

# Pre-Service Teachers' Understanding of Culture and Literacy through Telecommunications Discussions

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## ABSTRACT

The need for understanding and building upon diversity in education has received national attention. This concern is largely in response to the increasing number of children from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds, many of them are at risk of school failure. The urgency of this situation emerged a decade ago, spurred by the 40 and 50 percent dropout rates among Mexican American and Puerto Rican students, respectively. In contrast, demographic reports indicate that the racial/ethnic composition of teachers is increasingly White. This striking imbalance between the student and teacher populations appears to ensure that in the near future, all teachers will be instructing students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own. Multicultural education was defined in 1979 as "education involving two or more ethnic groups and designed to help participants clarify their own ethnic identity and appreciate that of others, reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and promote cultural pluralism and equal participation." No matter how well intended, brief and decontextualized experiences with diversity may only serve to affirm pre-conceived negative images of children from diverse backgrounds, rather than call such portrayals into question. Research suggests that merely reading articles about diversity or responding to hypothetical scenarios has limited impact on students' beliefs and actions. For teachers' education, the use of electronic communications to gain global resources for understanding self and others is timely and accessible, and opens new possibilities for integrating multicultural education into existing teacher education programs.