

## EXPANDING ON BASSEY'S "PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY"<sup>1</sup>

Joyce Woelfle Lehmann

In his article "Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century: Connecting Preservice Teachers to Community," Magnus Bassey states that teachers tend to lack relevant information for instructing diverse populations. He points out that most students believe it is important to see reflections of themselves in the learning environment, and adds Henry Giroux's concern that an instructional agenda should enable students to draw on their own histories, voices, and cultural resources in developing new skills and knowledge.

Although Bassey focuses on programs for preparing pre-service teachers in cultural diversity, it may be equally important to consider whether there is a receptive climate in the schools where they arrive for student-teaching or employment and how this climate is being developed. For example, in rural Wayne County, New York, two locally-initiated projects attempt to bridge cultural gaps between teachers and students as well as among students themselves.<sup>2</sup> A Multicultural Club for 4th to 6th graders begun in 1987, and a Multicultural Education Resources Notebook for teachers and administrators published in 1988, both focus on expanding the dominant white perspective in the public schools to encompass and value minority cultures—particularly the heritage of migrant farm workers and resettled migrants who support the agricultural economy of the region.

In the past, these migratory workers usually have been African-Americans from southern states, but in the last decade increasing numbers are Puerto Ricans, Haitians, and Mexicans. The 1990 census indicates that about 5 1/2% of Wayne County's population is minority; or specifically of the 89,000 total population, approximately 84,000 are White; 2,700 African-American; 1,500 Hispanic; and the

remainder undetermined. Also, some 3,000 to 5,000 seasonal workers temporarily reside in the county during the June to November harvesting and food processing season, and add between 100 to 200 students to the schools at the beginning of the semester as well as some in summer school.

The Multicultural Club was formed in the north central part of the county at the Sodus Elementary School where the year-round student population is about 15% minority. The club's original format included field trips, sampling ethnic food as a sharing experience, and outside speakers who were usually scheduled every two or three weeks. Also for a while, the club froze special desserts to present in a multicultural luncheon for family members and staff at the end of the school term.

By the second year, the club developed a different format. The speaker component continued, but two committees had evolved, each meeting weekly on different days after school for a separate activity. The interview committee works both in the school and the community to generate interviews of persons from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, particularly older people who began life in a foreign country or another region of this country. The students then transcribe and store this information on a computer as an available resource for multicultural events. The other committee collects old family recipes, especially those brought from another country or from another area of the United States, adding to it a short paragraph explaining how the food connects to the family's culture. These recipes and personal information are compiled into an annually-updated cookbook given free to members and sold to others. Also the group prepares some of the recipes for sale during lunch period, often assisted by members of the interview committee. At the end of the school year, both committees meet together to select an ethnic restaurant for a club outing which they pay for with the money generated for that year.

This model was developed by Dr. Jim Wood, a 4th grade teacher

*Joyce Woelfle Lehmann*

and curricular services coordinator, who said:

We try to do things that bring an appreciation for the wide array of cultural backgrounds and try to get kids working together. I know it doesn't always work out exactly, nothing really is perfect, but it's been pretty helpful. One of the things I think that's interesting about it is that when we first started we probably had a high percentage of African-American students and we still have a good percentage of them but it's really attracted the White students as well; and we find out some surprising things about the background of different kids. I think that for self-identity it's real important for all of them to understand that when they start to look into their own backgrounds they find out a lot of diversity also.

Dr. Wood thinks that this club along with a number of other things that have been initiated over the same period really make kids aware, especially of the dominant minority culture in that particular town—the African-American culture. He explains:

It's given kids a chance to appreciate—more than just look at this as a foreign body and say "I don't understand it, it's strange, and it's scary, and it's intimidating" but to see it in a deeper context; and that's why the Multicultural Club is tremendously valuable.

The idea for this club emerged from a discussion between an outreach worker, Rosetta Henderson Pappin, and the director of the Wayne-Finger Lakes Tutorial Program, Basil Dobush, who recalled:

I just got the idea that we want to involve the kids more in multicultural, ethnic activities; also one of the main indicators for dropouts is that kids don't have any after school activities that they go to. So I put all that together and said "Well, why don't we try an after school activity around that theme?"

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He added:

Sodus was chosen because Sodus was pursuing the same concepts. They had some racial problems that they were trying to deal with so it was a ripe ground to start it. I knew Jim, I knew that the administration would be very supportive of the concept. We had worked together on bringing in speakers which we had jointly funded. We had done several activities, college visits, jointly so we were working together hand-in-glove in Sodus. It was the most likely spot to try.

Dr. Woods added this comment:

I think when you look at a group of two white kids and two black kids, and they are listening to somebody whose experience was Canadian, and the Canadians are not very different—but they all had pretty much the same reaction to something that was kind of foreign to them; ...I think that's important for them to see together, and then have things pointed out as to how that's similar to anybody's experience that's different—it's going to be uncomfortable—they're not sure about it, it sounds weird and strange.... That's what we want—those things to come out, so the teacher has teachable moments.

Probably a broader segment of the community was affected by the second project, the Multicultural Education Resources Notebook, that was published by a local community organization, Wayne Action for Racial Equality or WARE. This two-inch thick looseleaf volume includes ideas for curriculum development, names and addresses of local speakers for inservice training plus other staff development resources, models of student projects, lists of local people available for career days, resources for minority students, assistance for minority staff recruitment, and extensive bibliographies of children's literature. There are additional units for parent involve-

ment and college/financial resources plus a back pocket containing an 80-page booklet, "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Resource Guide." In addition to preparing this resource book for sale to area educators, WARE participates in regular joint meetings with the NAACP and Wayne County superintendents of schools for the purpose of sharing views, ideas and strategies for digging beneath the status quo to undo the harmful effects of racism in the schools and to accomplish the extraordinary efforts that are needed to produce genuine outcomes.

Projects such as these, of course, are not part of the pre-service training recommended by Bassey; however, they too create a positive environment for beginning teachers who want to develop appropriate behaviors for working with diverse populations. Although national focus often is on inner city situations, there are also these persistent ongoing efforts to dislodge institutional racism and promote mutual understanding and racial harmony in rural areas. In the words of the WARE group:

Our schools need to be models in the county for how to undo the dangerous and harmful effects of institutional and individual racism. We can no longer afford to mistreat others who share our community—we all lose in the end.

*State University of New York, Oswego*

#### ENDNOTES

1. Magnus Bassey, "Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century: Connecting Preservice Teachers with Community," *Educational Change* (Spring 1997), pp. 29-37.
2. This information is based on personal research and was presented at the New York State Foundations of Education Association meeting held April 22-23, 1994, at Ithaca College, New York.

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