

PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: CONNECTING PRESERVICE TEACHERS WITH COMMUNITY

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Public school demographics in the United States have changed dramatically over the past decades. However, despite the changing demographics studies show that teachers lack the knowledge and the preparation needed to work with diverse populations (Avery & Walker, 1993). Indeed, most teachers have very limited understanding of other cultural and linguistic groups. Studies show that middle-class teachers know very little about the values and characteristics of lower-class students. Also, in a recent study, it was found that less than 20 percent of preservice teachers were willing to teach in diverse settings. In the same study, about 40 percent of the preservice teachers responded that their training did not prepare them to teach in diverse environments (Avery & Walker, 1993). Besides, most teachers are not aware that schools sometimes perpetuate inequalities or that cultural conflicts can be barriers to learning (Cooper, Beare & Thorman, 1990).

Also, a striking discontinuity exists between students and the teaching population. While students are increasingly minority, the teaching population is predominantly white and middle-class. The changing demographics pose serious challenges to teachers. This is particularly so when students' cultural values conflict with middle-class values of the teachers (Gay, 1993). In addition, some teachers sometimes behave in ways which impact negatively on classroom interactions and practices. As Geneva Gay (1993) points out, "these conditions do not create 'safe and supportive' environments for learning. . . Instead, the result is classroom climates charged with adversarial opposition, distrust, hostility, and heightened levels of discomfort and tension" (p. 290). Apparently, some children fail to

learn in school because of uncomfortable classroom climates. James Banks (1986) made this point very well when he wrote:

Teachers are human beings who bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams to the classroom. They also bring their prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions. Teachers' values and perspectives mediate and interact with what they teach, and influence the way messages are communicated and perceived by their students. (pp. 16-17)

Given the above realities, Geneva Gay (1993) advises that teacher preparation programs should be designed to teach preservice teachers how to be "cultural brokers" and how to be "competent in cultural context teaching." A cultural broker, according to her is:

one who thoroughly understands different cultural systems, is able to interpret cultural symbols from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or establish linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process. Cultural brokers translate expressive cultural behaviors into pedagogical implications and actions. (Gay, 1993, p. 293)

How can we help teachers become cultural brokers? Teachers can become cultural brokers by studying about different ethnic and cultural groups; by having firsthand experiences in actual classrooms and cultural communities; and by cross-cultural awareness. Cross-cultural awareness is competency in recognizing, interpreting and understanding cultural elements that contrast with one's own behaviors, values and beliefs.

This means that teachers should be aware of the cultural contexts that shape not only their own but their students' way of knowing as well. In this way, teachers can see in different but in more inclusive manner. Helen Harrington (1994) argues that in order to

achieve this goal, “teachers must (study) society writ large, about the historical and cultural roots of who and what we are as a nation and a people” (p. 194). In other words, teachers should understand diversity because self-understanding emerges through engagement with others who may think and act differently from us. According to Harrington (1994), this may mean stepping outside our ways of knowing and acknowledging that others may see things in ways that are different from ours. In order to prepare teachers who are cultural brokers, that is, teachers who see the psychological world of their students; teachers who show empathic understanding for their students and are sensitive to their needs; and teachers who are able to provide students with teaching-learning environments and curricula that reflect the cultural experiences of the different ethnic, social and racial groups, some colleges have introduced the “Early Field Experience” program. This is a program where, as part of their multicultural education and social foundations of education course requirements, teacher education majors are required to do some hours of preservice observation and training. In one such program in a teacher education department in suburban Upstate New York, students are required to take a full semester of course work in multicultural education and foundations of education as well as undertake some hours of preservice observation and training in social agencies and in traditional and non-traditional school settings. They are also required to observe suburban, metropolitan and poor rural schools to acquaint themselves with social and cultural diversity and the many social problems that impinge on students’ success in school. This program consists of two components, the classroom component and the field component. The classroom component consists of lectures on such topics as poverty, stereotypes, the hidden curriculum, inclusion, cross-cultural awareness, sexism, racism, bilingual education, multicultural curriculum, multicultural learning, ethnocentrism, etc. The extent to which these topics are covered depends on the individual instructor. The field component of the course begins at the conclusion of the semester’s work. In the field, students are required to take extensive notes and to observe the extent to which the problems studied in class manifest themselves and impinge on students’ ability to learn. Students are

particularly required to observe classroom dynamics including but not limited to the following: whether teachers feel comfortable discussing racial issues and reflect racial openness; whether teachers are tolerant of inclusion; whether teachers encourage diversity of viewpoints and diversity in the curriculum; whether teachers have high expectations for all their students irrespective of race; whether teachers fully understand the effects of poverty on students' academic achievement; and whether teachers have the training necessary to work with culturally diverse student population.

Some of the students involved in this project have shared their experiences with the instructors. A student who visited "Family Services" noted: "Going to Family Services made me realize how many underprivileged families and children there are in this area which is something we tend to forget in our everyday routine". Concerning the schools she wrote, "area schools need to be aware of the social and economic needs of students in their communities to enable them provide services which would enhance students' academic achievement". The student continued by saying that in all the three social agencies she visited, she found parents with children living under poverty. According to her, these experiences had profound impact on her because for the first time she came "face to face with poverty." Another student who visited a bilingual education class maintained: "The program I visited had students from Germany, Jordan, Vietnam, and Turkey". He noted that all the students in the class spoke relatively good English but needed practice in writing skills. "In the class" he maintained, "students discussed how difficult learning English really was because of the different ways of spelling words that sounded alike". Also, the bilingual students thought it was strange how Americans say "we get in a car" but "get on a bus". Another student wrote, "I observed an elementary school. In the second grade classroom, there was a student who is handicapped and could communicate only through a computer. In this classroom I was particularly pleased to see how the teacher treated every student as equal". A student who observed an alternative high school noted:

I was very shaken when I first entered the school. But, I

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summoned up courage to see the principal. The principal asked me what I knew about the school and students. I was very honest and told him that the school was meant for “trouble makers”. The principal was kind enough to explain to me the mission of the school...At first, I felt very intimidated by the students. But with time, I was able to talk to some teachers and students. I learned a lot about the students because many of them openly told me about things they had done in the past. They asked me about life in college and I asked them about their school. In the end, I realized that they were just teenagers.

Some of the students involved in this project have expressed how valuable the experience has been. In a written report, one of the participants stated:

At first, I thought this project was going to be a bore, but it ended up being a very interesting experience to me. In fact, I learned a lot about how little I knew about other cultures. Probably the most important thing I found out about myself is that I should take more multicultural courses. I am now thinking about taking some black history courses. Because I’ve realized the importance of being educated and aware of other ethnic backgrounds, especially to be an effective teacher.

Another student wrote: “I enjoyed participating in this project. I found the project a valuable learning experience. I would like to see more courses involving multicultural education added to the education requirement. I feel it’s an important aspect in today’s educational experience.”

Responding to the classroom component of the course, a student participant stated:

This class was very informative to me. I worked with children last summer most of whom were minorities. I was able to relate things that I dealt with during the summer

with what I learned in this course. Multicultural education is an important course for teachers to take because diversity is a fact that teachers have to deal with in their classrooms.

Indeed, empirical studies show that preservice teachers who have been provided cross-cultural experiences feel more comfortable discussing racial issues, maintain associations reflecting racial and ethnic openness, believe that they have the necessary training to teach in culturally diverse settings, and are likely to encourage a variety of viewpoints among students than those who have no cross-cultural experience (Cooper, Beare, & Thorman, 1990). These teachers are more likely to help their students develop skills needed to survive in a dominant culture without “denying the existence of other values equally appropriate in minority children” (Cooper, Beare, & Thorman, 1990, p. 3). In another study Patricia Larke, Donna Wiseman, and Charmaine Bradley (1990) found that preservice teachers with cross-cultural experiences are more likely to believe that minority students have capabilities and strengths on which teachers could build. These types of teachers are more likely to use adjectives such as caring, responsible, polite, and creative in describing minority students than those who have no cross-cultural experience. They are also more likely to perceive minority students from positions of strength.

With respect to the curriculum, the participants observed that they found teachers who provided teaching-learning environments and curricula which reflected the cultural experiences of different ethnic, social and racial groups most effective. This is because most of the students they interviewed thought it was important to see reflections of themselves in the learning environment. This means, teachers who emphasize cultural relevance as a means of motivating students into accepting what they teach are often more successful in the classroom. A preservice teacher involved in cross-cultural experience said it best when she stated: “I believe students take more of an interest in history when their cultural background is brought in” (cited in Valli, 1995, p. 124). Apart from the curriculum, classroom

bulletin boards should represent peoples from different cultures, geographic regions, races and gender. As Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1991) point out, knowledge should “include a perspective of history from the students’ point of view and be selected and constructed in relationship to the students’ desires, visions, descriptions of reality, and repertoires of action” (p. 50). Indeed, Henry Giroux (1989) affirms that empowering education must provide students with “a curriculum and an instructional agenda that enable them to draw on their own histories, voices, and cultural resources in developing new skills and knowledge” (p. 729). According to Soren Kierkegaard (1846/1944), learning would be meaningful to every student if it takes cognizance of “the concrete and the temporal, the existential process, the predicament of the existing individual arising from his (sic) being a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence” (p. 267). This means, educators should take seriously the strengths, experiences and goals of their students because as Kierkegaard (1853/1959) once put it, “One must know oneself before knowing anything else. It is only after a man (sic) has thus understood himself (sic) inwardly, and has thus seen his way that life acquires peace and significance” (p. 46). Indeed, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi summed up this point in the early part of the 19th century in the following words: “For it is my opinion that if public education does not take into consideration the circumstances of family life, and everything else that bears on a man’s (sic) general education, it can only lead to an artificial and methodical dwarfing of humanity” (cited in Nel & Seckinger, 1993, p. 396). Pestalozzi further argued that learning should be connected with personal belief systems and prior experiences. Paulo Freire (1993) makes the interesting point that it is important that the “school system knows and values the knowledge of class, the experience-based knowledge the child brings to it” (p. 41), because if learning is not made relevant to students’ real life experiences, school becomes a place where students learn only compliance to adult authority and consequently students experience subject matter that is boring. This is why Maxine Greene (1978) argues that “the life of reason develops against a background of perceived realities...” (p. 2). Hence, concepts should be related to events that are pertinent to the lives of

students or to their cultural knowledge, for humanistic psychologists make the point that learning is likely to occur if students realize that the subject is related to the maintenance and enhancement of the self. In his book, *Experience and Education* John Dewey (1963/1938) cogently defined educative experience as one in which students and teachers find meaning in their lives. This is how he made this point: "...I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience - which is always the actual life-experience of some individual" (p. 89).

Finally, the participants in the "Early Field Experience" were unanimous in their opinion that the best pedagogical practices they observed in the classrooms were those that emphasized reflection and inquiry because such practices provided contextual connections between skills development, understandings and application of skills. Students in such classrooms not only were able to develop skills, but were able to evaluate why, how and when to use knowledge. Teachers in these classrooms constantly challenged the way students constructed knowledge. These teachers share the common aspiration of enabling their students to make connections between what they learn and their everyday experiences.

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