

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Cultural Applications: Ideas for Teacher Education Programs

By Michael Bartone

As a White male, I grew up in a suburban environment in Connecticut, which included big yards with a lot of room to play safely. I rarely encountered people of different racial backgrounds in my quiet little town, and when I did encounter them, it was mostly on my trips into Hartford or by working superficially with the students who were bused in from outlying towns. Though my interactions in school were limited as a child, I was very interested in understanding what made these marginalized groups, mainly African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, different than my own.

When I moved to North Carolina for college, I began to interact socially with several African-American students, many of whom came from urban environments. I began to question my own identity and role as a White male along with all of the assumptions and stereotypes I had learned as a child. I then moved to Clarkston, GA, near Atlanta to teach in a school with a very diverse population. Clarkston is roughly thirteen miles due east of Atlanta and quietly sits in the shadows of Metro Atlanta's urban sprawl. The town has changed drastically in the last 20-30 years, having once been almost all White to currently being one of the most culturally diverse communities in our country (St. John, 2009). With its easy access to major bus routes and inexpensive apartments and housing, the town became the perfect location for a refugee settlement community in the 1990s and 2000s (St. John, 2009).

I was terribly underprepared to teach this kind of student population at first. For instance, I had originally planned to implement the same classroom management strategies that I had learned from my assisting teachers in North Carolina. Students were given rewards for their behavior and were

judged by the teacher only; there was very little student buy-in. The acceptable behavior was based on a Eurocentric, middle-class frame of reference, to which I had unknowingly subscribed as well. However, I quickly learned from colleagues that this style of classroom management and mindset would be unacceptable in a tougher, more diverse classroom setting. I searched for a program that would help me to be successful during my first year of teaching. Thankfully, I taught with many African-American teachers who helped me to better understand the intricacies and history of what it meant to be Black in America. It was at this point that I realized how integral it was for me and my students that I become more of an active participant in understanding their culture rather than playing the part of the casual observer or teacher who just shows up to work.

So what does my story have to do with preparing teachers in pre-service teaching programs? I believe that my experience is not unique and that the curriculum in teaching programs must be scrutinized more rigorously against the backdrop of ethnic and cultural diversity.

## DATA SUPPORTING THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT TRAINING

According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), the number of – K-12 or ages 5-18 – White students in public schools has decreased since 1980. On the flip side, the number of non-White students – African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Native-Americans, and multi-racial students – has increased in public schools. In 1980, 74.6 percent of the school population in the U.S. was White, but by 2004 that percent-

age had dropped to 59.9 percent. That means that 41.1 percent of the students enrolled in public schools in 2004 were non-White and, thus, not part of the dominant U.S. societal culture.

However, even though the number of non-White students has risen considerably in the last 25-plus years, the number of non-White teachers has not equally increased to keep pace with the influx of non-White students. In fact, in 2000 13.5 percent of the teacher population was that of people of color, while 86.5 percent were White (Aldridge & Goldman, 2005). The proportion of White teachers to non-White students has a big effect on how teachers interact with their non-White students (Delpit, 1995; Howard, G, 2006; Schultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1996; Su, 1996).

Finally, I believe these numbers tell us that colleges or schools of education need not only to start attracting more teachers of color, but they need to continue to educate preservice teachers on how to best work with marginalized populations. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), in 1980 the total population of White students in schools was 74.6% and 25.4% for non-white students (African-American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multi-Racial). In 2004 the numbers were 59.9% and 41.1% respectively. Thus, in those 24 years, the proportion of the student population that was White *decreased* by 14.7% while the proportion that was non-White *increased* by 15.7%.

## TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Sleeter (2000) notes that an effective way of preparing teachers to work with diverse populations is to not only have multicultural courses but to align and connect these courses with field work. Sleeter also states

that in a study conducted by Bondy, Schmitz, & Johnson (1993), the researchers found that when multicultural courses are combined with field work, such as “tutoring in public housing neighborhoods” (p.218), the rate of impact was much higher than those courses that either only did one of these in isolation or those that did not implement either of the two pieces.

Wiggins and Follo (1999) found, through their pre- and post-semester assessments, that their subjects’ placement in diverse school settings before completing the preparation program was helpful, yet did little to change their overall attitude and comfort toward working with students of different cultural backgrounds. Carpenter (2000) suggests “required multicultural teacher education courses” follow the following steps in order to reduce resistance from preservice teachers:

- 1) Clarify and justify the purpose of the course, 2) Address the controversies associated with changing schooling practices by presenting all sides in the course content, 3) Address the teaching dilemmas and methods in order to prepare preservice teachers for actual teaching situations, 4) Give examples, invite guest speakers who can serve as models of multicultural teaching, 5) Maximize placements in local urban schools, 6) Maximize the preservice teachers’ diversity within the teacher education program, 7) If possible, smaller courses are recommended to ensure a sense of safety and comfort. (p. 17)

By doing these things, preservice teachers can develop a better understanding of the intricacies of working with marginalized populations, especially in an urban school setting.

According to Noel (1995) there are three main components to multicultural teacher preparation programs. These are knowledge, attitudes, and skills. As someone who has been through this process during my undergraduate studies, I believe that knowledge and skills are the easiest for preservice teachers to grasp. As a teacher, it is not too difficult to find books or programs that help teachers plan how

to work with diverse learning styles or create solid units. Attitudes are more difficult to change, because this process forces preservice teachers to grapple with their preconceived notions of marginalized groups and find a way to gain a better understanding of the diverse groups they will encounter one day.

### **BASIS FOR NEW PRACTICES AND TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

As Berry and Lechner (1995) found, most pre-service teachers they surveyed believed their college course work had prepared them to be culturally aware of the marginalized populations they were about to teach. However, the preservice teachers in Berry and Lechner’s study also noted that they felt unprepared to teach and communicate with students who were from different backgrounds than themselves. Garmon (1998) reports that preservice teachers who demonstrated a willingness to be open to multicultural training and those who possessed a “self-awareness/self-reflectiveness” trait were more positive and receptive to these courses as opposed to students who did not possess these traits; their attitudes did not change during the course of the class. These results align with Wiggins and Follo’s (1999) study, which found, through their pre- and post-semester assessments, that their subjects’ placement in diverse school settings before completing the preparation program was helpful yet did little to change their overall attitude and comfort toward working with marginalized populations. So how can colleges of education help?

The easy answer would be to say that teacher preparation programs need to incorporate more multicultural courses. Banks (2002) states, “Multicultural education is a reform movement designed to make some major changes in the education of students” (p. 1). He also notes that the purpose of multicultural education is to provide students the opportunity to gain a better understanding of where their perceptions and epistemologies about education and culture come from, as well as the perspectives of other cultures.

Taylor (2001) points out one disadvantage of incorporating more multicultural courses, noting that many faculty members feel they are not qualified enough to teach about diversity and cultural sensitivity and therefore avoid the subject altogether. This definitely poses a problem. Many professors in teacher education programs are not very different than the students they are teaching, and this may, in turn, have a deep unintentional impact on the effectiveness of these programs (Parker & Hood 1995).

However, for me, becoming more sensitive to students’ cultures and needs goes beyond just adding more multicultural courses to teacher preparation programs or offering more of the cultural sensitivity training courses that schools and districts give to inservice teachers as part of professional developments.

### **GOING BEYOND MULTICULTURAL COURSES**

In my own third grade classroom, I advocate for more depth instead of breadth in almost everything I do. For instance, as educators we need to teach multiplication facts. However, if we do not give our students the solid foundation in number sense, then memorizing the facts, in my view, is moot. The same goes for implementing courses that emphasize understanding and approaching diversity in one’s community or classroom. We can read and write lessons based on how to incorporate diverse perspectives, but if the message is surface-level only, then we have missed our chance to make an impact.

One content area that lends itself well to teaching with a diverse population is the topic of the Civil Rights Movement. I try to incorporate lessons that will resonate with the experiences of the students on a deeper level. For example, having students understand the reasons why Jim Crow laws were implemented to how the nonviolent protests and sit-ins effected change, especially change that continues to this present day, is powerful. The biggest compliment I have gotten, besides having my third grade students want to write informational reports about

non-standard historical African-American figures (i.e. Amzie Moore, Bob Moses, Diane Nash, James Lawson, Julian Bond, etc.) or stating that they wanted to go to NC A&T “just like the four young college boys,” was a compliment given by a former 1964 Freedom Summer worker in Mississippi. Her grandchildren attend my school, and she noted that my students know more about the Civil Rights Movement than she did! I let my students delve deep and ask probing, and at times uncomfortable, questions. But in turn, they have begun to see different perspectives, whether they were positive or negative, of the movement.

### TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS: A FOUNDATION

Delpit (1995) argues that teachers need to understand the “differences that may arise from culture, language, family, community, gender, [and] schooling,” in order to connect with their students. One way of going about this is, in essence, to become an active participant in students' cultural institutions and/or cultural traditions. Delpit also notes that this would allow for teachers to better understand the situations and experiences students talk and write about.

Howard (2006) mentions that through his actions, words, and attitudes he lets students know who he is and that he respects them for who they are by acknowledging that he respects their experiences in life and what they are bringing to the classroom. One way to go about this would be to ask students questions about *where they come from, what they can bring to you [educator], and what they need from you [educator]*, to make their education experiences more fulfilling.

### IDEAS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

This brings me to my point about how teacher education programs can better serve their students in regards to multicultural or cultural diversity training. In his review of different ways college teacher preparation and inservice teacher professional develop-

ment programs can be effective when training teachers for multicultural and culturally responsive teaching, LeRoux (2001) states “Because of diverse school populations with diverse backgrounds and unique learning styles and needs in schools today, effective teaching has to address such diversity of learning by needs and means of diverse teaching approaches and strategies,” (p. 18).

One approach I have found helpful in my years of teaching is to genuinely explore and connect with the unique cultures of my students, as Howard and Delpit have both advocated doing. When I first arrived at the school in Clarkston, GA, I talked to the students and parents about their customs and history. I attended social gatherings and visited the houses of students to get a better understanding of where they came from. Additionally, I found myself at church during Sunday service, regardless of the fact that I am a Christmas-and-Easter-kind-of-Christian, as well as walking the campus of the Atlanta University (AU) complex, of which I had never heard before moving to Atlanta. I ate homemade desserts at a Bosnian student's home while looking at his coloring book of where to find the land mines, went to an Ethiopian restaurant with an Ethiopian family and learned not only how to eat injera, but the history around food in their culture, and while in Seattle I attended a luau and learned the history of the Samoan people by dancing and talking with many members of the community. These experiences have become crucial in my growth as an educator working with a diverse population of students.

The most telling moment for me was being in Clarkston, GA during the World Trade Center attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Here I was, a White boy from suburban Connecticut, in a public school with roughly half the population Muslim and with an assistant principal who was Muslim. In addition, we had students from New York City, including one whose father worked in the World Trade Center (WTC).

In my class we had a student who had just moved to Georgia from Brooklyn, New York, and here he was working side-by-side with students whose religion would be the target of hatred

and another form of profiling in the U.S. Our class had such an open dialogue about the events and the cultures involved and what it meant at that moment in our nation's history. A few days after the attacks, I drove an Ethiopian student and his father, who were Muslim, to Emory so the boy could receive his physical therapy. In his broken English the father taught me more than any book or documentary could have about his religion, experiences, and how similar Islam and Christianity really are.

The key I found in all of this was in the dialogue. I could show up to the restaurant and just eat, but if I didn't ask questions about the culture, then I was just doing what many teachers do, thinking that if I eat the food or show kids what foods are represented from a country, then I have done my part incorporating some sort of diversity into my classroom. It is not just about adding holidays and food festivals to our curricula or teachings, but rather infusing perspectives from marginalized groups (Banks, 2002). One thing I remember about our International week while growing up was that we made the food from the country we studied, but learned little else. We might have read books about the country, but histories and experiences of the people came from, almost always, the dominant culture's perspective.

It is those experiences that have made me appreciate diversity and understand where my students are coming from. I suggest that teacher preparation programs find some way to allow students to get beyond the text and into real-life applications to implement a cultural applications component. These programs should encourage students to go to social gatherings or community meetings and talk to the numerous marginalized groups within their community.

### ATTITUDES OF PRESERVICE EDUCATORS AND CULTURAL APPLICATIONS

Preservice educators come with their own perceptions of the marginalized groups with whom they may work one day, and these perceptions can color the way preservice teachers interact with marginalized groups (Gorman,

2004; Pohan & Aguliar, 2001; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2006). These perceptions, I believe, can come from family members, the media, or personal experience, but having teacher preparation programs encourage students to challenge their own thoughts is crucial. They can do this by directly being involved with the groups about which they might have preconceived notions, and such experiences might just have an impact greater than any textbook could illicit. Other educational experiences that teaching programs can provide include facilitating conversations between preservice teachers and community and religious leaders about how to effectively work with children of their specific community.

Finally, for those professors who are uncomfortable with their own understanding of how to teach others about how to work with diverse groups, enabling preservice teachers to go to social events or talk with those belonging to marginalized groups in their own setting, as I had an opportunity to do, could make diversity training more meaningful.

### TACKLING CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT VIA CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE

As I stated earlier, in the first year of teaching, discipline/classroom management was a difficult thing for me as well as others I have surveyed. If preservice programs implement the

aforementioned suggestions, then first year teachers could become more comfortable stepping out and questioning their stereotypes and beliefs about their students, changing the way they manage all aspects of their classrooms. This would also allow them to gather information based on open and honest conversations with members of marginalized groups to figure out what works best or to understand cultural norms. Finally, students need to be cognizant of the fact that these leaders and community members are just a proxy and do not necessarily represent everyone in their communities, but they do provide much needed insight.

Classroom management is difficult to master, but if first year teachers have adequate training in *how* to get to understand a culture and *how* to communicate with different groups, then the management piece may seem a little easier and less daunting. Jervis (1996) pointed out that when one lacks the ability to communicate effectively with students from other cultures, s/he is neglecting the chance to have a powerful impact within their classroom.

### CONCLUSION

Going to where students and their families live, play, and socialize is one way of creating personalized relationships. In my years of teaching I have always found it is the little things that make a huge impact on all the lives of people involved. By incorporating a real life cultural application piece,

teacher education programs can give students the tools for interacting, understanding, and better serving the diverse groups of children they will likely encounter in their classes. Furthermore, the kind of training I describe above has the potential to facilitate a stronger relationship between new teachers and their students' families. As Gay (2000) writes, "The personal is powerful." A strong partnership between teachers, students, and students' families can have a positive impact on the students' and families' engagement in the education process.

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