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Overcoming Fear: Preparing Students to Teach Language Arts in Urban Multicultural Classrooms

Wendy J. Wenner and Curtis Jones

Many of our advisees tell us that they are afraid to student teach in the inner city: they have heard "horror" stories; they will be uncomfortable with children from races and socioeconomic groups different from their own; they believe that they will fail and that failure will ruin their chances of getting a teaching position when they graduate.

On our sabbatical in fall, 1996, we explored ways to revise English 400, Teaching the Language Arts, so that it would alleviate some of these fears. Because the School of Education requires all teacher education students to spend one semester in a multicultural setting, the English department has been working to infuse multicultural research and literature into the curriculum, but our language arts course has had little instruction in ways for our predominantly monocultural students to become successful multicultural teachers.

According to a national study published in 1989, the "Third Research About Teacher Education Study," almost 90% of elementary teacher candidates were female; only 8% came from major urban settings; nearly 50% spoke no other language than English; and fewer than 7% were people of color or of international descent; and 75% of teacher candidates who came from rural or suburban areas wanted to teach in those settings. Demographics on the GVSU student body, according to Bruce Tweedale and the School of Education (1995), are similar: 87% of our students are female; approximately 3% are people of color; 62% come from rural counties; and many of the others come from suburban areas. However, that analysis shows that the English Department demographics are different from the national in two areas. First, it has a lower number of minority students in the teacher education program. Since 1976, only three students of color have graduated with a B.A. in Language Arts. Second, all of our graduates are required to have a three-semester proficiency in a second language.

After reviewing the literature in four areas—teacher training for multicultural settings, culturally determined learning styles, adaptation skills for new cultures, and values as they affect teaching—we identified two main problems that we wanted to tackle:

1. Our students' limited background in addressing diversity and the values and beliefs they might hold that would make multicultural teaching difficult for them. We worked from Alquist's (1991) study which found that "dysconscious racism" (racism which tacitly accepts white norms and privileges without critical examination) and "miseducation" of student teachers contributed heavily to their

attitudes about their racially and ethnically different students. Finch and Rasch (1992) found that the more knowledge and awareness students have regarding issues of cultural diversity, the more they question their own biases and beliefs.

2. Our university's lack of preparation of students before they begin teaching in multicultural and socioeconomically different classrooms. Grant and Koskela (1986) showed that when student teachers received little intentional teaching in strategies for multicultural education, they did not implement multicultural teaching in their classrooms. And Kleinfeld (1990) argued that beginning teachers need to appreciate and respect minority cultures and be well prepared to enter a "complex and foreign environment" before they begin teaching.

After several weeks of reading and discussing the Sadkers' *Failing at Fairness* and Orenstein's *School Girls*, we added student teachers' attitudes toward gender to our original study, because we believe that values related to gender also play a significant role in the success of classroom teachers in urban/multicultural schools.

We began by interviewing GVSU School of Education faculty involved in teacher training; Kathy Large, the Multicultural Education Coordinator in the Grand Rapids Public Schools; and some of our own students. Then, because two Milwaukee institutions—Alverno College and Milwaukee Area Technical College—have highly successful training programs for urban teachers, we spent two days interviewing their program administrators and faculty and the students and inservice teachers at two local public schools—Roosevelt and Benjamin Franklin.

The data from all the interviews are separated into four categories: 1) skills, knowledge, and experiences that pre-service teachers wish they had; 2) programmatic problems; 3) coping strategies; and 4) teaching.

The first category, (skills, knowledge, and experiences) focuses on inadequate preparation in cultural and social stratification issues. Both student teachers and new teachers indicated a need for exposure to Black history. The respondents reported culture shock: for instance, discovering that children were solving their problems violently or were not able to write their names or identify colors. They had had no training in dealing with these problems. Moreover they had had no preparation in giving directions effectively or developing an authoritative voice.

Several suggested ways to help. They stressed the need for students to begin education courses earlier than the junior year and to have more on-the-job training: for instance, a one-credit course, for which they would visit schools and get to know the teachers and the classroom environment. They also emphasized the importance of being in classrooms for full days prior to field placements and spending more time in the classroom once they are in the schools, particularly at the beginning of the year, not after classes have established a culture that they did not have a hand in

developing. They also believed that they should be involved in some way with the community in which the school is located.

The second category, programmatic problems, indicated three concerns about some supervising teachers: their doing too little observing or not being “good” teachers; their low expectations for African-American students; and their domination of the student teachers.

Highlighted in the third category, coping strategies, is the need for being constantly critiqued in order to grow and develop as a professional. One suggestion was to have a friend observe and critique one’s performance. Another was to write an educational autobiography or journal during the student teaching experience. Others concerned supervising teachers: that they should model a lesson so that the student teacher could observe how to handle the class; and that supervisors should provide feedback immediately after teaching a lesson, pointing out what worked and what did not. One of the more surprising responses was that a semester of “subbing” be required between student teaching and beginning a teaching career.

Teaching, the fourth category, contains suggestions to assist “new” teachers. Many respondents believed that a mentor program would be valuable in assisting new teachers to adapt to a full-time position. Other suggestions were to develop a multicultural committee and to make available story books with multicultural characters.

A redesigned English 400, Language Arts for Teachers, can begin to address some of these needs. We will give students a better understanding of the sociological factors that have affected children from multicultural, low-income populations. We will also provide earlier contacts with the children they will teach, as well as the kinds of methods appropriate for the urban classroom. We will also help them understand how their values and educational history might make teaching in the multicultural urban classroom more difficult.

We will begin the course by asking students to examine their own values toward the primary attributes of gender, age, race, physical ability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and the secondary attributes of education, income, parental status, and religious beliefs to see how these might affect their dealing with children in a multicultural setting. We will move into a study of the history of multicultural education, discuss current literature on classroom management in urban settings and on teaching students from ethnic minorities and low socioeconomic groups. We will invite community leaders to help the students to develop reading and interview lists for learning more about the cultures and economic groups with which they will be working.

One of the assignments will be an ethnographic study which will require students to become familiar with the school and community in which they will teach. They will be asked to plot where their students live on a Grand Rapids map, describe the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic mix in the neighborhood, and note the kinds of facilities that are available to the children. Required will be service in a community agency which works with the students the pre-service teachers will teach.

Texts for the class will be the following: Joel Spring's *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States* (1994), to understand how our educational system has traditionally treated minority students; Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in American Schools* (1994), to understand the educational inequities in our current system; Myra Sadker and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness*, (1994), to understand gender problems; and Pamela L. Tiedt and Iris Tiedt's *Multicultural Teaching: A Handbook of Activities, Information, and Resources* (1990), as a general reference. Throughout the course, students will discuss, plan, and teach lessons based on what they have learned.

We hope that this new course design will help our monocultural teachers better understand and appreciate cultural and economic difference and better prepare them for teaching in an urban multicultural classroom. Interviewing our teachers before and after their multicultural teaching experience and continuing to participate in the growing national and international dialogues will enable us to keep revising the course as needed.

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