

# A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES IN AN URBAN, CULTURALLY DIFFERENT SCHOOL

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*The purpose of this study was to better understand how to prepare teachers for a diverse student population. The study addressed the significance of field experiences by focusing on the following research question: How do preservice teaching experiences at an urban, culturally different school affect teaching practices? Using several data sources, four conceptual categories formed the study's interpretive themes: (a) attitudes toward culturally different people, (b) pedagogy, (c) career expectations, and (d) senses of preparedness. Findings indicated that this experience positively affected the cultural attitudes and practices of the participants, increased cultural awareness, altered career expectations, and influenced the preservice teachers' sense of preparedness to teach culturally different children.*

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**“Dawes” Elementary School**, nestled on a hill overlooking the Oklahoma state capitol, enrolls approximately 250 students, 99% African American. Most of the teachers are White. The red brick school building is old yet immaculate, with halls displaying bright murals and posters of Black children. Several classes are housed in portable buildings behind the main site. Dawes is threatened with closure due to extremely low achievement test scores, which may account for its focus on content-driven curriculum and traditional teaching practices. Teachers report that the school population is constantly changing as families move often and most children come

URBAN EDUCATION, Vol. 32 No. 2, May 1997 184-201  
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184

from homes with little income. The area surrounding the Dawes district is considered a high crime area with much gang activity. The green lawns and well-maintained houses bordering the school sharply contrast with this reputation by conveying a peaceful, inviting backdrop. It was within this setting that 13 language-arts methods class students observed and taught over a period of 6 weeks. This article focuses on 10 of those students who represent the majority of undergraduate teacher education students in the country: White, young, middle-class females.

Although an investigation into the reasons for the disproportionate number of White, young middle-class females continue to fill the halls of our colleges of education is certainly worthy of investigation, the purpose of this study is to look at what is. Due to the shortage of African American teachers (Garibaldi, 1991), it will not be unique for these individuals to teach in a setting similar to Dawes. Referring to this phenomena, conceivably a crisis for those working toward successful urban education, Grant (1994) wrote:

If it hasn't happened already, urban teachers will soon find that the new teacher across the hall or the new teacher next door will be a White female whose first choice for a teaching assignment was a suburban school. These new colleagues may have some of the knowledge, understanding, and attitudes necessary for teaching urban students, but, for the most part, their backgrounds will be limited and superficial. (p. 316)

This is not to say that young, White, female teachers are not well intentioned or lack sensitivity to different cultures; but, do they possess the necessary experiences and motivation to understand and meaningfully teach students such as those at Dawes Elementary? What are their expectations for these students? What experiences could affect their abilities to successfully teach at Dawes? From these questions evolved this study that qualitatively examined the preservice teachers' experiences at Dawes.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to ascertain better ways to educate teachers to effectively teach students in an increasingly diverse

student population. The study specifically addressed the possible significance of early field experiences, that is, experiences prior to student teaching, by focusing on the following research question:

How do early preservice teaching experiences at an urban, culturally different elementary school affect the attitudes and teaching practices of 10 young, White female elementary education students?

In this study, the population is African American children from low-income homes who are culturally different from the White, female, mid- to upper-income, elementary education students.

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Given that America's elementary educators have traditionally been White, middle-class females, and given that this trend is expected to increase while the student population continues to become increasingly diverse,<sup>1</sup> it is increasingly important to investigate the manner in which these teachers are prepared to meet the needs of this diverse student population. If the curricula presented to these preservice teachers during their public school experiences (Sanders, 1987) and their training received as preservice teachers fails to address the needs of those culturally different from themselves, this stance lends credence to the cultural mismatch theory (Lessow-Hurley, 1996), which suggests that different groups have communication and learning styles that do not fit with the mainstream styles usually found in the classroom. Therefore, the theoretical perspective in this article suggests a cultural mismatch between the teachers and the students they teach.

To pursue this cultural mismatch theory, it is necessary to review the current literature related to multicultural teacher preparation. Although limited (Grant & Secada, 1990), the available research indicates that our efforts (or lack of efforts) in this area of teacher education have not adequately prepared students to successfully teach diverse learners in diverse settings.

Many teachers find themselves ill-prepared to comprehend the multiple cultures that students bring to the classroom, let alone bring dignity and respect for those cultures. They are taught subject

matter, but not what to do when the subject does not pertain to the life experiences of the students. Teacher education programs rarely prepare teachers to make education meaningful to diverse groups of students. (Krevotics & Nussel, 1994, p. xi)

Why is current teacher preparation ineffective? McDiarmid (1992) questions the content and pedagogy of multicultural coursework. After analyzing the experience of 17 student teachers representing five universities, it was concluded that the presentation of information under the rubric of multiculturalism perpetuated stereotypical thinking and prejudice toward certain groups of people (McDiarmid & Price, 1993). Furthermore, the basic beliefs and attitudes of prospective teachers remained untouched. The latter point is of special significance because teachers must first confront personal beliefs and attitudes to achieve authentic, culturally sensitive pedagogical change (Hadaway, Florez, Larke, & Wiseman, 1993; LoBaugh, 1993; McDiarmid & Price, 1993; Pate, 1988). Larke (1990) recommends that preservice teachers need a field base in multicultural courses to increase levels of cultural sensitivity. Most of the 51 female elementary education students in Larke's study thought they would work with a diverse population, but only one fifth admitted a preference for working with students from different cultures.

Haberman (1987) calls for a new form of field-based urban teacher education, a track of special preparation leading to an urban teaching license. He attributes the shortage of qualified urban educators to, among other reasons, racism, fear, a generally negative perception of what teaching in an urban setting is like, and the low percentage (5%) of faculty in schools of education who have urban teaching experience, which affects their ability to prepare teachers for urban settings.

Pasch and colleagues' (1993) survey of 88 urban teachers and administrators indicated that, in contrast to Haberman's position, a separate preparation track for urban teachers is not necessary. Instead, the critical differential training factor is "provision of early, ample, and carefully supported fieldwork in urban schools" (p. 28). Although the debate over separate preparation tracks is inconclusive, others have confirmed the need for frequent, structured, field experiences in urban, culturally diverse settings (Coballes-Vega,

1992; Kemp, Taylor, Clay, & Jefferson, 1994; Sleeter, 1985; Vold, Williams, & Ramsey, 1991). Cooper, Beare, and Thorman (1990) concluded that preservice teachers were more likely to develop culturally relevant teaching practices when provided with cross-cultural teaching experiences combined with discussion, an important prerequisite for minority children's success in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Pattnaik and Vold (1994) found that through assisted reflection, student teachers in an urban setting were more effective in recognizing consistencies and inconsistencies, including cultural relevance in their teaching practices, when compared to their counterparts at other school settings. Once preservice teachers recognize the importance of culturally relevant teaching, they seek strategies to help them teach more effectively (LoBaugh, 1993).

In summary, research, although limited, indicates that field experiences in culturally diverse settings may be a key component to effect preservice teachers' attitudinal and pedagogical change, which are necessary factors to achieve equity in schools and society (Pine & Hilliard, 1990).

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

The individuals in this study were 10 White, female preservice teachers whose ages ranged from 21 to 29 years, with a median age of 22. As elementary education majors, all were enrolled in a language-arts methods course taken one or two semesters prior to student teaching. Three other students in the class were not a direct part of this analysis because of its focus on a specific category of students. One student was an African American early childhood student who expressed her goal as teaching in a predominantly Black urban school. The remaining two students, one male and one female, were in their 40s and expressed no specific preference for a particular setting in which to teach.

The 10 participants were from Oklahoma. Although the size of hometown varied (e.g., sizes of high school graduation classes ranged from 60-695, socioeconomic status ranged from mid- to upper-level in their respective situations), all participants in this study reported minimal to virtually no contact with members of other races. Most of the reported contact was with people of American Indian descent.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

Students in the language-arts methods class met at the campus for the first eight class sessions, followed by a series of four meetings at Dawes. The remaining four classes were held on campus. This course was taught by one of the authors of this article who has experience teaching in a diverse, urban area and a strong interest in multicultural education. Because the purpose of the study was to ascertain better ways to educate teachers to effectively teach students in an increasingly diverse student population, it was necessary to investigate how what they did during the language-arts course affected their attitudes and, we hope, future teaching experiences. Because the assignments were a natural outgrowth of the instructor's wish to mesh theory and practice during the course, the participants were not coerced into an artificial setting that might have prejudiced the findings of this study from the onset. During the first 8 weeks, course content focused on three interrelated components: language arts, a multicultural context for teaching, and action research. In addition to other topics in language arts, the instructor introduced each of the upcoming field experience assignments, which were (a) a classroom observation focusing on children's literacy development, (b) teaching a book discussion, (c) teaching a writing experience, and (d) teaching a poetry experience. The students also maintained dialogue journals with the instructor throughout the semester. The initial entries described their cultural backgrounds, attitudes toward diversity, and expectations for the teaching experience at Dawes. These entries were discussed and served as an introduction to issues in teaching language arts in a diverse society and, most important, served as a vehicle for students

to confront preconceptions and cultural attitudes. Some students shared aspects of their personal biography in journals that they chose not to talk about with the class as a whole.

The third component, action research, was presented as a form of reflective teaching. By asking the students to carefully study, plan, and reflect, they engaged in action research: an inquiry approach to understanding and improving teaching (Fueyo & Nueves, 1994). In this process, teachers become more responsive to students, which is a way to better understand cultural diversity (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). This, too, was the approach the instructor used in the execution of this study.

The class members collaboratively outlined lessons for the upcoming field experiences. The plans were deliberately left open to adjustment so the instructor could observe how the preservice teachers adapted, if at all, to the culture of the classroom. Students had the choice to work individually or with another person. The class visited the elementary school as a group, riding in a university van driven by the instructor. This allowed immediate, candid information related to the preservice teachers' perceptions of the field experience and helped establish the sense of a cohort group, a recommendation made by the Holmes Group Equity Critique and Review Panel (1993) regarding effective cross-cultural teacher preparation. The instructor observed each preservice teacher as she worked with children. On several occasions, the instructor team taught with a methods class student.

Each student submitted a description of the Dawes observation or teaching experience and a one-page reflection paper for each class assignment. Students received credit for participation and submission of the paper with no judgment made on content. No letter grade was assigned. Instead, the fulfillment of this course component satisfied part of the requirements to earn a C or above within the contract grading system of the course—a further attempt to keep coercion out of the methodology.

## SETTING

The physical description of Dawes was presented in the introduction, and a political description of Dawes as well as other area

schools was succinctly summarized by a caption in the February 16, 1994 issue of *USA Today*: "Still Separate in Oklahoma City" (Kelley, 1994). During the 1980s, the United States Supreme Court ended over 10 years of busing in this district. In November 1993, an appeals court released Oklahoma City public schools from court supervision. Ten of approximately 60 elementary schools are virtually all Black. Dawes is one of these schools and, according to Marrett, Mizuno, and Collings (1992), Dawes is indicative of a national trend toward increased separation of race in schools.

#### DATA SOURCES

Because the focus of this action research study was to determine if the instructor's teaching strategies had affected attitudes and future teaching of her students, four sources of data that would most directly provide this information were analyzed: (a) dialogue journals, (b) qualitative ethnographic interviews, (c) class discussion and assignments, and (d) surveys.

*Dialogue journals.* Students wrote weekly entries in journals that were read by the instructor, who, in turn, wrote back with conversational comments. This served as a means to establish rapport between the instructor and students. In addition, each class member had the opportunity to examine herself through shared reflection, a key aspect to preservice teacher development. "Pre-service teachers are not passively adjusting to outside forces in their program. Rather, they must have opportunities to share the content of their internal dialogue with professors" (Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1991, p. 5).

*Interviews.* Each participant was individually interviewed by the instructor prior to the field experiences and again at the end of the semester. Although the interviews were informal, topics clustered around five areas: personal biography, cultural attitudes, career attitudes, career expectations, course expectations, and reactions to the course.



*Class assignments and discussion.* Each of the 10 preservice teachers submitted a total of four assignments related to the field experience. The instructor also took copious notes during and after class discussions, including the time immediately after returning to campus from Dawes.

*Surveys.* Participants completed surveys that provided demographic information, including amount and types of contacts with culturally different people. Other questions included (a) Do you plan to teach in an urban, suburban, or small town/rural setting? (b) Would you consider teaching in an urban, culturally different school? Why or why not? (c) What college courses or experiences, if any, have helped prepare you to work with culturally and/or ethnically diverse students? (d) Do you feel prepared to work with ethnically diverse children? Definitely/Maybe/No. Explain.

A matched group of 21 White, female, elementary education students (median age 22, age range 22-27 years), who enrolled in one of the two other sections of the same language-arts methods course, also completed the survey. These students were taught by another instructor who used the same text and materials, including a multicultural approach to teaching language arts, but did not require a field experience component to the course. The results of these surveys were compared to the 10 preservice teachers who participated in the Dawes field experience.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A grounded theory approach was used in this data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because grounded theory emerges as a result of data analysis, the triangulated data were cast onto a matrix that allowed for initial coding. On further examination of the data, focused coding revealed the following interrelated conceptual categories: (a) attitudes toward culturally different people and urban schools, (b) pedagogy, (c) career expectations, and (d) senses of preparedness. These themes served to organize the interpretation of data in this article.

### **ATTITUDES TOWARD CULTURALLY DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND URBAN SCHOOLS**

The use of personal biography and particularly the understanding of others' personal biographies before and during the field experience allowed participants to develop increased sensitivity toward others or, at the least, recognize the need to become more sensitive toward others. This was revealed especially through journal entries, interviews, and informal class discussion. The participants in the study reflected on their limited contact with other races and most commented on the need to develop these relationships to become a better teacher (or a better person). This strategy was used as a way to highlight any cultural mismatch that might exist between peers from seemingly same cultural backgrounds. An important way in which differences were highlighted and attitudes were affected was through sharing life stories and cultural histories with others in the class. This was especially true when the African American preservice teacher, who underscored the need for diversity in teacher education classes, recounted her experiences as a young child in a predominantly White school. One day, she had the following experience when a braid in her hair unraveled.

I started to cry because my hair looked crazy. No one knew what to do or how to fix my hair, so they sent me to the office and called an African American cook to fix my hair. It made me feel like no one wanted to touch me. . . . Braiding my hair was no different than braiding someone else's.

The sharing of personal biographies among the 10 participants also illuminated cultural differences among their shared ethnic identity. These differences included single parent upbringings, physical challenges, and familial attitudes toward gender and other cultural issues. All data sources supported the significance of these experiences, which encouraged understanding multiple cultural perspectives, as an important prerequisite for the field experiences at Dawes and for closing the chasm of the cultural mismatch that existed between the culturally different.

Teaching at Dawes proved to be a great learning experience for me. I had many misconceptions about teaching in an urban school. . . . The children I worked with had a lot of respect for us. I

was very scared to teach my lesson but the students made it enjoyable. I am now more open to teaching at a school like Dawes.

I was surprised at how eager these students are! I've heard a lot of negative things about inner-city schools and I had prepared myself for the worst.

The school setting surprised me. . . . Because of this experience, I would definitely consider teaching in an urban school. Truthfully, I was a little afraid that the students wouldn't like me because I was White. I didn't know if Black students would be different than White students. Well, as it turned out, kids are kids and teachers are teachers. Although there were cultural differences it did not keep us from developing a positive relationship.

One preservice teacher best summarized the positive affect of the field experience on her attitudes by referring to it as introducing the human factor. "I came face-to-face with my attitudes toward Black people and didn't like what I saw. I came away from the experience with a new attitude, a new respect for the school and the children in it."

#### **PEDAGOGY**

Related to the attitudinal shift toward culturally different people and settings, the preservice teachers also demonstrated varying degrees of increased sensitivity toward creating a culturally relevant curriculum. First, many questioned existing practices that, at times, included highly authoritarian classroom management, traditional text-based teaching, and a lack of material that reflected African American culture.

Only a few books are in the classroom library, and I didn't see any related to Black culture. It's sad to me that while some schools have so much, others have so little and what they do have does not have much meaning to the children.

Besides critiquing the existing practices, the preservice teachers were encouraged to reflect on their own teaching experiences at Dawes. The students were candid and insightful in their self-assessment:

The trip turned into chaos. . . . We thought that they would enjoy the alternate writing strategy [which was to write collaboratively]. They

had trouble cooperating with each other. It appeared as though they had not done much group work.

The last sentence is extremely important because this preservice teacher attributed the failure not to a cultural and/or ethnic behavior but to the fact that the students had not experienced much cooperative learning in the structure of this school. Class discussion revealed that other students had experienced difficulty in getting their students to work in small groups. The group generated ideas as to how to successfully incorporate cooperative learning into this situation.

Another felt a growing commitment to relevant teaching and noted that she wished that her poetry lesson would have included some poems about urban life and that she could better follow through on what the children were learning:

I wanted to stay and value their work rather than drop in and do a dog and pony show. Up to this point in time, I have been satisfied with dropping in and doing my thing and leaving.

An indication of increased attention to relevant teaching was also demonstrated when, after the first observation, half of the teaching pairs or trios changed the book they had intended to use for the book discussion to one that they thought would be more interesting for their students. Another pair decided to take books for students to read when they finished their poems. They carefully chose those books to include broad interests and ethnic groups. One of these preservice teachers wrote:

I realized that the students needed to read books that represented people of color. . . . I was trying to select books that [would help] the children value their culture, although many of the books focused on assimilation into White dominant society.

Other participants noted specific themes in children's stories that often reflected death and insecurity. The group questioned whether this is necessarily a cultural factor. One preservice teacher was intrigued by a student's rewriting of the three bears that included passages such as "Goldilocks jacked the blackeyed peas and cornbread." This provoked much discussion. Was the student trying to be shocking or humorous or both? How much emphasis should be given

to standard English in light of the low achievement test scores? How can one be culturally relevant and, at the same time, prepare students for dominant society, for example, college? Do these questions support the cultural mismatch theory (Lessow-Hurley, 1996)?

Interestingly, the preservice teachers did not report classroom management problems as did the students in Dana's (1992) case study of five White student teachers in a predominantly African American school. This may be due to (a) the structure of the school, which, although critiqued by the students as too authoritarian, did emphasize correct behavior and teacher respect; (b) the preservice teachers taught in pairs or trios, which allowed a team effort to manage the class; and (c) the length of time in the classroom was more brief than those in Dana's study.

#### **CAREER EXPECTATIONS**

Before the field experience, all 10 participants reported that they did not prefer to teach in an urban, culturally different school; two would consider it. The primary reasons included fear, preference for living in a suburb or small town, and lack of familiarity with other ethnicities. At the end of the semester, 9 (90%) students reported in the anonymous surveys that they would now consider teaching in an urban, culturally different school. Two decided that they would prefer it. The 1 participant who would not consider it stated the reason as a preference to live away from a large city. Twenty-five percent of students in the alternate language-arts sections would consider teaching in an urban, culturally different setting; none preferred it. Of those who responded that they would consider it, 67% reported that it was because they would take a job in any setting. Of the 9 Dawes students, no one cited this reason. Instead, the responses revealed two reasons: (a) The field experience at Dawes stimulated interest in urban teaching and (b) the altruistic need to help all children.

#### **SENSE OF PREPAREDNESS**

Efficacy, as a construct, was defined by Ashton, Webb, and Doda (1983) as the extent to which teachers believe they can influence

learning. It is of “significant value in understanding teachers’ definitions of their role, their attitudes toward their work, and their interactions with students” (p. iii). The survey asked participants to evaluate one dimension of efficacy: their preparedness to work with culturally different children and to document what led to this belief. At the end of the semester, all preservice teachers who visited Dawes rated themselves as maybe prepared to teach culturally different children. In contrast, 54% of the matched group rated themselves as maybe prepared, whereas 46% reported themselves as definitely prepared to teach racially diverse children. None of that 46% reported more than minimal contact with culturally different people or any extraordinary course preparation or life experiences. Instead, this group contained individuals who reported the least contact with individuals from other cultures and the most resentment toward multicultural education, in general. For example, one of these preservice teachers, who grew up in an all-White small town and reported no courses that helped prepare her for working with racially diverse students, wrote:

The goal of multicultural education is to share characteristics of other cultures. . . . The Euro-American culture has many things of value that are neglected. . . . We should stop worrying about being African American, Asian American, etc. and just be *AMERICAN*. . . . Courses like this one [a multicultural approach] do not find value in American culture.

A possible explanation for this finding is that these individuals hold extremely high senses of preparedness because they have had the least opportunities to test theory in the classroom and, therefore, are clueless that there may exist a cultural mismatch between themselves and the students they will ultimately confront. The Dawes group has, perhaps, learned from the classroom experiences that many variables exist that are not easily nor often successfully addressed. For example, one Dawes preservice teacher stated, “I would like to teach in an urban school from my personal standpoint, but whether I am capable of doing so is another matter.” Another less optimistic explanation for the matched group’s responses is the attitude that teaching involves certain, mainstream content taught in generic methods so no particular consideration need be given to

others' cultures; one is, therefore, prepared to teach in any setting, thus ignoring any cultural mismatch.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

The findings in this article underscore the need for teacher education programs to carefully examine the role of early field experiences in diverse settings. These findings and their implications, as listed below, suggest further research is needed to understand the complexity of teacher preparation for a diverse society.

*Finding 1.* Field experiences in a culturally different school within the context of a methods course positively affected the attitudes and practices of White, female preservice teachers, a group who represents the majority of elementary education graduates.

*Implication 1.* Early field experiences in culturally different settings with a reflective component should be an integral part of comprehensive teacher preparation.

*Finding 2.* Examining personal biographies and learning from others' personal biographies, especially those of culturally different peers, increased cultural awareness and, possibly, cultural sensitivity.

*Implication 2.* Preservice teachers need to critically examine preconceptions and attitudes toward cultural issues within a diverse community of peers.

*Finding 3.* The experience affected the career expectations of most students who taught at Dawes. At the end of the semester, nine would consider urban teaching; two preferred it. This differed dramatically from their expectations at the beginning of the semester and with the matched group of students.

**Implication 3.** Preservice teachers need experience in diverse settings to understand and evaluate career options. Interest in urban teaching may be significantly increased.

**Finding 4.** Preservice teachers need opportunities to examine discrepancies between their perceived and their actual abilities in teaching culturally different children, including an analysis of underlying personal philosophies and cultural attitudes.

**Implication 4.** Preservice teachers need to develop their own personal teaching philosophy that addresses their attitudes toward teaching students who are culturally different from themselves.

These findings tend to support the theory that a cultural mismatch does exist between preservice teachers and the students they will confront in increasingly diverse classrooms. Without preservice teaching experiences that will illuminate these differences, teachers will be hard put to identify their reasons for being ineffective and, therefore, to remove impediments that prevent effective teaching in the culturally diverse classroom.

## NOTE

1. Often-quoted statistics indicate that by the year 2026, the non-White student population will have increased from 23% to 70% of the total, the exact inverse of 1990, when Whites comprised 70% of the K-12 student body (Garcia, 1994).

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