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Preparing White Undergraduate Pre-Service Teachers to Teach African-American Students: What Does It Take?

by Frances Y. Lowden

Accelerated change in the demographics of the nation substantiate the need for pre-service teachers to become more sensitive to the needs, challenges, and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups. American schools reflect the ever-changing diversity of the population. According to the Bureau of the Census "between 1980 and 1990 the population of the United States grew by 9.8% with Anglos experiencing 6% growth, the smallest proportional increase. By contrast, the African-American population increased 13%; Native Americans increased by 38%, and Hispanics by 53%.¹ The largest minority group at the present is African-American with more than 30 million making up to 12% of the U.S. population.² By 2080, Anglos will almost certainly be the minority population in the United States.³ Gloria Ladson-Billing states:

African-Americans find themselves on a downward spiral. African-American students lag far behind their Caucasian counterparts on standard academic achievement measures. At the same time, the very society that experienced a civil rights revolution finds itself locked in the grips of racism and discrimination. Almost 40 years after a Supreme Court decision declaring separate but equal schools to be illegal, most African-American students still attend schools that are in reality segregated and unequal.⁴

Preparation and Curriculum

A strong appreciation and knowledge of diverse cultures is vital in delivering what the Association for Childhood Education International position paper identifies as the curricular areas that should be addressed in a preparation program for teachers of young children.⁵ Thus, undergraduates must develop: 1) an acquaintance with great music, art and literature, 2) a knowledge of health, safety and nutrition, 3) an understanding of the physical and biological aspects of the world and the universe 4) a knowledge of mathematical concepts 5) an ability to read with comprehension, then to analyze, interpret, and judge a wide range of written material, 6) a knowledge of technology as an educational resource, instructional tool and curriculum component, 7) a

comprehension of the variety and complexity of communication patterns as expressed by people of differing cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in a global context, 8) a knowledge and understanding of differences and similarities among societies and cultures, both at home and abroad, and finally, 9) an awareness of the social, historical and political forces affecting children and the implications for education within individual nations and world contexts.

This same program should include techniques for: 1) planning that integrates young children's needs and developmental stages with the teacher's education philosophy as well as local, state/province and national mandates, 2) selecting and evaluating prepared materials and creating new materials consistent with stated goals and objectives, 3) adopting a variety of curriculum models to meet individual as well as group needs, 4) creating learning environments that foster creativity, 5) creating learning environments that foster healthy self-concepts and regard for others, and intellectual and physical growth in balanced proportions, 6) integrating play, a growth process, as an integral part of a child's intellectual, social/emotional, physical and aesthetic development, 7) implementing a program of learning for young children that includes all curriculum areas such as language (oral, written, literature, reading), mathematics, use of technology, science (physical, life, earth and space, science and technology) social studies (geographical, political, historical, economical, cultural, anthropological), performing and visual arts (music, dance theater, art, film) and physical education, 8) recognizing the potential and need to integrate content across the curriculum, where appropriate, in varied education contexts, 9) developing classroom management and guidance techniques for children, 10) recognizing and responding to families (traditional and diversified) in school/parent/community relationships that involve them in the educational process, 11) assessing and evaluating children's total development (intellectual, social/emotional, aesthetic, physical) using authentic, performance-based assessment, 12) developing leadership ability for appropriate contexts."

Without immersion in multicultural literature, guidance by facilitators of learning in multicultural issues, and a commitment from determined, focused teacher preparation programs, the above mentioned areas of knowledge, performance and dispositions will not be infused with the multiple strategies, intent to equity, and self-reflection needed to transform a mediocre one-dimensional Anglo-linear pre-service educational experience into a student-centric, transformative, dynamic, constructivist experience where growth precedes change. Change involves intense scrutiny of personal values and beliefs, and these give way to new ways of examining one's motives and intents, thus greatly impacting the teaching and learning process.

Teacher Characteristics

Curriculum and preparation can be viewed in a matter of fact, generic manner in the spirit of the teacher-proof

curriculum or can be exposed to the lenses of teacher qualifications and attributes. Can prepackaged curriculum address the needs of an evolving, diverse student population? Or do teachers' perceptions, characteristics, beliefs, and philosophies impact the way curriculum is constructed in the minds of young children?

In *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty*, Martin Haberman states, "For children in poverty from diverse cultural backgrounds who attend urban schools, having effective teachers is a matter of life and death."⁶ Haberman's discussion of effective characteristics of teachers parallels those found in Michele Foster's *Black Teachers on Teaching* where both posit that these teachers are committed to African-American children, their communities, and other diverse communities that spawn them; these teachers are committed to believing in students' unlimited potential, to working hard to provide a quality education despite difficult circumstances, to struggling against (and helping their children struggle against) all forms of racial oppression, and to building a sense of connection between students and their communities.⁷ In Marva Scherer's interview with Mike Rose, Rose identifies teachers who do wonderful work in the personal context of educating themselves; working themselves into the community; buying in the community; of going to community functions; of living in the community; of forming alliances with parents; of absorbing local custom and culture. And though he goes on to say, "The color of one's skin and where one lives do not automatically confer the capacity to reach particular groups of students," in fact, the inability of African-American students to interact and identify with African-American teachers in their physical domain can cause a sense of inferiority and lowered self-perceptions.⁸

While the percentage of African-Americans is increasing, the number of African-American teachers is decreasing resulting in young white, middle-class females providing the foundations of education for a large number of poor, urban students of color. According to Lisa Delpit, "Most teachers who teach today's children are white; tomorrow's teaching force will be even more so."⁹ She strongly suggests that one tool to use in attending to the multiplicity of needs of diverse students is understanding their cultural baggage and providing a match between teacher strategy and specific challenge of the moment. Irvine views this as "cultural synchronization" between school climate and student background with teacher's knowledge and appreciation of the values, habits and norms of the student viewed as a valuable bridge to eliminating cultural conflict.¹⁰ Teachers who overcome negative attitudes and stereotypes exude a respect that fosters positive attitudes of expectancy for achievement and optimal success for African-American students. But according to Gomez, many attempts are being made in myriad teacher education programs to teach for diversity with minimal positive results. She states, "To date, no reform report on teacher education nor any single teacher education program has adequately addressed the complexity and the urgency of the challenges that lay

before us in educating all of our children."¹¹

School communities and their teachers can provide a safe place for the body and windows of opportunity for the mind, but they also can make or break the spirit of the student. When interviewing Black teachers, Foster found that throughout their Pre-service and in-service tenures many felt that their voices were silenced. If African-American teachers are silenced and African-American students are silenced where will their advocates come from? Can someone else really raise our children better than we, ourselves?

There is expertise in experience. To rethink the realities of education and to make visions clearer, the dreams of African-American teachers and students must be articulated and reflected upon. When these opportunities are not provided frustration ensues. In order to properly educate white undergraduates, African-American voices must be heard, appreciated, and valued. An ethnographic Afrocentric epistemology couched in lived experiences generates a wealth of knowledge on how to educate all teachers to educate African-American children.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that, historically, African-American students have been subjected to miseducation. It is unrealistic to think that African-American students are going to continue to buy into an educational system that relegates them to the "back of the bus." Without concerted intervention, the status quo will persist, and African-American under-representation in higher education, the "hard" sciences, and Ph.D. attainment will steadily decrease. That reality is alarming and must stir all with a stake in education to remedy this situation.

At present, the current cadre of white, female undergraduates who are ready to become early childhood and elementary teachers have a great responsibility to themselves and to all children. Their teaching and therefore their training will impact the 21st century. Though there is no one solution to this challenge, a sound effort in reprogramming negative, institutionalized thinking is necessary for all in-service teachers, parents and students. To choose not to accept this challenge can only be deleterious to students' well-being and to the well-being of our culture.

Notes

¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, Final 1990 Census Population Counts (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, 1991), 23.

²William Willis, "Families with African American Roots," in Eleanor W. Lynch and Maria J. Hanson eds., *Developing Cross-cultural Competence* (Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co., 1992), 114.

³Quality Education for Minorities Project, *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990).

⁴Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers* (New York: Jossey Bass, 1994), x.

⁵Position Paper on Teacher Preparation, *Childhood Education*, 73 (Spring 1997), 164-165.

⁶Martin Haberman, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1995), 1.

⁷Michelle Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

⁸Marva A. Scherer, "Conversation with Mike Rose," *Educational Leadership Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* (April 1997), 1.

⁹Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 599.

¹⁰Jacqueline J. Irvine, *Black Studies and School Failure: Policies, Practices and Prescriptions* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 23.

¹¹Michele L. Gomez, "Prospective Teacher's Perspectives on Teaching Diverse Children: A Review with Implications for Teacher Education and Practice," *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 62 no.4 (1993), 471.

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