructional aids, and other school personnel. For Beth, support came from workshops, observation opportunities, and feedback from her colleagues. Angela she stated: “We have a whole team of instructional aids that were specifically hired to help children who are struggling in their reading.” Kim, on the other hand mentioned that “classroom teachers don’t have support, but if a student really is lacking in something we can send them back to the classroom [ELL Shelter Instruction classroom] as a pullout program.” This is due to the fact that students who have already been through the ELL Sheltered Instruction class and have acquired basic English skills to perform at an adequate level. In Kim’s case, she continues to maintain close contact with her master teacher who she refers to for advice and guidance. Three teachers receive additional support from translators in the school, a literacy coach, and other school staff. On the other hand, collaboration with other teachers was possible for some teachers. Beth and Mathew discuss working closely with other teachers in their school who make them feel supported and mentored, with specific assistance in curriculum planning. Kim was the only teacher for first and second grade, which limited her collaboration with other teachers. Lauren taught ESL so she was unable to collaborate with other teachers.

Four of the five teachers who mentioned parent/guardian participation have very little participation in their classroom. At one school, parents/guardians participate in school events only if the school provides food. The teachers explain that participation in their classrooms varied from year to year and was in part reflected by their student’s socioeconomic status. Students from lower socioeconomic status had parents who worked one or more jobs to support their families and were unable to participate during schools hours.

Advice

Although advice was not a major focus of this study, all teachers participating in this study were happy to provide recommendations to future teachers. Angela, Lauren, and Jamie recommended that future teachers get as much classroom experience as possible before teaching. Lauren suggested that one should “volunteer as much as possible in the schools so you’re actually in the setting to see what’s going on. That will help you the most [rather] than reading a
textbook.” In Mathew’s opinion, teachers need to “…stick to just the basic things” when teaching. He suggested focusing on certain objectives and following them. Beth suggested taking full advantage of the resources in the school and being aware of what is out there in the educational world. Kim felt that “first-year teachers really need to get comfortable with the curriculum and comfortable with what they want to get done.”

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that though all beginning teachers had culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms, most of them felt prepared and supported when teaching literacy. Students came into their classrooms with a variety of languages and cultures and they felt they were responsible for providing quality literacy instruction. In each of these teacher’s classrooms, English language learners were typically the students who struggled the most with reading. This is consistent with previous research. Au (2000:838), for example, cites a study that:

found positive results when teachers accepted and built on students home language; structured interaction with students in a manner consistent with their home values; kept expectations high and focused on meaning-making rather than lower level skills; recognized that storytelling and question answering may take different forms in different cultures; and capitalized on students' ability to learn from peers.

Although my study did not investigate all of these areas, they are important factors when working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. In Beth and Kim’s classrooms, instruction focused primarily on teaching their students vocabulary and comprehension. They did not emphasize lower level skills, but instead, used what their students already knew to build on it.

Nearly all teachers participating in this study felt prepared to teach literacy instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse students. Angela was the only teacher did not feel prepared to teach after graduating from her teacher preparation. She states: “they didn’t really talk a lot about the struggles I would come up with culturally dealing with the things that are happening at home.” She didn’t think the program provided the necessary training to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. This is crucial because our countries cultural and linguistic diversity is rapidly increasing.

Many research studies explain the significance of helping teachers gain knowledge of cultural and linguistic differences and how these differences directly relate to the literacy learning and academic performance of students of diverse backgrounds (see Au, 2000). Overall, the results show that the university from which these teachers graduated is adequately preparing future teachers by providing numerous opportunities for field experience. The four teachers who stated they felt prepared to teach literacy indicate their preparation came primarily from their student teaching experiences rather than their coursework. As Jamie mentioned: “I feel like I was very well prepared but the majority of that came from my supervising teacher I student taught with. It’s interesting to learn the fundamentals and the people who invented these things but it doesn't really matter when you're in the classroom so…being a student-teacher was more helpful than the classes that I took.” Au (2000) supports this idea that teacher expertise is the factor that contributes the most to the achievement of students of diverse backgrounds.

Support was a major factor in the success of all these teachers. They were provided with reading programs, instructional aids in and outside the classroom, resources, and collaborative partnerships. Page, et al. (2000) and David and Bloom (1998) indicate that schools need to provide opportunities for beginning teachers to become part of a collegial network. It is vital that teachers have opportunities to observe and reflect on their development as teachers and ways to reach children whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. Too often teachers work in
isolation with few opportunities for professional dialogue or collaboration with other teachers (Davis and Bloom, 1998). Many teachers rarely have the opportunity to observe one another, to discuss professional practice, to problems solve, and plan together. The results of this study indicate that more schools need to develop support systems that value collaboration and continual learning.

All teachers had very little parent/guardian support. It is unfortunate to see the lack of cooperation between home and school. The challenges of education are ones which neither schools nor families can meet alone. They must support each other. When families and schools cooperate, children learn more; they enjoy school and the learning process, and experience a consistent sense of commitment and support from the important adults in their lives. It is important to understand that often parents are unable to get involved because they work one or more jobs to financially support their families. This is more common in schools where most students come from lower socioeconomic families or are recent immigrants to the country. Au (2000:848) discusses research that suggests that “low-income and low-literate parents understand the importance of literacy, and that they can and do support their children’s literacy learning in a variety of ways.” Families have cultural literacy practices they use on daily basis weather its reading the stop sign, reading the newspaper, or reading the label on a food can. Overall, there is a strong need to strengthen the bond of cooperation between home and school.

CONCLUSION

In 1992, 2.3 million students in the United State spoke a first language other than standard American English and were considered to have “limited English proficiency” (Au, 2000). This number has been increasing rapidly ever since. Statistics indicate that the state of Washington clearly emulates this change. Moreover, research shows that beginning teachers are entering the teaching field without adequate preparation to teach in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. Other research studies highlight factors that affect a teachers’ performance when teaching literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom settings. These factors include the classroom environment, instructional practices, professional learning, and support. In an effort to better understand these factors, this study focused on answering the question of how beginning teachers in culturally and linguistically diverse classroom communities portray their experiences and challenges surrounding their literacy instruction.

Results indicated that, as expected, all teachers had culturally and linguistically diverse students from a variety of cultural backgrounds and native languages. Most important to them was the support they received from their schools. Their schools provided them with reading programs to help their students learn, sufficient instructional materials, partnerships with other teachers, and a supportive staff. They were also given numerous opportunities for learning. They had opportunities for practical experience prior to teaching, workshops, and training. Overall, support and professional learning allowed these beginning teachers to become successful teachers. They felt prepared to handle the challenges that come along with teaching literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. This study strongly supports other research studies that identify teacher preparation and support as major factors in the success of beginning teachers.

REFERENCES


