

# **Exploring Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Cultural Diversity**

by

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### Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a better understanding of how eight preservice teachers perceived the culturally diverse students they encountered during their one-year teaching internship. Their personal and professional experiences with diversity were investigated in order to identify the direct and indirect influences they brought to a culturally diverse classroom. The data for this study consisted of narratives from their one-year teaching internship and their home, schooling, and college experiences with cultural diversity. Each preservice teacher was interviewed twice. The issues that emerged from their narratives were individually presented to give a clear picture of how they each perceived classroom cultural diversity.

From their narratives, it is clear that how each of these preservice teachers perceived culturally diverse students was largely influenced by their life histories and experiences with cultural diversity. Cultural preparation in college acquired great significance as they each reflected on their preparation to teach in culturally diverse settings. None of them felt prepared to teach culturally diverse students. Instead, they indicated a preference of working in school settings that exhibited students similar to their own backgrounds. Classroom cultural diversity was seen as presenting special challenges, none of them felt prepared to handle. The implications from this study suggest that more preparation on how to work within culturally diverse classrooms is needed prior to, and during the student teaching internship.

## **Dedication**

*For my father Mr. Fredrick Kimani, who lived this dream long before I  
ever did, but never lived long enough to see it through*

*For my mother Mrs. Grace Kimani, for encouraging me to do my best,  
through sacrificing a decade of my absence*

*To my husband, Dr. Mel Oluoch, who's Love, support, and encouragement  
has seen me through*

*To Tiffany Oluoch, for two young years of no greater love. May your life's  
path follow in our footsteps*

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Statement of the Problem

As early as 1994, Whalon and Kidwell predicted that by the year 2000, two fifths of all school age children would be racially, culturally, economically and linguistically diverse. A visit to any public school today shows that classrooms are diverse, with numerous students who are linguistically, socially, economically, culturally, physically, mentally, and emotionally different from each other. If these trends continue into the near future, the American classroom is expected to become even more diverse, and by the year 2020, 46% of student population will be from culturally diverse groups (Lorenzo, 1997; NCES, 1991)

In contrast, the preservice teacher's profile indicates that 90% of prospective teachers are female (Elementary education); 92% are White; fewer than 3% know a language other than English; only 4% come from culturally different populations; and fewer than 9% report an interest in teaching in urban and multicultural settings (AATE, 1990; Cannella & Reiff, 1994). Since current demographic trends continue to show a decline in minority teachers, most European American preservice teachers can expect to be placed in diverse classrooms.

These demographics create serious new challenges to prospective teachers with limited cultural exposure, because they will increasingly face classrooms comprised of students from various ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, family structures, learning styles, socio-economic class, and linguistic traditions (Chen & Goldring, 1992; Lorenzo, 1997). Since they will be called upon to respond to the diverse learning needs of this new generation of students, there is a growing demand for preservice teachers to be able to instruct in culturally heterogeneous classrooms in ways that insure the academic success of all students. But evidence exists that limited exposure to students from diverse backgrounds often hampers a preservice teacher's ability to work successfully in diverse environments.

After studying preservice teachers' perspectives of cultural diversity, Dorene and William (1994) reported that preservice teachers who had been exposed to other cultural experiences were more willing to work with diverse students than those who had no cultural exposure. In a similar study, Martin and Dixon (1994) found that limited exposure to other

cultural groups posed problems for preservice teachers, who experienced difficulty in interpersonal relations with students from cultures that they knew little about. Cabello and Burstein (1995) show in their study on beginning teachers' perspectives of diversity that cultural misperceptions still exist in the majority of schools. They report that the majority of teachers (both practicing and new) are not culturally prepared to teach diverse students and do not understand the experiences and challenges that these students bring to the classroom. According to Rodriguez and Sjostrom (1995, 1996) an overwhelming number of preservice teachers recognize that they are not prepared to deal with diversity. Martin and Lock (1997) found the same trends and have suggested that all teachers need to be re-educated in how to relate to the culturally diverse students.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the current debate on how best to prepare prospective teachers to work in increasingly diverse classrooms has become a major concern for educators and researchers. Responding to cultural diversity is one of the most important issues for educational practice today, according to a (1990) survey report by American Association of Teacher Education (AATE). Prospective teachers need to be able to reflect on the various experiences held by these students, and make decisions about teaching and learning that are all inclusive (Harrington, 1994). Yet little is understood about the complexity of teaching learners who come to the classroom equipped with individual and cultural experiences that might have a profound impact on how they learn.

Consequently, there is a need to prepare prospective teachers to transform their views and opinions of culturally diverse students in order to accommodate classroom diversity. An initial step towards this kind of cultural enlightenment begins with exploring how preservice teachers respond to the diversity they encounter in the classroom setting.

To help preservice teachers understand the needs of culturally diverse learners, it is first important to understand what beliefs and perceptions they hold about cultural differences, and whether these perceptions are open to change to accommodate classroom cultural diversity.

In response to beginning teachers' inexperience in multiculturalism, McCaleb (1995) challenges them to ask; what understanding am I bringing along with me to a diverse classroom? Similarly, Banks (1991) urges teachers to reflect upon their values and attitudes towards other

cultures and consider alternative attitudes and values that may be more accommodating. Davidman (1995) sees this as a process of self-exploration, self-definition, self-discovery, self-reflection, and self-disclosure. As Davidman argues, if beginning teachers have opportunities to examine their lives and their values, and reflect on their personal as well as professional experiences, they will better serve students by exploring options that may effectively accommodate student diversity.

### Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological qualitative study explored preservice teachers perceptions of culturally diverse students. Personal and professional life experiences with cultural diversity were investigated in order to identify those direct and indirect influences preservice teachers bring with them to a diverse classroom. Eight preservice teachers participated in a phenomenological interviewing that explored their experiences and perceptions of cultural diversity in their personal lives and during their student teaching internship.

Schatz and Walker (1995) define perception to mean the way we respond to situations that generate different readings and multiple interpretation (p. 15). Perception encompasses our very selves, our feelings, emotions, actions, beliefs, and values (Schatz & Walker, 1995). In social situations such as a classroom setting, perception is not a mechanical and passive process; it involves experiences that challenge old perceptions and adopt new ones (Hall et al. 1995). Ava (1995) indicates that although it takes time to change perceptions, they are best altered through reflecting on past and present experiences.

While there have been many studies of preservice teachers, few have focused on preservice teachers' personal understanding of classroom cultural diversity. This study attempts to do this by examining what it is like to work in diverse settings from the preservice teachers' perspectives. Giving preservice teachers an opportunity to voice their views about working with culturally diverse learners is an important means of illuminating for them their beliefs, assumptions, and understanding of cultural diversity. This may help them begin the process of reflection necessary to accommodate classroom diversity.

The potential of using preservice teachers own voices to understand diversity from their personal perspectives locates this study within a phenomenological approach. According to

Creswell (1998) phenomenology describes the meaning or the essence of the lived experiences of several individuals about a context. It is also concerned with the personal meaning that people derive from their experiences. By approaching preservice teachers' lives through a phenomenological perspective, this study looks at how they make sense of cultural diversity in their personal and professional lives. A Person's experiences cannot be separated from his/her life history, for as Watson and Frank (1985) explain, each person encounters life history through the way he/she views himself or herself and the meaning he/she makes of his/her current situation. According to Bullough and Gitlin (1995) "who the teacher is as a person, the kinds of experiences had inside and outside of school, values, beliefs and aspirations has a profound influence on shaping what he or she is as a teacher, for to teach is to express oneself (p. 41)."

This study differs from those of Kendal (1983); Wayson (1988); Whalon and Kidwell (1994) in that it uses the preservice teachers' voices to bring out their individual understanding of cultural diversity. These previous studies have looked at preservice teachers' attitudes towards multicultural education and how the preservice teachers are prepared for diversity. The key in this study is to view preservice teachers as students, learning not only how to teach but also how to teach to in diverse classrooms. My approach is influenced by Goodson, (1991); and Butt, et al. (in Goodson, 1992) who recommend that educators and researchers should ensure that teachers' voices are heard, for they define in their language, tone, and feeling, what it is like to be a classroom teacher.

### Research Questions

With the purpose of understanding how preservice teachers perceive cultural diversity during their student teaching placements, the following research questions served as a guide in this study:

1. How do preservice teachers talk about classroom cultural diversity? What stories do they tell about their experiences?
2. How do they make sense of cultural diversity in terms of their home, schooling, and college experience?
3. How does the experience of working in a culturally diverse setting shape their understanding of diversity?

#### 4. How does the student teaching experience shape their identity as teachers?

##### Definition of Terms

Several definitions will help clarify these research questions. *Preservice teachers* in the context of this study refers to undergraduate students majoring in Early Childhood Education (ECE) who were enrolled in a one year teaching internship at elementary schools, preparing to become K-5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. *Preservice teachers, student teachers, and interns* are used interchangeably throughout the study.

*Cultural diversity* there is no clear definition of cultural diversity. It is a collective term used to refer to commonalities, differences, identities, experiences, and cultural orientations. In the context of this study cultural diversity refers to multiculturalism as it relates to Ethnic Minority Students, English as Second Language (ESL) Students, and Economically Disadvantaged Students (LES).

*Life history* is any retrospective account in written or oral form by an individual of his/her life, in whole or part, that has been prompted by another person (Watson & Franke, 1985). The whole life course is seen from the point of view of the person currently trying to make sense of his/her relationship to past events. In this study particular attention is paid to preservice teachers home experiences, schooling experiences, and college training experiences with diversity.

*Biography* A biography is a story of a life or part thereof. It is a deliberate critical procedure that aims to make educational sense of thoughts, actions, feelings, attitudes and experience. Creswell (1998) uses this term to “denote the broad genre of biographical writings that includes individual biographies, autobiographies, life history, and oral histories (p. 84).”

*Experience*, in the context of this study is the process of learning through a personal encounter with cultural diversity.

*A phenomenological study* describes the meaning/essence of a human experience (Creswell, 1998) from the perspective of those who have undergone the experience. In the context of this study, a phenomenological study describes the student teachers personal and professional life experiences with cultural diversity.

## Chapter Summary

Clearly, without a doubt there is an increased need to prepare preservice teachers to address classroom diversity. As noted in the problem statement, 92% of preservice teachers' come from mainstream backgrounds (White middle-class and upper-level-incomes), which are different from the students they encounter in culturally diverse classrooms. How do preservice teachers react to the diverse differences between themselves and their students? How do they perceive these students? How do they talk about them? How do they work with them? These are some of the questions that I explore in this study.

To begin to understand preservice teachers' perceptions of culturally diverse students, there is a need to first define what cultural diversity means, and how it is used in this study. There is also the need to explore what has already been researched regarding this topic on cultural diversity. The next chapter presents the current debate on cultural diversity both in and outside the classroom.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **RELATED LITERATURE**

#### Introduction

To understand how preservice teachers perceive cultural diversity in the classroom, the following chapter provides a review of the recent debate on cultural diversity. This review is important in understanding what preservice teachers' face entering culturally diverse classrooms.

In order to understand the meaning of cultural diversity, it is necessary to begin by defining what culture means, and explore the three diverse populations presented in this study. The literature review also provides some insights into the current status of research on cultural diversity and how teachers' perceive diversity in the classroom.

For prospective teachers to become culturally aware, Wurzel (1988); and Nieto (1992) argue that, they have to go through a process of cultural transformation, which is discussed under the cultural awareness model. Preservice teachers' biography and experience prior to going into the classroom is becoming critical in understanding their classroom behaviors and how they address the cultural diversity they encounter in their classrooms. It is, therefore, important to understand the role of life history, especially as it relates to student teachers. The last part of this chapter reviews the role that life history plays in the actions, believes, and overall perceptions of preservice teachers.

#### Culture and Cultural Diversity

In order to understand the meaning of cultural diversity, it is important to first define the meaning of culture. In the broadest sense, culture is defined as the symbolic universe of a group of persons (Grant, 1977, 1992). In this sense, culture refers to the meanings people attach to relationships, to self, and to others.

Culture is crystallized relationships that society members have with each other and that place them in groups large or small, formally organized or unorganized. Language, beliefs, values, customs, kinship patterns, and skills define culture. These characteristics assist individuals with identity development, behavioral patterns, personality formation, group identification, institutional affiliation, and artistic activities (Wilson & Still, 1981).

In the context of cultural diversity, Boyer (1983) believes that culture includes commonality among individuals in language, diet, costuming, social patterns, and ethics. Boyer (1983) does not limit the meaning of cultural diversity to the more obvious characteristics related to racial, ethnic, national origins or religious backgrounds. Instead Boyer sees cultural diversity to be concerned with differences that reflect group identification in ideas, attitudes, behavioral patterns, and experiences. Brand (1998) takes it further and recognizes the diverse subcultures of today's classroom as taking many forms such as: urban and rural students, teenage pregnancies, children from single parent homes, and students with various learning disabilities. Cultural diversity is one of the major building blocks of this country.

Over the years, cultural diversity has taken many forms, and evolved in many ways. Grant's (1977) definition of culture represented groups of people characterized by language, customs, beliefs, and traditions. Ten years later, Anthropologists defined culture to include ways of perceiving, believing, evaluating, and behaving (Goodenough, 1987). The understanding of what constitutes cultural diversity is constantly changing. As defined by Brand (1998) cultural diversity in the classroom refers to students differing from each other in socio-class, geographic areas, cognitive styles, age, physical abilities, religion, family backgrounds, and educational experiences. Teenage pregnancies, single parent homes, Gay and Lesbian families also contribute to the expanding definition of classroom cultural diversity.

Gollnick and Chinn (1990) argue that Culture is found in all of us. It is not only purported in our behaviors, but it is also reflected in how we think and feel. Our experiences, histories, values, and backgrounds are all a part of our cultural orientation. In a culturally diverse classroom, culture is reflected in the various dialects represented by students, socio-economic structures (Upper, Middle, or Lower social classes), gender, religious orientation, ethnic and racial backgrounds, physical differences, and family.

The meaning of cultural diversity continues to evolve and expand. However, most research conducted on cultural diversity issues continues to represent racial and ethnic populations (Solomon, 1995) only. Even though racial and ethnic issues are important foundations for cultural diversity, teachers are now faced with classrooms comprising of diverse students' population that go beyond ethnic and racial identities. For many teachers, this diversity

creates complexities that may affect teaching and learning. More research that addresses this growing diversity is needed. For the purpose of this study, classroom cultural diversity was explored in reference to ethnicity, linguistic and lower socio-economic populations.

#### Socio-economic

Socio-economic according to the U.S. Bureau of Census refers to the economic status of a family based on occupation, educational attainment, and income (in Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). Socio-economic differences play a significant role in determining how a person acts, thinks, and relates to others (Manning & Baruth, 2000). In a culturally diverse classroom, socio-economic status of students is usually determined by how much education their parents have, where they live, how much they earn, what size of houses they live in, occupations, how they talk, how they dress, and what activities they engage in (Gollnick and Chinn, 1990; Manning & Baruth, 2000).

Many teachers in schools consciously or unconsciously place students at specific socio-economic levels based on economic observations. Teachers may unconsciously have lower academic expectations for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These students tend to be represented more in tracked and academically lower classes, and their academic failure is blamed on their socio-economic backgrounds than any other factors (Delpit, 1995). They are also often perceived as exhibiting disruptive behaviors. For majority of these students, their academic success is often hampered by their teachers' low expectations.

Low socio-economic populations are very heterogeneous and represent people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Socio-economic differences may in some cases be more pronounced than any other cultural differences. In my study for example, the socio-economic classes of the students was a major concern to the preservice teachers than any other differences resulting from cultural diversity.

#### Language diversity

Many recent immigrants into the United States come to the classroom with very limited English (Perez, 1994). Some of these students are bilingual and some speak a nonstandard dialect (Gollnick and Chinn, 1990). Stigma is often attached to bilingual students and they tend to be characterized as "low income, low status, and persons who are educationally at risk

(Hakuta, 1986, p. 7).” In many cases, language diversity is considered to be a handicap rather than a cultural resource. Flunking and retaining these linguistically diverse students is seen as the viable option for improving their fluency in the English language. According to Lucas, et al. (1990) the academic failure of linguistically diverse students may be attributed to the teachers negative perceptions of these students, and not the language deficiency. In their study on academic success of Latino students, one Hispanic student expressed:

I came upon a world unknown to me a language I did not understand, and a school administration, which made ugly faces at me, every time I spoke in Spanish. Many teachers referred to us as animals. Believe me, maintaining a half-decent image of yourself wasn't an easy thing. . . .I had enough strength of character to withstand the many school personnel who tried to destroy my motivation. But many of my classmates did not make it (Lucas, Henze, & Donato 1990).

Linguistically diverse students are expected to conform to the norm by talking and behaving like the other students they encounter in the classrooms. However, due to their limited English they often tend to be isolated from other students and teachers. They are perceived as lacking in socialization skills, are found to be culturally different, and their academic failure is often associated with their English language deficiency.

Language diversity is not limited to bilingual or ESL students alone. Considerable dialect differences exists in a culturally diverse classroom depending on the socio-economic class, geographic location, and the acculturation of the students (Manning and Baruth, 2000). For some African American students, the English language spoken at home may differ significantly from the language used in the classroom. For other students, the English dialect spoken at home may differ from the dialect spoken in their classes. For teachers working with linguistically diverse students, their perceptions of these students academic capability may largely contribute to their success or academic failure.

### Ethnicity

In a culturally diverse classroom, students are likely to come from several different ethnic groups, even though physical differences may not be easily identified (Manning & Baruth, 2000). For effective teaching to take place, it is important for teachers to understand the

ethnicity of their students. Ethnicity is the “identification with others of the same ancestral background (Gollnick and Chinn, 1990, p. 81).” Members of an ethnic group may perceive themselves as bound by commonalities in culture, values, histories, attitudes, and behaviors (Banks, 1994). In the United States ethnic groups may differ from each other in terms of early immigrants to recent immigrants, forced immigrants to voluntary immigrants (Ogbu, 1992).

The diverse ethnic groups in the United States can be traced back to the early European assimilation into the dominant culture. Educators, politicians, and those who were concerned with assimilating European immigrants gave little attention to African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos who formed their own separate cultural identity in the American dominant culture and demanded recognition and acceptance. These demands led to the civil rights movement, which paved the way for the push for cultural awareness in the schools today.

The above definitions largely contribute to the understanding of what constitutes cultural diversity in this study. Cultural diversity, its meaning and place in the classroom is an important issue for educators at all levels (Perez, 1994). Teachers and prospective teachers must now learn to recognize and draw on cultural influences, instead of trying to assimilate these influences into the mainstream culture. It is now becoming necessary for teachers to be able to not only teach ethnically diverse populations, but also be able to teach linguistically and economically diverse students.

### Culture and Schooling

Everyone has culture (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). However, because culture is ingrained in all of us, we tend to become aware of the culture of others who may behave differently from us. Historically in this country, the educational emphasis has been placed on assimilation rather than acceptance of cultural differences. To be culturally different is still considered as inferior (Bennett, 1994) and schools are still unwilling to accept, celebrate, and recognize the diversity of their student population.

Culture, visible or invisible, is profoundly involved in the processes and contents of education (Banks & Banks, 1997). Educators consciously or unconsciously address cultural issues every time they teach and every time they design the curriculum. According to Banks and Banks (1997) every moment in the educational environment, cultural issues such as family,

gender, ethnicity, race, and social class are at stake. How these cultural issues are addressed in the classroom is of critical significance. Kallen (1970) made this observation:

Deeply ingrained, cultural socialization becomes problematic in education when schooling process operates on one cultural model to the exclusion of others, when culturally different students are expected to set aside all their cultural habits as a condition for succeeding in school. Such a demand is not only unreasonable, but is impossible to achieve. Attempts to comply with it may lead to cultural adaptation, marginality, alienation, and isolation (p. 112).

The schools operate under the mainstream culture or what Delpit (1995) calls “the culture of power.” Delpit believes there are codes or rules for participating in the culture of power and for those diverse populations outside the culture of power, there exists a disconnection and discontinuation between the culture of the school and the culture of the home. Delpit explains:

Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes – of those in power. The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not the cultures that carry the codes or rules of power (p. 24).

Gay (1995) argues that the incompatibilities or discontinuities between the culture of the school and those of different cultural groups need to be major issues of analysis in making decisions about educational programs and practices that reflect and promote diversity. According to Gay, many of the incompatibilities that exist between mainstream culture and other diverse cultures operate on a subconscious level. These incompatibilities become critical as teachers try to perceive their culturally diverse students through their own lenses and the diverse students try to learn the culture of the classroom through their own histories and lenses.

Incompatibilities in cultural structures, values, orientations, and performance styles may cause school failure more than intellectual ability for some culturally diverse students (Delpit, 1988a). To successfully address classroom diversity, it is becoming necessary for teachers to

become conscious of how culture shapes their own and their student's attitudes, perceptions, values, behaviors, and experiences.

### Addressing Classroom Diversity

Because teachers play an important role in the academic success of their culturally diverse learners, they must know how and be willing to adapt to meet the learning needs of these students. According to Ladson-Billings (1994) their approach to content, materials, and instructional guidelines, as well as their perceptions, should portray their interest in the academic success of these students. Ladson-Billings suggests there are several variables that matter in the education of culturally diverse students and that can be applied in the everyday world of teachers. These variables determine whether teachers will be successful in addressing classroom cultural diversity:

- Teachers' beliefs about diverse students makes a difference in their performance and their academic achievement;
- Teachers for diversity modify their instructional approaches to include relevant teaching approaches that are applicable in culturally diverse classrooms;
- Teachers for diversity bring student's experiences into the classroom to make teaching culturally relevant;
- Teachers who are committed to diversity are not satisfied with a curriculum that recognizes diversity only on special days. They believe this approach trivializes cultures; and,
- What teachers' bring with them from their lived experiences and what they learn during their teacher preparation is essential in how they address classroom cultural diversity.

These variables are relevant to this study, for they are consistent with this study's findings as well as findings of several other studies conducted on teachers beliefs, perceptions, and perspective of diversity (Dorene & William, 1994; Tamura, Linda et. al. 1996). These studies suggest that the teachers' overall perceptions of culturally diverse learners are important elements in how they perceive themselves and their ability or inability to address classroom cultural diversity. These variables will continually be addressed in the rest of this discussion.

Every student comes to the classroom with a set of values, which reflects his or her upbringing (Delpit, 1995). Every child comes to school with a cultural identity whether these

identifications are conscious or unconscious. In order for students to feel they belong in the classroom, it is necessary for teachers' to recognize the cultures, values and experiences of their students by ensuring that they incorporate appropriate culturally relevant teaching and learning strategies.

The treatment of students as unique individuals, each of whom has something special to contribute in the classroom community, is an important teaching strategy for a culturally diverse classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994). According to Ladson-Billings, if a teacher is to understand the whole child, it is necessary that he or she becomes aware of the child's cultural background, history and experiences outside the boundaries of the classroom.

When teachers believe all their students are capable of learning, they teach accordingly by using a variety of teaching methods, incorporating student's experiences and understanding the students from an open-minded perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mosher & Sia, 1993). According to these researchers, a culturally responsive teacher sees all students as having abilities to experience academic success. Ladson-Billings (1995) in her study on Successful Teachers of African American Students, found that culturally responsive teachers see themselves building on students' strengths and experiences and viewed culturally different ways of learning as resources to be used rather than limitations.

Effective teaching from a culturally diverse perspective can best take place within an educational setting that accepts, encourages and respects the experiences of culturally diverse learners (Banks & Banks, 1997). For teachers, this means looking beyond curricular content and instructional materials to the context of classroom life and the processes enacted by teachers and students as individuals and members of the larger society.

In acknowledging that different students have different learning styles, cultural diversity takes into consideration the learner and his or her relationship to the material (Banks, 1994). Addressing classroom cultural diversity means taking from the experiences that the students come with to the schools and helping them make sense out of their everyday life.

#### Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Cultural Diversity

The concept of classroom cultural diversity is unclear to many prospective teachers, for it interacts with other common concepts such as multicultural education, ethnicity and racial

issues. Studies by Hall et al. (1995); Smith (1994); and, Solomon (1995) addresses the issue of cultural diversity under the umbrella of multicultural education, which makes it difficult to differentiate between the two concepts. Multicultural education is the foundation for cultural diversity, and teachers need first to have an in-depth knowledge and understanding about classroom cultural diversity in order to be able to integrate a multicultural content into the curriculum (Banks, 1991).

Cultural diversity and its meaning creates numerous uncertainties for teachers (Chen & Goldring, 1992; Hall, 1993) who may regard classroom diversity, on one hand as a Godsend and, on the other hand, as a severe constraint for effective work. They may recommend classroom diversity as a means to meeting the needs of all students and they may also advocate for its opposite, namely “strict ability grouping, which tends to differentiate between students of different ethnic and social classes (Chen & Goldring, 1992, p. 9).” In their study, Chen and Goldring found that teachers teaching in culturally diverse classrooms complained of more difficult working conditions than teachers working in homogenous classrooms. Also, teachers in heterogeneously diverse classrooms had a greater tendency to group their students according to academic ability as compared to the teachers teaching in homogenous classrooms.

Because of perceived and real difficult working conditions, more and more prospective teachers are showing a lack of interest in working with culturally diverse children. As part of a study on the preparation of teachers to work with culturally diverse students, Wayson (1988) found that fewer than 20% of student teachers completing their preservice programs indicated a preference for working in diverse settings, and 40% felt unprepared to teach these students. This study also found that beginning teachers were less likely to implement knowledge about multicultural education into the curriculum “due to a serious lack of knowledge about ethnic groups, their culture, their history and their participation in, or contributions to America (p. 16).”

Several studies have also found that preservice teachers’ willingness to work in culturally diverse environments is also largely dependent on cultural exposure (Avery & Walker, 1993; Dorene & William, 1994; Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1996). Dorene and William (1994) conducted a study on understanding the preservice teachers’ perspectives on diversity in which, they assessed the preservice teachers’ perspective about the problems that confront culturally

diverse students in the classrooms, their commitment to teaching these students, and their beliefs about the causes of failure for these students. They discovered that background experience with diversity played a significant role in the participant's perception of teaching in diverse environments. Those preservice teachers who indicated a low commitment to teaching culturally diverse learners "had minimal experience with diversity prior to college (p. 10)."

Such findings point out that, there is a critical need to address classroom diversity and how prospective teachers are responding to this diversity as we move into the new millennium. Clearly, majorities of teachers perceive culturally diverse learners as difficult to teach (Dorene & William, 1994; Headley & Maxine, 1997). This perception may be a major contributor to the prospective teacher's lack of interest in teaching in culturally diverse environments.

### Confronting Cultural Perceptions

Discussing the current debate on cultural diversity and the preparation of teachers to meet this diversity, Cortes has written:

Critical questions have arisen. How do educators perceive ethnic minority students, particularly those educators whose education did not involve specific training in working with minority students and whose previous teaching experience has mainly involved working with non-minority students? How much knowledge and knowledge-based understanding do educators have about minority students? How does their knowledge or lack of knowledge about ethnic minorities affect their attitudes and behaviors towards such students? (Cortes, cited in Martin, 1997 p. 48).

These questions reflect the concerns raised by various researchers who have studied beginning teachers' perceptions of diversity. Because they play a major role in how preservice teachers respond and commit to the diversity they encounter in the classroom, cultural perceptions create the most difficulty in the process of accommodating ethnic, linguistic, and economic diversity, especially if they are negative. Delpit (1988b) finds it necessary for teachers' to modify how they perceive culturally diverse learners if they are to be successful in teaching in diverse environments.

Banks (1994) recommends the most effective way to help prospective teachers' change their perceptions of culturally diverse learners is through real life experiences with diversity.

Through real life experiences, preservice teachers' are able to reflect on themselves and their role as teachers teaching economically, linguistically and ethnically diverse students. Many preservice teachers find these experiences enlightening and challenging and helpful in understanding how their lives and their histories are different from the lives and histories of their culturally diverse students. For some preservice teachers, these experiences become an eye opener and they are able to see how their histories are interconnected with the histories of their culturally diverse learners.

Teacher preparation programs that teach about cultural diversity can also serve as eye openers for many preservice teachers. In preparing preservice teachers to teach in diverse environments, the University of Akron requires all preservice teachers to take several courses that focus on cultural diversity. Students in the study conducted by Hall, et al. (1995) reported that these diversity courses were not only enlightening but helped them to reflect on themselves and their beliefs. One of the students in the program comments on the importance of this experience:

Before I used to think So what? I am Irish-Slovak-American and I live in America. I do not have any big problems, so I'll continue to live my life the way I have been. No problem. Now I see that my previous attitude may have been all right for someone entering another profession other than teaching. I now realize that I am only a small piece to the puzzle that forms America, and that I must really be aware of those around me and be sympathetic towards them, for I do not know entirely, only generally, and I must find ways to reach all of them educationally. (Hall et al., 1995, p. 299).

Confronting her beliefs and attitudes helped this student teacher transform her cultural perceptions and understanding of diverse students.

Giving student teachers' opportunities to reflect and question their assumptions about diversity is critical in helping them develop an understanding of diversity, according to Harrington and Hathaway (1995). In their study to determine if computer conferencing activities can be used to access and transform student teachers' beliefs about diversity, they reported that the student teachers' beliefs were challenged, which prompted a reexamination of the basis and foundations of these beliefs. These researchers believe that the conferencing activities allowed

the student teachers opportunities to discuss educational issues with their peers, which helped them to begin thinking about their role as teachers teaching in a multicultural society.

Through a case study approach that provided student teachers with real world educational dilemmas, Sudzina (1993) also explored the ways that preservice teachers think and respond to diversity and specific issues such as “prejudice, gender bias, poverty, and cultural misunderstandings (p. 2).” Sudzina reported that the preservice teachers discovered the case study format increased their understanding and comprehension of diversity and served as a powerful tool for communicating their personal experiences, concerns, and commitment to classroom diversity.

These studies show that confronting cultural perceptions can be achieved through direct and indirect experience with diversity. The perceptions of the preservice teachers in these studies changed, because they were given opportunities to dialogue, learn, and reflect on their knowledge and understanding of diversity. It is, therefore, not only important, but also necessary to give preservice teachers opportunities to voice and confront their cultural perceptions prior to beginning teaching.

### Changing Cultural Perceptions

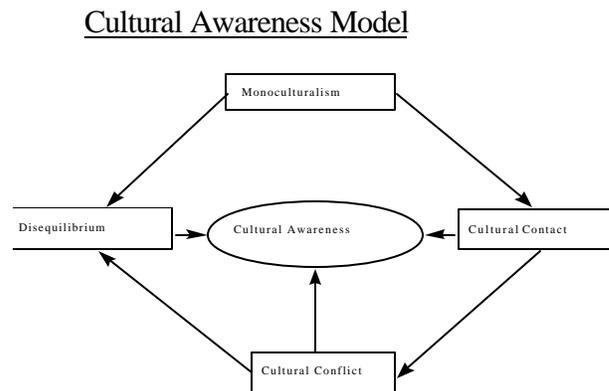
Although researchers recognize that cultural perceptions transform gradually, there is limited research on the various processes that prospective teachers perceptions undergo before they can feel adequately prepared to work in a diverse setting. Cheng (1990); Dorene and William (1994); Hall (1993); Mapp (1997); and Sudzina (1993) have all reported that preservice teachers beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of culturally diverse students change after some initial contact through field experiences or learning experiences with diverse students. However, these researchers do not adequately explain how this gradual transformation process takes place.

Nieto (1992) and Wurzel (1988) recognize this transformational process as the various levels of cultural awareness that teachers go through before they can become culturally aware. Wurzel (1988) has identified seven levels of multicultural growth: (i) monoculturalism; (ii) cross cultural contact; (iii) cultural conflict; (iv) educational interventions; (v) disequilibrium; (vi) awareness; and (vii) multiculturalism. Nieto (1992) has also identified a five-stage level of

attitudes and behaviors that teachers exhibit in diverse environments: (i) monoculturalism; (ii) tolerance; (iii) acceptance; (iv) respect; and (v) affirmation. Both Wurzel and Nieto imply that response and commitment to diversity is achieved through a gradual process that is exhibited in several different stages that are very important to know when exploring beginning teachers' perceptions of diverse students.

### Cultural Awareness

Wurzel (1988) and Nieto (1992) together identify over ten different levels of cultural awareness. For the purpose of this study, these different levels have been combined and a discussion of the five relevant stages follows.



### **Model I.I Wurzel 1988; Nieto 1992**

Monoculturalism as it relates to classroom diversity occurs when the preservice teacher assumes that his or her culture is universal and, therefore, superior to all others (Kendall, 1983; Nieto, 1992; Wurzel, 1988). Monoculturalism has been portrayed in studies by Hall et al. (1995); Spindler and Spindler (1994) among others. These studies report that the student teachers initially resisted any form of curriculum that focused on cultural diversity, because it challenged their monocultural beliefs.

Cross-cultural contact, the first step in moving from a monocultural perspective, happens when some information about other cultures creeps into one's experiences (Kendall, 1983). The awareness of other people usually occurs, for example, when individuals begin to

realize that there are other cultures besides their own (Avery & Walker, 1996). In the case of preservice teachers, cross cultural contact may happen during their schooling experiences with diverse students, during their college training and preparation that focuses on diversity or during the field experiences of working with culturally diverse students.

Cultural conflict, which Wurzel (1988) identifies as the confrontation of two or more ethnocentric views, emerges when intercultural differences dominate perception and cause stereotyping (Martin & Dixon, 1994). According to these two researchers, stereotyping may happen consciously or unconsciously as the preservice teachers view the diverse students through their own histories and experiences. To avoid cross-cultural conflicts, Cabello and Burstein (1995) recommend that preservice teachers reflect upon their beliefs and how these beliefs affect their teaching practices, rather than stereotype, when faced with students who are culturally different from them. Nieto (1992) recognizes this stage as cultural tolerance.

Disequilibrium occurs when previously held knowledge is challenged or invalidated (Wurzel, 1988). Harrington and Hathaway (1995) discovered that when student teachers encountered a variety of other perspectives, they felt confused and cheated and struggled to understand these other perspective. Martin and Lock (1997) report that when new information about a culture is learned, the preservice teachers then become more understanding of the diverse students. Rodriguez and Sjostrom also (1995) report that, preservice teachers felt more prepared to work with culturally diverse students after they had had experiences of working in diverse environments. This cultural knowledge leads to respect for cultural differences, cultural opinions, and cultural learning differences.

### Becoming Culturally Aware

Attaining the cultural awareness level means reaching a new level of consciousness that one's own world-view is profoundly different from the views of others (Bennett, 1991). This consciousness which is in constant motion, evolves as new information and understanding is achieved. Wurzel (1988) and Nieto (1992) portray a cultural awareness model that is continually changing and growing. The rhythms from this model may at times be in harmony and other times in conflict with one another, as new cultural understanding is reached. Throughout the process, preservice teachers must become the cultural mediators in their classrooms (Cheng,

1990). They must become aware of the multitude ways in which culture influences the classroom and engage all students in accommodating diversity.

The context of cultural diversity provides special challenges to teachers, since it demands an awareness of diverse students as individual students, each with their own unique experiences and needs. Part of the process of responding to classroom diversity, according to Cannella and Reiff (1994) requires that prospective teachers: (i) examine their own cultural beliefs through ethnography, autobiography, and cultural history; (ii) analyze how these beliefs have developed, and (iii) construct understandings which are open to multiple realities. To reach the level of cultural awareness and commit to the process, prospective teachers need to examine and reflect on their histories and life experiences and how these experiences influence their perceptions of culturally diverse students.

### **Teacher Biography**

To understand how preservice teachers cultural perceptions have developed Banks (1991); Cannella and Reiff (1994); Delpit (1995) among others, suggest an examination these teachers life experiences with cultural diversity. Teacher biography which gives a picture of who the teacher is as a person and why they act the way they do, may be able to help us understand better beginning teachers cultural perceptions. The importance of beginning teachers' biography is increasingly being recognized as influencing classroom behaviors and practices, (Denzin, 1989b; Goodson, 1992). Munro (1987) observed that:

What preservice teachers bring with them into the training may well have more significant effects on their teaching behavior, than the training itself. Preservice teachers disposition towards teaching, relationships with pupils, and classroom management would appear to owe much to factors embedded in personal biographies (p. 115). Munro notes that biography has a significant impact on how beginning teachers behave in a classroom environment. A teacher's previous life experience shapes her/his view of teaching and the way she/he sets about it. It is therefore, important to locate the life history of the beginning teachers within their current teaching context (Ball & Goodson, 1985).

Butt (1986) has also suggested using autobiography to understand teachers' personal knowledge, because teachers bring into teaching a particular set of dispositions and knowledge

gained through their life history, thereby making it necessary in the study of teachers to study their life histories also. Butt acknowledges Berk's (1980) definition of biography:

A biography is the formative history of an individual's life experiences. It not only focuses on what has happened in someone's life, but also addresses how that individual responded to or initiated various events. It not only addresses attitudes, feelings, thoughts or actions, but also examines the relation between earlier and later events. It attempts to infer how a person came to be the way he/she is. A biography is a story of a life or part thereof. It is a deliberate critical procedure that aims to make educational sense of thoughts, actions, feelings, attitudes and experience (p. 97-98).

Berk (in Butt, 1988) by accepting that a person's biography explains a large part of his/her current actions and practices, emphasizes that biography helps understand how people come to be the way they are. In the case of preservice teachers' in my current study, biographies may help clarify their classroom behaviors and perceptions of cultural diversity.

After studying preservice teacher's lives, Crow (1987) recognized that beginning teachers' prior experiences play a major role in their classroom practices. In his study, preservice teachers considered role models, previous teaching experiences, socialization, and childhood experiences as major influences in their classroom behaviors.

In their study on beginning teachers' classroom experience Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1989) found that prior experiences play a significant role in whether beginning teachers will experience difficulties in their initial teaching assignment. In forming their images of the students, the beginning teachers in Bullough et al. (1989) study drew on images of themselves as students and compared these images to the students they were teaching. These researchers concluded that the beginning teachers' lack of understanding of the students they teach becomes a major problem in the classroom.

After assessing the perceptions of beginning teachers teaching in an urban school, Hines (1994) points out that, even though preservice teaching experiences are major influences in their understanding of teaching in an urban school, past life experiences, influences of family, and former teachers are major sources of knowledge as they learn how to work in urban settings.

Ball and Goodson, (1985) have evaluated the transition from student to teacher by examining the transition of preservice teachers as they moved from student teaching to beginning teaching. They found that beginning teachers experienced difficulties in overcoming their prior beliefs and experiences, and those assigned to school environments different from their own had difficulty adjusting to the new environments.

In addition, research has shown that personal experience prior to teaching shapes the identity of beginning teachers. Butt et al. (in Goodson, 1992) suggest that these experiences contribute to the many facets of a person, such as his/her belief, values, disposition, feelings, guiding images, and principles. However, these researchers found the factors not to be static but changing and evolving overtime. These researchers go on to suggest that educators of teachers need to look at teachers as individual students, evolving in their own special ways, as they learn how to act in a classroom. According to these researchers, in order to understand how teachers think, act, feel, and know what they know, it is necessary to understand their private and professional histories in the context of their work. In the context of my current study where I am trying to understand preservice teachers' perceptions of culturally diverse students, it becomes necessary to explore their life histories in reference to their homes, schooling and college training experiences with diversity.

### **Teachers' Voice: A Phenomenological Perspective**

To understand how preservice teachers perceive classroom cultural diversity, it is important to study them in their current context and past life experiences. Since teachers perceive, interpret, and understand teaching and learning from the perspective of their own lived experiences, studying their lives involves studying them in their present context, and how this context is related to past experiences and future hopes. Some recent studies on beginning teachers (Jensen et al. 1997; Salyer et al. 1998; Sand & Okhee, 1997) recognize the importance of the teachers' voices. These studies reveal that teachers have lives and personal identities that demand attention, for they influence who they are as classroom teachers, and how they interpret the world around them.

Recognizing the importance of giving teachers opportunities to interpret their own experiences in a manner that reveals how they have been shaped by these experiences (Ball &

Goodson, 1985) is beneficial to educational reform, and conducive to the empowerment of teachers. The importance of listening to teachers' voices is a compelling way to understand their lives. As early as 1942, Allport (in Watson & Franke, 1985) recognized personal voice and personal meaning as important research tools about other peoples lives. "If we want to know how other people feel, what they experience, and what they remember, what their emotions and motives are like, and the reasons for acting as they do, why not ask them? (Allport, in Watson & Franke, 1985, p. 31)."

This perspective of using preservice teachers voice, to understand a phenomena differs from other social science approaches in that it acknowledges what the person feels, experiences, and thinks as important, and places personal meaning at the crux of a study. A phenomenological approach uses the voices and the experiences of those who have lived through the phenomena to understand it from their point of view.

A phenomenological approach emphasizes entering into the field of the participants' perceptions, in order to see life as they see it, so as to be able to determine what an experience means for the persons who experienced it. In my current study, I find this approach to be a non-threatening way of letting the preservice teachers talk about their fears, hopes, successes, and the challenges they experience as they learn how to work in culturally diverse settings.

Although there are many different philosophical perspectives associated with the phenomenological approach, for this study, an existential phenomenological perspective is most appropriate, for in the study of lives, these two philosophies are not easily separable. Phenomenology pays attention to first person experience while existentialism pays attention to the actions, feelings and thoughts of the person (Seidman, 1991; Solomon, 1972). Phenomenology describes the experience, while existentialism examines the experiences of doing, participating, and choosing. Existentialism, as a philosophy, stresses the worth of the individual (Riemen, 1986; Seidman, 1991) while phenomenology stresses the meaning of the experience (Creswell, 1998).

Existential phenomenology is interested in what people are and do, the beginnings of the peoples thoughts and actions, and what people make of themselves (Solomon, 1972). It is tied to the moods, feelings, and emotions of people as they go through an experience and describes

not only what we do, but also how we do it, and how we know what we are doing (Seidman, 1991; Solomon, 1972).

Using an existential phenomenological approach to the study of preservice teachers lives, allows the preservice teachers' lived experiences to be placed at the center of this study. This approach calls for a presentation the world from the preservice teachers own perspectives, taking them as they exist, live, act, feel, and think (Butt et al. in Goodson, 1992). This approach will bring out the meanings behind the preservice teachers behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and actions in culturally diverse classroom.

Existentialism phenomenology insists on avoiding pre-judgments and laying aside one's own feelings in order to understand the phenomena from the perspective of those being studied (Creswel, 1998). Using this method, I will seek to understand the interns as students who require empathy and understanding. This translates into entering into the field of their perceptions, seeing how they experience, live and display themselves and their worlds, as they make meaning of their lives. It is therefore necessary that I first set aside my pre-judgments about the study, if I am to understand it from the perspective of the eight interns being studied.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Introduction

To understand the overall work conducted in the field for this study, it is necessary to revisit the purpose for conducting this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to have a better understanding of how preservice teachers perceive classroom cultural diversity, through asking the following research questions: How do preservice teachers talk about classroom cultural diversity? What stories do they tell about their experiences? How do they make sense of cultural diversity in terms of their home, schooling, and college training experience? How does the experience of working in a diverse setting shape their understanding of diversity? How does the student teaching experience shape their identity as teachers?

Due to the large number of culturally diverse students entering schools today, it is increasingly becoming necessary to explore how preservice teachers who may or may not have the same kind of experiences with culturally diverse students, perceive them (Lorenzo, 1997). Recent studies conducted by Cabello and Burstein (1995); Martin (1997); Rodriguez and Sjostrom (1995) have all reported that preservice teachers feel unprepared to work with culturally diverse students, due to the learning, cultural, and behavioral differences portrayed by these students. Majority of preservice teachers feel inexperienced to cope with this diversity and less than 9 % are reporting an interest in working in culturally diverse settings (AATE, 1990; Cannella & Reiff, 1994).

These demographics call for a better understanding of why preservice teachers show disinterest in teaching in culturally diverse settings. I believe an in-depth exploration of the preservice teachers understanding, and experiences with cultural diversity during their year of student teaching, and an exploration of their life experiences with cultural diversity, may give a better understanding about why they feel unprepared for diversity.

The rest of this chapter presents the development of this phenomenological, qualitative study on preservice teachers' perceptions of culturally diverse students. It begins with a description of the initial work done in the field, the methods used for data collection, and how

the data was analyzed. The chapter will conclude with ethical considerations and the limitations of the study.

### **Situating the Phenomenon**

My personal history has been a large part of my interest in this study on cultural diversity. My experiences as a Black person, and an international, bilingual student, have considerably helped me develop an interest in multiculturalism and diversity because these are issues I feel touch me in a very personal and professional way.

I started thinking about multiculturalism it's concepts, content and processes during my doctoral studies and exam preparation. In preparing for my preliminary exam, I started off by looking at the literature on multicultural education, the various perspectives and how it is enacted in the classroom. Being an outsider, with little knowledge of the American cultural diversity, I wanted to understand how the various cultural perspectives found in this culturally diverse country are presented in the books, and enacted in the school curriculum. During my preliminary exam, what stood out in most of my readings was the gap between multicultural education in theory and multicultural education in practice.

I had opportunities to discuss my concerns with several people in the field of education (professors and a school superintendent), who agreed that, with the curriculum being governed by the Standards of Learning (SOL's), multicultural education looked good in theory but not in classroom practices. I therefore knew, it would not yield fruits conducting research on how multicultural education is enacted in the classroom, especially in the small community where I was undertaking my graduate studies.

My interest in multicultural education was renewed when I attended a seminar on Lisa Delpit's book, Other People's Children (Delpit, 1995). I listened to one parent narrate how she related to issues raised by Delpit regarding linguistically diverse children. She related some of the problems her children encountered in the school as they tried to adjust to being in a new country and learning a new culture and language, that differed from their home culture and language. She expressed concern that her children were mocked by other students, and ignored by teachers, who did not understand their cultural background. Being an international student myself, I had faced similar problems at various stages in my life, and could relate to her

frustrations with a school system that did not readily accept her children's different cultural upbringing. I was filled with a renewed interest about conducting research on multicultural education.

I believed I had finally found a researchable problem, and I fine-tuned my focus to explore how teachers perceive diverse students. In the beginning, I was interested in looking at only the English as Second Language (ESL) population in the schools, but after discussions with my advisor, I realized that the ESL populations in the surrounding schools might not be large enough for a study. I felt it would enrich my study if I defined cultural diversity in terms of three different student populations: English as Second Language (ESL) students, Low Economic Status (LES), students, and Ethnic Minority students.

### Pilot Study

My research problem became more focused after I took a seminar on “Schooling and Diversity”. My initial assumption about the seminar was that it would give me insights into the diversity of the schools and how teachers address it. It turned out that we learned mainly about ourselves - our perceptions about race and diversity issues. This seminar gave me an opportunity to dialogue freely (although with great difficulties) with other graduate students on issues concerning racism, diversity, institutional power, multicultural education, and cultural diversity.

We all carried into this seminar our histories and our experiences as *Students, Employees, Parents, Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Gays, Catholics, Jews, Atheists, Teachers, and a Graduate Community of Students*. We were all interested in talking about race matters, yet not sure how far we could expose our fears, anger, frustrations, dreams, and hopes. This class helped me realize how deeply our individual racial and cultural perceptions are ingrained in our histories and experiences, and how challenging and difficult it is to illuminate these perceptions, as we try to dialogue across our cultural boundaries.

It was during some of these seminars that I had opportunities to dialogue with one practicing teacher and two beginning teachers on their perspectives about diversity in the schools. None of the beginning teachers felt they had been prepared to work with a diverse classroom. None of them had taken a diversity seminar before that helped them critically

analyze their perceptions of cultural diversity. They all agreed there was need for more seminars on diversity issues, which would not only help them critically analyze their own perceptions, but also help them begin to understand how to work with culturally diverse students. These conversations inspired me to explore cultural diversity perceptions within the school settings, especially with beginning teachers. As I started thinking about my study, two excerpts from the conversations were especially inspiring:

In the first, Anna, a beginning teacher, talks about her perspective on diversity in the classroom:

I never talk to my students about race issues for several reasons: I do not feel it necessary to talk about it, unless there is a need. I mean what would I say? Let's sit down and talk about this Black child and their culture? I think I would sound like a racist. I guess I feel like there has to be a reason, like if one of my students insults another student or if the issue about race arose in the classroom front. I also feel like I do not know much about other cultures, and so I am not a good resource person for my students. . . . We have learned about the civil war, the Native Indians, and the Black History month, but it's been from a historical viewpoint and we did not apply it to what is going on today.

As I listened to this beginning teacher, I could relate to what she was saying. If it were already difficult enough to illuminate race and cultural issues in this graduate seminar, how challenging would it be to bring it up with young students? However, this also made me raise another question. If teachers are not addressing race matters in the classroom, where are they being addressed?

When in another conversation with a fellow graduate student (Mary) who expressed her frustrations with the seminar's racial issues that kept being the forefront of the discussions, it gave me a different perspective on cultural diversity:

All I keep hearing in here is how White people in this country are privileged, how they are racist, and how we have the power. I have never been a racist, at least as far as I know. I have had to work hard to be where I am today. I do not feel like I am privileged for being White. When I hear that White people are privileged just by being White, I keep thinking how am I privileged? I am White, does that make me a racist? I

believe there are opportunities for everyone today, Black White, Asians, I think all have privileges. I also believe racism does not exist today as it did then, but a lot of people are still stuck in the old days when all those bad things happened. Why can't we move on, you know, draw a line, o.k. this happened, we cannot change it, but we need to transcend beyond all this and create a safe ground where all of us can feel comfortable talking with each other and not feel threatened by issues of race, privilege, cultural differences, or our past histories?.

I found Mary's viewpoint very interesting, even though I did not entirely agree with her perspective. I strongly believe that the history of this country is a part of the diversity in the schools today and to sweep it aside would mean going back to the melting pot theory. I also believe that "being privilege" is still a very debatable issue. However, I thought seriously about the word "transcending" and how it might be indirectly applicable to the classroom practices. Connecting Mary's conversation with Anne's, I started raising some very general questions on cultural diversity: (i) Is it possible to transcend beyond the histories of this country and if so, to what direction? (iii) Do parents, teachers, schools, and society have an obligation to talk about cultural matters? (iv) How do teachers, parents, and schools in general address cultural issues? (v) Should cultural matters be brought up within our homes, and schools?

#### On becoming focused

These very broad questions and other conversations I had with various other people in different contexts helped me develop some general ideas about exploring cultural perceptions. I believed the best approach to start thinking about my study was answering some of these questions. Eventually my question for the research would change to focus more on preservice teachers. I felt this young generation of teachers had a different perspective on cultural diversity, having experienced it in their schooling, in their homes, and in their communities. I also believed that, to understand the preservice teachers' perspective on cultural diversity, I had to look at them as whole persons with lives and histories that may or may not influence their classroom actions.

My overall purpose therefore, became to explore what cultural diversity means to preservice teachers working in culturally diverse classrooms. I was interested in understanding

how it is like to be a student teacher, who may or may not have had different cultural experiences before, suddenly exposed to diversity each day of his/her student teaching year. How does one act? What feelings, influences, and thoughts come into play? I was interested in hearing preservice teachers' voices on what diversity means to them, and how this initial teaching experience has contributed to their understanding of culturally diverse students. These many questions led me to the next research stage; looking for participants who would be interested in participating in the study.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

#### Choosing the Study Participants

To answer the above questions on cultural perceptions, I narrowed my focus to preservice teachers, and started exploring avenues to get some volunteers for the study. I approached several faculty members engaged in preparing preservice teachers, and talked to them about using their interns as participants in the study. Although several faculty members showed an interest in the study, I chose Dr. Gallagher, because he was closely involved in my graduate studies and had a number of interns doing their student teaching in area schools with diverse populations.

In phenomenological studies, participants are chosen on the basis of one central issue: that personal experiences shed light on a specific issue being explored. Most important, according to Creswell (1998) "they must be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences (p. 111)." In this study, the interns were chosen to purposely meet the focus of the study. In choosing the study participants, I used the following criteria. (i) They were undergraduate students in their final academic year; (ii) They were enrolled in a one year student teaching internship; (iii) The student teaching internship was within the NK-5 grade range; (iv) Their student teaching internship was in a culturally diverse environment; and (v) They were willing to participate in the study.

For a final participant selection, I approached Dr. Gallagher to help identify those interns working with a significant number of culturally diverse students in their classrooms. I began by asking the Interns in Dr. Gallagher's teaching model to identify the number of culturally diverse students in their classroom and chose those interns who had a significant number of

diverse students. I was looking for interns who were working with linguistically diverse (ESL) students, ethnic minority students, and low socio-economic status (LES) students. In the end, I chose ten interns who were working in four different elementary schools to participate in the study.

After identifying the participants, Dr. Gallagher held a brief meeting with them to request them on my behalf if they would be interested in participating in the study. I followed up this meeting with correspondence, giving them a general idea of the study and thanking them for their volunteering to participate. I also told them they were free to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study. They all expressed their interest in the study and a willingness to participate. I then sent a second correspondence suggesting the dates for the interviews and the times for the meetings. All ten of them replied with the dates and times they felt worked within their schedules.

Two of the interns would eventually bow out due to other demands. Of the remaining eight participants, six were of European descent, one of Italian descent and one was an African American. All the participants were females between the ages of twenty and twenty-three years.

#### Time line for interviewing

The interns were completing their student teaching placement end of April 1999 and, graduating thereafter during the spring commencement. With this in mind, I began interviewing in early March, and continued through the last week of April. This gave me seven to eight weeks of meeting with them for individual interviews. In the beginning, I foresaw myself conducting three interview sessions with each of them. However, since by early May they were busy interviewing for jobs and getting ready for graduation, it became impossible to meet with them a third time.

Two phenomenological interviews were conducted with the interns: A classroom experience interview, and a Life history interview. These two interviews were spaced 10 days apart to allow the interns some time to reflect on the previous interview, and give them some more time to gain experiences in their teaching placements. I believed capturing them when they had gained experience in the classrooms was crucial to my study, for what I was seeking to capture was the essence of the whole student teaching experience.

By March when I started conducting the interviews, the interns had already had one semester of field placement and were now in their second and final semester. Each semester they were placed in a different grade level. This gave them the experience of working with different students and different grade levels.

I found that in capturing the interns during their second semester of student teaching, they were more comfortable in their teaching environments, had gained some teaching experience, had more information about their diverse students, and were developing their own styles and philosophies of teaching.

#### Phenomenological interviewing

Phenomenological interviewing is one method that is used to gain access to peoples' perceptions and reflections. This method aims at understanding what the phenomenon has been for the people who have experienced it. Phenomenological interviewing is constructed in a way that helps the participants put their experiences into a progression or sequence. For my study, phenomenological interviewing appeared to be most effective way to understand the experiences and perceptions of the interns about their experiences with cultural diversity.

#### Conducting the Interviews

To understand their overall perceptions of cultural diversity, I started off by casting my net wide (Briggs, 1986) as I tried to get as much information from them as possible. I made my initial interview questions broad and general. I started off by asking the interns a general question such as how they chose to get into teaching. This question led us in many directions such as their childhood, their schooling and their working experiences with students.

My opening questions were designed to elicit information about the kind of experiences the interns had with children, the homes they came from, the schools they had gone to, and their interests in children and teaching. In compiling the interview questions I looked for sources that had conducted research on preservice teachers and diversity issues. The sources that I found applicable to the study were: Bullough and Gitlin (1995): On becoming a student teacher; Delpit (1995): Other peoples' children; Dollase (1992): Voices of beginning teachers; Gonzales (1995): Multicultural education in practice. Other qualitative interviewing materials were also utilized.

To collect information from the student interns, I used oral narratives and stories, because in life history and phenomenological studies, a portrait of an individual's life is created from oral narratives and other personal documents. (Creswell, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Stories communicate a broad message, or a set of beliefs (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) while narratives describe processes and events that led to a particular situation (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). My interest was to listen to the stories that the interns tell about their experiences, and the meanings they make of these experiences. Through listening to their stories, I hoped to capture how the interns thoughts, actions, feelings and understanding evolved and developed, not only during the student teaching year, but through-out their lived experiences.

In each interview which lasted about two hours, I followed (Moustakas, 1994) suggestion that, in phenomenological studies which are devoted to capturing people's experiences, long interviews consisting of open-ended questions, casual chatting, and exploration elicit detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. I therefore, let the student interns do their own narration and interrupted only to ask the next question or to prompt for further details.

During the course of the interviews, I found some of the interns were more than willing to take over the discussion and tell me all about their experiences without my asking too many questions. Others needed to be asked details, especially when they gave yes or no answers. In such situations, I would explore with them on their meanings, or would request them to give me examples. When they gave concrete examples, I found I was better able to understand their meanings about particular issues.

#### Classroom experience interview

My first interview involved asking questions about the interns' classroom experiences with diverse students. I asked them questions about their first weeks experiences of being in the diverse classroom, their teaching approaches, their perspectives and experiences with multicultural education, and, the behavioral and learning problems they encountered working in diverse classrooms. I used the approach suggested by Butt et al. (in Goodson, 1992) of asking questions about the present context and following into the past to stimulate recall. This approach proved to be very helpful, because the interns not only recalled their current experiences, they

also reached out and compared their current teaching experiences with their memories of their own schooling. Even though I knew I was going to conduct a life history interview with them, during this first interview I let them talk about issues in their life histories that they saw as relevant to their current classroom practices. This helped me understand better how they made sense of their current teaching practices, and cultural diversity.

The other interview technique I found helpful was one suggested by Anderson and Jack (in Gluck & Patai, 1991), of “listening carefully to the interviews, the responses, as well as the questions (p. 17).” For example, in asking the student interns to describe their initial classroom experience, I found myself focusing on their feelings, and their meanings. In doing so, I found myself intuitively hearing the “inner voice” and becoming attuned to when they were uncomfortable about a particular question, when a particular situation was painful to talk about, or when they did not want to answer certain questions. To avoid uncomfortable situations for them, I would then take my questions in a different direction. In such situations, I would make notes that helped me reflect further about the situation, and why it made the intern feel uncomfortable.

#### Life history interview

The second interviews involved asking the student interns’ questions about their lives, because the life history approach seemed “best suited in unraveling the threads of personal teacher related-biography.” (Woods, in J. Symth, 1988, 125). A life history interview is a “procedure of eliciting and recording personal stories in the subjects own words” (Runyan, 1984 p. 23). Life histories focus on the meanings, which emerge in the particulars of stories of past experiences.

The life history interviews, conducted ten days after the classroom experiences interviews, involved asking questions about the interns schooling experiences with diversity, their home experiences with diversity and their college training experiences with diversity. These interviews helped me understand further the interns’ classroom practices and how they made sense of their current teaching experiences. The life history interviews also helped to develop a richer and deeper understanding of how they made sense of cultural diversity in their lives, and in their teaching placements.

### Audiotaping

All the conversations with the interns were audiotaped. During the interviews, there were occasions when I would stop the tape and rewind, if an intern was unsure of what she had said last. After the fieldwork, the tapes became a helpful resource for re-living the interview and tuning into the interns mood and tone of voice while they answered particular questions.

I tried to transcribe the audiotapes at the same time as I conducted the interviews. My intention was to transcribe all the audiotapes of the first interviews before conducting the second interview. When this proved an impossible and overwhelming task, I relied on listening to the tapes over and over again, reflecting in my journal about what needed elaboration and what I needed to ask during the next interview. Listening to the audiotapes became an important part of my study because this enabled me to visualize the interviews. As a result, by the time I started writing my dissertation, I felt I was very familiar with my text.

### Note taking

To further make sense of my overall perceptions of the interns, the interviews, and the study, I kept a journal throughout the entire research journey. This journal formed my fieldnotes. Fieldnotes consist of social processes within the various contexts (Delamont, 1992). My fieldnotes consisted of daily journal entries of my feelings, ideas generated from the interviews, my perceptions of how the interviews were going, the physical and mental appearance of the participants, and my frame of thinking at the time of the interviewing.

Throughout my research journey, the journal has served as my soul baring and soul searching (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In my journal I aired my frustrations, my fears, my hopes, my joys and my triumphs.

### Collecting related documents

Related documents also proved important to my assessment of preservice teachers' perceptions of classroom cultural diversity. I obtained written permission from the participants to read their weekly reflections, which they had kept throughout their student teaching year. Bennett (in Bean & Zulich, 1991) sees reflective journals as a way of helping teachers work through their concerns and problems. In their weekly journals the preservice teachers reflected on their classroom practices, their triumphs, and their frustrations.

These reflective journals added insight and richness to the interviews. They gave me a better picture of the participants' development and growth as teachers. The journal reflections also helped me understand better some of the things they had described in the interviews, which needed elaboration or confirmation. They also gave me a better picture of the classrooms, some of the learning issues that the preservice teachers had described, the teaching and learning processes they had talked about during the interviews, and an overall feel for their one-year teaching experience.

### **My Role as a Researcher**

I had worked for three years with undergraduate students as an advisor and I felt that my graduate assistant position had prepared me for the role of a mentor, listener, advisor and interviewer. These were roles that I found myself assuming at various levels of the data gathering process.

During the data-gathering phase, I struggled constantly in understanding my role and figuring out what role to take as I conducted the interviews. This struggle sometimes arose from the interviewing environment. I found myself more comfortable in my graduate student office, I knew where everything was, and it was an environment I had used many times before to talk with students. In this environment, I could take the role of a participant in the dialogue, a host, and a friend. I also believe the interns felt more comfortable and friendly in this environment.

On occasions when I had to conduct the interviews in the schools, the flow of the interviews was interrupted several times either by other school teachers wanting to know if I was a parent in need of a conference, or due to lack of quiet space for the interview. In one such occasion, it took us fifteen minutes to find a place to sit for all the quiet places were occupied. By then I was in panic and worried that we might have to cancel the appointment. I had yet to learn how to adjust to unplanned emergencies such as missed appointments, late appointments, cancellations, or lack of interviewing space in the schools.

Whenever I met the interns in their classrooms, I felt they considered me more of an interviewer. The process appeared to be more formal, and the interns viewed me more from a researcher/researched perspective. In such instances and throughout the research process, I tried to convey to the interns that I was a learner and they were the experts because of their

experiences. I also tried to convey to them that I was more interested in making the interviews a dialogue and encouraged them to raise issues they believed were important to the study.

### Early concerns

Malinowski (1967) who raises the issue of the effect that research has on the individual conducting the study, acknowledges that, those who study humans are themselves human, and bring to their study all the complexities involved in studying human life. I identify myself as a researcher who was embarking on an unknown journey and was not sure what it would yield.

I list several concerns here, regarding my study that I felt were important for me to learn how to handle before they might arise during the data-gathering phase:

- How effective would I be as a person of color talking about cultural perceptions?
- How do I encourage critical thinking from the participants?
- How can I as a researcher deal effectively with participants' cultural perceptions?
- How do I define what counts as negative or positive response towards cultural diversity?
- What are the limits to what I could ask in this study?
- How will I know when to stop?

I knew ultimately I could not resolve every concern until I got out into the field and started to grasp how the data gathering process was proceeding. However, raising these concerns helped me understand better the journey I was embarking on and how to handle situations that might arise. Several of these concerns are further explored in the discussion chapter.

### Data gathering issues

The eight interns were teaching in four elementary schools. The four elementary schools differed in terms of the culturally diverse student population. Two of the elementary schools were within the proximity of the local State University that brings in International students and researchers whose children attend the local elementary schools. There was therefore a relatively larger number of linguistically diverse and ethnic minority student population in these two elementary schools. The other two schools were both rural schools serving an economically diverse White student population. According to the interns in these two rural schools, the income levels ranged between very poor families and middle income families.

I worried about how this lack of complex diversity in the schools would affect my findings. I questioned if I would find different issues and concerns depending on the location of the student teaching placement. To resolve this concern, I designed my interview protocol to cover similar topics and ask similar questions that I deemed relevant and applicable to the study. To organize the data, I decided to organize it according to these two teaching placements. For the interns working the rural schools, I called it a rural teaching experience, and for those who were working near the State University, I named it a suburban teaching experience.

I believe in doing this, I was able to capture the similarities and the differences that emerged from these two student teaching locations. Because the questions were very similar, both the rural and the suburban student teachers talked about similar issues they were faced with teaching in culturally diverse classroom. However, there were also few differences that emerged as a result of working with different student populations.

### **Analyzing the Data**

Transcribing and analyzing the preservice teachers' life history and classroom interviews using a phenomenological approach turned out to be very detailed. For a general overview, I started by listening over and over again to the tapes and re-living the interviews. In listening to the recorded interviews, I was able to hear the tone of voice of the participants, listen to their reactions to various questions, and look for information gaps.

When transcribing the data, I read through it several times to get a good sense of the overall data. As I did this, I wrote reflective notes that served as reminders of issues that arose as I collected the data. I borrowed the following steps from examples of phenomenological data analyses provided by Denzin (1989b); Seidman (1991); Colaizzi (1978). I also used Wolcott (1991) strategies, for transforming qualitative data.

i). Data managing: To manage the data I started by creating and organizing computer files for each of the study participants and each of the interviews. I had initially planned to file the data in the form of issues that emerged from the eight interns' interviews, but the process proved challenging because of the amount of data that I had gathered. In the end, I decided to file the data according to each study participant. This method was a more suitable method for a

phenomenological study (Seidman, 1991). Each intern's file was given a pseudonym. I ended up with eight different data files on individual classroom experiences and eight different data files on the interns' life experiences.

ii.) Reading and memos: The next stage was to read through all the transcribed interview notes (conversing with the text). As I read, I made margin notes on what I considered to be important information. I also formed initial codes that helped me identify emerging patterns. For example, if a particular aspect of the notes involved talking about the homes of the students, I would write home issues in my margins. Later on I went back and made more specific notes, such as "home life & parents" "home life and poor" "parents and support" and so on.

iii.) Describing the data: To describe the data, I looked through all the information collected, my margin notes, the codes, and extracted those statements, phrases, and sentences that I believed were most significant and relevant to each of the study participants. This process helped eliminate those statements that contained the same meanings or were of little relevance to the study. This description of the data became a continuous process throughout the writing up stage.

iv.) Formulating meanings: Important meanings were formulated by interpreting the significance of each statement. This turned out to be a difficult process because I had to reflect several times on the classroom experience and life history interviews. Whatever meanings I came up with, I would then figure out how they fit within the rest of the interviews. I tried not to contradict the meanings of the participants. In instances when I was not sure if I was interpreting the meaning correctly, I went back into my journal to see what I had written about the particular interview and the participant. I also depended on the weekly reflections to clear some of the contradictions I made as I interpreted the interns' meanings. I found the process of reflecting on their journals very helpful, because it gave me a clearer picture of certain vague issues the interns had raised in the interviews.

v.) Clustering of themes: I then formulated the important themes or issues as they emerged from the patterns and meanings, of each of the interns' narratives. This process resulted in several issues that I felt were relevant to the purpose of the study. These issues are: diverse students' home life; learning experiences of culturally diverse students; teaching approaches in a culturally diverse classroom; behavior management in a culturally diverse classroom; multicultural

education practices; life history; and, the interns' perspective of teaching for diversity. A complete discussion of these issues is presented in the portraits and the discussion chapter.

vi) Presenting the information: In a phenomenological study where I was looking at each interns experience and the essence of the experience, I found it more enriching to present the experiences of each participant as a single case. Since I was also looking at their individual life experiences with diversity, I found that developing profiles of each individual intern a more compelling way to understand them as whole person, with individual lives, and experiences that impact on their classroom behaviors.

### **Establishing Credibility**

Due to the nature of this study, where I am trying to understand preservice teachers personal perceptions of cultural diversity, the lived experiences as narrated serve as a form of credibility. This is because the lived experiences were narrated directly by the person's who experienced the life (Goodson, 1992). In this context the stories were narrated by the eight interns. However, the study of life history relies on memory, and what the participants want the researcher to know. Thus, it is possible to receive either half-baked truths, or information supplied from inaccurate memories of events. However, using the technique advanced by Butt et al. (in Goodson, 1992) of beginning with the present experience and connecting it to the past, aided the interns recollections, thereby increasing the data credibility.

Thick written descriptions of the information collected through the interviews and the documents may also serve as a means of credibility (Creswell, 1994). In-depth descriptions of the events also ensure consistency and credibility of the data (Drew, Hardman, & Hart 1996). In my presentation of the interns portraits, I have written in-depth descriptions of each of the participants lived experiences in their own words.

I had hoped that the eight interns would also serve as a check throughout the data collection and analysis process. But due to time limitations, it was not possible to give each of them complete transcripts to react to. During the second interview, I touched on some issues that needed clarification. After the interviews, I relied on sending the participants electronic mails about particular issues that needed further clarification. I also relied on their faculty advisor and their weekly reflective journals to help clarify some of the meanings that I had made out of the

participants' stories. I believe that I have been careful in capturing the meanings the participants made of their classroom experiences and their lived experiences.

### Triangulation of data

Triangulation is the way to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, by collection of alternate forms of data that supports the findings. I used a variety of data from different sources such as reflective journals, and the interviews. I also did a cross checking of the information gathered through reading closely the different interviews from the different participants to identify consistencies and the discrepancies in the various issues that arose from the study.

For consistency, I compared the student interns' life history interviews with their classroom interviews to see if there were consistencies in their actions, beliefs, and experiences. I also looked at other research conducted in the field of cultural diversity and multiculturalism to see if there were issues that may be consistent with issues raised in this study. I also did an "audit trail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.186) with several faculty members and other graduate students, about some of the issues that arose from my data. I believe all these strategies have helped yield more valuable data and provided a more holistic understanding of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Anderson and Jack (in Gluck & Patai, 1991) tell us that the first step in careful listening to interviewees is to "immerse ourselves in the interview, trying to understand the person's story from their vantage point of view (p.19)." This meant that I bracket my own interpretations, my own biases and let the interns interpret their own stories. Bracketing one's biases is also a strategy that is also recommended in phenomenological studies. Bracketing my biases was a difficult and challenging task for me. Since the interviews were days apart, I found myself mentally comparing the interns classroom experiences. I also found myself sometimes being judgmental of their practices and how they talked about diverse students. On one such occasion, I wrote in my journal:

*How can this be? All I seem to hear is living in broken homes, trailer parks, discipline and learning problems, lack of parental support, and lack of*

*experience as they describe their culturally diverse students. I want to cry, I want to scream, I want to say to these Interns, can't you see there is more to these students? But then I can't. How can I remain objective in my study when I do not agree with some of the things I am hearing? How can I move beyond this pain to a rationalist view of the study? (March 25<sup>th</sup>)*

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that as we try to make sense of our social world, it is important that we continually raise awareness of our own biases. I knew I was becoming biased and judgmental. Bracketing myself out of the interviews was proving to be a difficult procedure that initially affected, how I viewed my data. However, I reminded myself that by raising these biases I was becoming aware of my own perceptions and this became a continued challenge to work towards overcoming my biases. I knew that, despite my own personal feelings, it was important that I remain open and unbiased throughout the study to avoid contamination of the data.

The Virginia Tech protocol of human subject's standards was adhered to in the implementation of this study. All the participants were informed of the purpose and the general procedures of the research in writing. A consent statement form was given to all participants prior to the beginning of the study. (A consent statement form is included in Appendix A).

To protect participants' privacy, real names and any other defining characteristics that may be traced back to the informants were disguised. Instead, pseudonyms were used. Considering the nature of my study, such precautions are necessary. Cultural issues are sensitive and many people are fearful of being misinterpreted in their intentions and thoughts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The idea of using the preservice teachers' voices as a credible way of understanding classroom diversity may be considered a limitation of the study. I am basing the truth of the study on the preservice teachers' words. Becker (1998) states that "people know a lot about the world they live in (p. 98)" and to fully understand their experiences, we need to see the

world from their own eyes. However, he goes on to recommend that since the accounts people give are given in a research setting, “these accounts cannot be taken at face value (p. 99).” To offset this limitation, I use other forms of ‘listening’ such as the reflective journals, to understand how the interns perceive classroom cultural diversity.

Another limitation may be the use of the interns as the study participants because they were working in their cooperative teachers’ classrooms without all the freedom and flexibility to establish their own rules and guidelines. It is possible that they followed the cooperating teachers’ ways of doing things and of perceiving working with diverse students. The way they talk about diverse students, and how they work with them, may have simply reflected their cooperating teachers’ approaches.

However, because I was aware of these limitations, I was able to ask questions specifically relating to the participants’ own “*ways of doing things*”. I asked questions such as “if this were your own classroom, what would you do differently?” I also asked specific questions such as “do you feel prepared to work in a diverse environment?” I believe that in asking such questions I was able to capture some of the interns’ perceptions of teaching in diverse classrooms.

### **Chapter Summary**

To understand how preservice teachers perceive culturally diverse students, the design of this study gives grounding for the qualitative processes that took place throughout the research journey. Phenomenological interviews were the primary methods for collecting the data. Other sources such as reflective journals were used to add depth and credibility to the findings.

Eight interns participated in this study on cultural perceptions. Each of them was interviewed twice. A life history interview and a classroom experience interview were conducted to assemble as much as possible a complete picture of the eight interns and their experiences with cultural diversity. To analyze the data, I used several strategies that have been recommended by Denzin (1989b); Seidman (1991); and, Colaizzi (1978) for phenomenological studies. For data presentation, I followed Seidman’s (1991) recommendation of developing

phenomenological profiles of individual participants. The next two chapters present these eight interns' narratives.

## SETTING THE STAGE

In order to understand the preservice teachers perceptions of culturally diverse students, the next two chapters describe the stories and narratives which, the eight interns shared, about their student teaching experiences. Within these accounts are their beliefs, challenges, attitudes, fears, hopes, and tribulations as they each learn how to teach in culturally diverse classrooms. Also included in these narratives is a reflection of their individual life experiences with cultural diversity within their homes, schooling, and college training.

In attempting to understand how the eight interns perceive classroom cultural diversity, it was necessary to ask the following research questions: How do preservice teachers talk about classroom cultural diversity?; What stories do they tell about their experiences?; How do they make sense of cultural diversity in terms of their homes, schooling, and college training experiences?; How does the experience of working in diverse settings shape their understanding of diversity?; How does the student teaching experience shape their identity as teachers?

To answer these questions, two, two-hour interviews were conducted with each of the interns. Though the questions of the interviews were similar, the eight narratives reflect individual uniqueness as they each reflect on their experiences with cultural diversity.

To understand the interns' personal and professional experiences and perceptions of cultural diversity, it was necessary to locate this study within a phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand an individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience (Mertens, 1998). Through asking what the participant's experience is like, phenomenological inquiry tries to understand and describe the experience from the point of view of the participant.

The next two chapters present individual narratives of how eight interns interpret and perceive the cultural world around them. Whether about the classroom, their homes, their schooling, or their training, the narratives told by the eight interns are individually presented to give a clear picture of how each perceived their experiences with cultural diversity. In presenting the narratives, sometimes the reality of the classroom experience and the reflection on their life experiences are brought together to give a better perspective of the interns overall experience with diversity.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **A RURAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

This chapter describes four of the eight interns' individual classroom experiences and perceptions of culturally diverse students. The chapter also presents these four interns individual life experiences with cultural diversity. A description of the interns, their age, and the student teaching grade levels is provided to give the reader a better picture of the individual interns. All the names used are pseudonyms, and any information or description of the schools was eliminated to protect the participants' anonymity. The chapter ends with a summary of the four interns overall perceptions and experiences with cultural diversity.

The two rural schools that the four interns in this chapter were working in, served about 450 students each. They were both located in small, rural communities about 20-30 miles from the large State University at which the interns were studying. The interns described the communities as predominantly White, with primarily low-income families and a few middle-class families.

#### **Christina**

##### **Introduction and Decision to Teach**

At 22 years of age, Christina is petite, about five feet tall, but not afraid to say what she believes. Dressed in brown pants and a short sleeved gray blouse, one could easily mistake her for a 5<sup>th</sup> grader in this school. The first time I met Christina, it was an early-release day and she had decided to set aside her lesson planning time to meet with me. We met in the school's library because she felt more comfortable talking in a learning environment: "I love books, they help me think better." According to Christina, she was brought up to see school as the most important thing in her life.

Christina developed a love for learning early in life, and her desire has always been to work in a learning environment. Prior to student teaching, Christina had worked in daycare environments, tutored in elementary schools, and served in various student governments. During her student teaching year, she taught in fourth and fifth grade classrooms.

## **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

### Early classroom concerns and challenges

The cultural make up of this rural school was very different from Christina's background. The large number of students from low-income families surprised Christina, who found the school/classroom to be very diverse even though demographically the school was homogeneously White. During the spring semester, Christina had student taught in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in a class of about 20 students. Out of these 20 students 11 of them were from lower-income backgrounds, and 9 were from middle-income backgrounds. 4 of these lower-income students were attending special education classes, 2 of them had a full time classroom Aide. None of her students was ESL or any other ethnicity.

During the fall semester, Christina's class was also composed of 20 students 10 from lower-income levels, and 10 from middle-income levels, 1 was Black. She explains the diversity within her two classes:

In a class of 20 White students I had all sorts of diversity. I had students who were at different learning abilities, students with different home experiences, different family structures, different religious backgrounds, and several students from poor families. I came to realize that even with a class where you will have 20 White students there is still some aspect of diversity.

Christina's definition of diversity was more encompassing to include more than ethnic diversity. Her views of diversity appear to be influenced by her past experiences from her community and her schools. Christina did not see the students as belonging to one cultural group or one color. Instead, she looked beyond their surface homogeneity to see the diversity of religion, family background, socio-economic status, and education.

### Knowing the students

In teaching, Christina emphasized respect for each other and for differences, hence bringing some aspect of her family influence into the classroom. As a child, Christina's parents had taught her to respect people's differences no matter what their "racial or cultural origin" may have been. "I believe in respecting students each as their own individual, they will show you

respect back.” One way she felt she could achieve creating a respectful environment was by being able to interact well with all her students.

I think the strength that I have, which is just natural, is interacting with the kids and just being able to recognize when they do not understand something without them telling me. I did not know I had this ability, but I have been able to notice it and it makes them more comfortable because then they do not have to say I do not get it. I look at them and say, you know you are making a funny face, do you not get it? And they are more comfortable with it, this way because I do not embarrass them.

Having this ability has helped Christina understand what the students are coming with, how much they know, what they are not getting, and how to handle situations that can become embarrassing for the students. As a teacher, Christina saw her role as being able to dedicate herself one hundred percent to the learning styles of all her students. She defined teaching as being willing to put 150% or more work into it than is expected:

It means as a teacher expecting more from yourself than you expect from your students. My belief is that if you are going to be a good teacher you need to be so involved and so excited about it that you are putting all this work into it so that it is going to be natural for students and it’s going to be easy for them to learn. And it needs to be more work for you because you need to create an environment where they can all discover and learn no matter what their cultural, ethnic or learning differences are . . . .

Christina emphasized that her role as a teacher was to help all students learn, “no matter where they are coming from or what their economic backgrounds are.” According to Christina, “every child is capable of learning and it is up to the teachers to tap into this knowledge.” This attitude was evidenced in a conversation we had about some of her students who were going for remedial reading:

I have these two girls that leave and go to the Special Ed teacher during reading, but they stay for everything else. I am not really sure why they leave for Special Ed. I have not seen them have problems with the reading that we do in Social Studies. They have been able to answer questions, and they have done well with their written responses to questions. I kind of assess them myself to see their progress. I have been told to look at

their past files, and I do not really want to know, because I want to see how they are with me and see how they perform on the assignments that I give them and how they work with one another, and I have not noticed a problem.

She went on to explain:

Last week I read their journals and found they had an ability to summarize a whole chapter. Now, are these kids who need remedial learning? Even though their writing did not reflect deep thoughts and feelings, I was very impressed by their piece of work.

And I believe if they were in my classroom, I would not refer them to anybody because I have not had any problems with them. I just look at who they are now, and let them prove themselves, you know they have a lot to show.

Christina looked at students as “unique in their own way.” She believed they all learned differently, and especially in a diverse classroom where students came with varying learning experiences and needs. She also pointed out that “seeing each student’s uniqueness would help put an end to some of the remedial learning and special education labeling that has become a trend in today’s classroom.”

#### Teaching approaches in a diverse classroom

In teaching, Christina explained that, to be able to work with diverse students, “one has to be able to bring in varying teaching practices that would benefit all students.” She felt it was important to “use what the students already knew” in order to help her as a teacher learn and understand where they were in their knowledge.

I have found myself using a lot of the students’ thoughts to run the class. I like to know where each of them is at first, before I venture into bringing in my thoughts and ideas about a particular topic. Because all the students are not at the same learning level, or have not had the same kind of experiences, I like to first know where they all are before I teach them. I like to focus my attention on the students and take time to provide the opportunities for them to have authentic, fun learning experiences. Through communicating with them, I discover many attributes from each of them, and each day I think of how I can make learning better and fun for all of them.

Through talking and discussing with the students about a particular topic, Christina gets to learn what they already know about the topic. She feels it is important to first gauge from the students their knowledge about a subject before teaching it.

Use of group and collaborative learning is another teaching approach that Christina used in her classrooms. Christina believed that collaborative learning helps students learn together. “To be able to have good collaborative learning, you have to create an environment where making mistakes is a learning experience.”

To me there is no wrong or right answer. That is why I tend to use more student discussions and thoughts. Every child in my classroom deserves to be heard, whether they come up with the best answer or not. Because of how I have created this environment, I find all my students are very engaged and very excited about learning. I find that even those students who may get bored with the assignment do not, because they are working together either in small groups or in large discussion groups.

Christina nicknamed her discussion style “the basic plan.” She would create a discussion about something that is of relevance to the students, such as what is going on in school or something that they were interested in. Through discussion she finds that student input helps her figure out what they may already know.

#### Learning experiences of diverse students

Christina knew her experiences and some of her students’ experiences were very different. She, therefore, did not want to assume they knew things. She believed it was important, when trying to tie things together, to be considerate of the students who probably did not have the same experiences. She explained:

In a diverse classroom you will have students who know a lot because they have had a lot of experiences, and there are students who are behind in some of these things.

Whenever we start talking about a topic and I notice that some students are lost, that is when I try to take advantage of students as resources, so that the rest of the students can know what we are talking about. I try to get some students to talk about their experiences.

Christina also emphasized that she did not favor only those students who have had more experiences, instead, she looks at different areas that can be applicable to a certain topic then students take turns talking about what they know.

#### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

From Christina's viewpoint, a multicultural curriculum is necessary in the schools today. She believed multicultural education "provides students with a more holistic look at the world. It is not only about learning the different cultures, but going deeper and learning how people behave, why they behave that way, and their value systems."

Christina looked at multicultural education from the perspectives she had received during her schooling where she had several opportunities to learn in-depth about cultural diversity. During her student teaching experience, she had very few opportunities where she could teach her students about other less-known cultures. Christina felt that her school was not doing enough to "incorporate a multicultural perspective into the curriculum." According to Christina, the Virginia Standards of Learning, (SOL's) which mandates what a teacher could teach, did not give a lot of leeway for incorporating a multicultural perspective. She went on to express:

Students are not getting exposed to the contributions of the different diverse cultures in this country. There is need for students to know where they came from, where the African-Americans came from, why they are here, the importance of the native Indians in this country, and the immigration of the Europeans. Exposing and sensitizing the students to these issues will develop them into citizens who are respectful of each other and each other's differences.

Christina commented that she felt very discouraged with her student teaching experience because there lacked support for cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In terms of cultural diversity, she explained that the students were being "cheated out on something that was very important in the world they would face once they got out of school."

## Classroom management

When I asked Christina to talk about her behavioral and disciplinary style in a diverse classroom, she corrected me and told me the term she used was “classroom management” and not discipline. Christina explained that she chose management because she did not believe in discipline. “Discipline sounds to me like corporal punishment. Management is more positive,” she explains:

I believe in creating a positive learning environment for all my students. When students are engaged and interested in what you are teaching, you are able to control the class and avoid behavioral issues. I also believe that when you know your students, you will be able to tell when something is no longer interesting for them and change to something that will keep them engaged.

As part of classroom management, respect for her students and caring for them as individuals was very important. These extended to her belief of diversity and respect for differences that she had talked about earlier on. She found that because she was able to respect her students that they, in turn, respected her. According to her, being shown respect by students is the “biggest reward as a teacher.”

Christina also tried to understand her students’ behaviors by knowing them individually. Through communicating with them, and through what she had been told by her cooperating teachers, she explained that “some of her students did not come from very good homes and some of their classroom problems stemmed from family problems.” To emphasize her point, she gave an example of one of her students:

Tommy stuck out like a sore thumb. He had a lot of problems socially and he had a lot of anger. He was from a very poor background. He was stubborn and he would get angry about being in school. He had been taken away from his mother because his mother’s boyfriend was beating her and him so he was living with his grandparents in a trailer. His grandparents did not really want him, so he wasn’t in a good home. He wasn’t really being cared for. So he had a really hard time in school, and I think it had a lot to do with, obviously, where he had been and where he was coming from. You could have walked into the classroom and easily tell who my problem child was

because I spent the whole day on him. I had problems with him almost every single day. But I knew Tommy and I knew that he had a lot of family issues to deal with. I do not make excuses for his behavior, but when your home life is not so great, it can really affect your self-esteem, your learning, and your behavior. I truly believe Tommy was a good child. He just had a lot to deal with.

Christina felt positive about Tommy's learning ability. She had come to understand Tommy's background and tried to help him deal with the problems he was facing in school such as not doing his homework. In this way, she was able to reach out and motivate him to learn.

Christina's perception of classroom management portrays her strong attitude towards respect and understanding of differences. As a teacher, Christina "looks beyond the classroom problems to the more complex issues that a student brings into the classroom."

#### Parents involvement in a diverse classroom

Working in economically diverse classroom also means working with an economically diverse group of parents. Christina commented that "the majority of the parents in her two classes had been very supportive." She went on to explain, "even those parents who could not afford to give everything to their children, had been supportive when it came to helping with homework, attending conferences, or school related activities." She shared her view about parental support as "how a teacher communicates with the parents. Building a good relationship with the parents, being on their side and not against them." According to Christina, "parents want their children to learn and are proud to hear their child is doing well in school." She felt it was the work of the teacher to build "good relationships" with parents.

Christina believed the role of the teacher was to keep communication lines open with the parents at all times and not just during conferences. "It's just as important that parents know how their child is performing and not just the bad behavior. You must also tell them that their child was doing well in class."

She believed that the majority of parents were scared of approaching the teachers, or assumed the teachers know best, but it was necessary that "teachers take it upon themselves to let parents know their input was valid in the learning of their children." Christina also felt it was important to understand that in a diverse classroom;

Not all parents will be supportive and involved in their child's learning, because of other circumstances. In these situations teachers need to be understanding of the circumstances and offer ways to help the students learn instead of using the students' backgrounds as an excuse for failure.

### **Christina's Journey of Growth and Reflection**

Christina sums up her student teaching year as a very good experience. Her passion for learning continues even in the classroom. Because of her love for learning, she feels that she is certainly in the right profession.

In teaching a diverse classroom, Christina has found out "there were many things in the diverse classroom that need to be changed." She saw "tracking" and "labeling" of students when she was a student and still sees these things continue to happen. She, therefore, feels that schools have a long way to go before they recognize the diversity of the students and how to address diverse students.

The student teaching experience has also helped Christina bring in experiences she had learned in her life. Because of the way she was brought up, she already had an understanding of cultural, religious and racial differences, and she has been able to transfer some of this into her classroom practices. In one of her weekly reflections she wrote what student teaching has been for her:

I believe this student teaching year has been very beneficial to me. It has been an eye opener to a lot of classroom issues that you deal with when you work in a diverse classroom. It has helped me think back to when I was a student and how my teachers taught me. I have been able to bring in the most important lesson I learned from my parents: respect for differences and of everyone. It has helped me to grow into a more confident teacher. It has made me realize how teaching well makes a difference to the students. I feel like I was able to reach out to a lot of them. If I can continue growing in this way, then I believe that I will be able to help my students. (Tuesday Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup>.)

However, Christina still feels she has a long way to go before she can feel fully prepared to work in a diverse classroom:

Part of me thinks, well, maybe I could do it, and I would love to be in a diverse classroom. But I still do not think I have been trained to work in really diverse environments. I do not think I have enough experience to convey my interest and to show that I do care, want to know, and respect diverse students. I also believe that the best experience is the classroom experience. I feel I have a long way to go as I learn how to work with students from diverse cultures, but I think it takes being exposed to it and being interested in working with all students.

Even though Christina does not feel prepared and ready to work in a diverse classroom, she has a lot to offer in a diverse classroom. She cares about her students and wants to make a difference in their lives. She feels very passionate about learning and wants to help each child who passes through her classroom to develop a love for learning. “If they never remember me for anything else, let them remember me as a very passionate teacher.”

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

Christina was brought up in a small New Jersey community, in a very diverse cultural and religious environment. She pointed out “there was more diversity in this small community than I experienced during my four years in college.” Her community consisted of diverse people from different cultural backgrounds. There was also diversity of religion especially Jewish, Catholic, and Hinduism. It was a community where no one called themselves one hundred percent American for everyone identified with his or her culture and with where they came from. Christina explains what diversity meant in this small community:

The diversity in my community was very much recognized and there were no issues with it. It really wasn't something that was ever addressed in the community. I could live next door with Indian or Chinese neighbors, and no one found it a big deal. The community is also very religious. It is split up in terms of Jewish, Catholic, and Hinduism. No one thought twice about those people who went to the Temple on Saturdays or those who went to Church on Sundays. It is an accepted way of life and everyone lives with it.

Diversity of people, religions, and different ways of life has always been a part of Christina's life and she learned early in life to respect people's differences.

### Family background and heritage

Family and religion played a big role in Christina's life. These values were a continued source of strength to her and brought about her strong sense of commitment to diversity and respect for differences. Christina comes from a strong Italian and Irish background, which is part of her family's proud heritage. Her mother's family is Irish, and her father's family is Italian. She described what stood out from both sides.

It's been interesting for me, growing up in this kind of family. From my mum's family they emphasized religion. And I think that's because of having come from Ireland. They are really proud of their religion. My dad's Italian background emphasized food and family. I come from a very close family. And we love good food. Oh yes! My family loves good food.

Christina's parents taught her early to respect everyone regardless of their differences. She described her parents as being very firm in telling her and her siblings not to judge people based on who they are, how they talked, where they lived or what/how they looked like. Her mother's sister had been born with physical disabilities, and according to Christina, this experience left her mother very adamant about respecting people's differences.

### Lessons from school

Christina's elementary school was both ethnically and religiously diverse. "Building on students' cultural diversity" is how Christina saw her elementary school. Her perceptions of multicultural education were grounded in some of the things she learned in her early schooling years. Her early schooling was a continued source of knowledge and growth in learning about how other people lived.

We had parents come in and talk to us about their culture. We knew about everyone's special and religious holidays, and we talked about them in the classroom. We knew who went to mass on Sunday, and who went to the mosque. We used to discuss these differences openly. It is different for me coming here and finding out you cannot even talk about your religion in the classroom.

Having being brought up Irish and a Catholic, Christina was very connected with her religion, and felt it was important to observe religious holidays. Coming into student teaching, she found out she could not talk about her religion or any of her students' religions which was a big disappointment to her for she had expected that her student teaching experiences would be similar to her schooling experiences.

### Diversity in high school

Her high school was also very diversified in terms of ethnicity and social economic status. She found that in her high school, there were African Americans, Latinos and Asian students. The students were also from a large mix of social economic classes. According to Christina, this diversity was not always recognized. Students were "very separated and were more interested in staying in their own ethnic groups and cliques."

Christina explained that it was during this time that she started feeling very disconnected with her schooling. She could not understand "why people would not get along" even though there was no violence among the different groups of students. She felt that "students avoided each other based on where they came from, their cultural and racial differences, how they dressed or how they looked." Christina saw this as against the way her family had brought her up. Christina's disillusionment with the school was further worsened by an incident that occurred in her high school:

The one racial incident that I remember happened in my senior year. A student had written a racial slogan in one of the boys' bathrooms. I was in the same class with this student and had always known him not to make necessarily racial comments, but just pointing out differences in people. When it was brought to the student committee for discussion, I was the only one who said he should be suspended and do some community work. I felt strongly that he deserved to be punished. Everyone else was so angry with me that I had made such a suggestion. That year a lot of my friends ended up not talking to me because I had stood up for what I knew was right.

It was at this time that Christina started noticing other things that she had ignored before. She was in what was called "enrichment classes for honors students." She started to notice that the majority of the students in these classes were from "the same economic status."

In my enrichment classes, you could almost tell most of the kids were from very good neighborhoods. They had parents who were very rich. I do not recall seeing any of the low-income kids in those classes. Maybe there were a few, but I do not recall. I guess those kids whose parents had a bit of some money had given them more experiences, but I do not believe that we were more intelligent than our peers. I did not believe in this and it bothered me.

Such enrichment classes added to the separation of students. It was at this time that Christina went through a stage of “self-criticism.” She was at a point in her life where she was developing her own identity and her thoughts and started looking at cultural diversity from a very different perspective. Christina was beginning to understand that, “diversity did not necessarily mean respect for differences, but it also meant treating everyone equally.”

#### Multicultural curriculum

One important aspect about her middle school and high school teachers that Christina appreciated was “their knowledge about multiculturalism and their willingness to share this knowledge with the students.” In school, she not only learned about the Civil War, but also about the holocaust. Her school celebrated Black history month and she learned about other international cultures. She gives examples of some of the things she recalls learning that were multicultural:

When I was in high school we learned about the Civil War. We talked a lot about slavery and about the African-American culture and why they were here in the first place. I think at the high school level it was really interesting to study it and the teacher was really into it and we had a lot of discussion about it, and I really enjoyed that. We also studied about Black History month, and also in another History class in my junior year we studied World War II. We went into extreme depth about the Holocaust so it was a big study time for us. And there were students who had gone over and done the Walk of the Living, and they had gone and taken pictures and they did a presentation in the school. That was something everyone found to be very interesting because the majority of us knew very little about the holocaust.

In my English class, we did Russian Literature and we talked a little bit about Russian culture and different countries in Russia. I think this coincided with when the countries were changing and I remember we talked a lot about the different countries. My literature teacher had some Russian blood in her and this made it even more effective because I felt like she was talking about something that touched her in a personal way. I remember being confused about the changes that were taking place, but my teacher was so good at explaining things and I learned a lot from her.

Christina thought that learning about the different cultures made a “big impression on all of them.” The fact that there were teachers who were from diverse cultures “played an important role in how multicultural education was presented in my school.” Christina compared this experience with her current student teaching experience, and the unit she taught on the Civil War:

The Civil War in my class was presented directly from the SOL’s. We did just what the students were supposed to know. We did not venture into deep things like why slavery took place in the first place. I did not even feel like my students got anything important out of it. They just got to know the names of the generals who fought in the Civil War. They did not get to learn about important things like how the African Americans got here, or how the Civil War started. I felt like it was just simplified so much and none of the important details were given.

Christina said she was disappointed at the lack of depth in the curriculum about the Civil War, for her understanding of multicultural education was that information became meaningful to students only if presented in details.

#### Lessons from college training

Coming to college, according to Christina, was a very different experience. “Everyone assumed that everyone was either one religion, celebrated the same holidays, or had the same beliefs.” She felt that such assumptions would not have happened in her community because “you were surrounded by differences.” She was also surprised when she came to college and everyone would ask her where her name was from, for this is a question that she had never been asked before.

Of course everyone had a strange name in our community! I had never stopped to think, now what does that name mean? I had never before been asked where my name came from. I felt like a foreigner here at first, and I had to get used to telling people that I am Italian. This was something I was not used to.

Christina expressed her disappointment of not being prepared in college to work with diverse students. She had expected there would be seminars and classes on multicultural education, but what she learned was “minimal.”

Coming to college, I had thought that I would learn more about multicultural education. I learned more about other cultures in elementary school and in my high school than I did in college. I do not recall taking a class that dealt with diversity; we had a Social Studies class, but what we learned in this class was not really relevant in working with these students. My Early Childhood Education classes helped me understand the developmental needs of students, but these classes did not even talk about the cultural differences of kids, and how to deal with these differences. I was lucky because I was already experienced with diversity, unlike some of the student teachers.

Because of this lack of preparation to work with diverse students, Christina believes she is still not completely ready to work in culturally diverse settings.

## **Karen**

### **Background and Decision to Teach**

When I first met Karen she had just finished what she referred to as “another day of teaching.” Within minutes she was chatting away about the dull rainy weather, and before long, we were both relaxed and ready to start the interview.

The 20-year-old European American female recalls enjoying working with young children, especially her younger sister. “I like being around kids because they make me feel good,” she stated as she went on to explain how she decided to get into the Early Childhood program. “They are so interesting and full of life, and I am so energetic, so together we are just a team.” Karen had worked in several day care environments before venturing into the real classroom. During her student teaching placement, she taught in third and fifth grade classes.

### **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

#### Challenges of a diverse classroom

Karen’s first few weeks of being in the classroom were a “big challenge.” Working in a rural school with children who were from poor backgrounds was a new experience for Karen. The responsibilities of teaching also overwhelmed her. “I was not prepared at all for this year. I had no clue how to plan, how to discipline, or even how to manage a classroom.” She had not worked in a classroom environment before apart from the university Human Development Lab, and she felt that the experience did not prepare her to work within a public school setting.

During the spring semester, Karen had worked in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class where she explained the student diversity as; 12 students from poor backgrounds, 5 from middle-class backgrounds, and 6 of these students from poor backgrounds were going remedial classes. During the fall student teaching placement, Karen’s class composed of 9 students from lower-income backgrounds, 5 from middle-income, 1 from high income and 1 child was bi-racial and had a full time aide.

One of Karen’s first cultural shocks was seeing that the students she was teaching did not grasp things as quickly as she expected them to.

For me I was, Oh! My God, I can’t believe they can’t get that. I can’t believe it. The first big unit that I taught was on time. I just could not believe they could not understand

some of the things, like telling time. I guess I was thinking about myself. When I went to school I understood things pretty easily so it was hard to decipher how their minds worked and to think how they were thinking. My teacher would say you have to think at their level. It was very hard for me to try and think at their level, and come up with strategies that I could apply to teach them.

Karen felt overwhelmed from teaching students who were extremely diverse in their learning. She felt burned out. Karen also commented that her students were not only having learning problems, but also had many family problems, such as poverty, single parent homes, and living in foster homes. She gave an example of such a scenario:

I had this girl in my class with multiple disabilities. She was physically and sexually abused from 18 months to about 6 years old; she just would be locked in a room and actually be abused, so her disabilities came from what happened in the past. She used to defecate on herself; it was really bad. In the classroom she would lie and she would steal and do things, and I guess it was because she had some bad, 8 years, of her life. She was now living with a foster family that I guess took her to live with them, because of what had happened. But this foster family has two other children and so she is not getting the attention and the support she really needs.

Karen felt she not only had to deal with home problems, but also all the other problems that her students came with to the classroom. She explains:

My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class is composed of every child that had a disability, a family problem, or label. It was very diverse. We are at a point where you are just like you want to help them, but they are never going to get it. They just do not understand. I mean we spend a month on division. They think dividing 3 and a 5 is just impossible. I mean it this is bad! And there is not much that one can do. They are just problem kids, and you just do what you can do with them.

Karen commented that her class was composed of all the children in 3rd grade who had a problem. "They are all tracked into this one class." Trying to work with this group of students was a difficult experience that Karen had not been prepared to handle.

It was so hard for the kids because first of all, they did not have anything. Many of them came from very poor backgrounds. You feel bad, you almost feel guilty. You almost want to do something about it. But you know there is nothing you can do. I think it's harder when you are feeling guilty knowing you cannot help; you cannot change the situation, I think it's bad because you know what they are going home to and it's not necessarily going to be a good home life.

Karen felt guilty about what her poor children were going through. But she felt there was nothing she could do about their situations.

#### A different kind of experience

The challenges of teaching in a diverse classroom are numerous, more so when one is a student teacher who has not had these kinds of experiences before. For Karen, her biggest challenge was seeing the socioeconomic differences of her students. Karen explained that her background experiences and those of her students were very different, making it challenging for her to relate to them. She explains:

Here I was, this spoiled girl who had gone to good schools and my parents had provided me with everything. I had been to many places, I had traveled and all, and I generally was thinking and teaching from that perspective, assuming that the students had some of the same exposures.

She goes on to give an example of the differences between her and her students:

I recall this one time I was talking to them about museums, and the kinds of things found in the museum. I kind of just taught it like they had all been in a museum. They were amazed at some of the things you find there, and I had to go back and think, hey, maybe some of these kids have never been to the museum, maybe I need to explain in detail. That was challenging for me, because you really have to find ways to make it as real for them as possible. You really have to think at their level, which was very difficult.

Karen was concerned that her students had very few learning experiences they could use in the classroom. When talking about some of her students' experiences, she commented "most of their experiences were from going to places like Wal-Mart,

K-Mart, or the laundry.” She did not hear them “talking about going to the library, a visit to the bookstore, museum, or educational things they did with their parents.” She felt unfamiliar with their experiences, and did not understand where they were coming from. She found it difficult to relate to her students.

Regarding academic performance, Karen commented that she had noticed that students who were from middle-income backgrounds performed better than those students who were from low-income backgrounds. She explains:

You never really think about it, until you start teaching. That is where you notice where the kids are lacking. There are some kids who have been everywhere, who know everything; their parents have given them good exposure. Like right now I have a child whose been everywhere you know! Europe, you name it. We have this “around the world” spelling unit and I mention anywhere, and he seems to know where that is. Then we have others who are completely lost as you teach, because they have never been outside their small town, and they do not know much about other places even other towns closer to them. They are not exposed at all.

Due to the learning exposure some of her students received, they were “already equipped with some basic learning knowledge unlike students who did not have the same experiences.” Karen had come to see that “exposure to learning experiences made a difference in how children learn.” She, therefore, felt it was important that all children be exposed to learning experiences other than what they got in the classroom.

#### Teaching approaches

Karen’s approach to teaching involved teaching and managing classroom behaviors. Due to the differences found in her students’ learning styles, she found that her best teaching method was through the use of “group work,” and “pairing up students.” In pairing students, she noticed that students who had problems understanding the content learned best from their peers. Working together according to Karen, was also a way to “keep all the students active and engaged.” However, this cooperative learning method did not always work, due to the diversity makeup of her class.

In the beginning, Karen's style of teaching was to teach from the perspective of the students who understood the material, and those who paid attention to what she was teaching. Her teaching perspective was from her past experiences of herself as a student. In asking questions, she referred to those students who always answered questions until her cooperating teacher pointed it out to her. It took her a while to recognize that, "not all students were at the same learning ability level," and she needed to adjust her teaching style if she was going to reach all of them. However, even after utilizing all the teaching strategies she had learned, she felt there were students who "never get it."

It is really difficult to decide how best to teach some of these kids. I think there are some kids who will not learn the material no matter how much you try. I repeat myself, I make it interesting, and I make it as simple as it can be. But I cannot get to some of them.

Karen felt she presented her overall teaching in simple and understandable manner. However, she had found that there were some students who "were never going get it," no matter how much she tried. Karen also strongly believes that parents are the first teachers of their children. According to her, the students were not getting the extra help at home, hence, they were not learning in school as well as they should. Karen commented that she had noticed a "big gap" between students "who got help at home versus those who did not." This made her believe that parents played a major role in their children's learning.

#### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

In explaining how she incorporated multiculturalism into her teaching, Karen stated, "her school had very few ethnic students, hence teachers' did not address multicultural education." She also commented that, the little she had taught about multicultural education was governed by the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL's), and "was not very applicable to the students in her classroom or in today's modern world:"

During one of the units, we studied different countries and different cultures that are really ancient, for example ancient Greece. I noticed that the teachers do not branch out into modern countries; it's all ancient and it just feels like, it is way of avoiding what the students need to be learning. They should be learning about their cultures, and other

modern cultures, instead of learning about some ancient time in the world they do not need to know about.

According to Karen, what the students were learning appeared to be a multicultural education lacking in depth, just like the multicultural education she explained she had learned during her early schooling.

Karen also mentioned that when her cooperating teachers' talked about cultures, the emphases was mainly during Black History month. Karen was opposed to this. She felt that recognizing only one culture was a way of creating divisiveness among the different cultural groups. She expressed:

Why do they have Women's month, a Black History month, or International week? Why don't we recognize every one of them all year through, all the time? Making one group more unique than others create conflicts. It makes people feel they need to talk about that group during that special occasion only. The Black History month seems to say, O.K. talk about us during the month of February, then thereafter, you do not have to do anything else. I wish we could cover all the different cultures in the curriculum, bits and pieces of things that are important.

Karen recognizes that multicultural education should be part and parcel of the whole curriculum and not for special occasions only. She also feels that multicultural education should be all encompassing, touching on the various cultural groups found in the United States, and not only "special groups of people."

#### Parental involvement in a diverse classroom

In talking about parents and their involvement within the school and the classroom, Karen commented that she found it difficult to get parents involved in the everyday activities of the classroom. She explains:

You would expect that elementary school kids are still at the stage where they need their parents to help them with homework, and come to talk to teachers about learning. But, this was not the case with my classes. Kids would come without their homework done, they would say no one was there to help them, they would come without logging their logbooks...It's endless.

A lot of my kids also live in trailers; you could tell when their parents came in, you know, their appearance or attitude. Then we had some kids who are living in big houses, they are rich, and they get help with their homework. These are kids whose parents value education more.

In comparing her economically diverse parents, Karen felt certain that parents who showed interest in their children's learning were from middle-income backgrounds. Karen felt that the majority of parents who were from low-income backgrounds were always working, hence they did not have the time to get involved in their children's education. She went on to explain:

I saw very few of those poor parents come for school-related activities. I think these parents work full time and their homes are the kind of places for the poor, I guess reading for their children is not the most important thing. They need money to live, they need money to survive, and I guess they just do not get concerned with their children's education. They have other priorities.

Karen also commented that the reason some of the parents did not show any educational concern was because they had been told many bad things about their children. She commented that parents were not ready to hear the truth about their children, so they simply assumed that the teachers were against their children, and this turned them away from being involved with the schools.

### **Karen's Journey of Growth and Reflection**

Working in a diverse classroom has been a "new and challenging" experience for Karen. Teaching in an economically diverse classroom comes with a lot of teaching and learning issues that a teacher has to deal with every day. Karen explained that, even though she had learned a lot from the experience, she would not be able to teach in such an environment for too long. She was certain she would get burned out.

I know that this is something that I do not want to do; I would not do it for another year. I think I would definitely get burned out after this year. I am for sure already feeling it. And I think a lot of the teachers in my school get frustrated dealing with the same problems every year. Students from low socio-economic status come with the

same problems. I think the teachers are tired, they are burned out, they are sick of dealing with these problems year after year.

Karen feels she needs to be out in the field much longer “preferably back home” to get some teaching experience before she can feel ready and prepared to handle cultural diversity. She went on to explain:

It’s just the frustrations from all these things; it’s not even worth what you get paid. This week I came to the realization that teaching is a non-stop job from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. I think teaching is a hard, hard, job. You have to know how to do it, you have to know what goes into it and a lot of us did not know what we were getting ourselves into when we got in teaching. We did not know what was expected, we all come from totally different backgrounds. This has been a new experience for me.

As she closed the interview she put it plainly, “I will not be surprised if by the end of this semester I change my mind about going into the teaching profession altogether.” Karen’s plan was to substitute teach for a year before she finally makes a decision about whether she wanted to get into the teaching profession.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from Home

Karen’s family lives in a predominantly White community. She described the community as middle-to-high-income community. In this large community one only knew those who were their closest neighbors. Karen could not recall any ethnic cultural groups living near her neighborhood.

Growing up in this community, Karen explained that she grew up in a very sheltered life. “I like to think that I never lacked anything. I had parents who worked hard and gave us a lot, they were also very supportive when it came to our education.”

Karen compared her experiences of having supportive parents who were involved in her education with what she saw during her student teaching placement and said:

Because of the way I grew up, I always thought that all parents were like my parents. When I see how tough it is in my school for parents to make the time to come to talk to the teachers about their kids, I just think I was really lucky that my parents were there for me. I just cannot understand how parents do not make the time to come and find out what's going on with their kids in school.

Karen was surprised to see that parents in her classroom were not involved in their children's education. Compared to what she had grown up believing, she said it was a surprise for her to see parents being called over and over again for conferences who could not make the time to come talk to the teachers. She feels lucky her own parents were very involved in her schooling.

#### Lack of diversity experiences at home

In talking about her experiences with cultural diversity, Karen expressed "I had not been exposed to cultural differences as I was growing up. It was not an issue at home, and it was never brought up". She explained that her cultural exposure was very limited to the schools she went to, college, a one time visit to the Amish county, her vacation trips with her parents to Hawaii and the Bahamas. However, according to Karen, this exposure never really hit home since it was not something that was brought up for discussion at home.

In talking about her family's perspective on cultural diversity, Karen commented that her father could be "very prejudiced in his own ways." He comes from a rural southern community where she believes he got a lot of "jargon" when he was growing up.

My father's family is real Southern. They just seem not to be aware of the changes going on, like they need to jump 10 years ahead. They seem to be real behind; their thinking is real narrow-minded. You see every now and then a little bit of that prejudiced jargon with my dad because that's how he grew up.

Because of lack of exposure to diversity in her life, Karen expressed that "it was due to this lack of diversity in my life that I experienced problems relating to the poor kids"

I did not know there were so many kids living in the kind of poverty that I saw in my school. If someone had told me there are kids who come to school hungry, wear the same clothes over and over again, live in fear of their lives and their mother's lives, who have the problems that I have seen and heard about this year, I would have said, that is

not true. I know that sounds very ignorant, but, because I was brought up among other kids who had the same experiences as I had, it was easier to assume that in this country, all children had the same opportunities I did.

During her student teaching, Karen had come to learn that not all children had the same opportunities that she had. This was a difficult lesson for her, one that made her feel inadequate when it came to teaching poor children. She felt she could not relate to her students, she found it challenging to reach out to them and in the end she felt burned out working in an environment that she had not been exposed to before.

#### Lessons from school

Coming from a predominantly White community, the elementary school that Karen attended was also predominantly White. The majority of the students who attended her elementary school were from middle and high-income families. Karen could not recall her school having the kind of low social economic families she saw during her student teaching. Elementary school, according to Karen, was an extension of her home, in that there were few ethnic and culturally diverse students. She recalls the majority of her teachers being White females, very few men and a few Blacks.

#### Classroom grouping according to ability

Karen recalls that in elementary school “they used to be tracked according to learning ability.” In thinking back and after what she has seen going on in the schools, she now believes that the students who were in “high ability classes were from financially well-to-do families, while those students who were in low ability classes were from lower income families. ‘ She explains this tracking method:

They tracked our classes, usually the higher the income the higher ability of the students. I mean that’s what it seemed to be. I, for one, would never have known that was going on until I started my student teaching. The math class I was teaching last semester had students with a lot of social and economic problems. You could tell by how they came dressed, they lived in trailer parks, and they were not doing well in class. It got me thinking of how we used to be grouped in my elementary school, I think I saw the same

kind of things here. The kids who we were in the gifted and above average class were from the same kind of families that I come from.

### Diversity in middle and high school

Going into middle school and high school was a different experience for Karen. The middle school pulled in students from two/three elementary schools making it more diverse than her elementary school. The percentage of Black students was about thirty percent. She also recalls seeing a few Latino and Chinese students, “especially in high school.” Even though there was more diversity in middle school and high school, there was also a sense of separation along racial lines.

I noticed that even though we had all these new people come together, we were all kind of separated into Black and White, and also by what you did. All the cheerleaders and football players, all the people who were in the band, all the people who were in theater, all the poor White students hung out together, all the nerdy people stayed together, so everybody just kind of went where their little group was.

There was also the tracking practice, which she commented continued in middle and high school. “You kind of got to know the people you go to the same class with. You make friends with them and you spend more time with them.” Because of this separation, she said that even though there were more Black and ethnic students in her school, she did not learn about them.

### Learning about other cultures

Karen could not recall learning much about diversity in any of her schools. The little she learned did not cover much about the American cultural diversity. She also commented that did not understand it.

I recall in elementary school we talked about the Civil War and slavery, but my teacher did not tell us much about it, she kind of touched on it, like our great, great, great grandfathers used to own slaves. I do not remember this as having an impact on me. I think I must have thought that they needed people to work in the farms. I saw the same thing in student teaching. When we talked about the Civil War, we did not get deep into the things that led to it, we just explained that there were people who owned slaves and others did not like that and they fought about it. I do not think my students really thought

about what that means. I think they just felt like I did when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. They thought it was essential to have slaves.

Because the Civil War was not taught in depth and the teachers did not go into the deep details of how the Civil War came about, Karen recalls thinking that slavery was essential at that particular time. She did not get to learn about the evils of slavery. Karen commented that she had noticed the same thing during her student teaching, when her students learned about slavery. She felt that her students had not understood the significance of slavery in this country.

Karen believes teachers do not want to teach in details about things that people find “sensitive” for fear of offending anyone. “You would think that because my high school and middle schools were more diverse, we would talk more about culture. But we never did much of it. I guess the teachers worried they might offend the Black kids or make the racial tensions worse.” This, according to Karen, made her very limited in what she knew about other cultures, about students from low social economic status, and about teaching from a multicultural perspective.

#### College and diversity experiences

Coming to college, Karen was very surprised to see all the diverse cultures that were represented. However “even though there was a large representation of diversity in the university, it was not recognized hence, did not touch me in any way”. Most of her Early Childhood classes were with students who were like her, “female, White and middle class.” She, therefore, felt that she did not experience diversity in college.

The Early Childhood program (ECE), according to Karen, did not prepare her for how to become a teacher. For three years, she learned about young children, and it was not until her last year that she was sent out to the public schools, to work with children. She feels she was not taught how to work in the classroom, or with diverse students. Karen felt that, because she did not get opportunities to go to the school long enough before the student teaching year, she did not understand the problems that diverse students come with. She also felt she was not prepared on how to deal with these problems.

I did not go out into the schools before this year, so for me to see all those things that the kids come with to school was all new. I quickly realized that teaching is not just

about going in there and teaching the class, it's about dealing with all sorts of issues. And we are with these kids more hours of the day than their parents are, so you get to know them personally, get to know their home life, their problems become yours. Teaching then becomes more work for you because you are not only teaching these kids, you are also helping them deal with home problems. You become a teacher, a counselor, and a parent. How was I expected to handle all these roles when I was not even been prepared to teach?

Karen commented that her teaching preparation would have been better if she had been in school from the beginning instead of waiting until the last year of college to get the experience. She thought there was a lot to learn in the public schools and being there for two semesters was not enough preparation for one to feel fully prepared to go into teaching.

Karen also noticed differences between the way they were trained in college, versus the way teachers teach in the public schools. She believes the way they are taught in college does not work with the way schools work. "One has to be in the classroom to get the real picture." She felt that the schools and the university were very "disconnected" and their approaches to teaching were very "different." According to Karen, "the reality of teaching is in the classroom" and she needed to be exposed to that instead of learning about it only from her "content classes." In summing up her teacher preparation, Karen felt that "more should have been done to help her and the other student teachers' cope with the reality of the public schools."

## **Doreen**

### **Introduction and Decision to Teach**

Doreen's, a 21-year-old European American, dream of becoming a teacher started at a very young age, when she would play school with her stuffed animals. In meeting Doreen, her strong personality, seriousness of purpose, and measured words, gives one the feeling that she means every word she says. At 21 she's very mature, such that as we conversed it was easy to forget her age. Doreen described herself as being very organized, diligent, and disciplined to a point of perfection. Her student teaching placement was in Kindergarten and Third grade classes.

## **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

### Early teaching challenges

Doreen is not new in the classroom, she had some experience working with early elementary students “back home” and like all the other student teachers interviewed, Doreen had also spent some time in the university Early Childhood Education lab school as part of her ECE program. She believes the lab school “opened her eyes to the diversity of students;” however, she expressed that the lab school “did not prepare her to work in a public school.”

The lab school is a very ideal setting if you compare it to the public school where I have been student teaching. In the lab school, you have very strong parental support, you have students who are for the most part professors’ children, and who are at least average in their abilities and in their knowledge if not incredible. These students knew things that I thought were way above their age. The things that they were doing were very creative. So, in that sense, I did not really feel that the lab school prepared me to work in the public school system.

Doreen appreciated the lab school for having opened her eyes to student diversity. However, she also felt that, because the majority of the children came from very good backgrounds, they were very different from the diverse students she encountered in the rural public school.

Teaching in a rural public school setting was a different experience for her, “very different from teaching back home where schools have good financial backing and children come from middle and higher income families.”

### Learning experiences of diverse students

In Doreen’s third grade class, out of 20 students, 11 of them came from low socio-economic households, 8 from middle income, 3 students had physical disabilities, and 4 were labeled special education; only 1 child was from a minority group. In Kindergarten where she had student taught during the fall semester, Doreen’s class consisted of 17 students, 10 of them from poor backgrounds, 1 student was Black, 1 Native American and 8 of the students were

from middle class homes. As a student teacher, Doreen was faced with “a whole new challenge of learning how to work with such a diverse group of students.”

The biggest diversity issue that Doreen encountered was “academic and economic diversity.” Working in this rural school, she had several students from middle income families and then she had a large number of students from very poor backgrounds. She explains what diversity meant in her class:

I had students whose parents had given them outside experiences, whose parents helped them at home with their homework. I guess I could say that in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I started seeing where the money made a difference. I had 20 students in my classroom, some of them from middle-class families, but I also had some that were from very low-income families. The academic abilities of these students were very noticeable. You could almost pick out when they read whether they are from high or low-income brackets. These are differences that had not been so easily noticeable in the Kindergarten. I think it was more noticeable as they got more into structured learning, it was easier to tell those students who had more experiences than others, who could read at a higher level than others.

However, even with these academic and learning differences, Doreen recognized that “every child is capable of learning.” What differed were only their “learning exposures.”

According to Doreen, learning exposures did not mean that some students were necessarily brighter. However, Doreen saw how “the classroom structure was set to favor those students who came already equipped with some basic learning tools.” Doreen was convinced that the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL’s) were geared towards students coming to school already equipped with these basic learning tools:

Now with the new Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL), I think they need to just call them the Standards of Living because I have noticed in my classroom that students who do have more experiences are better able to connect what they have learned with different things. They have more to draw from. I do not think this is fair to those students who cannot afford learning experiences outside what they get in the schools. I

think they are being blamed for failure when it is the schools and the society that are failing them.

Doreen pointed out that the schools were not doing enough to support the learning needs of poor children. It seemed to her that the culture of the school catered to those students whose parents had given them educational opportunities outside what they got in school.

Doreen believed that teachers should not only facilitate learning, but also empower all students to achieve their highest levels. She saw “teachers gearing towards teaching one group of students, that being the students who came from economically well- to-do families.” She emphasized this with a discussion she had overheard.

The other day I heard one of the teachers talking about a student and saying that “he will never really amount to anything and will be fine doing janitorial work.” This student was one of the students who lived in trailer parks. And I just thought, how awful! Here they are in kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade and they are already being labeled as that kid is going to be the janitor. I mean who says that he can’t make it in life just because he comes from a poor background?

She went on to express:

I think sometimes how the students perform in the class has to do with the attitudes of the teachers. I am not saying this for every teacher and for every place, but I think a lot of times people just expect that if a child is from a poor family, they are not nicely dressed, they are not as well kept, and they are not coming to school talking about their vacation, or the professional jobs that their parents have, they are just not going to do well academically. I think these students just get kind of pushed to the side.

I just think people do not look at education as being a way out; they do not really see it as that. And I think if teachers would treat every child with respect, then they might be a little more convincing to the students. I think teachers, as a whole, turn kids off education at times.

According to Doreen, teachers view students who are going to make it in life and schooling as those who already have the parental and financial support, and those from poor families are viewed with the perception that they will not better themselves through getting an education.

These perceptions are then passed on to students who end up losing the motivation to work hard and achieve academic recognition and mobility.

Doreen acknowledges that “to be able to work in a diverse environment, a teacher has to put into consideration all the diversity in her class.” She believes that in order to reach out to all students, “she had to create an equal learning environment where every individual student felt valued whether they were the brightest child in that classroom or not, whether they come from a rich family or a poor family.” It is with this teaching philosophy that she tried to create a learning environment that was conducive to all her students.

#### Approaching teaching in a diverse classroom

In a multicultural classroom, one method of teaching may not be conducive to all the students and the challenge becomes to find ways to communicate to each student by using various teaching strategies. Part of Doreen’s perception of classroom diversity involved “creating a positive student-learning environment.” Doreen called herself “a student-centered teacher,” for she saw learning as a “two-way” activity where “the teacher gives ample opportunities to students to bring in their own perspectives.” Through her instructional strategies, she found she was able to draw her students to work in a cooperative learning manner.

I do a lot more hands-on experiences. I like a lot of group work and group discussions, and I like the students to help each other to discuss how to do this or that. I also like to do things that are more creative for them. I am much more thematic. I want to integrate things that they know into different subjects. I like them to have fun with what I teach. I want them to see learning not as a drag, but full of fun.

In the beginning, Doreen was faced with the difficulty of trying to integrate some of her teaching philosophies. Her cooperating teacher had used the textbook method, and Doreen did not believe in using textbooks. She wanted her students to be active students. She believed in group work, being creative, discussions, active learning, and incorporating examples that are outside the books. Doreen found that, as a teacher, she had to try to meet the needs of many different students. “You are not going to walk into the classroom and have 20 students who are all on the same level, you, therefore, need to be more creative to be able to help them learn.”

She also emphasized that it was important to know students individually - their values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. She expressed that, “in learning to know her students, she was able to create a learning environment that was conducive to all of them:”

Knowing the students is one aspect of reaching out and working with diverse students. In knowing students, Doreen was “able to understand their learning needs.” Doreen felt she had come a long way in the past few months in learning how to work with diverse students. She explained that she had come to the realization that “in teaching, it was not about what the teacher wants to teach but what the students need.”

#### Incorporating a multicultural perspective

Part of working successfully in a multicultural classroom is being able to incorporate a multicultural perspective into the subject content. Doreen emphasized:

In a diverse classroom, it is important for the students to see their different cultures being incorporated into the curriculum at the same time, see other students’ cultures. Even in the classes like the ones I taught that had little ethnic diversity, I think it was necessary to incorporate a multicultural perspective.

During her student teaching, she had few opportunities where she was able to incorporate aspects of cultures. This she did through Internet research, storybook reading, and bringing in several people to talk about their cultural experiences.

Doreen emphasized the importance to her students of learning about other cultures.

I feel deprived. I was deprived in my schooling, for I never had opportunities to learn about cultural diversity. I feel it is my duty not to let the students come out as ignorant as I did. If it had not been my involvement with the Freshman Orientation Symposium I would still be very ignorant about cultural differences.

She also expressed a lack of depth in the multicultural curriculum:

There is so much that one can do with multicultural education. There is so much one can learn from. But we did not get into much. I feel that because we did not touch on it in-depth, my students sometimes would get the wrong impressions. I remember when we learned about the Native Indians, and we had someone come in and talk about the Native Indians and all they could recall was how he [the presenter] was dressed like a

Native Indian. He had talked a lot about the Native Indian cultures, but my students did not seem to have understood the importance of what they had learned. Due to lack of depth in the learning about other cultures, Doreen commented that her students did not understand the underlying meaning behind cultural differences, and the richness of the different cultures. Instead she found that her students were “more impressed by the physical appearances, such as traditional attires of the Native Indians.”

Doreen also revealed “because she was still learning about other cultures, she was not very knowledgeable in teaching multicultural education.” She believes that to be able to teach from a multicultural perspective, one has to do a lot of research, read a lot, and be willing to learn together with the students. According to Doreen, “teachers like her do not get the time to learn about other cultures; it, therefore, becomes difficult to teach something that one may not be very familiar with.”

#### Behavior problems in a diverse classroom

In terms of classroom management, Doreen expressed initial concern with students’ behaviors because they did not view her as a “real” teacher. Being new in the classroom, she exercised the same punishment methods that her cooperating teachers used. She, however, came to realize that punishment or positive reinforcement methods did not always work:

My teachers used the points method, whereby if students behave they get certain points and would be rewarded for good behavior. If they misbehave, they get points for bad behavior. I do not think I agree with these methods of reward and punishment. I saw that those students who were constantly getting punished were always getting into trouble.

If this were my classroom, I would say good behavior depends on the child. If the child is tough, you get tough with them. With other students I just have to say, well you know that really hurt my feelings. I think talking things out with them and letting them know what they did, and discussing with them ways to improve their behavior would be better than punishment.

Doreen thought that her students’ behaviors had not improved even after the punishments were carried out. She believed there were other methods of handling behavioral problems besides

punishment. However, this was not her classroom and according to her, she had to adhere to what her cooperating teacher was already doing.

### Parental support

Comparing both teaching placements, Doreen commented that parental support was more visible in kindergarten compared to what she saw in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. She explains:

At kindergarten the kids are at a stage where everything is new to them, and unless you have really supportive parents who are really working with their children every night, you may end up losing them academically. The students in my Kindergarten class seem to have come from such good families; the parents were supportive, they helped their kids at home and even the parents who are working all the time, they seem to have had the time to help their kids.

Now in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I see where the money starts to make a lot of difference, it seems that those kids who come from lower economic status are also poor in reading and math, and apparently do not receive a lot of support at home. I guess it's because a lot of their parents work, and so they do not have the time to work with their children at home.

Doreen pointed out that children who came from well-to-do families had more educational support from home than children from poor families. The poor students according to her were also performing lower academically.

Doreen also expressed concern with lack of communication between the parents and teachers. She believed it was due to this lack of communication that parents were not very involved in the school and with their children's learning:

I believe that the way teachers communicate with the parents is very important. I do not see much communication going on in this school. The only time I saw my teacher talk to parents was during the conferences, and this was done so fast I did not even get a chance to participate. I feel like that's the only time the teachers feel they have an obligation to talk with parents.

Doreen did not think that her teacher was communicating a lot with the parents. Because this was the trend set forth in her classroom, she did not make attempts to contact parents when she took over teaching. She saw it as her teacher's responsibility. However, she

commented that when she gets her own classroom, one of the things she will make sure she does is keep communicating with the parents constantly. “I think it is important that parents are made aware of their children’s progress throughout the semester”.

### **Doreen’s Journey of Growth and Reflection**

Working in a diverse classroom can be challenging as Doreen has indicated. One has to be aware of the student differences in learning ability as well as the diverse experiences they come with to the classroom. Doreen was open to learning and coming up with diverse teaching approaches that she felt were beneficial for her economically diverse classrooms. Her interest in creating a multicultural environment is portrayed in how she talks about it:

I think creating a multicultural classroom is not just about teaching the various cultures, it is also about creating a classroom environment that every child feels comfortable in. As a teacher, my job is to help each child move forward in a positive direction. Whether a child lives in a trailer park, or in a big house, whether a child has money or none, I think that should be secondary when they come into the classroom. In this classroom, I have created an atmosphere where each child feels valued. I am learning how to work with all students no matter what academic, economical or social differences they come with to the classroom.

Although Doreen had learned a lot from this experience, she still thinks she is not well prepared to work in a diverse classroom. She feels there is still much she does not know especially when it comes to working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds:

I definitely do not feel like I am prepared to work in a diverse classroom. I am applying in North Carolina, and I met a lady who works at the school board office, and she asked me if there was any place that I would not want to go, and I said I just do not think I could go to the inner city. I just could not teach at one of those schools because I feel I cannot handle the pressures of a first year teacher and have to deal with that immense diversity there. I have not really had that experience in my personal life and I do not feel like I have a great background about it. I still feel very unprepared to do it on a full-time basis.

As a student teacher, Doreen feels she has learned a lot about diversity; however, she feels she should have been more prepared to work with diverse students. She had to face the pressures of student teaching in a poor rural school with little preparation. She did come to understand that “teaching had many dimensions; some of them can only be learned in the classroom.” Even though Doreen felt confident she had handled her classroom’s socio-economic differences very well throughout her student teaching, she believes she needs time to learn about being a teacher first before she can feel confident enough to work in very diverse classrooms.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

Doreen calls herself a student of diversity. She explained that she grew up in a very White community, where cultural diversity was none existent.

We live in a suburban area pretty much. It is a pretty new city as far as cities go. It was just founded in the late 60’s. I think because of the way the world was at that time I guess what started to happen was that the different groups went to different places and it really has not meshed back together. The part that I live in is basically almost all White and most of those houses were brand new. We bought our house 14 years ago and all of the houses around us are the same.

All her neighbors had the same standards of living and went to the same church and community center. She saw her community as a very close-knit community. She could not recall seeing people from other cultures until four years ago when the first African- American family moved in. “Everybody was like wow! I mean, not that they minded them moving into the area, I guess it were because they were the first African American family to move in.”

Doreen’s upbringing played a major role in her life and how she views people. Living in an area where everyone was the same, she believes she did not get lot of negative influence in the sense of looking at other people in a “stereotypical way.” She explains:

We live in an affluent area where there is a pretty good financial backing for the schools and the parents are very supportive at home, that I think I ended up with good impressions of people. The few African-American students who I did go to school with,

maybe about six in all my classes combined, were the most talented and some of the most wonderful people that I met in high school. So I think I did not get a lot of the negativity that a lot of other people have when they have lived and gone to school in diverse neighborhoods.

This is the attitude that Doreen went with to the classroom. She was expecting all the students to be as she was when she was going to school - having parental support and coming from good financial backgrounds. She later realized that there were differences between the students' backgrounds and her own background that she had to deal with and understand, before she could connect with her diverse students:

I guess in my mind, I had the ideal classroom. I expected the students to be in the kind of classes that I was in, you know, lots of parent support, and basically expecting they were all the same socially, economically, and I guess culturally.

I went to the classroom with this idea that all students would be like me, polite to the teachers, hardworking, and ready to learn. I went with that mentality like all the students would be able to understand what I was teaching. I did not put into consideration what they already knew, or what they did not know, their backgrounds, and their experiences.

Doreen had grown up regarding everyone she had met and gone to school with as "very impressive." Even though she did not experience ethnic or cultural diversity at home, her parents had instilled in her the belief that everyone was the same, and she should not judge people based on their color.

My parents have always been careful in how we describe people. I learned early in life that some terms were not very polite and I never use them. I remember one time my brother referred to an African-American woman as "colored" and my mom said: "you can't say that, do not say that, that's something that they used to say a long time ago when there was still segregation, that's really impolite. You would not want someone to call you names such as red neck would you? We are all people and you should see everyone as a human being. You have to look at the person and not all the other things about them." It's not that we constantly had conversations about cultural issues, but I

think my parents were very careful in what they said around us, and what was brought up in front of us.

Names that identified people by their color or culture were not tolerated in her home. Even though Doreen saw her parents as not being very culturally aware, she compared their upbringing and believed they had come along way in terms of being open to cultural differences:

We are all from the South. My great, great, great uncle was 2<sup>nd</sup> in command in the Confederate Army so obviously they had slaves and felt that that was OK. And then by the time you get to my grandparents, they are 90 and 92 and they did not have slaves, but they always say “colored people” and that drives me crazy. They still had Blacks that worked in their house and were their maids and my grandmother always had a Black cook when my dad was younger. And then by the time it gets to my parents, this negative perception is kind of less and definitely a lot less with us children. Regardless of my parents’ beliefs they did a really good job with not bringing a lot of that into our house. I never remember hearing negative stereotypes as far as people go.

Doreen felt that even though she learned to value people’s differences, not learning about cultural diversity made her ignorant of ethnic cultures, even her own. Her perceptions about other people were tested when she finally came to college and realized that she was not as unprejudiced as she had always assumed.

#### Lessons from school

Doreen commented that she not only lacked diversity in her home life, but also in her schooling experiences. In high school, she recalls having about six students who were from different cultures. She recalls these students as being very impressive athletes and students. They also came from very affluent families and no one treated them differently than the rest of the students.

Doreen could not recall learning much about ethnic cultures. When they did the Civil War in high school, she remembers learning about “the generals in the Civil War.” She believed the reason behind this was because “the school did not have a large number of minority students.” Multiculturalism was not addressed in her curriculum. She recalled there was “no politically correct way of doing things. Holidays and special occasions were observed.”

Everyone was assumed to be a Christian, and all the students believed in Santa. “Nobody was worried about the politically correct way of doing anything. I knew only about one religion. My experience with other beliefs is, therefore, very limited.”

Coming into college and then going into student teaching made Doreen realize “there were differences among people’s beliefs, cultures, and views.” Student teaching made her become even more aware of how diverse the world is, and how challenging as a teacher it can be to work with this diversity.

### Lessons from college and teacher preparation

Coming to college opened Doreen’s eyes to diversity. She was surprised by the differences that students came with in terms of different races, religions, beliefs, and culture. But Doreen did not realize how “ignorant” she was about other people until her junior year, when she started working with a freshman orientation program. Among the things that the orientation program dealt with was to sensitize the new freshman students to the diversity on campus through seminars that talked about race issues and cultural differences. It was during one of these orientation seminars that she came to the realization “she was not as unprejudiced as she had always assumed.”

We spent one week talking about racial diversity and there were speakers that were brought in and talked about racism on campus. This made me realize how one can get stuck in their limited vision of what is going on in their life.

If you were to ask me if there was racism on this campus, by my personal knowledge I would say no, no, we do not have racism on this campus, I have never seen it, you know. But then by listening to what people are saying, you really start to think about some of the things that you do. Like I had never ever thought about this until this guy came in and we were talking about racial diversity. He said, “it upsets me when I will be riding my bike or walking down the street and someone will be in their car at a stop sign and you will see them reach over and lock their door or you can hear the car doors lock.” I thought oh I never do that and like a week later I caught myself doing it and I thought how awful that I would lock my doors when that person walked past. So I think

you get so caught up in your limited vision, until someone points it out to you, and you realize, maybe I am as prejudiced as the person next door.

The orientation seminars opened her eyes to many diversity issues that she had not known about before. The debates which were centered on racial matters made her realize that her own background had not prepared her to understand the perceptions of others, especially those who were hurt by the existing prejudices.

She decided to learn more about other cultures by spending some time with one of the international students, also working with the orientation. Her limited picture of diversity was challenged. She started reading books, watching movies that dealt with diversity, and having discussions with people of diverse cultures. Student teaching eventually helped Doreen to confront her beliefs and assumptions, and to learn how to work with cultural differences. However, Doreen feels she still has a long way to go before becoming culturally aware.

## **Amy**

### **Introduction and Decision to Teach**

Amy, a 23-year European American young woman, describes herself as a “born teacher.” Amy is of average height, with a ready, warm smile that lights up her face every time she talked about her teaching experiences. Amy describes herself as having had a sad life until when she started teaching, and now she “catches herself smiling all the time.”

Her desire to teach was influenced by her 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher whom she sees as the “most memorable person in her life.” This teacher treated all her students “with respect and love no matter what background they came from.” This teacher gave Amy academic confidence during the early years of schooling. Amy believes it is important for students to have a teacher who believes in them, and who makes a difference to how a child views him or herself. As a first and fourth grade student teacher, Amy “aspired to be that one teacher who influenced her students’ lives.”

## **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

### Early classroom concerns and challenges

Amy described her classrooms as being “economically diverse [with] no ethnically diverse students.” She explained that in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class of 20 students 14 of these students came from “very poor backgrounds”, 6 were considered middle-income, and 4 were going for special and remedial classes. Her 1<sup>st</sup> grade class that she had interned during the fall also had a culturally diverse group of students. Out of 16 students, 10 were from poor backgrounds and 6 were from middle-class backgrounds. Being a rural community, it did not surprise Amy that so many children were poor.

I come from a poor, rural community. So the poor children in this school did not surprise me. However, when you are a student, you never realize the learning disparities of students. There are lots of differences here in terms of the experiences that these kids have been exposed to. I would never have noticed this when I was a student.

She went on to explain how she noticed the social-economic differences:

I have a few students who live in trailer parks; I did not think they had a lot of money, you could tell, you see them wearing the same clothes twice, others were wearing same clothes several times. You can tell the differences between the kids who are well take care of. Like if they say that they go to the library, to the bookstore, or if they order books through the book club here or if they say that they went to the science museum, I guess that tells you that they are in the middle class. But then there others, you never really hear them say anything about that, if they say they go somewhere, it's I went to the baby sitter's or I had to go spend a night with grandma or we went to the grocery store. I don't know, I feel like maybe this is stereotyping, I feel guilty. But it is easy to tell, as a teacher, which children come from poor backgrounds.

Amy pointed out that as a teacher it was easier to tell the differences of her students' backgrounds. As she talked about this, she felt guilty, she hated to “differentiate kids based on their cultural or economic differences.” She wanted to see all her students as “one big family.”

### Understanding the learning needs of her students

The importance of seeing all students as a family was emphasized in both of Amy's interviews. Initially it was a major struggle for Amy to learn how to differentiate her students' learning needs because she wanted to see all her students as one big family.

Connecting with students was also important to Amy. She believed it was "through having a connection with her students, that was able to assess them, their interests, their behaviors, learning experiences, and interests." To emphasize this, she gave an example of working with a child who was considered a major classroom challenge.

When I started student teaching in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, my principal told me I had a boy named Patrick who, how can I describe him? He was the biggest challenge I have ever faced. My principal told me, if I make it through that class, I will make it through student teaching and that scared me. Patrick was a very disruptive child and most of the time he would be lost in his own world as I worked with the rest of the students. But then I got to find out he was interested in fishing and his dad took him fishing every weekend. There was a book that I was reading and when we reached the part where two of the main characters were going fishing, Patrick who had not been with me for days now suddenly was a changed person. I did not have a problem with him the entire lesson. He knew more about fishing than anybody else and he was sharing and telling stories about fishing trips he had gone to he became very attentive to me.

Amy had found an experience that Patrick could relate to and was interested in, she was able to get his attention and keep him motivated. Amy's teaching involved "looking for experiences that her students had had outside the class and they could all relate to." She felt this made learning interesting and meaningful to them.

Amy also finds it necessary to talk with her students individually in order to get to know them. She feels this strategy of listening to her students gave her a good perspective of their learning needs.

I am attuned to my students. I like to listen to them talking about their home situations, their families, and their lives. I find in listening to the students I am able to tell where each of them is, how their home life is, and what problems they may be facing outside the school.

Amy explained that this strategy of listening to her students helped her understand and know them each as individual students.

### Learning experiences in a diverse classroom

Lacking in learning experiences is one salient issue that was raised by several preservice teachers, as they talked about their poor students. Even though Amy emphasized the need to see and treat all her students the same, she also pointed out that “she could not help but notice the learning differences among her economically diverse students:”

I do feel like the kids in the lower socio-economic status or bracket do not get as much of the experiences they need. I feel like a lot of them do not go to plays, museums, or do not come here when they have special events at school, like after school programs. I feel like with a lot of them, their life is wake up at the baby sitter’s, go to school, get off the bus at the baby sitter’s, and parents will pick us up later in the night because they have to work so much.

She went on to explain:

I see that the kids who come from a low economic status are also slow in learning. It all comes around to money and it is probably because they have not had the experience. And I see that in the computer labs, those kids who do not have computers at home or do not have access to them or have never been really exposed to technology, are just amazed and are lost. They also seem overwhelmed and almost scared to use the computers.

Even though Amy emphasized that “each child came to the classroom with something to contribute,” she stated that she could “not help but recognize that, children who came from well-to-do families were performing better academically.”

Money is learning, and I never really realized that before. I think money has a lot to do with whether you have access to go buy the books or whether you have access to go on educational trips with your family and things like that. I think they should just call the Virginia Standards of Learning, what a friend of mine calls them: The Virginia Standards of Living. It appears that the students who have it all at home are also the ones who are making the grades in the class. This disturbs me.

Amy had also noticed that the poor children were also the ones going for remedial learning:

Last year we had an aide that would come in to work with a couple of the students, one little girl, I am pretty sure she is in the low economic status. There was a boy that was also in the low economic status and he had an aide that needed to be with him probably three or four hours a day. This year we have students that are pulled out for reading recovery, Title 1, which is another reading help specialist, and I would say these students are also from low economic backgrounds. It all comes around to money and the SOL's.

Amy, like Doreen, felt that the Virginia SOL's catered only to the needs of students who were coming to the class with some knowledge in reading, writing, technology, museums, and exposure to books. Due to these expectations, there were students who were being left behind, if they lacked in these types of experiences. These students then become possible cases of retention. In the following example, Amy emphasizes her concerns about some students who were to be retained in 4th grade:

When my cooperating teacher told me they were thinking about retaining two students, it really bothered me. What will repeating do? Will they actually improve themselves intellectually by repeating the same grade twice? Will another nine months of calendar bring these kids to speed? This really outrages me! I see two young individuals here full of potential, but the school and the society have failed them. The teachers have failed them, and the SOL's have failed them.

Amy also went on to point out that “the problem was not with the students but with a school system that does not readily adjust to the students learning needs.” Amy believes that if more teachers could believe in the potential of all their students, then retention would not be considered as an alternative way to help students learn.

#### Teaching approaches

When I asked Amy to describe her teaching approaches, she started off by describing herself as a teacher “who is interested in looking for different teaching methods to reach to all students.” In preparing lesson plans, she would “think of her students and how each of them would react and relate to the teaching materials.” As she describes the different learning styles of

her students, one can easily tell that Amy was very much aware of the learning diversity in her classroom:

In a diverse classroom, I have come to learn that there are all sorts of students with different learning styles. There are those who learn by seeing, there are students who learn by hearing, there are those who learn by doing, there are those who learn by hearing from each other and there are those who learn from themselves, there are those who learn by feeling and touching. I used to be the kind of child who learned better on my own; I would go home and read everything, and so this helped me learn more, because as much as I tried, I would not pay attention in class. There are, therefore, different ways of learning and as a teacher I have to be aware of this.

Amy also emphasized the importance of using a variety of teaching methods and tools. She describes her teaching and planning style:

As I do my daily planning, I try to think of the students' experiences, of their needs, and I find myself able to tune in to all of them if I use different teaching approaches. My cooperating teacher has taught me a lot in terms of preparing lesson plans to meet the need of all kids. I make sure the kids are learning from each other by having classroom discussions where they hear each other. I also work one-on-one with those students who are slow students and need more time to learn things. I try not to use just one method of teaching. At the same time, I want to make teaching fun for all kids. But then sometimes it is so difficult.

Amy commented that it is difficult and challenging to try to meet all the learning needs of diverse students. However, she also suggested, for teachers to be able to understand where students are coming from, that they need to think like the students, learn their learning needs, and be able to tune in to all of them.

Amy pointed out that a diverse class where a teacher is trying to differentiate the students' learning needs and getting to know each child, is a challenge for any teacher. It calls for "more planning and preparation." However, she believes that for a teacher to teach a diverse classroom successfully, "one has to be committed to teaching and to be willing to understand the learning needs of diverse students."

### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

During her second semester of student teaching, one of the school requirements was for every teacher to teach some aspect of African-American history during February. Her cooperating teacher did not do much in this area and they struggled to show their school principal what they had covered. Asked what she personally thought about Black History month, she expressed:

It baffles me, I do not understand it. I feel like we have come so far in this world and especially in this country with diversity issues. Our country is such a diverse country, but yet we still have one month that is Black History month, why? Is there a Native American month? Is there a Chinese month? No, there is not and what is that telling the students? I am doing a unit on biographies next week, as I just found out this morning. I am planning on teaching about certain Black people, but when I get my classroom next year and the following years, I will only teach about Black History month if its required of me in February, but there is no way I am going to focus on it more in February than I am throughout the entire year. I won't even mention to my students that it is Black History month if I do not have to. I am really hesitant to do that because I do not want them to feel like it's not all around them all the time. I do not want them to feel like they can't learn about Black people all the time and I just feel like that separates people too much. I feel like by saying to students its Black History month we have to learn about these Black Americans, and I have seen it happen before. Students look around to see where the Black students are. I have seen this happen, and then I have seen the Black students feel like their peers are looking at them and they are being singled out. I just do not like that at all, it really aggravates me.

Amy felt that in teaching she would have to teach about all the people, all the time and not just about African-Americans or Asian-Americans. However, she also expressed that with the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL), they did not cover much about the American people and with all that they had to do, there was not much leeway to incorporate multicultural education into the curriculum.

### Classroom management

In terms of dealing with student behaviors, Amy stated that she had noticed those students who were constantly being punished were the same students who were constantly in trouble. She also felt that, in a diverse classroom, the teachers had a lot to deal with, and lacked classroom control. She explains:

In a diverse classroom, you have behavioral problems. You have kids who have different ability levels. You have kids who you just want to take home and continue teaching. You have kids who come in with physical and mental problems. Others come to school with all sorts of family problems. Kids have become uncontrollable. I feel like teachers have lost control of classrooms. I think it takes a certain kind of person to be a teacher nowadays because schools are changing so fast and if you are not cut out for teaching, you will burn out very fast.

Amy also commented that a teacher has to set up a classroom in a certain way, and as a student teacher, she had to follow the same rules that her cooperating teacher used. She did not feel she had the “flexibility to create her own preventive measures” and so she simply continued to use the same behavioral strategies her cooperating teacher used, even though she had found out they were not working.

### Parental support

In talking about Parents and their support in a diverse classroom, Amy felt that the teachers were not doing enough to elicit support from parents. She feels that communication between parents and the teachers only happened when a student was in trouble.

I cannot say that I see my teachers interested in bringing in parents to help, or even to teach about particular topics. I am sure they would be willing to, if approached.

Teachers say parents are not supportive, but how can they be, if they have not been asked to? I think that a lot of teachers feel that it is extra work for them if they have to do things like meet with parents or take measures to get them involved.

Amy thinks that parents should not to be blamed for failing to support schools. She feels that the schools are not doing enough to encourage parental support, and teachers expect too much from parents, which sometimes is unrealistic.

From my past experiences as a student, and from what I can see now, I think parents are normally left out in the education of their children. I think teachers and schools only need parents when they either need them as volunteers, or when they need money, or help with homework. The homework especially aggravates me. What if some kids have parents who cannot read or write? I do not recall my parents helping me with homework or being involved in my schooling. That does not mean they were not supportive when it came to my learning!

Amy believed it was the role of the schools and the teachers to make parents feel welcome in the school and make them feel important when it came to their children's learning.

### **Amy's Journey of Growth and Reflection**

In summing up her one-year teaching experience, Amy pointed out that, "even though it is challenging to work in diverse classrooms, I have enjoyed learning the diverse issues that poor children come with to the classroom." According to Amy, those students who were disruptive and considered outcasts were the ones she cared for most. "Knowing that I am making a difference, hopefully, in their lives in a positive way is very fulfilling for me." Amy finds herself easily connecting with students who have problems. "My life has not been an easy one. I, therefore, relate well to what some of my students are going through."

Amy hopes she made a difference in her students' lives. "I look at how many different things these students are going to go through and I think well am I really going to be able to help them? I am going to make any impact on them?"

In terms of working in a diverse environment, Amy feels she still lacks preparation especially in teaching a very culturally diverse classroom. She, however, believes that after working in the lab school and from her student teaching experience, she is better prepared to address classroom diversity.

There is no child I would mind teaching. There is no place I would mind going. My only concern is that since I am still learning how to address other cultures, and learning how to work with economically diverse student's differences, I would probably feel very unprepared to teach a city school or a very economically diverse school.

Amy cited more preparation as important if she is to succeed in teaching diverse classrooms. She also stressed that what she really needed was more experience, and exposure to cultural diversity.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

Amy was born in a small town in Virginia, which she described as a “rural town full of tobacco farms and farmers.” Her family is a traditional tobacco growing family. Amy grew up in a community that had a large number of Blacks and Whites. She grew up seeing the African-Americans around her working in her father’s tobacco farms and surrounding farms. Talking about cultural diversity issues is a difficult experience for Amy. As far as she remembers, she has always been fighting racism in her family, her schooling, and her life.

I have been fighting racism all my life. I got this from my family that White people are better. My dad, being a farmer, has had Black people working for him and I got the impression from him that White people were superior. I remember from a young age thinking to myself, I do not understand why my family feels this way. I do not think I am better than the Black students in our school. But then I would hear people from my family talking this way and it would influence me. But then in my heart I would feel that I am really not this way, and so all of my life I have just been pulled back and forth.

Even though Amy grew up in a racially diverse community the people she was exposed to were the neighboring children who were like her (White, poor, or middle class children). She learned from a very young age that, “there were differences between Blacks and Whites,” and these differences in most cases were negative towards the Blacks.

I was never exposed to other people really other than White. My family taught me at a very young age, that there were differences between Black and White. My neighbors taught me that the Blacks were not good enough in anything but work in our farms.

She went on to explain:

In our community, there are separations between people according to race and economic status. We had the rich section of town. It was primarily White and the

upper-class section and then you had your apartment complexes that were primarily Black and then you had apartment complexes where it was primarily White. If people would say, a street like Manor Street, you would know that was a street that Black people live on and if they say Brightwood you would know that was a development where the rich White people live. Then we have those who were real poor living in trailer parks and that was another part of town.

Due to the way the community was separated, Amy believes that the cultural diversity in that community existed, but was not recognized or appreciated.

“Blacks and Whites” were two racial differences that “disturbed and confused” Amy from a young age. She said she would look at the people who were being called Black and think to herself “they looked more brown than Black.” She one day tried to draw a picture of herself as a White girl and she saw herself looking like a ghost. The word “colored people” also confused her for it signified multiple colors of the rainbow.

I remember so clearly it seems like it was just yesterday when I heard the word colored. I pictured a Crayon box and then its like my mind colored this woman who I did not know; I colored her rainbow colors. I had never seen anyone who looked like a rainbow. I showed it to my brother since he was in school by then and saw more people than I did and he told me colored meant Black people. I did not understand what he meant. I am glad that term is not used a lot anymore. I think today if I said that to my students they would look at me with the same confusion.

Due to the negative stereotypes that Amy grew up with, she tries to be careful about what she says to other people, especially her students. In her classroom she wanted to treat all the children the same, at the same time make them feel valued as unique individuals. “I do not see the colors of my students.” To her, seeing students in terms of color is bringing back all those racial issues she has had to deal with:

I have never been good at diversity issues. I have never been good at seeing people’s colors. I mean I see people as different, but it’s very hard for me to say whether he looks Hispanic, maybe he is half Black and half White, or maybe her culture is this. I struggle with that. I was taught that this person is different, this person is different from

you, those differences in the case of my family were more of Black and White. I was taught that from day one, and I do not like it at all. These are students, and I want to see more to them than simply their color.

In the classroom, Amy tries to treat all her students the same and see them the same. She believes that to do otherwise is to show the students' differences, and all the stereotypes that come with such differences.

### Lessons from her schooling

The schools that Amy went to were also diverse especially with regards to Black and White students. The majority of the students were from the surrounding poor and middle class neighborhoods. Due to the racial and economic make-up, students were very divided according to income and race. In schools, Amy continued to experience racial friction between Whites and the Blacks.

In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we had to do a project with two people and I chose Tina and Dina, two African-American girls to be my partners. They would come over to my house for practice and they were two Black girls and I did not think anything of it. Well, when we put on the play, we did a great job, the teacher loved it and we got an A+. Afterwards, I went outside and we were playing with my friends and they were teasing me saying that I was up there with two Black girls, and they were laughing at me and I did not know what to say.

Amy did not want to sound "uncool" to her friends so she lied to them that the two Black girls had chosen her. She said she felt bad afterwards because she had had a great time with the two girls and had not seen anything wrong with it, until her friends pointed it out.

Such incidents continued to pull Amy back and forth between what she believed and what other people expected her to think. Amy found herself constantly torn between wanting to become friends with Black people in her schools, but not daring to because she was afraid of what her family and her friends would think of her.

### Separation in high school

High school and middle schools were also diverse according to Amy. However, this diversity was barely recognized either in “activities done in the schools, or in the integration of the students.” Amy believes that middle school and high school were places where all the “differences between the Blacks and Whites came out.”

We had terrible, terrible fights in our schools like one a day at least. The students hated each other. And we finally got to the point where they had to put security cameras in all the hallways and stairwells. We had to wear name badges with our bar codes on it. We had to go through metal detectors and we had to have our bags searched twice a week. We had lock downs where policemen and their sniffing dogs would come in and sniff our lockers and our cars and things like that. Learning was not fun, especially in high school. We had interruptions all the time. Our teachers were spending more time controlling the classrooms than teaching. High school was a difficult learning environment, to say the least.

This high school experience left Amy feeling very negative about the separation of people. She expressed, “I cannot understand why we all have to be so separated. It creates so many problems for everyone.” During her student teaching year, Amy explained that she tried to make all her students get along and whenever she saw a “clique” forming, she would try to break it apart. She wanted her students to value each other, without thinking of their differences.

### Multicultural perspective

Even though Amy’s schools were diverse in terms of Black and White, and social economic backgrounds, there was no emphasis towards learning about multiculturalism. Amy could not recall learning about other cultures. Even though she believes there may have been some things that they probably talked about such as the Civil War, she did not think the teachers emphasized much about it. She believes that her teachers would not have dared to teach sensitive cultural things due to the racial tensions, especially in her high school.

### Cultural diversity in college

Amy, like the rest of the preservice teachers’ interviewed for the study, saw college as being very diverse in terms of International students, Hispanics, African Americans, and White

students. Even though she comes from a diverse community, coming to college and seeing all the diversity conglomerated together was a new experience for her.

When I came to college, I was very surprised at all the diversity. I mean, there are people from all walks of life. There are bisexuals, there are Asians, Blacks, you name it! What really impressed me was that you could believe what you want to believe and no one could really change your mind. I feel that even though I did not learn as much about diversity here as one would have hoped, this experience has helped me become strong in my beliefs and now I do not have to lie to people anymore. I still argue with my friends and family. They are so closed, but I now feel like I do not need to pretend to be something I am not.

Coming to college has helped Amy develop her own “identity” and she now feels that she can “challenge her family and friends and form her own opinions.” She does not let other people influence her now unless she wants them to. She feels that her family is gradually coming to terms with her beliefs and learning to respect her for whom she is. However, she also acknowledges that there will always be differences in the ways her family thinks about people, cultures, and Blacks versus the way she thinks. “ I believe it is going to be a lifetime struggle for me to try and change my family. I hope one day I will.”

### **Chapter Summary**

How do the four interns presented in this chapter talk about their rural teaching experience? How do they talk about the low socio-economic children they each encountered in their student teaching placements? How do they address cultural issues in their life histories?

The large number of children from low-income families surprised all four of the interns, who commented that several of their students came from very poor backgrounds, had few learning exposures, were performing at a lower academic level than their peers, and came from diverse family structures and family problems. The interns saw socio-economic class as a determinant in the students’ academic achievement. Poor children appear to be perceived as lacking in learning experiences due to their poorer backgrounds.

The four interns were faced with similar challenges as they each learned how to work in economically and culturally diverse classrooms. Some of the issues they addressed were: the challenges of working with students of diverse learning abilities, the teaching strategies they used in their classrooms, and the academic needs of their poor children.

Other important issues they brought out were their own backgrounds versus their students' backgrounds, their perspectives of what should be included in a multicultural curriculum, and their overall perspective of teaching in diverse settings. How these four interns individually addressed these issues differs, depending on their prior experiences with cultural diversity, their teaching philosophy, and their personal beliefs.

Christina feels her home background with cultural diversity has prepared her to deal with diversity. In her classroom, she emphasizes respect for cultural and individual differences. She attributes her approach to her open-minded parents and her culturally diverse community.

Doreen and Amy pointed to the Virginia Standards of Learning and commented that the learning standards were geared towards children coming already primed with basic learning skills. They felt that the society and the schools were not concerned about the welfare of children from poor families. Their perspectives may have come from their life histories and experiences with diversity. Doreen had stated that her cultural awareness came from her involvement with the University Diversity Symposium. The symposium exposed her to the society's prejudices against minorities. Her opinions about society's responsibility to children from low-income backgrounds may have come from her newfound knowledge about social and economic prejudices.

Amy, on the other hand, said she grew up in a prejudiced family and community. Her opinions about the society and the schools' responsibility towards culturally diverse students in general may have stemmed from her beliefs that everyone should be treated equally, regardless of race, culture, or social economic differences.

In teaching, Christina, Doreen, and Amy see themselves as student-centered teachers. They value the opinions of their students and feel it is important to connect and know the students they are teaching. These three interns believed it was through knowing their students that they were able to understand and address their learning needs. They also felt that in a

diverse classroom, it is important to utilize strategies and learning materials that all their students can relate to. Karen is a teacher-centered, teacher. She expected her students to do their share, and the parents to be the first educators of their children. She finds her students lacking in the basic learning preparation they should have received at home.

Working with children from low-income backgrounds was considered to be most challenging by Karen. She found her students lacked in learning exposures and learning motivation. Karen believed the problems that were associated with these students, such as learning disabilities, family problems, and poverty caused them to lack learning motivation. Karen expressed burn out from working in a culturally diverse classroom.

Why were Karen's perceptions of her diverse students so different from the other three interns, who had been exposed to the same rural classroom environments? Karen acknowledges she had been brought up a very sheltered life and her experiences with cultural diversity were very limited. The culture shock of working in a poor rural school left Karen feeling inadequate and unprepared to deal with economically diverse students. Without prior cultural experiences to draw from, Karen judged her students against her own mainstream background, and world perspective, which was very different from her diverse students' world.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **A SUBURBAN TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

This chapter describes four student interns teaching experiences in two suburban schools, which served linguistically diverse (ESL) students, students from diverse income families, (poor, middle, and high income) and ethnic minority students. The two suburban schools are located near the vicinity of the large State University (where the interns were undertaking their undergraduate studies), which brings in a larger number of culturally diverse students, faculty, and staff. Due to this diversity makeup, the community and surrounding schools pull in student populations from diverse incomes, cultures and linguistic orientation. Each school served about five hundred students.

The chapter also explores the interns life histories and experiences with diversity. A description of the interns, their age, and the student teaching grade levels is provided to give the reader a better picture of each individual intern. All the names used are pseudonyms, and any information or description of the schools was eliminated to protect the participants' anonymity. The chapter ends with a summary of these four interns' experiences.

#### **Linda**

##### **Background and Decision to Teach**

Linda is a soft-spoken, shy, twenty-three-year-old young woman. Although teaching was as a “last result,” Linda had always wanted to work with young children. She started off as a pre-med major, but after changing majors twice, she decided to try the Early Childhood Education program.

I knew I had always wanted to do something with children, but not teaching. Never in my life did I ever dream of becoming a teacher. My father is a teacher, and I always heard him say “these damn kids.” He would come home and he would be mad at them. I saw teaching as a high stress career, and the money is not even good.

Despite her feelings, Linda believes she has finally found her “calling” as a teacher. She sees herself as being “very good with children.” Linda had had opportunities to work with children before, as a summer camp leader, daycare lead teacher, and a tutor, so working with

young children was not a new experience for her. During her student teaching year, Linda taught in third and fourth grade classes.

### **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

#### Early classroom challenges

Linda was faced with the challenge of working with a diverse group of students, from various cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds. Before her student teaching experience, her exposure to cultural diversity had been very “minimal.” Although Linda had worked with culturally diverse children in the University Lab school, she found the suburban public school’s diversity to be very different. She explains:

In the lab school we had children from diverse cultures, but most of their parents were either graduate students in the university or employees. They were not only intelligent; they were also very involved in their children’s lives. The experience was very different. In the public school, I had a very diverse 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. I had 4 kids who could not speak much English. I had 3 students who were from different ethnic backgrounds, I had several students who were on Ritalin, and I also had 5 students who were from very low social-economic backgrounds. I had a big diversity in my class, and that in itself comes with a lot of challenges. We had 2 students who actually had come into the country and immediately into the classroom with no word of English. It was amazing to see the differences of the students. I had some students who were from pretty low-income families; they live in trailer parks and all. I also had students who came from single homes, one who was being taken care of by his grandmother. Then we had students whose reading ability was very diverse. I had students who read at a 1<sup>st</sup> grade level and others who were reading at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade level. The classrooms are just very diverse. That’s the hardest thing to get used to, I think.

In her 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, out of 18 students Linda had 5 from Low-income families, 5 from middle to higher income brackets 3 African American and 4 ESL students, 2 of the African American students were special education, while all the ESL students were attending ESL classes.

Initially, Linda did not have the time to learn about her students as much as she would have liked. The pressures of being a student teacher left Linda with little energy to tune in to the

students, especially during her first semester of student teaching. Due to a lack of communication with the students, when Linda took over full time teaching, she found herself faced with many behavior-related problems.

### Learning experiences of diverse students

Student diversity also meant diversity of learning experiences. In talking about the learning experiences and abilities of her diverse students, Linda pointed out that some of her students were “lacking in skills especially when it came to reading and writing.” She elaborated:

I have children in my class, who do not do much reading at home, so I have a hard time choosing things for them to read. I have kids whose parents are college professors, and they know so much and would get bored with simple books. I have others who still can barely read 2<sup>nd</sup> grade books. Then I have the ESL kids, who are unfamiliar with some of the vocabulary that we use.

Linda felt concerned about the learning differences of her students. She decided to talk to her other 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers about it, but felt the response she received was very negative. She felt the “students had been passed from teacher to teacher, from grade to grade, everyone realizing they have a problem, but nobody doing anything about it.” Handling situations like this where her teachers already knew there was a problem and were not doing anything about it was “complicated” according to Linda. She did not want to overstep her boundaries by choosing activities and reading materials that differed from what her cooperating teacher used. She felt it was safer, as a student teacher, to follow the already established system.

I asked Linda to explain how she would have dealt with the situation if this had been her classroom, and she answered:

It’s a difficult problem. I still do not know much about learning disabilities, ESL students, and minority populations and how to differentiate reading materials. My teacher gives them different things to work on; like those students who are at higher levels, she gives them books that are challenging to them, and those kids who are reading at lower levels, she gives them books that are not so difficult to get into. I do not like this method, but I think when you cannot give them the one- on-one, I think that’s the best a teacher can do.

Linda went on to elaborate that many of her students needed more guided learning than the teachers could offer. She was still learning how to work with learning disabilities and diverse cultures. She was also working in someone else's classroom and did not dare move beyond what her teacher was already doing.

### Teaching approaches

For the sake of her classroom diversity, Linda knew she needed to utilize teaching strategies that would be effective with a diverse group of students. One strategy that she said she had found worked well with her diverse students, was the use of collaborative learning. "I try to get students to work together and help each other," she explained. Group and collaborative learning was especially helpful when it came to working with ESL students and those students who did not process information easily.

In my 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, I can tell you, every child is different in their reading skills and abilities. I have from 1<sup>st</sup> grade reading skills to 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading skills. With these learning differences, I find that whenever I am teaching, there are ten hands up with questions: how do I do this? how do I do that? It's constant questioning. I repeat myself over and over again, and yet, they still ask the same questions. So when I am teaching, I try to pair them in groups of two or three so that those who got it can teach the others. I have seen this work very well. Those who do not get it the first time, they get it when working in a group.

In teaching, Linda also utilized a variety other of teaching approaches, such as visuals, hands-on experiences, writing practices, and individualized instruction. However, she felt that, no matter how much she tried, there were students who were not keen on learning.

Linda strongly believed that in learning, "a child has to want to do it." She expressed, "I do not believe in pushing some of these kids." She felt that if she tried to push students who were having difficulties understanding the materials presented in her class, it would make it even harder for them to learn. Her philosophy was not to "push them too hard." She also pointed out that "some learning problems were associated with problems going on in the students' lives," and "unless one could understand what was causing these problems, it is impossible to get

through to them.” She gave an example of one of her African-American student's who was dealing with family problems and said:

Cassia is one of the students in my class who is really having a hard time grasping things. She was adopted when she was four, but until that time she had lived with an abusive father and a mother who allowed it. I found out early this week that her biological mother died; her sister is very upset, but she is not. She is angry with her mom for allowing her to get hurt. She was scared of having to go to the funeral in case she saw her father. My taking over the class was difficult for her. She is stubborn, difficult, and withdrawn. I do not want to push her. I think she has already gone through enough without me adding any more stresses.

Such cases made Linda strongly believe there were other uncontrollable circumstances that explained why some of her students were “unmotivated when it came to learning.”

#### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

Even though Linda had a culturally and linguistically diverse class, she explained that they did not teach much about the various cultural perspectives represented by her student population. Linda associated this lack of a multicultural perspective with the requirements of the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL's) and the demands to prepare students for the SOL's testing.

We did not get lots of opportunities to discuss other cultures. I guess that comes with the territory. Over here, students are pushed more towards passing the SOL's and covering the areas required. Like this semester when they are preparing to take the tests, everything we are doing has to do with the SOL's. This seems to be the priority. Besides the demands for the SOL testing, Linda also felt that for a teacher to teach from a multicultural perspective, “one has to really be interested in it, because it takes research and extra work.”

I think for you to have a multicultural perspective, you have to have made your class that way. I think you also have to have an interest in other cultures. Since it is not necessarily a mandatory curriculum, I think most people would rather avoid it than have to research about cultures they probably know very little about. I do not think my

teacher had promoted a class that is multicultural. As a student teacher, if that's the way your cooperating teacher approaches her class then you have to approach it that way.

I asked Linda whether given a chance she would have tried to promote a multicultural perspective and she explained:

I won't deny that I am very ignorant about other cultures. I did not have much cultural diversity growing up. I did not have a strong background that identifies with any cultures. I feel that I am not knowledgeable about other people. I probably would have also been afraid to promote multiculturalism because I would have had to learn about all the other cultures, which takes time and interest. Maybe as time goes by and I have my own classroom, then I would have it organized in such a manner that there would be more cultural awareness.

To promote multiculturalism, Linda stressed that a teacher must have the classroom "already set up that way." She also feels that, "the teacher must not only be interested in a multicultural perspective, but also be willing to learn." Due to what Linda deems to be her lack of exposure to other cultures, she feels very limited when it comes to multicultural knowledge.

#### Behavior problems in a culturally diverse classroom

The culturally diverse makeup of a classroom can also mean diverse student behaviors. Linda pointed out that her biggest problem throughout her student teaching year was handling behavioral problems. She did not see herself as a "forceful person,"

I am not a very forceful person at all. It's very hard for me to be forceful with the kids. I did not come in giving them expectations so they learned that they could get away with more. I somehow felt that the students took me to be someone not serious and would want to play me, and so they would test me to my limits.

Even though Linda talked about behavioral problems as a collective whole, she had one student whom she felt was her "problem child." Linda believed that Geoffrey, one of the two African-American boys in her class, "did not respect her as a teacher or as an authority." When it came to Geoffrey, Linda commented that she was at a loss as to how to work with him.

Geoffrey was a very angry child. I have never seen anything like it, an extreme discipline case. What are some of the things he did? Just being very mean to the other kids,

constantly pushing or shoving or yelling at them and at me, never listening, never doing his homework, it was just a daily thing with him. I used to feel like I was walking on eggshells around him.

She went on to explain:

Geoffrey was very conscientious about being Black and he would tell you if he felt he was being treated differently; it's only because he is Black. I never used to separate him. He separated himself through his attitude and behavior.

I had no answer for this child. I had been told he comes from a broken home, his father beats him up, and they were very poor. He had serious learning problems and he never wanted me to work with him. I tried talking with the school counselor about him, the cooperating teacher, the principal, other teachers, but in the end I did not come up with any solution. I really tried. He simply ruled the class. I would come home and write in my journal about my daily problems with him. I used to hear his name in my sleep, out of calling him so many times.

Linda pointed out that Geoffrey came from an insecure background, and these insecurities effected his learning and behavior. In the end Linda “gave up on him,” for she could not “find an answer on how to work with him.” In her Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> journal reflection she writes, “Geoffrey controls the class. I have no control when it comes to him.”

Linda also felt that Geoffrey came from a cultural background she was unfamiliar with, and this could have contributed to how he regarded her. In another journal reflection she writes about these cultural differences:

I am lost in this situation. Is it a cultural thing? Do I communicate differently to him? My cooperating teacher has told me to be conscious of my body language around Geoffrey and Marcus (another Black male in our class). They come from a different culture . . . (Weekly reflection Oct. 28<sup>th</sup>).

Based on her experiences working in a diverse classroom, Linda went on to express that the children who were having problems at home were also the ones who were big behavior problems in the classroom:

It's very difficult. I do not know what it's like to be in their families; it must be really hard. You might hear things like they are being beaten and they are not getting enough food, but you do not really know exactly what is causing it. Then they come to the class and they want to remove their anger on everyone else, which is hard for us teachers. Such situations are hard on everyone. You do know that there are other problems causing the anger, but you cannot solve those problems. I cannot imagine being in this kind of situation for too long, and the stress on you for thirty years?

By the end of her student teaching, Linda felt that, to be able to handle a diverse classroom, a teacher had to have some "special skills" and a "lot of experience." "I really believe it takes special skills to handle a culturally diverse classroom. I feel I lack in these skills, maybe that's why I have had such a difficult year."

#### Parental support

Educational support by parents emerged as one of the important issues in how the preservice teachers perceived their diverse classroom. Linda expressed concern with the lack of parental support especially in the higher-grade levels where she was student teaching. She felt that parents were not concerned about coming to talk to teachers about their children's learning:

I have not seen even one parent come to our classroom to volunteer. I see it is difficult enough to get them involved in PTAs or related activities. Sometimes it feels like parents just dump the kids here and teachers take over the role of parenting. I even hear some parents get very angry when we have early release. They just do not have time for their kids.

A teacher's role, according to Linda, was not only to teach, but also to parent the students. This is a role that Linda, as a young student teacher, felt she was too new at to be successful. She pointed out that lack of parental support was even more prevalent when it came to her poor and ethnic students:

I have seen it in both the classes that I have been teaching. The children from poor and minority families, their parents do not help them with things like homework. I remember when my mother used to stay home with us, she was very involved in the schools, was in the PTA, was always volunteering to work in the class, would come to school at least

once or twice each week. Some of my students have parents who do not work, and yet, they are not visible in any school-related activities.

During her two semesters of student teaching, Linda saw very few culturally diverse parents coming for any school-related activities. For these reasons, Linda came to the conclusion that “culturally diverse parents do not care about the education of their kids.”

### **Linda’s Journey of Growth and Reflection**

The classroom, according to Linda, has been her “best teacher.” She felt the teaching experiences helped her understand what it takes to work with diverse students. “Probably the experience I have received could never have been taught.” Seeing all the things that a teacher deals with has also helped Linda understand her role as a teacher. She expressed her views about becoming a teacher:

I do not think you can be taught how to be a teacher. I think it comes with experience and being in the classroom and seeing all these things. The biggest experience is actually being put in a classroom. It’s really been an experience and it’s been very challenging, and I know that I did not understand it all; I did not manage to work with some children as well as I would have loved to. There were some that were more challenging than others were. Like with Geoffrey, I wish I could have done more for him; I felt like I failed myself and failed him, but I have learned from my mistakes and I will take with me what I know and am sure I will continue learning more each day.

For Linda, working with children who have problems, whether learning problems or family problems, is “heartbreaking.” However, she has also come to understand she does not have all the answers, and teaching is learning. Linda feels lucky she went through a normal childhood, unlike many of the children she is seeing in the schools today. This student teaching journey has also taught her a lot about cultural diversity, as she explains:

I think working with diverse students is not about whether you can teach, but it also involves learning about other cultures, and how they do things. I do not feel like I have this experience. Maybe for now I still have a lot to learn before I can really say I am prepared to work with all the diversity found in some of these schools.

Even though Linda feels she has learned from the student teaching experience, she still feels she would not be able to effectively work in a diverse classroom. She commented that, “for one to successfully teach students with cultural, behavioral, and learning differences, you have to be prepared and possess special skills.” Linda also felt that to address classroom diversity successfully, there was a need to spend a lot of time in a diverse classroom. One year of student teaching experience, according to her, is not enough exposure to cultural diversity.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Cultural Diversity**

#### Lessons from the home

Linda grew up in a small university town. The community was largely low income, with a few middle income neighborhoods. The community is also considered diverse because of its Black population, White population, and low-income families. However, even with this diversity Linda saw her community as very separated in terms of race, and socio-economic status.

Its really weird you know, everybody lives in their different sections, there is the rich section of town and the middle class section, and there are a few trailer parks and areas for people on the lower socioeconomic status, and then there is the Black section of town. It was very separated. Everyone who lived around me was middle class, and then we had the others who were living on the other side of town, they were living in trailer parks, very poor, and you did not know them. The Black population is not very large, just a few apartment blocks.

Diversity and racial issues were not discussed in Linda’s home. She saw her parents as very “ignorant about their family background.”

My parents never really talked about our background. They do not identify that much with their family backgrounds. Even for me, I never really questioned who I was until now. I guess it is working with children, especially with international children who come in with different cultures, that has made me more aware of cultural differences. There are still things I guess I will never understand about other cultures, and I guess this is due to lack of cultural diversity in my own life.

Looking back at her home life experiences, Linda could now see where she was lacking when it came to cultural awareness. She felt that it was due to this lack of cultural exposure that she had faced difficulties working with culturally diverse students during her teaching internship.

### Lessons from school

The elementary, middle, and high schools where Linda underwent her schooling were highly homogenous. She recalls seeing a few Black students in her classes, a number of poor children, no Asian students, or any other cultures.

I would say the schools were not very diverse at all; 95% are White middle class, and most of our parents work in the university or the few schools there. We also have a big hospital. So I would say the majority of the kids are middle class. There are also some lower socio-economic. I think in every grade there are probably like 5 Black students and that was about the extent of the diversity in my schools.

Linda recalled middle school and high school as “being separated in cliques, social groups, and race.” Each group had a designated area in the school where they would “hang out and it was out of bounds” to members of other groups.

We all just kept to ourselves. The Black students would hang out together, and then we had the alternative group, the popular group and the athletes. I guess it was just like the way it is in all schools; at that age you try to identify with one group, unlike now when am older and I can understand about other people. I mean there are some things that I will never understand. I do not live in their neighborhoods, or homes, but I feel I am now more open to other cultures.

In high school, Linda recalled trying to cross those boundaries by becoming good-friends with an African-American student in her class. She recalled the experience caused her a lot of problems with the Black girls in her school. She explains:

The Black girls scared me. They felt I was taking him away from them and I guess they were jealous of our relationship. They started to threaten me, not in a harmful way, but just enough to scare me. It scared me at that age and having over ten people against you, it's the worst thing that could happen. I feared going to school. I feared each day I

would have to meet them, and I tried to stay away from them. I just felt like I could not relate to them, and if they were not like me I was just going to stay away.

This experience made her aware of the distances and separation of White and Black students in her schools. Linda believes there are some cultural differences that she will never understand. According to Linda these cultural differences made her work with her African-American students a challenge.

#### Learning about other cultures

Linda recalls learning very little about ethnic cultures during her schooling. “We used to celebrate Christmas, Halloween and Easter.” Linda thought it was unfortunate her schools did not emphasize the learning of other cultures. She believed the reason behind this was due to the fact that her schools were not culturally diverse. “I guess it is always the assumption that because you are mainly one group, there is no need to learn about other cultures.” This lack of knowledge about other cultures would be tested during her student teaching, when she had to teach a 4<sup>th</sup> grade unit on the Civil War. Even though she knew some information about the war, she felt unprepared to teach about other cultural perspectives.

#### College experience with diversity

Linda’s experiences with diversity were also very limited even in college. The university had a reputation of being very diverse and Linda came expecting to learn a lot about other cultures. She remarked:

Back home I had heard about how there are so many International students here in college and it’s true, there's quite a number, especially Asian students. I had expected to see a lot of diversity within the campus. I thought there would be events all year through, classes that people have to take that talk about different cultures, and all such things. I was surprised that there is very little going on. I did not feel like I benefited from this diversity.

Linda felt that the promotion of diversity on campus was absent. She feels she would have benefited from classes that taught about diversity, multicultural issues, and working with ESL students as she progressed through her ECE program. Unfortunately, very few classes were offered that had a multicultural perspective.

I think we definitely need more classes on diversity and student differences. We are required to take one class, its called Education of Exceptional students. We do not have any class that talks about working with ESL students, Black students, or Hispanic students or the cultural differences that we should be aware of. I think we definitely need more of a background in that area.

Overall, Linda feels there is a big difference in the way the university professors see teaching and the way teachers in schools see it. “They [university faculty] are very idealistic, which makes it hard on us. We go to the schools with all these ideas we have been taught for three years and we are not able to use them.” According to Linda, she will not know whether ideas the many ideas she learned in college work until when she has her own classroom. Linda had come to the conclusion that her best training had been the experience she got in the classroom.

## **Jessica**

### **Introduction and Decision to Teach**

Jessica is a charming 20-year-old who has always had the knack for teaching people. She recalls that as a little girl she would go for tennis lessons and ballet lessons, then come teach her neighbors who couldn't afford the extra curricula activities. Jessica explains that her teaching desire came from wanting to help others, especially those who were less fortunate.

I find myself wanting to help people. This is my biggest weakness. I just cannot stand by and see anyone in need and not feel that I need to help. As a teacher, I want to help children learn. I guess to me whether it is in teaching people how to swim, play tennis, or teaching in the classroom, I derive pleasure just by seeing people able to do something and I was able to help. I feel teaching is my gift; it is what I love to do. Teaching people is what Jessica loves to do. Jessica could not recall wanting to become anything else but a classroom teacher. During her student teaching year, she taught first and third grade classes.

## **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

### Early classroom concerns and challenges

During the spring semester, Jessica taught in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom consisting of 19 students. 1 student was from Korea, 1 from India, 2 china, and 1 from Egypt. She had 3 Black students, 5 from higher-income backgrounds, and 5 from lower income backgrounds.

Jessica referred to her culturally diverse classroom experience as “challenging.” She had a diverse group of students consisting of ESL students, students with physical and mental disabilities, low-income students, and ethnically diverse students. Her initial concern was how to work with these students’ differences.

My first week I was very surprised. It was nothing like I had expected. The students were largely mixed. The class was comprised of students with physical disabilities, racial differences, and language differences. I do not recall any of my schools being like this, it really surprised me.

I had a little boy who came in straight from Korea that first week, straight off the airplane, and had never spoke English in his life. We could not find anyone else who spoke Korean in the school. We did not know how to communicate with him, even for the simple things like, what would you like for lunch. He was a sweet child, but he could not communicate with us.

I also had another ESL student who could read anything you gave him. But ask him the simplest question about what he had read and he could not tell you. He understood how to read, but did not understand what he was reading. I think his problem was processing the information.

I also had a girl in my class from India. She experienced a lot of difficulty in writing. She would spell out everything exactly the way it sounds. That is the way they did it in India. It was very difficult trying to get her to write things like we do. She would write a story and you would have no idea what she has said in it.

I had one little girl who was moderately deaf; she had to wear two hearing aides. Without them she could not hear. And I had to wear an auditory trainer. And then we had two African-American boys who I guessed had learning disabilities. One boy

already had an IEP; the other boy had a learning disability. They also tested him last year and found that he was ADHD. Then I had children from every economic status ranging from kids who were very poor and living in trailer parks, to kids whose parents were doctors and professors.

Jessica had imagined that students would be what she could recall of herself as a student: “Quiet, ready to learn, sit in their seats, and be of the same learning ability levels.” With these diverse students she found she had students ranging from those who were “very smart and got things very easily” to others who “needed a lot of help.”

#### Working with ESL students

In her culturally diverse 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Jessica had 4 ESL students all from different cultural backgrounds and different countries, and spoke different languages. Jessica found out that with these ESL students there were differences in their learning skills, socialization, and classroom behaviors.

It was interesting because with my student from Korea, I could never tell whether he was listening or whether he was talking to himself. I would be teaching something and he would be bent over his book reading out loudly, in his language. And I could not understand what he was saying, so that was difficult. The Indian girl was very shy. I was afraid of asking her a question, she would never respond. I am not sure whether she had problems understanding me or she was scared of speaking English. With these kids I had to be careful. I did not know where they were coming from, how to communicate with them, or how to make sure they understood what I was teaching. That was really difficult for me to deal with.

Jessica found this experience of working with ESL students initially challenging because she did not have “anyone who was an expert with ESL students in the school.” The only expert she could find was the ESL teacher who was helping the students learn English. “Even though she was a helpful resource person, she did not speak their languages.” To be able to teach her ESL students, Jessica realized she had to understand “where they were coming from, how they learned, and what they already knew.” Jessica contacted the local university International office who found someone who spoke Korean and was willing to come help with her Korean student.

She also contacted the parents of the other three students who were eager to help with their children's learning.

From that point on, teaching her ESL students became a "very enriching experience" for Jessica. She worked together with these students and their parents to try to bridge the gap between their culture and the new culture. She found this experience not only beneficial for her students, but for her too. Through talking with the parents and the students, she was able to learn about their different cultures. "In learning some aspects of their culture, I was able to cater for the learning needs of my ESL students."

#### Learning experiences in a culturally diverse classroom

Working in an economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom, Jessica found that the learning experiences of the students differed significantly. She had students who "knew so much," and she had others who were "behind in their learning." She had students from low-income families who were performing at a lower level. Then she had those who came from middle and high-income families who were very advanced in their learning. She explains this economic diversity:

. Last semester, I taught in a class where there were a 6 students from low income families who lived in the trailer parks, did not come from very cultured backgrounds, and were lacking in some skills, especially in reading and writing. I never really noticed the differences until this semester when I am now working with 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. What these students can do is mind blowing. Some of them are from very good families, their parents are working in the university, the parents are well educated, and the kids learn a lot from them. The difference in these students is like night and day. They have computers at home, they have parents who are helping them do some extraordinary projects, and the parents are very supportive.

There were other problems of working in an economically diverse class. Jessica found that teachers had "lower expectations of children who were from lower income backgrounds."

There is a group of kids that everyone talks about. They are better known as the group from hell. It was not until recently that I discovered that this group was also the trailer kids. It is really terrible how the trailer kids have their name attached to everything bad.

I have seen it with my own eyes that two children can be doing the same activity and yet the poor kid is the one sent to the office. Because of the location of this school, I feel that there is a tendency to look down on kids from the poor families. I feel like the teachers do not care whether they make it to college or not.

The school is located near the local university, hence, there's relatively large numbers of children from higher income families. Jessica felt that "the few students who are from low income-families are also the ones who are looked down upon, have less learning experience, and are tracked to the low math and reading classes". As a student teacher, Jessica has come to realize that the income level makes a difference in what students learn, and in how teachers perceive them. In one of her journal entries, she reflects on her perspective of teaching:

The Virginians sets the standards of what teachers are to teach. The politicians dictate what the children will learn. The teachers determine how the students learn. It is a case of the buggy carrying the horse. One thing that teachers do not consider is all the power they have. The teachers have the power to control the children's spirits. They are able to silence their voices. They are able to divide the class according to ability. They can develop or demolish a child's self esteem. They hold the key to children's educational success. A student's ability is created through teachers exposing their files and finding out where they come from: poor, rich, Black, White, ESL, or disabled. They are all judged by what they come with to the classroom, and in this process the poor suffer the most (March 10<sup>th</sup> reflection).

Jessica comes from a poor community, went to school with economically diverse students, and so to Jessica, "to be poor does not mean you are different than any other students." Her parents had also taught her "not to judge people based on their backgrounds." As a student teacher, Jessica feels disappointed to see how negative the teachers' perceptions about the students from low-income backgrounds are.

### Teaching approaches

Jessica's philosophy of teaching a diverse classroom is that all students learn at their own pace, and reach "the deep seas at their own pace.". Within this philosophy of teaching, Jessica believed "each student is capable of learning as long as they are exposed to it." Jessica

also believed that “all students are motivated to learn, and are capable of learning so long as they have a teacher who is committed.” With this in mind she tried to cater to individual students’ learning needs.

I try to teach to the middle of the class and I try to hit all of them and make sure they understand what I am saying first. And then I give out the activity. And then I have several that may have problems with the activity I go over and make sure the one-on-one is there, especially after I find out their weaknesses or their strengths for a particular activity. I bring them aside and we do it one-on-one. I find that with these kids when they have the one-on-one or the one-on-two they do better. They get it and I make sure they get it, then it becomes easier to move on.

Jessica feels that if students are exposed to the material and teachers take time to communicate with them individually, they will learn. To perceive if the students comprehend what she is teaching, Jessica used their faces. “Kids’ faces, very simple, I mean they are either there or they are not. If I can see it in their face I can tell if what I have been teaching them has made some sense to them.” Jessica was very personable with her students, communicated with them, and knew their strengths and weaknesses. Being able to communicate and understand her students helped her know when they “did not get it.”

I think one of my strengths in teaching is that I am very personal with the kids. I think I really connect to them. I try to analyze and think about and reflect on what makes a child tick. Like I really study about that a lot at night, and then I think of a way in which I can reach that child. I have noticed that slowly, one by one, I have kind of got this little thing I do and we always have this little connection, and I make sure that their needs are met.

Jessica sees herself as a facilitator of learning. Teachers, according to Jessica, serve as guides, mentors, and supporters of learning. A teacher’s job is to make the learning process interesting and to keep the motivation of individual student. To Jessica, teaching a diverse classroom is not about being in front of the class and teaching, “it is about knowing the needs of individual students and finding a way to make sure those learning needs are met.”

### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

Due to the cultural diversity in her classes, Jessica explained she was “able to learn more about cultural diversity during the one year of student teaching than she had ever in her lifetime.” In explaining her cultural exposures, she said “I had been very ignorant before about other people, and I never realized how fascinating it can be to learn how different people do things.” To learn about the cultural differences of her ESL students, Jessica asked their parents to come and talk to the class about their countries and their cultures.

By recognizing her international students, Jessica explained she was “able to make them feel a part of the classroom while at the same time make the other students realize they were not different.” She also noticed that the rest of the students appreciated learning about their international students.

During Black History month, Jessica incorporated some African-American Heroes in the stories and had students do projects about the life histories of some famous African-Americans. According to Jessica, “the students did not gain much from these projects and stories as much as they did from the parents’ presentations.”

My biggest complaint is that the children did not recognize Booker T. Washington for what he did. They recognized that he was Black, and I think that was the bad part about it. I think that is promoting not necessarily prejudice, because it’s not a prejudiced mood that we were presenting, but more like being stereotypical. It was not until about half way through the month of February that I realized the downside of this. I felt like we only learned about the Black people because it was Black History month. I do not think the students got the underlying meaning that it is not because they are Black and that is why they are famous.

Emphasizing learning about Black people Black history month implied “they were different.” Jessica pointed out “a multicultural perspective should be portrayed in the whole curriculum, and not just particular days or months.” However, her biggest challenge was how to “incorporate so many histories in a curriculum, mandated by the Standards of Learning.” According to Jessica, the Virginia Standards of Learning do not recognize the important work done by these people.

## Behavior management in a diverse classroom

Working in a diverse classroom, Jessica was faced not only with teaching a diverse group of students, but also dealing with diverse behaviors. Jessica pointed out individual students who were the “ones considered to be a behavioral problem” and stated “the anger and distractions these students were causing in the class were a result of the emotional and psychological problems they were going through in their homes.” In the following excerpt she talks about Leah, the “raging bull,” (one of the students living in the trailer parks) and how her home life may have been a cause of her behavior problems:

Leah had many emotional problems to deal with. She was a smart kid, but she wanted so much attention from my cooperating teacher and me. In the beginning when I started student teaching, she would come in every day with either a stomachache or a headache. Her mother has never been married before so they have a weekly boyfriend who comes in and lives in the house. And I picked up on it that she has been sexually abused. When this last boyfriend lived with them she would come in with blue marks on her, and I noticed one day she came in and I guess it was like my second week being here, and she just broke out, I mean she just fell down on the ground bawling. I have never seen a child cry as hard as she did. She ran to the bathroom, and I went after her to see what was wrong and she said that her mother broke up with that boyfriend, and she had kicked him out and he was threatening to kill them all, and had come to the trailer with a gun. Here I was trying to teach her this simple math and she is worried if her mother is going to be alive when she gets home! And I do not blame her you know. I do not blame her at all. It really breaks my heart when I know an eight-year-old is going through all this.

We call her a “raging bull.” She can be like a little flower and so precious and so sweet, then she can switch just like that on you, in the middle of a sentence. I mean she would literally take out any child in this room. She has a lot of behavior problems, but I understood what background she came from. She had gone through some tough years, tougher than I have had to face in my 20 years. I tried to show her respect, even when

she would do terrible, terrible things in class. I did not want to disrespect her. I knew how much she needed an adult to show her that, “hey I care.”

Jessica’s concern for her students is seen in how she handled this situation. After learning about the problems that Leah had gone through, Jessica felt the need to give her a “second chance” and let her know “someone cared.” Instead of punishing Leah for her bad behavior, Jessica recognized that Leah needed a safe place to be and people she could trust.

Nick, the “trouble maker,” was one of Jessica’s African-American students whose behavior problems was also a result of his home life:

I have another student in my class, whose middle name is trouble. He is very determined and independent. He has been suspended more times than I can count. Nick comes from a broken home, it’s more than just a divorced family, more of a divorced and abused home, and a lot of things. His mother works one job; he has four other brothers and sisters, and she lives by herself. It is tough for him and his family. I was told he is a very disturbed child, and I should expect a lot of behavior problems with him. The first two weeks of teaching, I was scared to death of this boy everyone had told me about. At first I tried to be all goody-goody with him like I do with the other kids, really friendly, and that did not cut it with him. He took me down the first day. After several attempts I realized I could either allow him to ruin my student teaching, or I could try to work things out with him. It came to the point where I had to learn to speak his Lingo. I got to his level.

Nick can single-handedly ruin my day, but instead, he makes it. He makes it so much fun because he is the type of child whom you want to help, you want to get him out of his family and get him into this good home. Underneath he is such a good kid. And when I think of all those things that he is labeled and all those discussions about him by other teachers . He just needs a chance. He needs someone he can relate to, someone who understands him.

To communicate with Nick, Jessica said she learned to speak his “Lingo,” come to his level, and treat him with respect. Because she was able to communicate with Nick, she did not have discipline problems with him, as had been expected. Jessica believes that in dealing with

problems, you have to “deal with each child individually, communicate with them, and find out what was causing the behavior problems.” She felt teachers make quick judgments about particular students without giving themselves a chance to know the students. Jessica believes “deep down, there is something good about each student.” She further illustrates this:

We have a new student who joined my class. He is a very quiet boy who wants to please my cooperating teacher and me. He is one of the sweetest, kindest boys I have in my class. One of my colleagues informed me that Thomas had moved from another county. When I told her about this sweet child, she said it was hard to believe I was talking about the same Thomas she knew. She went on to tell me about his notorious and outrageous behavior, how he had no self-control, and how his emotional problems and his home life were total and complete chaos. The teachers in the former school he was in had a celebration party after Thomas and his brother moved.

After listening to all this, Jessica did not believe they were talking about the same student. She decided to go look at his file. According to the file, Thomas had been through more things in his eight years “than most of us can imagine in a lifetime.”

Now here he is coming to school and the teachers do not give him a break; they just keep nagging him. I always thought that school was a place where children should be free of worry. Now I have come to sadly realize that for those kids who have not had it easy in their lives, schools become an extension of their problems. It is unfortunate no one bothers to find out what these kids have gone through before being so judgmental.

To deal with behavior problems, Jessica pointed out “she tried to see more of the students than just the behavior.” She is able to recognize that class misbehaviors are caused by other problems the students may be going through in their lives. Jessica is keen to learn about her students. She looks for ways to connect with them, show them respect, and make them feel safe in the school. To emphasize what she meant by “school safety” Jessica commented “school is supposed to be safe for all children, it is my job to make my students feel welcome here.”

#### Parental support

Parent participation was seen by a majority of the student teachers as a major part of teaching success. In talking about communication and support from her culturally diverse

parents, Jessica commented “she had more support from her ESL parents than with all her other parents,” because the “ESL students needed extra help at home and their parents were the only people who understood their languages.” The concern and interest the ESL parents showed in the education of their children impressed Jessica.

The ESL parents were very supportive, which was surprising I think. One of my biggest surprises about them was how much they appreciated whatever I did for their kids.

They all were “oh yes, we thank you so much, you are wonderful.” They really appreciated everything that I could do for them.

Now there are kids in my class from low-income parents. I did not get to meet their parents. I called several times, called their homes after school to let them know what was going on, but I never got to meet them. I cannot say they did not care. I am sure they cared as much as they could, but it was just that maybe they had another job, maybe they just had other responsibilities so they could not make it.

Jessica commented that the school participation from her poor and other diverse students’ parents was low. However, she went on to say “these parents had to take care of their basic needs and may not have had the time to come to school.” During her second semester of -time teaching, Jessica took it upon herself to call up parents and tell them “how good their kids were behaving in the class.” Doing this changed some of the perceptions of her diverse parents.

To call a parent who has always had a teacher call and complain about the negative things that their child is doing, I think it completely changed their outlook on things. I had a couple of parents who wanted my phone number so they could call me at home.

Several times parents called during school hours and wanted to talk to me. I do not know if it was because of my ideas, or if it was because they felt comfortable with me. I think they appreciated my calls.

Jessica felt she was able to open communication with the parents due to her non-threatening approach. Even though she did not get opportunities to meet with all the parents, through the phone conversations she found “they were all concerned and supportive of their

children's education." According to Jessica, "all parents care about the learning of their children, it all comes down to how teachers communicate with them."

### **Jessica's Journey of Growth and Reflection**

In summing up her overall one-year student teaching experience, Jessica feels that it has been "a great success." She motivated herself a long time ago to work with children, so this experience has not only been very enjoyable, but has also made her believe more in herself and her future as an educator. She sees her talent as a teacher "is being able to connect with students." Jessica feels she is in the right profession. Teaching, according to her, is her calling and she has no regrets about wanting to become a teacher.

I have not felt like I do not want to be in the classroom anymore. I have walked away being very stressed, I have walked away having a headache, I have walked away thinking I just want to be alone. But I have never walked away thinking I do not want to teach anymore. I have never walked away with the feeling like everything went wrong today.

During her one-year field experience, Jessica's most valuable experience was in learning that teaching is not about just being in the classroom and teaching, but was also about "listening to the students and knowing their learning needs." She said:

I enjoy listening to the kids. I have come to know my kids this way. The day I feel like I have gone an entire day or an entire week or an entire month or an entire year and not listened to the children, not listened to what they liked, what they did not like, and not listen to their opinions, I am out.

Jessica is passionate about teaching and working with children. However, she feels that when it comes to working with diverse children she needs "more preparation before she can feel prepared to work in a fully diverse class."

There is no child I think I cannot work with. Give me any class, and I can grow with them. I can grow to love every one of them. However, there is also more to teaching than just loving children, and when you are working with a diverse class, you have a lot to deal with. You need better preparation than we got here. I would need to learn more

about cultural diversity, and how to teach multicultural education. I would hate to feel like I am burned out working with diverse children, and, therefore, I feel like I need more experience and definitely more preparation and learning about cultures.

Jessica's concerns about her lack of preparation to work with diverse children makes her feel she may not be able to handle a culturally diverse class. However, she also recognizes that she has a rare gift of connecting with all students.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

"Little to none," is how Jessica described her exposure to ethnic diversity. Living in an all-White neighborhood, the differences she noticed were "the socio-economic differences." Jessica comes from a small Southwest Virginia community, which she describes as small, rural, and poor.

Jessica's parents and her grandparents were her biggest influence. In describing her parents, Jessica sees them as having served as role models by "being open and respectable to everyone."

My parents served as my role models; they taught me to be respectful of other people's differences and to be tolerant of their differences and yet it was not something they sat down and said. It was just the aspect and the belief that you have to respect everyone whether they have different ethnicity or different religions or anything. Just respect them as people. Even though we might have had more money or more opportunities than other people in that area, I never once looked down on them because they lived in a trailer or they lived in a smaller house. I did not, I never thought like that.

Jessica emphasizes that "she never looked down upon people" to explain how she perceived her poor rural community. Reflecting on her teaching placements she commented, "it's very disappointing to see how people around here look down upon poor kids."

Growing up in a small rural community, she found people were more "conservative" and "closed" towards outsiders, especially towards different cultures:

I think that once you grow up in a rural community, you tend to become very conservative. I can tell my family is not open to diversity. I do not see them really concerned with other people outside our community, or what's going on around the world. I see them as being closed. They have grown up in this small place where everyone is the same and they have known each other all their lives. I do not mean they are prejudiced or anything; I mean that they do not know much about other cultures. You do not hear my parents talking against other people you just do not hear them talking about other cultures at all.

Due to this lack of cultural exposure, Jessica was initially concerned about going to teach in a diverse classroom, especially teaching ESL students. She felt she did not know how to work with them, she did not know their cultures, and was afraid she might say something that may end up offending some of her students. It was this inexperience with cultural diversity that inspired her to learn more about the cultural backgrounds of her students, especially her ESL students.

#### Lessons from school

Jessica went to White homogenous schools close to home. Her schools were, however, economically diverse. In her school almost everyone was White. In her graduating class she could not recall any ethnic minority students.

As far as income is concerned, it was pretty diverse. We had a lot of low-income families and several middle-income and then a few high-income. And as far as ethnicity is concerned, there was not much at all. I think I had no people of other ethnicities in my graduating class. I think there was one African-American two years below me and maybe one, a year above me, but other than that, we had more low-income kids than anything. When I say low, I mean real low-income.

In terms of learning about other cultures, Jessica could not recall learning about other cultures during her schooling. She feels her community and her schools lived in their own enclaves and ignored everything else happening outside. She explains this shielded life:

We live in this little place where we expected everyone to be the same. We used to have Halloween parties, Christmas parties, Easter bunnies and egg hunts, and there was

no fuss about it. I think since the schools knew everyone, their families, and they went to the same churches, same shopping center, they simply assumed we all had the same beliefs. Since no parents complained about it, I guess they just assumed it was okay.

### Lessons from college and training

Coming to college, Jessica was surprised to find extensive differences in the college students. She was surprised at the freedom of expression in how students dressed and spoke. Having been brought up in a conservative culture, it took her time to get used to life on campus. For the first time in her life, she was taking classes with Black, Asian, Latino, and other European students. Jessica especially found college a very enriching environment due to the population of the International students.

It's like there is this big International group of students, then there is a small African-American group, and then the rest are White Americans. I feel like the International students are the most. I mean you see them everywhere. What's really cool is you hear them talking in their languages, and it just makes the campus look very diverse. I remember taking a class with a student from Italy and to me it was amazing to hear how different life is in Italy. I think when you live here you tend to assume the world is the same.

Based on the diversity of the university, Jessica pointed out that more should be done to educate the college students about diversity. However, even with the large group of different cultures on campus, she feels she did not gain much from this diversity. Going into the classroom and working with ESL and ethnic students, she feels it would have been to her benefit if she had had opportunities to learn about cultural diversity during her training.

## **Mary**

### **Introduction and Decision to Teach**

Mary, a 21-year European-American, described herself as the kind of person who "worries and get stressed about everything and wants everything to be organized all the time." It took her time to adjust to the classroom environment where everything is not always organized.

Mary's desire to teach was inspired by the joy she derives from being around children and working with them. "It is something that I always wanted to do". Mary had worked with children before in daycare environments and summer programs. During her student teaching year, Mary taught Kindergarten and first grade.

### **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

#### Classroom diversity: ESL children

The elementary school in which Mary was placed for student teaching experience was near the local university. There is a relatively larger number of ESL, ethnic minorities, middle class, and poor students in this school. During the fall semester, Mary found herself working with several children from low-income families, and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Out of 18 First graders, 6 were from poor families, 4 were ESL, 3 were from higher income levels, 3 Black students and 5 from middle class homes. Her Kindergarten also was socially, economically and culturally diverse. Out of 16 students, Mary had 4 from lower income brackets, 4 who were ESL, 6 from middle income backgrounds, 1 was Filipino, and 1 Black student.

According to Mary, working with the poor children was "an eye opener." It gave her "an appreciation for her own life, and how she was raised." Working with low-income children and ESL children comes with problems and concerns that Mary felt the average teacher working with mainstream children does not have to deal with. With her ESL 1<sup>st</sup> grade students, the problems were with their language, social skills, and comprehension. She explains:

I had one little girl from China and she could read anything you gave her. I mean she was just a whiz at reading, but then if you asked her a comprehension question, she would have no idea what it meant, but yet she could read every single word.

I had another little girl from Egypt. Reading was extremely hard for her. I do not know why she just could not catch on like the other students. She was just learning English and so she could not read many words. It was more of a kindergarten level.

I had a little boy from China. When he first came here, he had problems with social skills. He is very smart; I mean he is doing math on a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, multiplication, division, but as far as social skills are concerned he is definitely at kindergarten level.

I also had a little girl and a little boy who are of African descent. They could read more than the other ESL kids, but behavior wise, they were very destructive.

Mary felt it was challenging to work with these ESL students for they all came from different cultures. To help them, she felt she had to “identify with them in order to understand their prior experiences, which was a hard thing to do.”

It was hard because you want to help, but you do not know how. You do not know their culture, their experiences, and I did not have experience of working with ESL children before. You do not know whether it is a language problem, or whether it is fear that they are in a new country. So, it becomes difficult because you have to try different ways to approach them and it is not always easy.

#### Cultural diversity: LES children

Mary was not only working with ESL students, but also with children from low socio-economic (LES) backgrounds. She pointed out that “some of the real life circumstances of poor students were really sad and your heart really goes out to those kids and their families.” It was the first time Mary was exposed to poor children and some of their home life situations. She expressed:

I had six or seven of them living in a trailer park, and it was kind of sad to see some of them. One or two of them would come to school really dirty. Dirt is on their hands, on their face so that was really kind of sad to see. And you know sometimes there would be behavior problems and maybe it is something going on at home, or something that is on their mind.

Mary continues to describes one of those “sad” situations:

I had this one little boy and almost every afternoon in the fall his grandpa would take him hunting and he would carry his own gun and they would shoot deer and ducks and everything. One day he came into the class with his eye extremely red, all puffy and actually on the White part it was like some of the piece had been taken out. And he was at school with no bandage, and my cooperating teacher sent him up to the office. They called home and got hold of his mom, they told her about it and she was like “oh its fine, it’s fine.” He needed to see a doctor. His eye was puffy and blood shot; it was awful to

look at. They had put a bandage on it and it was until the next day that I apparently found out that when he got home the mother just ripped the bandage off. The next day when he came to school, the teacher wanted to put a bandage back on, but he yelled and cried and did not want a bandage for fear of his mom.

Seeing one of students in such a condition and the attitude of the mother made Mary feel that parents of poor children were “not responsible enough about their children’s welfare.” She went on to express: “how can one concentrate on teaching, at the same time worry whether a child’s eye is going to be okay?”

Mary felt being in a class with children from poor families was a challenge, since they were faced with many problems such as “coming to school hungry, sick, dirty, or with family problems”. She commented that when it came to poor children, “their parents did not care about their welfare and they sent them to schools for the teachers to deal with these problems.”

Mary also pointed out that she felt her teaching was not very effective because she had to attend to other problems going on in the classroom. To avoid feeling burned out, she learned to go each day with a new attitude and start all over again. She also learned not to carry her students’ problems home with her. Mary felt frustrated. She “wanted so much to help these children, but did not know how.”

It’s easy to get buried under as one tries to handle all these problems. In the beginning I would come home and I would cry and feel hopeless because one of the kids had a bad day and a bad attitude and there was nothing I could do about it. I would have loved to take all of them home with me. They are so young, and yet, already facing many problems. My cooperating teacher told me that I needed to stop carrying my students’ problems home with me, otherwise I would get burned out very fast trying to carry all these problems around. I now take each day as it comes.

Mary commented that she had come to the realization that as a student teacher, there was not much she could do to solve some of the problems her students were facing. According to Mary, she had to look beyond these problems in order to concentrate on her student teaching.

## Classroom management

Working with children from lower grade levels, Mary felt there were less behavior problems to deal with, especially in Kindergarten. She had also found that whatever behavioral problems they had were manageable because the children were still very young and were willing to listen.

In 1<sup>st</sup> grade, she recalled two students who were “difficult to deal with.” One of these students was a girl (of African descent), whom she described as being “very disruptive, rude, and mean to the other children.” Mary felt the reason why the girl behaved in a disruptive manner was because she was older than the rest of the students. “Even though mentally she was progressing, like she could read and write, her behaviors were definitely not for 1<sup>st</sup> grade.” To deal with this problem, Mary explained that she would take her aside and try talking to her:

We often had to take her out of things like circle time. I would be reading a book and she would be all over the place, just being disruptive to everyone. I think she had some emotional problems, but this was the first semester of school, and we did not know much about her background. All we knew was that she was in a foster home, but I did not know how long she had lived there, or for what reasons. She was a difficult child to work with.

Even though Mary did not know about the student’s background, she felt certain that her behavior problems stemmed from her background.

Mary had also found out that “some of her students had never been to a social setting before such as daycare, or preschool.” They were still learning “sharing, cooperative skills, and the daily classroom procedures.” Several of her first grade students were still having difficulties in writing and lacked interest in writing activities. She explains this with the example of Matt, her African-American student:

Matt was one of those kids who did not want to do any class work. I felt like he could do it, but he was sometimes just holding back. Like when it came to writing practices, he would refuse to write anything. Try as much as we could, if he did not feel like writing, he would not do it. There was nothing we could do. It is almost like he knew the next day that “well I am just not going to write and they are just going to let me,”

you know what I mean? So, since he knew we could not force him to do it, each day he would flatly refuse to write.

According to Mary, they could not force Matt to learn unless he was willing to. She explained that if they were to try forcing him, he would become even more adamant about not writing. She recalls she had tried using force and what he wrote over and over again was “I do not feel like writing.” Mary was at a loss as to what to do in this situation. She thought he was having learning problems and needed special attention from an aide or a special education teacher.

#### Parental support in a diverse classroom

One of Mary’s concerns of working in a diverse classroom was the lack of support from parents. Mary was concerned that “parents did not show up for conferences, for field trips, for school-related activities, or to volunteer in the classroom.” She further explains:

There is little support from the parents here; I must say that. I do not see many coming in and talking with the teacher, and even when my cooperating teacher called the parents, they still do not bother to come in. The little support I have seen (like once a week a parent comes in and wants to help) are from some of the parents who work in the university, other than them, there has not been much involvement.

Mary was surprised to see little support from parents, especially when the children were still very new to the school. The teachers needed volunteers and had requested parents to come and volunteer, and yet very few showed up. She had noticed that the parents who used to come for related learning activities were mainly parents who were working in the local university. They tended to be “very involved with their children’s learning,” and according to her, these parents were mainly the “middle class parents.”

Mary believes learning should be a partnership, where “the parents, the teachers, and the students work together towards the same learning goals.” Mary saw this partnership as involving the teachers who worked with the children in school, and the parents who reinforced learning at home. This partnership, according to Mary, was lacking.

### Teaching approaches in a culturally diverse classroom

According to Mary, teaching of young children requires interesting activities to keep them interested, engaged, and motivated. She saw Kindergarten and first grade levels as “delicate and important stages” where children are learning new things and improving on what they already know.

This stage requires a teacher to constantly introduce new learning activities to keep students engaged. I still have problems coming up with new activities all the time. I am not a very flexible person. I have always been very organized, I guess I kind of expect things to work out as I plan them. When something does not work, I find myself having a difficult time trying to switch from one activity to the next.

Some of the teaching methods that Mary quoted as utilizing in her teaching were “hands-on experiences, manipulative skills, visual aids, kinesthetic, and individualized teaching.” She also explained that she liked the idea of using the whole language approach and involving her students in the writing process.

Mary also commented that “a child had to be interested in learning, otherwise it did not matter what strategies a teacher used; none of them worked unless the child is motivated to learn.” She gave an example of Matt and said, “he has to have the right frame of mind, he has to be interested. If a student is not interested there is nothing a teacher can do.”

In talking about the learning experiences of her diverse students, Mary commented that students who had little exposure to learning materials such as books and manipulative activities had a more difficult time relating to the learning activities she presented:

Especially in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, you can tell those kids whose parents read for them at home, who spend time with them like doing learning activities, they are interested in learning. Others do not want to do anything, and if you ask them what their favorite thing is when they are at home, they say watching TV. I think they spend too much time watching TV. When they come to the class, they are bored with learning, because they probably never did much of it before.

Mary believed that each child needs some learning preparation either through daycare, home schooling, preschool, or the Head Start program. She had noticed “students who had had

early learning exposures were not only performing much better in her class, they were also better in everything else - social skills, cooperative skills, and technology skills.”

#### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

With regards to multicultural education and addressing cultural diversity, Mary commented that she did not notice much being done in her school to encourage multiculturalism. Her ESL parents were not involved in classroom activities that promoted multiculturalism, and the teachers did not teach about other cultures. She explained that “everything was left for the International Week, when the teachers invited some parents to come and talk about their cultures.”

Asked if she had tried to address multiculturalism and diversity in her teaching, she explained “no I did not do it. I had to follow the guidelines of my cooperating teacher, apart from the International Week when we had a chance to look at cultures, we did not do it.”

#### **Mary’s Journey of Growth and Reflection**

Mary felt that she had gained a lot more confidence within herself by the end of the year. This confidence is a result of her field experience and having gained a better understanding of what to expect in the teaching profession. Mary believes the best experience was actually being in the classroom and being exposed to all the things going on in the real classroom. She was amazed at all the things teachers have to deal with, especially when it came to diverse children.

If you were to ask me, if I was very open to diversity and experienced with it, I would have told you yes due to my family background. However, now I have learned that diversity is not about just different races or knowing people from different countries. It is about dealing with many cultural differences such as race, behaviors, language, family structure, and family economic status. I have now come to understand that all these differences in backgrounds play a role in how children learn.

Mary commented that what she felt she lacked most was the preparation to work with ESL students, because of the language and cultural differences.

It is difficult to work with kids from other cultures. There is the language difference, the cultural differences, and even simple things like how they read, or comprehend things. I

definitely need more knowledge to work with ESL students. I still feel like when it came to ESL students, there was nothing I could do to aid their learning process. It's interesting because I come from a diverse family, we have lots of relatives who were born from other countries . . . but this was different, this was very different.

She also comments about working with poor children:

I have never seen a school with as many poor children. I guess I am comparing it with where I come from. Children in this county are poor, their parents are not very concerned, and it is difficult to work with kids who have so many problems. It's like you feel they are there, they are in the class with you, but their minds are elsewhere. You know what I mean? It's not easy to get them actively engaged and involved. In the end you feel like you are not effective as a teacher.

The field experience has been an "eye opener" for Mary. She knows that she needs more training when it comes to working with culturally diverse children. She also feels that even though she is better prepared to work in a diverse classroom, she may not yet be effective enough. "It comes with experience, I still lack teaching experience, so I am not sure I would be very effective in a highly diverse environment."

### **Life Influences and Experience with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

Mary lives in the suburbs of Richmond where she found diversity lacking, as compared to New York where they had lived before. Mary's upbringing was in a culturally diverse environment. Her uncle's twelve children brought diversity richness within their family. "He adopted several Black, Vietnamese, Brazilian, and Asian children." Growing up in this racial representation was, according to Mary, "unique and very normal" and at the same time "difficult." She explains:

I remember when I was growing up and one of my friends would make a comment like "you have Black cousins" or "you have Vietnamese cousins." To me it was no big deal, but my friends would make it sound like it was bad or something. And this would affect me and I would go home and ask my parents why my friends think it is bad to have

Black or Vietnamese cousins. My parents would explain to me that people find it strange because we are White, but they would also make me understand that the color of my skin did not matter. You treat everybody equal; it doesn't make you better because you are White. So culture talk was brought up in those ways. I recall this being a confusing time for me, I had played with my uncle's children, I considered them a part of me, but when we started schooling, I guess that's when we came to the realization that we were different.

It was not always easy learning to live with the realization from one's peers that your family is different. However, according to Mary, it was even harder for her Black cousins because they had to deal with being Black, but having White parents.

I remember it being talked about at home that my cousins were having trouble in school because their friends would make fun of them especially as they grew older. It was difficult for them to fit in with their Black friends because they were considered different. It was okay when they were younger, but in high school, where you are trying to fit in with your friends and you have White parents, it seems strange to people. I remember it being difficult for my uncle and the kids.

### Lessons from school

The large elementary school where Mary underwent her early schooling was predominantly White. She could only recall two Black students in her graduation class and one Chinese student. She also recalls the celebration of special events such as Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and St. Patrick's day. Coming into student teach, Mary was surprised to find that schools do not celebrate these special events anymore.

Other than the celebration of special events, Mary could not recall whether the teachers emphasized multiculturalism.

Mary experienced more diverse populations, especially Korean students, in middle school and high school. She recalls her high school being a very college-oriented school. "Students and the classes were separated in terms of the college preps and the mechanic type." The attitude was "college preps were headed to college while those in technical classes were the type of people who were not going anywhere."

We were more or less tracked according to those who were being prepared to go to college and those who were not. For those headed to college, we used to take college preparation courses. I recall the high school being very separated in this way. I think, also, the kids in my classes, the college preps, were more from high-income families. In my school we had a large number of high-income students and those are the ones who were taking all those pre-college classes. Due to this tracking, I recall we used to look at those who were like working on cars and say they will never make it anywhere.

These students were, a lot of times, the few Black students and the kids from poor families.

Mary found that students were separated depending on whether they were “college prep or the mechanic type.” She also found the Korean students to be very “culture conscious” in that they used to only “hang together.” Mary, like several other preservice teachers, felt that even though diversity existed in high school and middle school, it was not recognized or celebrated.

#### Multicultural curriculum

Multicultural education and diversity issues in high school involved doing projects on particular countries and people.

We would do some research and give a class presentation. Each student would make a presentation. I felt, even though I learned about countries like Greece, and about the Native American people, I did not get a deep understanding of either the history of the Greek civilization or the history of the Native Americans. I think it would have been neat to do the projects, and also get very involved, have presentations, discussions, and visits to historical museums. I think this would have been more meaningful. When you are doing a project for the grade, you are only interested in the grade, and not anything else. The multicultural education was very superficial and did not give us a good understanding of other cultures.

She was also disappointed about having a large number of Korean students, yet not learn anything about them.

I see it now in my school we have International students and during International day we learn about them and we get someone to come and give a talk. I did not see this

happening in our school. We had many Korean students, but we never learned anything about them. I also recall they kind of used to separate themselves and keep to themselves. So there was no chance of learning about their cultures because you do not get to talk much with them.

In terms of experiencing diversity-talking to children from diverse cultures in her schools and learning about diverse cultures-Mary feels that she did not get a good cultural diversity experience.

### Diversity in college

Mary found college to be very diverse with Black, White, and international students. She recalls being taught some classes by international graduate students and expressed:

The Chinese graduate student, who taught one of my biology classes, was really difficult to understand, like the way they talk like it is so hard in a lecture. You really had to strain to listen and to understand what he was saying. So that was kind of hard for us. And then I had you [the interviewer] for my Professional Development class. So, I recall you and this Chinese student as the only two different students that I got to know as members of international cultures. I also knew several professors who were from international cultures, I think. But I recall maybe being taught one or two classes by any of them.

Mary also pointed out the fact that diversity in the university was limited to certain colleges and department. “We only had one African-American student in my program. But I had friends who were in other colleges like Engineering and Chemistry and they had a lots of students from different cultures.”

With regards to taking college classes that reflected a multicultural perspective, Mary recalls taking one Social Studies class that emphasized working with diverse students.

I enjoyed the social studies class. I really liked the professor. He was very experienced and well traveled. But I feel the course would have been more practical and relevant had we been given some real life issues. We should have had international students come and talk to us about their experiences. We should have had someone talk to us

about how to work with diverse children, especially ESL students, we should have watched videos and looked at books that dealt with real life cultural diversity issues . . .

Mary also recalled taking a class on children with learning disabilities that she felt did not help her in terms of working with students with disabilities because they concentrated on learning the laws and issues surrounding inclusion. “It’s good to learn about the Laws, but when I am working with these kids, Laws will not help me figure out what to do in cases of emergencies!” Overall, Mary thought that the majority of her classes lacked meaningful and practical ways to teach students in the public schools setting.

## **Michelle**

### **Teacher Background and Decision to Teach**

Michelle is a 22 year old African-American who started off her undergraduate degree as a mass communication major planning to become a journalist. During her sophomore year, she decided to change to the Early Childhood Education major even though “teaching was not her first love.”

Unlike several of the preservice teachers interviewed, Michelle had not had any teaching experiences before other than being in the classroom as a student. Michelle has a natural caring personality for students who are going through difficult times. To Michelle, “teaching is a commitment not only teach, but be a role model, and a good influence to the students.” During her student teaching year she taught third and fifth grades classes.

### **Inside a Culturally Diverse Classroom**

#### Classroom diversity

Michelle’s students were linguistically, economically, academically, and ethnically diverse. In her fifth grade class, she had 5 special education students, 3 African-American students, 4 Asian students, and a 6 students from lower-income families 6 from middle-class families, 1 Native-American. Michelle saw the students as “very separated according to their different groups.” Once she took over teaching, she explained that the first thing she did was help the students learn how to get along with each other.

The 5<sup>th</sup> grade class was very diverse and very separated. The special education kids always hanged out together, the middle class kids always hanged out together, the kids who were in more advanced levels hanged out together, kids from low social economic status hanged out together, everybody was just kind of sitting in their own little groups. As the time went along, they started learning how to get along and get to work together. I had gone in with the attitude that, even though these kids are different, they are all the same. I felt they needed a teacher who was going to be there for them, listen to them, and avail to what each kid needed. I think they saw that as being a role model. Well, if the teacher can be with this person, she can be with me. From that point, they started learning how to get along.

By showing the students she was going to treat them the same whether gifted, poor, of color, or rich, she modeled to the students that it was possible for them to get along.

Michelle's third grade class was also culturally diverse with 4 ESL students, 1 Bi-racial student, 1 Hispanic student, 8 students from lower income, and 5 from middle to higher income families. She explains this diversity:

We had four Chinese students, I think they are all from China, I had one Native American student, and one bi-racial child and most of that class was in the low socio-economic bracket. A lot of the kids were poor. My cooperative teacher and I were talking about this competition going on in the school, where the kids who brought in the most canned juice could win a price for their classroom. And we thought of how unfair that was for a lot of other kids, especially the poor kids who may not have the money to give away food.

Working with ESL students was a new experience for Michelle. She was initially worried she would not know how to work with them, they would not understand her, and she might not understand them. However, she was surprised that all her ESL students spoke fluent English for they had been in that school since Kindergarten.

Working with a relatively larger number of poor students surprised Michelle. According to her, "it appeared the students were grouped according to ability. And a lot of times the poor

children were the ones in the lower classes.” In both her student teaching placements, Michelle worked with the “low level Math and Language Arts groups.”

I do not know why, but it seems like both semesters I ended up teaching the low- ability kids. These were kids who were so low they hardly knew how to do addition or read. I saw myself in these kids. I had a difficult time understanding concepts when I was their age and so I could relate to what they were going through.

Michelle could relate to what her students were going through, and the learning difficulties they were having. She felt was able to reach out to them and teach them, as she would have wanted her teacher to teach her.

#### Learning experiences in a diverse classroom

One of the problems that Michelle was faced with was how to make the content relevant to all her students. Being in a diverse classroom, she found there were things that were abstract to her students. She explains:

I think the biggest problem that we do have in our class, is that the kids have not had the experiences with some things in order to be able to do particular projects. Some kids had never used computers before, and they are learning how to use one. We can be working on something and the kids will come to me and say, I do not know how to do this, I do not know what to write. It is a constant thing of I do not know, I do not know. I have a lot of that going on. I have few students who, when they want to avoid work, will go to the bathroom, will talk to their friends, will do anything just to avoid the work simply because they do not want to deal with it, especially if it is a new thing they have never learnt before.

Michelle felt she understood where the students were coming from, “it is not that they do not want to do the work, it is because they do not know how.” Michelle saw her job as a teacher was to look for “learning options” that would work well with all the students:

I try to use other things such as going into the library and getting books that they can use for a project instead of using the computer. I put myself in their shoes and if I had had to use a computer when I was in elementary school, I would not have known how. I had not been exposed to it. I feel sometimes teachers just punish kids for no reason. They

want them to do something, even when they have no clue how to do it. It should be every teacher's job to find out if the kids understand what they are asking them to do. And if you are working with children who have not had the kind of experiences that you have had, one should not take it for granted. I put myself in their situation, to try to see things as they see them.

In her classes, Michelle believed that each child is capable of learning. She believed "each child needs the extra push to be able to relate to the learning materials." Michelle emphasized that in a diverse classroom, "one almost has to develop twenty-two lesson plans for individual students." Since the students come in with varying learning styles, she did not believe that one approach or one lesson plan was enough to cater for all their learning needs. In preparing her lessons, Michelle emphasized that she thinks of the materials and her students and how each student would relate to what she was teaching.

#### Teaching approaches

Besides thinking of different ways to teach her students, Michelle also tries to be a flexible teacher. She sees herself as a teacher who is "willing to learn from her mistakes with the hope of making it better next time." She feels the need to give herself a chance to find out what works well for her and what does not. Due to her flexibility, she is not afraid to explore new ideas ways of doing things. She explains her teaching approaches:

With my special ed. group, I try to come up with activities I know they will enjoy. I try to go to the library and get them books that they will enjoy reading. When I see they are getting off task, instead of yelling at them I give them something else to do that will hold their interest.

She went on to explain:

Giving a child a label is telling them they have limits. I do not think any kids have limits. Kids have different experiences, but I think each and every child can reach for the sky if given the wings. I try to give them wings hoping they will learn how to fly.

Michelle strongly believes that a teacher has to find strategies to reach individual students, instead of labeling them. She went on to emphasize this with "Michael," one of her African-American special education students:

Teachers believed Michael could not read. So they used to give him simple books to read. But with me, Michael was totally a different child. I recall when I started working with him, I went to the library and I got Role of Thunder Hear My Cry for him to read, and he said he could not read it. I told him I would read for him from the beginning and he could take it home and continue to read some more. So I started reading the book for him, and he was really into it. He liked the language. Then we got into another book called Mississippi River and he read that one on his own. He enjoyed books where the language was not so complicated for him. He enjoyed books that he could relate to with stories that were interesting to him. So he did not have a problem with reading. Yet, they kept saying he had problems with reading, but I did not see this. He read these books, and he took the test and passed the test. It was just that the material he had been given to read, he just was not interested in it.

According to Michelle, Michael did not need a label. She explained that “teachers expected students to read the same reading materials regardless of whether it bored them or not, and if they can’t read the book, then they are labeled learning disabled.” Her teaching philosophy was that each child learned differently and it was up to her to make sure that each individual child’s learning needs are met. By giving Michael books that were interesting to him, she found he was able to read and enjoy the books.

#### Teaching from a multicultural perspective

In explaining her perspective about multicultural education, Michelle was concerned that the students were not learning much about cultural diversity in the curriculum. She was also concerned that the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL’s) covered very little about the cultural representations of the American people. “You could go through a whole book and not find anything that is culturally related apart from the Civil War, which is the only time that Black people are presented.” She went on to explain:

The SOL’s really do not cover much cultural diversity. They do not get into it. The only time that we really talk about something that is SOL’s related to other culture is when they talk about slaves. You know slavery has contributed a lot into this society as we know it now, but I do not want to talk about my people as nothing but as slaves. That is

why I like to keep off talking about slavery, because some of the kids might think Black people are not better in anything other than being slaves. They may lose respect for me, and for all the other Black children in the classroom.

Michelle pointed out to the slavery experience in America and commented that the significance of that experience might be difficult to comprehend especially for young children. She gave an example of how she had tried to teach about women and their contributions to American history, and some of her students commented that “women were okay staying at home and being homemakers.” This experience made her feel adamant that her students were not ready and did not have the maturity to appreciate some of the “sensitive issues in the American history.”

Michelle felt that for a teacher to teach about the African-American experience, one has not only to be prepared but be aware of the sensitive issues that may not be appropriate to discuss with young children. Overall, Michelle commented she was disappointed with the curriculum because, “very little attention was being paid to cultural diversity other than during International week, and Black History month.”

#### Dealing with behavior problems

The fifth grade class that Michelle was teaching was known as the “backtrack class” by everyone in the school. This class had all the special education and behavioral problem students tracked together. When Michelle started her student teaching, she found that what she had been told about the class was “exaggerated.” She explains:

I had the class that was popularly known as “backtrack.” Like everybody in the school had a complaint about the students. We had a lot of special education students who were put into one group, and I admit there were some with behavioral problems. But for the most part I did not feel that they were that dramatic for people to make a big deal about it. It was just a matter of just being firm and letting them know who was in charge.

Having come from a poor family and having had difficult learning experiences during her early elementary years, Michelle felt she could relate to her students. Being able to relate them helped her manage the behavioral problems in her class.

I thought I could relate to myself being in school, with people not having faith in me. I was the outcast and the outsider. For me it was a matter of just getting in and blending with them and getting them to understand that “hey! I know what you are going through and there is a way to work through it.” The discipline problem started to kind of move away at that point. It started dying out. I started to notice that by the end of my student teaching, we did not have as many behavioral problems. People from other classes were not coming in and complaining about our classes. We were settling down. Michelle developed a professional but friendly relationship with her students. “They knew I was their friend and, as a teacher, they also respected my authority. They were good kids.” Being able to establish herself as a friend and an authority was important for Michelle because it helped her relate to her students in a personal and professional manner.

The star fish:

It was during her fifth grade placement that Michelle became very attached to one of her African-American student. She called him her “star fish.” “I think everyone has a star fish student that you very much want to help get back into the deep seas . . .” During the two interviews Michelle talked at length about Evan sharing her concerns and her fears, and the things she had tried to do to help him get “back on track.”

Evan was labeled seriously emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, and hyperactive. There was one point where he had five different labels on him. Everyone feared Evan. He spent time terrorizing his classmates, his teachers, and his aide. He never paid attention in class. He stood out like a sore thumb. When I first met Evan, I was embarrassed by his attitude, his way of dressing, (he used to wear the baggy clothes, listen to the hard type music like Heavy D), and his attitude! As one of the few African-Americans in my class, I saw him as selling himself short. From the first time I met him, I made a decision that as long as I was teaching the class I was not going to stand his hard attitude.

She went on to explain:

It came to a point where I said to myself, I am going get off my high horse and deal with this kid’s attitude. So the first thing that I said to him was stop coming in here

aggravating everybody! And he said something back to me, and I said something back to him, and he said, “so! Is that supposed to make me scared?” And I said, “ no, its not supposed to scare you, I am not scared of you, you are not scared of me, we do not have a problem.” That was the point. He kind of grinned at me and he was surprised that somebody had actually spoken back to him in a rough and aggressive way.

According to Michelle, she dealt with Evan as he would have expected an African-American “mother” to deal with him. She did not take his nonsense, she established herself as an authority from the first day. She believes this made him become respectful of her, and within no time, he started making progress in his behavior. However, because of the perception that his teachers had of him, he was still considered “an outcast.”

Michelle saw Evan’s behavioral problems as connected to his home life. He had lived with his grandparents for “the most part of his life and was now being taken care of by his father.” Because Michelle had had similar experiences growing up, she believed that his school problems might have been caused by what was going on in his home life. She explains:

I had had some of the same family problems. I lived with my grandparents for most of my life, so I could relate to him. I felt deep for him. This poor child who had gone through so much in life, was not getting a break even in school. I wanted to make his life better. I had had a teacher who had believed in me and that is why I had improved dramatically from the non-academic child I was about to become. I needed to do the same for Evan. I knew for many students all that it took was having just one teacher who believed in them.

Michelle counseled Evan, became a role model, helped him with difficult assignments, and spent time one-on-one with him reading books, tutoring him, and guiding him. She explained that she came to his level, talked to him in a “real” and truthful manner. Michelle stated that she told Evan that “as one of the few Black persons in the school, he had to behave as a role model for other Black kids.” Evan treated Michelle like the mother he never had. He respected her, listened to her, and made dramatic improvements in his behavior and academic work. Michelle felt certain that she had led Evan “to the deep seas, and now swimming would be much easier

for him.” By the end of Michelle’s student teaching placement, Evan had gone from having five different labels, to the counselors and the teachers looking for “one suitable label.”

Michelle saw that the majority of her fifth grade students needed individualized attention and a teacher who believed in them. She tried to be that one teacher, and she explained that by the time she left her fifth grade placement, several of her students had improved in their reading, communication, interactions, and overall classroom behaviors.

#### Parents support in a diverse classroom

In talking about parents and their educational support for their children, Michelle commented that “parents were not very visible” in the two classes she had taught. She went on to explain: “In upper level classes, students are more into structured learning, and teachers may not need many volunteers.” Michelle also reasoned that, her “cooperating teachers did not like soliciting parents’ support which may have caused the parents to stay away.”

For those parents who did not show up for conferences, Michelle reasoned “a lot of parents feel very disconnected with the schools and are fearful of their teachers and do not know anything about learning especially when it comes to 5<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.” Based on her own growing up experiences, Michelle knew poor parents had “other priorities to make ends meet, making it difficult for them to come to conferences or have the time to help their children with home assignments.”

Coming from a low-income family myself, I can understand some of the reasons that some parents have. You are struggling to put food on the table, you are struggling to bring up the children maybe by yourself, and you do not have the time to go to the schools or help with homework. My mom did not have time to help me after working long hours and I did not have anyone else around that could help me so I did the work on my own. So I guess that means she is a bad parent because she did not help me with homework? Not hardly! I am not satisfied with anyone trying to pass judgment on kids from poor families. I have been there and I know it is hard on parents to face the fact that they cannot always help their kids with homework.

According to Michelle there were other ways schools and teachers could work with parents to develop communication, especially if parents are not as “visible”:

Call them and talk to them over the phone. Get to know the community you are working with and get to know the parents. Send letters home telling them what is going on in the school. And make sure you do not always tell them negative things about their children. Tell them some things, which are positive, which make them proud of their child. Make them aware and proud of the little achievements that the child is making. Michelle believed her parent philosophy worked, because she had tried it. She found that parents feel very proud for a teacher to call them about positive things. She pointed out that in calling the parents, she was able to let them know that the school was a positive environment for their child to be in.

### **Michelle's Journey of Growth and Reflection**

In the beginning, Michelle had been unsure about going into the teaching profession. By the end of the student teaching year, Michelle strongly felt she had chosen the right profession. She feels she has a natural connection with children who are going through difficult times, and as a teacher she wants to continue looking for ways to work with “troubled children.”

Initially, Michelle worried about how the students would react to her, for she was the only Black teacher in the whole school. Even though she did not experience any prejudice based on her color, Michelle expressed that she would prefer to teach in a highly diverse school. “I would prefer to work in schools that have a large number of Black kids. I feel they need my help most; I understand them better, especially what they go through in their homes and in the schools. I have been there, and I can relate to them.”

Michelle feels the education system has failed poor children and children of color. She explains:

I see a lot of differences here. If kids come from parents who do not have money, they pretty much end up in special education class. I was at the risk of being put in special ed. myself and I do not want to see these kids having to suffer because of where they come from, their color, or because they do not have money. I believe every child is the same, and every child is unique in his or her own way. I do not know if the education system here will ever change, but, as new teachers, we need to start somewhere. We need to be the ones to make a change, we should not tell kids they cannot do this or

that, instead, we need to tell them they have the ability to do more. We need to challenge them to do their level best. We need to encourage them to achieve their highest goals. I think this is going to be a challenge for me in the future, but I am looking forward to it. You know, you can change someone's life, one person at a time. You can encourage the children; you can lift them up.

Michelle has grown immensely as an educator. From the shy student teacher she once was to someone who cares deeply about her profession. "I now believe I was born to teach." To Michelle teaching is not just about going into the classroom and teaching, it also involves "caring for the children, listening to them, crying with them and laughing with them." According to Michelle, her greatest strength is being able to tune in to the students.

### **Life Influences and Experiences with Diversity**

#### Lessons from home

Surrounded by the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Michelle calls the relatively large town near Southwest Virginia, home. With a population of about 60,000, Michelle lives in a predominately White community with a relatively small number of Blacks. She explains about the White and Black divisions in the community:

You can pretty much tell which areas are Black or White. There is one section that is mostly Black, then you have another section that its like kind of beautiful hilly sides with nice houses and everything and you know it's a predominately White section. You can actually tell what areas are predominately Black areas and which areas are predominately White areas, by the houses, and the surrounding environment.

Michelle lives with her grandparents and her single mom. With regards to acceptance and appreciation of diversity, she explained that her family was "very reserved and closed about outside cultures." Her grandparents, being of an older generation, had had experiences with segregation, which she believes, left them very "untrusting of the White people."

My grandparents and my mum all went to an all-Black school, because of that segregation thing going on at that time. My grandma had some really negative experiences with White people so a lot of their views are kind of like, we can associate

with White people as much as we have to, but they still have very negative fuses. Anything that goes on just like any form of injustice that they see, it's about race, it's about being Black, everything that went down. I mean I can say a lot of it probably did center around race, but anything that went down, anything that does not go their way, they feel like it is race related.

Michelle did not always agree with her family's racial perspective. Even though she did not want to call them prejudiced, she thought they were very cautious because of the experiences they had gone through. Michelle went on to explain that her family "did not understand the diversity of cultures or trust people outside their cultural boundaries" such as the newly arrived immigrants in their community.

As far as with other cultures I noticed we had a lot of Hispanic and Vietnamese people coming to the area. My family is just really, so reserved. They reason why they do not associate with people of other cultures is because they cannot understand them. You know it is like they have this very optic view that this is the way I was raised, this is what I see, and this is what I know. I cannot see them really branching out into other cultures and learning about other things. It is like they are set in their way of doing things.

Because of this lack of exposure to cultures other than her own, Michelle perceives herself as inexperienced when it comes to knowledge about Asians, Latinos, Native Indians, and other ethnic groups.

Even though Michelle's family is not open to diversity, she regards her grandparents as her biggest educators in teaching her about the African-American history.

It is through my grandparents that I came to understand who I am, and my role as a Black, educated woman. They taught me the lessons of life. My grandfather would sit for hours telling me about segregation, about the Civil War, about slavery. He was well learned about his history and he made sure he passed this on to me.

According to Michelle, learning about her history helps her make connections to her past

## Lessons From school

Michelle attended the homogenous schools in her community, which reflected a White majority. Michelle explained that her early elementary schooling experiences were very negative. Being the only Black child in her classroom, she felt singled out, not only by her teachers, but also by the other students. She sums up her early schooling experiences as:

My kindergarten experience was pretty good starting off. I really liked my teacher, and I tried to do everything I could to please her because that was the one thing that I thought was most important. But as the year progressed I could tell for some reason that she just really did not like me. She would write notes home to my mom saying I was not doing any work, I was lying around in the floor, I picked on other kids, I was rude and lazy. At five years old, I was not taught to question what an adult says about me. And yet here was a teacher seeing things that I was not doing. I used to try even harder to please her, but she continued to make my first year of schooling very difficult.

A quiet, shy girl, Michelle was also constantly harassed by the students. She was often accused of being responsible for things happening in her classes such as taking other students' snacks or snack money. Because of this negative beginning, her academic performance was very poor, she hated being in school, developed health-related problems, lost her self-esteem, and lost her motivation to learn. These problems continued throughout her first three years of schooling. It was not until in third grade, that Michelle started making academic improvements. Michelle credits her academic improvement to an African-America third grade teacher, whom she feels made a tremendous difference in her world of learning:

From her tone of voice, simply speaking with her made it a lot easier on me, and that is when I started getting my self confidence and my self esteem started coming back. She is, until this day, my favorite teacher. She brought me to a point where she made me realize that I could do more, she opened my eyes, when she said I a talent in writing. She told me I could write well, and that geared me to becoming a very good student. I am on the honors roll now. I am hoping to graduate with one of the highest undergraduate honors. Fifteen years ago if someone had suggested I could have

achieved this, my teachers would have laughed on my face. Having one teacher who encouraged me is what helped me to get over what everybody had done to me.

It is from her past experiences as a student that Michelle came to strongly believe “a teacher can change a child’s life.” Throughout her student teaching placement, she found herself drawn to those students who were “neglected” in the classroom. These neglected students became her “star fishes.”

#### Middle school and High school experience

Even though in middle school and high school there were more Asians, Hispanics and Black students represented in the student population, Michelle commented that “the teachers continued to ignore them and did not take opportunities to utilize the diversity in the schools.”

During her senior high school year, Michelle changed from the suburban high school to a city school that was predominantly Black. Michelle explained that she changed schools because she felt “there was a very biased attitude towards Black students in the predominantly White high school.” The White school used a tracking system to track students into “college preps” and “none college track.” The few Black students in that school, including Michelle, were all in non-college track classes. Michelle felt there were biases towards the Black students, and since she wanted to further her education through college, she decided to change to a predominantly Black school.

Moving into a new schooling environment that had more Black students, Michelle “felt at home.” She found that in this new school, “there was more Black cultural recognition especially during the Black History month.” She also saw more Black faculty and staff than she had seen in her former school. “I felt at home. I felt I belonged.” She also commented “if I had not changed schools, I would probably have never seen the doors of these college.”

#### Multicultural curriculum

Michelle could not recall learning much about other cultures or about her own culture throughout her schooling. According to Michelle, her knowledge about her culture came from her grandfather. Her teachers “did not teach about other cultures because they knew very little about cultures, it was not a part of the curriculum, and it was easier to ignore them than to do the necessary work it takes to teach from a multicultural point of view.” She went on to explain:

I think a lot of teachers feel that they do not have to teach outside what is in their curriculum guides. I see it now that I am in the classroom. Teachers just want to follow the easy way out. Why learn about other cultures? That would mean doing extra work and no one has the time. As long as it is not mandated, then they are happy not to teach it. In my schools we learned mainly about the famous people in history, or who discovered this or the other, and for the most part they were White. It was very discouraging because it made you feel like you as a Black person are not significant, and yet there are so many well-achieved Blacks we never hear about. I used to make it a point when I hear of any Black person mentioned in any of the books I go find out more about them because I was interested in learning what my people had achieved.

It was through educating herself and the history lessons she had received from her grandfather that Michelle came to learn about African-American history.

#### College experience and diversity

Having visited the State University several times before, Michelle already knew that the university was not culturally diverse. She was not surprised to find she was the only African-American student in the Early Childhood Education program. Being the only Black student in many of her classes, Michelle felt like “the token, especially when the moment came to talk about cultural diversity issues.” She explains:

In a lot of the classes I noticed I ended up being the little token student in the classroom, the only Black person sitting in the classroom, and I did not mind. I did not mind it so much until when it came to culture talk. Then everybody would look to me for my expertise to answer the questions about Black people or things that are related to Black people or an issue surrounding minorities. And I was just like, you know! I represent me, OK! I am just a Black female. I do not represent Hispanic. I do not know what to tell you about them. I am not Asian. I do not know what I am supposed to tell you about Asian people. I do not know about the other cultures out there. I know what I have been through and what I have been facing. I can tell you about my experience, but I do not represent Black people or other cultures. I think this has always been hard for

me. I can tell about my experiences, but I do not believe these experiences represent all Black people.

Michelle felt being the only Black student that she was always being put into the “other” perspective, and yet she represented only herself.

In terms of learning about different cultural traditions, Michelle felt she did not learn much about multiculturalism in any of her undergraduate classes. It was not until her student teaching year that she started “understanding” the public school and the diversity within the public school system. As a student teacher, she saw herself as the “other child” in many of her students such as Evan, Michael, and all the other students who had been labeled learning disabled or identified as behavioral problem.

When we started student teaching, that was when we really felt hit with some of the things that actually go on in the public schools. Our supervisor would wake you up to a lot of things that go on. And yet, in thinking back, I have been there and I have sat in those classrooms. I have been that child that needed a label. I have been that Black student that everybody thought was stupid. I have been that poor child that everyone assumed could not amount into anything. Yes, I have been there.

Seeing herself in her students was a painful reminder to Michelle of “where she has been, and what she would have become.” In conclusion, Michelle emphasized that more exposure is needed during training, in the hope that exposing the student teachers to the issues and problems in the public school settings will make them become more sensitive to their culturally diverse students’ needs.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the cultural perceptions of four interns working in two suburban schools. It depicted narratives of four interns faced with the every day challenges of working in culturally diverse classrooms. Each of them tell vivid narratives of their experiences, and in these narratives the reader gets a picture of how they address the cultural diversity they encountered during their student teaching placements. They addressed cultural diversity as regards to low-income students, ESL students, and ethnically diverse students. Because the schools were near

the university, they had a larger number of ESL students and African-American students than the interns in the rural school settings.

The issues addressed in their classroom experiences were discussed under several sections. These issues were: classroom diversity; parental support; learning experiences of culturally diverse students; classroom teaching approaches; behavioral problems in a diverse classroom; and teaching from a multicultural perspective. The interns' life experiences with cultural diversity were also explored.

In talking about children from lower income families, comparisons were made between these children and children from higher income backgrounds. The interns felt that children from lower income backgrounds were performing at a lower level. Because there was a relatively large number of children from higher income families in both schools, it is not surprising the lower income children academic expectations were measured using the same measures as the children from higher income families.

Two other salient issues that came out from these four interviews were working with linguistically diverse students and working with African-American students. With the linguistically diverse students the biggest challenge was limited English proficiency, while with the African-American students the biggest challenge was behavior problems. How each of the four preservice teachers addressed these issues differ, depending on their experiences, teaching styles, cultural knowledge, and teaching philosophies. These issues are further explored in the discussion chapter.

The teaching strategies they use in the classroom are very similar. They cited using several culturally relevant teaching approaches such as group work, visuals, individualized instruction, and hands-on experiences. Jessica and Michelle also believe that in a culturally diverse classroom there is a need to know one's students, their needs, and learning experiences. Linda, on the other hand, stated she did not have enough time to get to know her individual students. This lack of communication with her students may have caused her to experience behavior problems.

Among these four preservice teachers, Mary was the only one who stated she had been exposed to racial and cultural diversity in her family life. However, in her culturally diverse

classroom experiences, it is not very clear how this exposure helped her approach working with diverse students. If anything, she feels overwhelmed working with children from many cultures.

Michelle and Jessica also had some exposure to diversity. Michelle's exposure was mainly through the Black and White students she encountered in her schooling. Due to her early schooling experiences, she feels she can understand what her African-American students and children from poor families go through. Throughout her teaching placement, she worked with these students to help them achieve academic success.

Jessica was brought up in a poor, mainly White rural community. Because of how she was brought up, she is very sensitive to how people talk about poor children, and believes in the academic success of all her students. Throughout her student teaching, we see Jessica reaching out to all her students. She is also very passionate about teaching and this passion is portrayed in how she talks about her teaching journey.

Linda appears to have had the most difficulty in teaching suburban children. She feels she lacks classroom control and lacks an authoritative approach when dealing with behavior problems. Among the eight preservice teachers, she is also the only one who feels she does not have complete control of the classroom. It was not explored whether this was due to her cooperating teachers' style of teaching, or whether it was her belief that she lacked this control.

The four preservice teachers felt unprepared to work in highly diverse environments. They cited the need for more training and experiences in the classroom before they can feel adequately prepared to teach diverse children.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This phenomenological study explores preservice teachers' perceptions of culturally diverse students. Responding to cultural diversity is becoming an important issue for education professionals. Studies by Lorenzo (1997) and Whalon and Kidwell (1994) indicate that two fifths of the school age children population will now be racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse. On the other hand, 92% of all teachers going into the elementary teaching profession are White, come from middle class backgrounds, and have limited repertoire of experiences with students of differing ethnic, socio-economic, and linguistic preferences (AATE, 1990; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Sudzina, 1993). Consequently, there is a need to prepare prospective teachers on how to address the cultural diversity they will encounter in the classroom. An initial step towards this preparation begins with exploring what perceptions preservice teachers have about culturally diverse students.

Eight interns, all women between the ages of twenty and twenty-three years, were interviewed for this study on cultural perceptions. Six identified themselves as European-American, one identified herself as Italian-American, and one identified herself as African-American. These eight interns were undergraduate students in their final academic year, and enrolled in a one-year teaching internship within the K-5 grade range. Four of the interns were placed in rural elementary schools, with a homogenous group of White students from primarily lower socio-economic backgrounds. The other four interns taught in suburban elementary schools, with a mixed group of students from diverse racial, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The research questions guiding the study included:

1. How do preservice teachers talk about classroom cultural diversity? What stories do they tell?
2. How do they make sense of cultural diversity in terms of their home, schooling, and college training experiences?

3. How does the experience of working with diverse students shape their understanding of cultural diversity?
4. How does the student-teaching experience shape their identity as teachers?

To answer these questions, I conducted two phenomenological interviews with each of the eight interns. The first interview focused on their classroom experiences with cultural diversity during their year of student teaching. The second interview focused on their home, schooling, and college training experiences with cultural diversity. From the results of the interviews, seven issues that reflected on their professional and personal experiences with cultural diversity emerged:

- Home backgrounds of culturally diverse students;
- Learning experiences of culturally diverse students;
- Perceptions about teaching linguistically diverse students;
- Perceptions about teaching from a multicultural perspective
- Parental support in a culturally diverse classroom;
- Dealing with behavioral problems;
- Interns experiences with cultural diversity in their homes, schooling, and college training experiences.

These issues emerged as a result of comparing and contrasting, and discovering the common threads and differences among the eight interns' narratives. Since the overall purpose of the study is to understand how these study participants perceive culturally diverse students, diversity issues during their teaching internship were explored in depth. Connections between their home and schooling experiences were interwoven into their student teaching experience whenever these connections were readily seen, in order to provide a better understanding of how prior experiences shape their cultural perceptions.

### **What Has This Journey Been Like For Me? A Self Reflection**

Cultural issues touch me in a very personal and professional way. My intercultural experiences back home and abroad have led me on a self-discovering journey trying to understand and adapt into various cultural contexts. Through my educational travels here in the

United States, Europe, Asia, and back home in Africa, cultural issues have been a large part of my life's journey. I am still traveling on this personal journey of searching and questioning my *otherness* and trying to understand where my sense of place is, within this culturally diverse world. Conducting this research on how preservice teachers perceive the *otherness* of their students has given me an opportunity to see myself in these culturally diverse students.

This research has not been an easy journey. I was not emotionally prepared to handle the issues that would arise as I conducted the interviews. Even though I tried to remain unbiased throughout the research, it was challenging to remain objective about the issues that came up during the interviews. As I listened to the cultural experiences of interns, there were many times I saw myself as that economically, socially, ethnically, and linguistically different child.

Would a White researcher have obtained different responses and reached different conclusions? Maybe so. However, I feel I had a distinct advantage being an outsider. As an outsider, I found, many times, that the interns were much more open with me for they felt they were educating me about the classroom and their teaching practices about which I was unfamiliar before this study. However, revealing one's perceptions about cultural issues is never easy, and I felt there were times some of the participants did not open up to me in the same way they might have opened to someone White.

I feel I had a unique group of interns who were open, aware, and willing to share with me their cultural experiences and perceptions. During the interviews, several interns mentioned they had, on several occasions discussed among themselves the diversity issues they were encountering within their individual teaching placements. I believe these discussions had made them become more aware of the diversity within their classrooms.

Even though I did not purposely design the study to explore a rural and suburban teaching experience, I find my study singular in that it explores cultural perceptions of preservice teachers working in two different socio-cultural communities. I feel this approach gives a better understanding of the similarities and differences preservice teachers face working in rural and suburban settings. I found socio-economic issues prevalent and a major concern among the eight interns. Ethnic and linguistic issues were more unique to the four interns teaching in the suburban

schools, who had a larger number of ethnic and linguistically diverse students. Where necessary, the differences between the rural and suburban teaching experiences are explored.

The purpose of this study was not to offer recommendations for teaching culturally diverse students, or to offer best practices of teaching for diversity. Rather, I conducted the study for the purpose of understanding how eight interns perceived the classroom cultural diversity they encountered during their field placement, and how they made sense of this diversity through their life histories. It is my hope that in presenting how they talk about classroom cultural diversity I have presented their opinions in the ways they intended.

## **Discussion of the Emergent Issues**

### Home Backgrounds of Culturally Diverse Students

In a study conducted on preservice teachers' attitudes towards culturally diverse students, Dorene and William (1994) found that how children look, how they dress, and their home backgrounds influence how preservice teachers perceive them. Moreover, this impacts on how teachers react to classroom situations such as learning and behavior problems.

Similarly in my current study, the home backgrounds of culturally diverse students were of particular concern to each of the interns. Specifically, the home backgrounds of the lower socio-economic students surprised the eight interns. The general perception was that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds came from home environments that contained abuse, poverty, and a lack of educational support. In describing the home backgrounds of these students, the interns used terms including *broken homes, single parent homes, foster homes, living in trailer parks, poor living environments, uncultured backgrounds, difficult home life, physical and sexual abuse, lack of learning support, and lack of good nourishment.*

The terms that the interns used to describe the home backgrounds of these students seemed to be influenced by how they had heard the media, or other teachers, talk about them. One intern had expressed, "I had heard there were more children from very poor backgrounds living in this area." Several others had overheard teachers identifying children who lived in trailer parks as "amounting to nothing better than janitor," "the group from hell," and "those trailer kids." These students were also more likely to be tracked in special needs and remedial classes,

be labeled as learning disabled, and require teacher aides. This negative labeling may have affected how the eight interns reacted to their culturally diverse students.

Reactions among the eight interns about the culturally diverse students' backgrounds varied. Christina, Amy and Doreen felt that it was important to see each child as capable of learning regardless of socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, they saw teachers' attitudes towards learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds as very important in empowering them to move forward and achieve academic success. These three preservice teachers felt that the schools, the teachers, and the society were not doing enough to support the learning needs of low socio-economic students. Instead, these students were being blamed for academic failure when "it was the school and the society that was failing them".

Michelle and Jessica expressed similar views. They felt that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were treated differently because they come from poorer backgrounds. These two interns believed that each child learned differently regardless of backgrounds, and "reached the deep seas at their own pace." They saw a committed teacher as very important in helping children from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieve academic success.

In reacting to the home backgrounds of their lower socio-economic students, Linda, Karen, and Mary expressed powerlessness and guilt about the home backgrounds of these students. They felt that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds came to school with many learning problems. They also saw these learners as lacking in learning motivation. Since these three interns were unfamiliar with the backgrounds of their culturally diverse students, they perceived them to be too culturally different, making it difficult for these interns to understand what these students knew and what their learning needs were. These three interns felt they were not prepared to deal with diversity. They, therefore, saw teachers as needing special skills and experience to work in culturally diverse classrooms.

Why are the reactions of these three interns so different from the other five, despite the fact that they were all student teaching in culturally diverse environments? To answer this question, it is important to go back to the literature and the interns' narratives. The interns, who had had some experience with cultural diversity either during college training or in their home lives, were much more sensitive to their culturally diverse learners' backgrounds. In teaching,

they emphasized knowing, connecting, and listening to these students. They were able to understand and value these students' learning needs, and found their backgrounds to be a learning resource rather than a limitation.

According to Ladson-Billings (in Hollins & Hayman, 1995) for a teacher to understand the whole child, it is necessary to become aware of the child's cultural background, history, and experiences outside the classroom boundary. This implies that for teachers to begin to understand the children they are teaching, they need to familiarize themselves with their culturally diverse learners' home backgrounds, and use this information to accommodate these students' learning needs. In this study, the interns who had limited experiences with cultural diversity perceived their culturally diverse students' backgrounds as different and, subsequently, difficult to relate to. Since they were unfamiliar with their students' backgrounds and cultural experiences, they experienced the most difficulties teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.

#### Learning Experiences of Culturally Diverse Students

Teaching to ensure the academic success of all students is a challenge. This is even more apparent in culturally diverse classrooms where students come from diverse backgrounds and learning experiences that may be unfamiliar to the teachers (Banks, 1993). One of the recurring themes among the eight interns was that culturally diverse students have limited exposures to learning experiences. They found their culturally diverse students lacking in education-related experiences such as trips to museums and libraries and competency with reading, writing, and computer skills.

The interns also felt there were learning disparities between their culturally diverse students and those from the mainstream backgrounds. They pointed out that children from mainstream culture (middle and higher income backgrounds) had more knowledge and experiences to draw from. They also felt that these children had more supportive parents, and were familiar with basic learning skills such as reading, writing, and computer skills.

Even though culturally diverse students may not possess mainstream learning experiences, they come to the classroom equipped with experiences that teachers can draw from (Perez, 1994). Christina, Amy, Doreen, Jessica and Michelle had come to understand this

through their teaching experiences. Their classroom narratives reveal their success stories of working with culturally diverse students. In the process they had come to understand that, even though there were learning disparities between their mainstream students and their culturally diverse students, in teaching, it was necessary to recognize these students' experiences. According to these five interns, working in a diverse classroom requires one to know the students' learning needs and their learning experiences. This knowledge then had to be applied in ways that would help facilitate each learner's success.

Professionally, these five interns saw themselves as student-centered teachers. They perceived differentiating and knowing the learning needs of their students as central to successful teaching. They recognized that as teachers, they had to know the students, engage them, and make learning interesting and accessible to all students in the classroom. These interns saw knowledge as empowering and looked for ways to motivate and empower their individual students.

These five interns also believed that how they perceived their role as teachers had a major impact on their students. As participants in knowledge building (Ladson-Billings, 1994) they saw themselves working together with their students to create knowledge. They also emphasized respect for students and students' differences. They based their teaching philosophies on how they were brought up and on their early schooling memories. The narratives reveal that respect for people's differences had been emphasized in Christina's Jessica's and Doreen's homes, while Michelle and Amy felt that having a teacher in elementary school who had believed in them had influenced them into becoming better persons.

Teaching in a culturally diverse classroom was perceived as challenging by Karen, Linda, and Mary. These three interns expressed difficulties trying to teach culturally diverse students, due to the numerous learning problems exhibited by these students. They cited lack of basic reading and writing skills, lack of educational support, and lack of motivation, as some of the challenges they experienced working with culturally diverse students.

In a study conducted on preservice teachers' cultural perceptions, Martin and Dixon (1994) found that limited exposure to other cultural groups posed problems for preservice teachers, who experienced difficulty in interpersonal relations with students from cultures they

knew little about. In my current study, the narratives of Karen, Linda, and Mary portray that these three interns felt challenged as they learned how to work with culturally diverse students.

“They will never get it” is how Karen described her low-level math group. Karen viewed her students from the perspective of herself as a student. A bright and good student herself, she had come to the classroom expecting all children to be like her. Karen’s narrative reveals that, the task of working in diverse classrooms caused her to feel “burned out” after only one school year.

“Teaching to all but reaching a few” is how Linda expressed her challenges of teaching in a culturally diverse class. Linda reported that cultural differences hindered her understanding of the needs of her students. Having grown up in a homogenous community, Linda believes the learning challenges she faced with her culturally diverse students stemmed from her limited exposure to diversity.

“I cannot force a child to learn” is how Mary expressed her frustrations from trying to reach out to students who had learning and behavior problems. Mary felt that in a diverse classroom, a teacher had a lot of learning and behavior problems to deal with, which draws one away from effective teaching.

These three interns perceived themselves as facilitators of knowledge. According to Ladson-Billings (1994) facilitators of learning build on what the students already know and in the process they lose the motivation to reach out to their culturally diverse students and come to believe that teaching is challenging because culturally diverse students lack in this prior learning knowledge. Also, these three interns felt unfamiliar with their culturally diverse students’ backgrounds. They found them not only difficult to teach, but also too different to relate to.

### Perceptions about Teaching Linguistically Diverse Students

For this study, cultural diversity in the schools also meant richness in multilingualism. For Christina, Doreen, Amy, and Karen, working in the rural schools exposed them to a variety of dialect differences. This dialect difference was seen as one way of telling the social class of the students. Karen and Amy had explained, “you can tell when they (students) speak or read, you can tell if they are high, middle, or low class.” Even though these four interns were faced with

different dialects, they did not express difficulties working with their culturally diverse students due to these dialectical differences.

For Linda, Mary, Jessica and Michelle, teaching in the suburban schools meant working with linguistically diverse students, specifically ESL students. These four interns cited working with children from Korea, China, Egypt, Italy, Pakistan, India, and Ghana. The overall perception was that these students were limited in English proficiency, communication, comprehension, and socialization skills. Linda and Mary stated finding it difficult to work with linguistically diverse students. They felt unprepared in their training to work successfully with students whose linguistic skills in the dominant language were very limited. They also felt unfamiliar with these students' cultural behaviors and learning experiences, which were different from their mainstream culture.

Jessica's narrative reveals that she recognized the importance of working towards understanding the cultural and linguistic differences of her students. In her narrative, she relates how she worked towards enhancing these students' linguistic skills in the English language, and the knowledge she gained from learning about their diverse cultures. Her approach towards working with linguistically diverse students is of significance in this study. She discovered that the best way to engage these students in the learning process was by involving their parents through communicating and working with them on daily classroom activities. Through working together with these parents, she was able to learn about the different cultural perspectives represented in her classroom. She also came to understand the learning and cultural experiences/differences of her ESL students, and in the process, was able to bridge the gap between the culture of the home and the culture of the school.

What does the above example tell about working with linguistically diverse students? For interns to become familiar with linguistically diverse students' cultures, experiences, and languages, it is important that they interact with these students and their parents (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). This interaction helps them learn about the culture, languages, and behaviors of linguistically diverse students. This interaction also helps the ESL students feel appreciated and not alienated in the new culture. This approach of working with linguistically diverse students is also applicable to working with children from poor backgrounds and ethnic minorities. The

experience gained from interacting and communication with parents and students is beneficial in working towards the academic success of culturally diverse students. It is only through such interactions that teachers are able to engage these in the learning process. Engaging with culturally diverse students can also be done through learning about the various cultural perspectives that are represented in a culturally diverse classroom.

### Perceptions about Teaching from a Multicultural Perspective

Effective teaching for culturally diverse students can best take place within an educational setting that accepts, encourages, and respects their experiences (Banks & Banks, 1997). Several interns have already suggested that to work successfully in a culturally diverse classroom, a teacher must understand the educational needs of culturally diverse students, their experiences, and their backgrounds. One way of doing this is through communicating and listening to these students and their parents, and another way is through a multicultural education that explores different cultural behaviors and experiences.

All eight interns felt that multicultural education is an important element of the school curriculum. They defined multicultural education as awareness and exposure, learning about other cultures, celebrating special occasions, and a holistic look at history through a variety of cultural lenses. According to these interns, multicultural education is necessary not just for culturally diverse students, but for all cultures to learn about one another. They all mentioned including some aspect of multiculturalism in their teaching. However, their narratives reveal that the actual inclusion of multiculturalism was very minimal.

One reason the interns believed was responsible for the lack of multicultural inclusion in the curriculum was due to the mandated Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL's). They pointed out that the SOL's did not give them the flexibility to teach about other cultures. They also felt the SOL's had very little information regarding ethnic minorities, poor children, or linguistically diverse students. Instead, what the SOL's covered was Ancient History, which the interns considered too abstract to engage students. Several interns gave an example of a unit on Ancient Greece and commented, "it does not make sense to learn about Ancient Greece, when the students cannot relate to what they already have in their classrooms and communities." They

suggested that students need to be learning about themselves, “who they are and where they come from.”

Concerns were also raised about a multicultural education that concentrated on particular cultures and special events, but not on all cultures. These interns felt that learning about cultures only during particular occasions served to highlight racial as well as cultural differences rather than encourage community. Christina, Karen, Amy and Doreen gave examples of Black History month (which had been emphasized in their various grade levels during the month of February), and pointed out that talking about famous Black people only in the month of February implied that the African-Americans were different, and therefore separate. To avoid divisiveness between cultures, they suggested that the African-American experience be included into the total curriculum, instead of only being taught during the month of February. Amy had explicitly stated “I will never teach about Black History Month in February unless I have to.” She felt that schools need to be more effective in incorporating many cultural perspectives into the curriculum, instead of giving superficial attention to a few.

Jessica, Karen, Mary and Michelle expressed similar views about their schools’ yearly International Week celebrations. They explained that the downside to an International Week was that teachers talked about their International students only during that time and neglected them for the rest of the school year. They suggested that International cultures should be included in the overall curriculum, and not taught only on particular occasions.

The eight interns thought they should have covered more about other cultures, but time limitation, lack of knowledge about other cultures, lack of support from the schools, and a curriculum that lacked a multicultural emphasis, discouraged them from doing so. Furthermore, they felt that their training program and their schooling did not adequately prepare them to teach multicultural education. This lack of knowledge made several interns believe they could not teach about other cultures. Comments including, “I feel I might say something wrong and hurt some of my students’ feelings” and “I do not think I have much knowledge on other cultural perspectives,” were expressed to show that lack of experience with diverse cultures hindered these interns’ ability to teach about them.

Clearly, how the interns talk about what multicultural education ought to be, as opposed to ways they approached teaching from a multicultural perspective, is of significance to this study. The majority of them felt they did not do enough in applying a multicultural perspective in their teaching. They, however, recognize the importance of multicultural education, and felt responsible for providing this information to their students. They expressed regrets about the lack of multicultural education in their own schooling and felt they did not want their students to come out as ignorant and uninformed about the world around them. They, therefore, called for a holistic approach to multicultural education that recognizes all cultures all the time.

#### Perceptions about Parental Support in a Culturally Diverse Classroom

According to these interns, classroom cultural diversity mirrors parents' diversity. Parents are seen as an important component of children's learning and a good resource for cultural information (Banks, 1997). In the diverse learning environments described in this study, the overall perceptions of the eight interns was that parents of poor children and those from minority cultures were not very involved in their children's learning. However, there were mixed feelings about the role that parents play in this involvement. These feelings ranged between blaming parents for not being supportive enough and complaints that the cooperating teachers were not doing enough to solicit support from parents.

Karen, Mary and Linda were of the opinion that the parents of poor and ethnically diverse children did not care about the educational welfare of their children. They saw these parents as always working, not concerned about education, and not very helpful with their children's homework. These three interns felt that culturally diverse parents alienated themselves from the school, by not showing up for teacher-parent conferences or school-related activities.

They also compared their culturally diverse students with their mainstream students and concluded that parents from upper-level incomes were more supportive and showed more concern for their children's learning. These three interns saw parents as the first educators of their children. Culturally diverse parents were perceived as lacking in this involvement, hence, lacking in educational support. Their premise appears to be based on their thinking about what parental support was like when they were children. These interns came from two-parent homes

and had parents who were very involved in their learning and seemed to value education highly. They, therefore, perceived the lack of parental support for their culturally diverse students as a sign that parents did not value education, as expressed by Karen. “You hope they care about their children’s learning, but when they do not show up for conferences, when you send homework home and kids say no one helped them, you begin to wonder if these parents value education.”

On the other hand, Christina, Amy, Doreen, Jessica, and Michelle felt that the reason why parents of poor children and those of ethnic minorities were not involved in the classroom was due to teachers’ lack of communication with them. According to these five interns, teachers did not solicit support from parents, for they felt it was extra work. Teachers were also seen as having unrealistic expectations for parents. These five interns felt that parents were blamed unreasonably and yet, they (parents) did not know what teachers expected of them, or how to support and get involved in their children’s learning. Amy and Michelle reflected on their parents’ involvement in their own education and commented that their parents had not been very involved. However, they felt this did not stop their parents from being supportive and encouraging towards academic achievement, just like all parents of culturally diverse learners do.

In arguing on behalf of culturally diverse parents, Delpit (1995) argues that parents of poor children and those from culturally diverse backgrounds do indeed care about their children’s education, but lack what she calls the “culture of power - its codes and rules” (p. 24). According to Delpit, the classroom culture is shaped by the unconscious norms and beliefs upheld by the mainstream culture. Poor and diverse children and their families, who are not from the mainstream culture, may not be familiar with these norms. These parents may distance themselves from the school, creating a communication gap between themselves and their children’s teachers. They may believe that teachers know best, but teachers may perceive this as the parents not caring about their children’s learning.

The perceptions of these latter five interns support Delpit’s (1995) notion that a majority of culturally diverse parents do care about their children’s learning and are willing to become involved if approached by teachers. Several of these interns had worked directly with parents

and had found them eager to hear about their children's performance, and eager to help if approached by teachers. This discovery made them believe that parents of culturally diverse children want to become involved in their children's education if approached by teachers. According to these interns, what seemed to be lacking were positive interactions between parents and teachers. For parents to become more involved in the classroom, more teacher-initiated contacts with parents were needed. These interns suggested that in order to develop parent-teacher relationships, it is important for teachers to view parents as partners in the learning process of their children. This partnership was seen in many cases as lacking.

### Dealing with Behavioral Problems

Working in a culturally diverse classroom is not only about working with a culturally diverse group of students and parents, but also involves dealing with student behaviors. Interns, as well as beginning teachers, face the problem of handling inappropriate student behavior, which Parker (1993) states is one of the greatest teaching barriers that must be overcome. In my study, all the interns expressed initial concerns with classroom management. They worried that the students might not respect them as teachers due to their age and lack of experience. They also worried they would not be able to handle discipline as well as their cooperating teachers. Several of these interns stated that behavioral issues were the biggest challenge they faced throughout their student teaching year.

Behavioral problems were perceived as tied to the students' home lives. The eight interns felt that children who came from difficult homes, especially ones, which contained abuse, were more likely to be behavior problems. According to Christina, Jessica, Amy, and Michelle, dealing with behavior problems meant looking at the more complex issues students bring to class. It also meant being attuned and listening to the students in order to discover the source of the problems. The narratives show that the interns who communicated with their students found ways to work beyond the behavior problems.

Even though all the interns cited discipline as one of the major issues when working in culturally diverse classrooms, discipline was of particular concern to Jessica, Linda, Mary and Michelle, the four interns who were working in suburban schools. A look at their narratives

reveals that behavior problems were an everyday issue in their classrooms. An even closer look at the “problem child” in each of their narratives reveals an African-American student. How they talk about and dealt with this “problem child” is a significant portrayal of their perceptions of working with African-American children.

Benson-Hale (1986) suggests that in many instances, White teachers are unable to discipline African-American students because they do not connect with them culturally. The White teachers find Black students behaving differently from what they know and are used to. Due to these differences, they experience challenges when it comes to working especially with male African-American students. In my current study, Linda and Mary expressed the most difficulties dealing with African-American students. Linda felt she could not relate to one of her African-American male student’s and believed that cultural differences hindered her ability to work with him. She expressed lacking in cultural exposure, which she saw as a hindrance to understanding this student’s experiences and how to work with him. Mary also felt that these students came with many family problems, which effected on their classroom behaviors.

Delpit (1988b) suggests that African-American students view authority very differently than their White peers. Authority, to these students, is talking the way they are used to being spoken to at home. Linda did not see herself as an authority figure. She felt that her “shy, quite nature was taken advantage of, particularly by her African-American students”. Not being able to see herself as a “forceful person” may explain why she felt unable to establish herself as an authority figure. Because of her negative experience with her African-American student during the internship, she felt she would not be effective in culturally diverse classrooms due to the many behavior problems portrayed by students.

Jessica and Michelle dealt with disciplining their African-American students very differently. According to these two interns, working with African-American male students meant coming to their level and relating to them. It also meant speaking their language and understanding their experiences. Michelle believed that African-American students understood and respected authority (Delpit, 1988b) hence, she had to portray herself as an authoritarian. In dealing with one of her “problem child” she explained that she had had to “come off her high horse,” and deal with this student “the way his mother would deal with him”. This meant

crossing the cultural barriers. She saw the cultural barriers as being the mainstream culture, or the classroom culture of power (Delpit, 1995) into which they were both trying to fit in.

Michelle also felt she was able to relate to what her students were going through, having gone through similar problems during her early schooling. Michelle's negative early schooling experiences had made her more sensitive towards her students' behavioral and learning problems. Her classroom narrative portrays her passion for working with her "starfish" whom everyone had regarded as the most difficult child to work with. Because of how she approached working with this African-American student, she felt she did not experience discipline problems with him.

Likewise, for Jessica, dealing with her male African-American student meant being able to communicate with him, by learning his "lingo". Jessica felt that by finding a way to communicate with this African-American student, she was able to understand his behavior better. Jessica also explained that she tried to establish herself as an authority figure from the beginning of her full-time teaching placement. To Jessica, being an authority figure meant being able to "relate to students, understand their experiences, and make them feel safe in school." Jessica felt she was able to work with her African-American student and other students who had been considered trouble makers, because she believed that in dealing with problems one has to "see more of the student than just the behavior." Seeing more to people was important to Jessica. It was a lesson she had learned from her parents, to see "more to people than meets the eye." In working with her students, she saw beyond the problems to the uniqueness of every child. Because of her approach, she stated that she did not experience significant behavior problems with her students.

Michelle and Jessica managed their pupils and classrooms by creating and establishing authority and respect at the beginning of their full-time teaching placements. They believed that if they were to work in culturally diverse classrooms where every child comes with varying learning and behavioral differences, they had to deal with each child individually, looking for the sources of any problems. Their approach to behavioral problems implies that when teachers find ways to communicate with their culturally diverse students, it becomes possible to move beyond the cultural differences, cultural and miscommunications and manage disciplinary problems.

Thus, working effectively with culturally diverse learners implies being able to communicate and relate to them. Whether it is in teaching or disciplining, the narratives reveal that the interns in this study who communicated with their culturally diverse students were more aware of these students' needs and experiences. For those interns who expressed difficulties working with culturally diverse students, their narratives reveal there was a consistent sense of a lack of communication. They expressed experiencing difficulties trying to reach out to their diverse students. They perceived culturally diverse students through their own cultural lenses and found cultural differences impeding successful work in diverse classrooms.

According to Gay (1995) the incompatibilities that exist between mainstream culture and diverse cultures results from mainstream teachers perceiving their culturally diverse students through their own lenses. To work effectively in culturally diverse classrooms, it is important for teachers to analyze the cultural differences and become conscious of how culture shapes their own values, behaviors, and experiences (Banks & Banks, 1997). This can be done through an examination of their own life experiences and how these experiences shape their perceptions of culturally diverse students.

#### Interns Experiences with Cultural Diversity in their Homes, Schooling, and College Training Experiences

To understand how preservice teachers make sense of the diversity they encounter in the classroom, Banks & Banks (1997); Cannella and Reiff (1995); and Delpit (1995) among others suggest an examination these teachers' life experiences. In my study, life experiences in reference to home, schooling, and college training were explored. These life experiences reveal the cultural inferences that interns bring with them to the diverse classroom. It appears that, how cultural diversity was addressed at home and in the interns' education at every level, has significant influences on how they talk and act in a culturally diverse classroom. This is consistent with studies conducted by Doreen and William (1994) and Rodriquez and Sjostrom (1996) who found that preservice teachers' backgrounds shaped their perspectives of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. They found that the preservice teachers with limited cultural

exposure expressed difficulties working with culturally diverse students, as compared to those who had had prior experiences with cultural diversity.

Likewise, my study reveals that experience with diversity prior to the student teaching internship effected the eight interns' perceptions of culturally diverse students. The interns who reported limited prior experiences with diversity felt challenged as they learned how to work with culturally diverse students. They found these students to be culturally different and felt unfamiliar with their cultural experiences. Furthermore, they found these diverse students to be unmotivated in learning and lacking in learning exposures. They also perceived culturally diverse parents as uncaring about the education of their children. These interns viewed culturally diverse students through their own mainstream histories and experiences. They perceived the cultural differences to be a limitation rather than a resource. How these interns talk about their culturally diverse learners implies that, these students could only blame themselves, their backgrounds, and their parents for a lack of academic success.

In contrast, the interns who reported experience with diversity prior to the student teaching internship indicated a higher commitment to working with their diverse students. They felt responsible for these students' academic achievement, and saw their cultural experiences as learning resources. They saw the role of culturally diverse parents to be determined by how teachers communicated with them. Their narratives disclose that these interns were more understanding of the experiences of their students, and searched for ways to make learning more accommodating to culturally diverse learners needs. Instead of blaming them for lack of academic success, they felt that the schools, the society, and the teachers were failing these students through a curriculum that did not recognize the learning experiences of diverse students. Their narratives reveal that cultural experiences prior to the student teaching internship helped them recognize and respect cultural differences, cultural opinions, and cultural learning differences.

To this end, prior life experiences, as related to cultural diversity, played a significant role in the eight interns' cultural perceptions. Therefore, it becomes important to explore further how these eight interns talked about the cultural lessons learned in their homes, their schooling, and their college experiences.

### Lessons learned from home

For Christina, Doreen, and Jessica lessons learned from home during those formative years positively impacted on their classroom practices. In their culturally diverse classrooms, these interns emphasized respect for individual student's differences and believed in seeing something positive in their students regardless of the students' cultural, linguistic, economical, or social circumstances. "Seeing students as they are, respecting their efforts to work hard, and understanding the students learning needs", were some of the teaching strength's portrayed by these three interns. They attributed their approach to parents who were open-minded and adamant about respect for cultural, economic, social, and religious differences.

As a result of early struggles with stereotypes and racial issues, negative experiences with diversity at home impacted on Amy and Michelle's perceptions of culturally diverse students. Because of their own negative experiences with diversity, these two interns developed a deep need to reach out to their students, especially those students who were going through difficult home and schooling experiences. What is significant about these two interns is that one was European American and the other an African-American. Even though they were from different racial backgrounds, they had gone through negative racial and cultural struggles during their formative years. Amy had struggled with family and community racial perceptions about Black people, while Michelle struggled in school with racial perceptions about being Black in predominately White schools.

Due to their racial struggles and poorer socio-economic backgrounds, their narratives reveal strong desire to be positive influences in their culturally diverse students' lives. However, their classroom approaches reveal significant differences. For Amy, teaching in a culturally diverse classroom meant using a "color-blind" perspective, of seeing "all" her students as the same. A color-blind perspective stemmed from her need to break loose from what she saw as her family's prejudiced view of race. Through using a color-blind perspective, Amy tried to emphasize social and educational equity among her students.

On the other hand, Michelle strove to influence her students by emphasizing an individualized perspective. Through having particular students as her "starfishes," Michelle emphasized seeing the individuality of her students. She believed that change is possible "one

child at a time”. Having a teacher in elementary school who had helped her towards academic success made Michelle strive to help other individual students like her to achieve academic success.

Linda and Karen reported limited exposure to cultural diversity during their formative years. They stated that diversity was not an issue at home and was rarely discussed. These two interns had lived very sheltered lives, away from the cultural world around them. Going into diverse classrooms, these two interns expressed difficulties relating to their culturally diverse learners. They felt guilty about their upbringing and lack of cultural exposure. Karen had expressed feeling guilty about some of the “poor living situations” of her culturally diverse students. She also felt burned out from working with children who came to school with numerous learning challenges.

Linda on the other hand believed that cultural differences hindered her ability to work effectively with culturally diverse learners. According to these two interns, it was difficult to understand their students’ cultural experiences because they were not exposed to them; they came from very different cultural backgrounds, and they had not been prepared by their life experiences to handle cultural differences. This finding is consistent with Martin and Dixon (1994) who found that limited exposure to other cultural groups posed problems for preservice teachers, who experienced difficulty in interpersonal relations with students from cultures that they knew little about.

#### Lessons learned from schooling

On the other hand, exposure to diversity does not guarantee experiencing it or understanding it, according to the eight interns in this study. Even though they all mentioned some aspect of cultural, racial, economic, and linguistic diversity in their schooling, this diversity appears to have been apparent only in a superficial sense because students lived in their own separate, non-diverse entities. They did not have any cross-cultural contacts (Wurzel, 1988) with each other, which would have helped them become more culturally aware. They commented that students in their own high/middle school experiences were separated by race, culture, socio-economic status, cliques, activities, relationships, and academic abilities. This separation meant that students stayed close to the group they naturally associated with. The

interns saw this separation as an impediment to learning about other students' cultural experiences. From the eight interns' narratives, it appears that exposure to diversity in their schooling, meant there were *those people* and *we people*.

Apart from Christina who reported learning about other cultures during her schooling, the rest of the interns recalled learning very little about other cultures. What little they could recall learning focused only on African-Americans and the Civil War. They felt that this cultural education lacked depth and meaning just like the multicultural education they had taught during their internship. It was due to this lack of knowledge that they felt unprepared to teach about other cultures. Due to their perceived lack of cultural exposure in their schooling, seven of the interns felt they had not experienced cultural diversity in their schooling. Cultural lessons learned from schooling were, therefore, very limited.

#### Lessons learned from college training

For majority of the interns in my study, college brought about a big diversity change in their lives. They saw more International students and African-American students, and experienced a more diverse range of socio-cultural populations. Several of them mentioned taking classes with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. However, even though the interns felt they had seen more diversity in college, they also found the same separations along racial and cultural lines in college as they had in high/middle schools.

The interns commented that even though the university had a diverse student population, it was barely recognized either through the classes they were taking or other cultural events. Teacher-training programs that educate about cultural diversity serve as eye openers for many interns going into culturally diverse classrooms according to Hall, et al. (1995). In their study, students reported they found the cultural diversity courses to be enlightening and helpful causing them to reflect on themselves and their cultural beliefs. In reflecting about their college experiences, the eight interns in my study expressed the need for more classes that focused on diversity issues. They felt classes such as these would have sensitized them towards the diversity they encountered in the classroom. Even though they all agreed that the year of field experience was "the best teacher", they still felt that classes that taught them about multicultural education

and how to relate across cultures were needed in preparation for the reality of culturally diverse classrooms.

Overall, the eight interns attribute the lack of experience with cultural diversity in college as contributing to their limited preparation to deal with classroom diversity. They also stated that they did not receive adequate support during their internship for handling cultural diversity. The eight interns felt that it was in college training where their eyes should have been opened to diversity, how to deal with it, teach it, reflect on it, and confront their own cultural perceptions. This cultural awareness, according to the eight interns, was absent. Indeed, this lack of cultural training in college acquired great significance as the interns reflected on their interests and abilities in working in culturally diverse environments.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to discuss the eight interns' overall perceptions about their one-year student teaching experience in culturally diverse classes. The chapter also explores these interns interest in teaching diverse student populations, and the implications that can be derived from their experiences. The interns' overall perceptions about their one-year of student teaching gives a better understanding of their preparation and interest in teaching in culturally diverse environments. The insights derived from their experiences with cultural diversity though not generalizable to the population of all student teachers suggest some possible significant implications for teacher educators and preparation programs.

In a similar study conducted on preservice teachers' perceptions and preparation to work in culturally diverse settings, Wayson (1988) found that fewer than 20% of preservice teachers completing their teacher education programs indicated a preference for teaching in settings that eluded students of culturally diverse backgrounds. In my study, all the interns exhibited a preference for working in homogenous environments. They felt they were not adequately prepared with skills for teaching multicultural populations. Their narratives reveal that limited content based knowledge on diversity, limited cultural preparation, lack of support, and limited cultural experiences to draw from, directly impacted on their predisposition towards working with diverse student populations. These issues are further explored in the discussion that follows.

#### Preservice Teachers' Perceptions: Teaching in Culturally Diverse Settings

The eight interns indicated they were not yet ready, as beginning teachers, to teach successfully in culturally diverse environments. Instead, they indicated a preference to teach children similar to themselves. Even though several of them felt they had handled their classroom cultural diversity very well, they expressed initial concerns of not being able to handle situations due to the complexity of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. As beginning teachers, they felt they still had limited knowledge about culturally diverse students, their cultures, and their

lives. According to these interns, working in a culturally diverse classroom calls for a teacher to change his/her whole way of looking at cultures, looking at life, and looking at teaching. They surmise that such a change in perspective comes with training, teaching experience, and teaching maturity. As beginning teachers, they felt they could not handle the pressures of teaching along with the challenges of working with culturally diverse students. Therefore, they preferred to work in homogenous environments that did not call for much knowledge about cultural diversity.

Several of these interns pointed to their home lives and teacher preparation to explain their lack of preparation to teach culturally diverse learners. They felt they lacked real life experiences with diversity because their home lives and educational backgrounds did not expose them to cultural diversity. This year of student teaching has confirmed to them that, there is still a lot to learn about working with culturally diverse learners. According to these interns, teaching in diverse environments consequently calls for a teacher to integrate and accommodate the diversity of students. They indicated that more preparation was needed if they were to work successfully in fully inclusive classrooms.

The narratives disclose that within this year of experience with cultural diversity, the interns have drawn strong conclusions about teaching culturally diverse students. They have come to understand that diversity in the classroom is more than seeing the color of their students, because there are also economic, language, social, physical, family, and learning differences that need to be taken into consideration when one is teaching. They have come to see that teaching has many dimensions, some of which calls for taking on different roles, while maintaining the role of a teacher. For these beginning teachers, the many dimensions of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms creates a new experience, one for which they still feel unprepared.

Why did these interns indicate a lack of teaching preference in culturally diverse environments? Yet, several of them had emerged as successfully able to address classroom diversity? A closer look at the student teaching experience and teaching preparation may be able to help answer this question. The student teaching experience was seen as very important in exposing the interns to classroom diversity. For the first time, the majority of these interns received real-life exposures to what classroom diversity really means. They went through initial

culture shock, felt culturally challenged, and at the same time found the experience very enlightening about cultural issues. Unfortunately, they lacked a support structure where they could learn, self-explore, self-discover, and self-reflect (Davidman, 1995) freely on the cultural issues they were encountering in their classrooms. Seminars and courses that gave them opportunities to confront their fears, concerns, and perceptions might have helped them feel better prepared to handle classroom cultural diversity.

The student teaching year appears to be very important in forming the interns' perceptions of culturally diverse students. Without adequate knowledge, preparation, and support on how to work with these students, the exposure to classroom diversity presents a special challenge and an impediment to choosing to work in diverse settings. Even though several of these interns had experienced cultural diversity prior to their student teaching, they still felt that the teacher education program should have prepared them on how to deal with classroom diversity. They also felt they lacked support during their internship that would have helped them deal better with classroom cultural diversity. For majority of these interns, this support was needed. For this purpose, they gave several suggestions for practices they felt need to be included in the teacher preparation programs.

### **Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs**

Existing Research conducted on preservice teachers portrays that, majority of novice teachers become more willing to work with culturally diverse students after some field exposure to diversity (Dorene & William, 1994; Tamura, Linda, et al. 1996; Sudzina, 1993). In contrast, my study reveals that exposure to cultural diversity effected the preservice teachers' preference to teach in diverse settings. They generally felt inexperienced in handling classroom cultural diversity and indicated that, if given a choice, they would prefer to teach in homogenous schools that call for less student diversity.

A significant finding results from Christina, Doreen, Michelle, Amy, and Jessica's perceptions about teaching in culturally diverse settings. Even though these five interns had over the student teaching year indicated a growing commitment and understanding of diversity, in the end, they also expressed a preference to teach in homogenous schools. On job interviews,

Doreen explicitly stated she did not want to work in city schools due to the student diversity typically found in such schools, while Jessica, Amy, and Christina maintained that they needed more teaching preparation before they could feel ready to work with culturally diverse students. Even Michelle indicated a preference of teaching in schools that portrayed an African-American student population. She was concerned that as a Black teacher she would not “fit in” working in homogeneously White schools.

This preference to work in homogenous environments is inconsistent with other studies conducted on preservice teachers perceptions and exposure to cultural diversity. Dorene and Cheng (1990); Hall (1993); Mapp (1997); Sudzina (1993); and, William (1994) have all reported in their studies that the perceptions of preservice teachers changed after some initial exposure to classroom diversity. Even though the preservice teachers in their studies felt challenged, the cultural exposure enlightened them, making them more responsive towards culturally diverse learners, and in the end, these preservice teachers indicated a growing interest in teaching in culturally diverse environments. In my current study, the eight interns continued to portray preference towards working with children who had backgrounds similar to their own, even after some field exposure to classroom diversity.

One explanation that could be advanced for these particular interns’ preference to work with children who had backgrounds similar to their own was the growing sense of the anxieties and responsibilities likely to accompany their first year of independent teaching. These interns felt that as beginning teachers the challenges of unsupervised teaching and working in culturally diverse classrooms would present special challenges, ones which they still felt unprepared to handle.

The challenges presented by classroom cultural diversity may be explained from their student teaching experience. According to Delpit (1995) “student teachers are exposed to descriptions of failure rather than models of success (p. 177).” Delpit goes on to explain that student teachers are exposed to school environments that rely on labeling (broken homes, poor backgrounds, living in trailer parks, group from hell) to explain that culturally diverse learners’ academic achievement is inevitably connected with home backgrounds and socio-economic status.

The teaching environments that these interns were exposed to, serve here as a good example of this labeling of culturally diverse students. The interns inevitably perceive this labeling as presenting special challenges when working with culturally diverse students. In the end, even though several of them became sensitive towards these students' backgrounds and experiences, their perceptions about the challenges of working with poor, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students remain. Teaching in culturally diverse environments is perceived as challenging because of the numerous teaching and learning problems presented by the learners.

To help interns move beyond this negative labeling and perceptions of culturally diverse students, it then becomes the job of teacher preparation programs to help them become aware that negative cultural perceptions are socially and culturally constructed (Cannella & Reiff, 1994). This cultural awareness would then help the interns understand that it is possible to work successfully in culturally diverse classes. To this end, Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that teacher educators at all levels address several questions: How can teacher educators encourage more dialogue about diversity? How can teacher preparation programs best prepare interns to become culturally sensitive? How can they encourage interns to bring in their histories and reflect on these histories? How can they make interns better understand their culturally diverse students' experiences? How can they liberate them from negative and stereotypical perceptions of culturally diverse students? The interns also offered several suggestions they felt would help others like them feel better prepared for classroom cultural diversity.

**Prolonged exposure to multicultural school settings is needed throughout the teacher preparation program.** These eight interns suggested that long term exposure to public school settings that portray culturally diverse children should be included throughout their K-5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher preparation program. They felt they had spent too much time in the Early Childhood Lab school, which did not expose them to the cultural reality of the public schools. They saw the lab school as a "very ideal setting" hence "very different from the public school setting which they were expected to teach in." For this purpose, they suggested that more field experiences in culturally diverse settings be included throughout the preparation program.

Banks (1994) and Dorene and William (1994) also recommend multicultural school settings be included as part of field experiences for the preservice teachers. Multicultural settings

serve as eye openers for many preservice teachers who may not have had this cultural exposure before (Banks, 1994). Multicultural field experiences give preservice teachers a different perspective from what they know and are used to. According to Gollnick and Chinn (1990) “long term cultural experiences are probably the most effective means for overcoming fear and misconceptions about cultural groups (p. 30).” These cultural experiences serve not only as eye openers for the preservice teachers, but may also help change their cultural perceptions (Banks, 1994). The long term exposure to multicultural school settings may also help the preservice teachers to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students, in order to provide their students with effective instruction. It therefore is imperative that preservice teachers be exposed to these multicultural school settings throughout their K-5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher preparation program.

**Seminars and courses that explore classroom cultural diversity issues should be included in the teacher preparation program.** Giving increased attention to cultural awareness through seminars, case studies, videos, presentations, open discussions and classes that explore issues of prejudice, poverty, linguistic and dialectical differences, and cultural misunderstandings are needed to increase the preservice teachers’ understanding of diversity. These exposures could serve as a means for the preservice teachers to explore their own fears and others cultural perceptions in a non-threatening manner. Such seminars can either be multicultural-representing people from various cultural backgrounds, or preservice teacher seminars- that give them opportunities to self reflect and self explore (Davidman 1995) among themselves about their student teaching experiences. Such seminars would hopefully give the preservice teachers a wider lens that reflects various opinions and perspectives of different people.

Classes and courses that explore different cultural perspectives are helpful in developing ways to “examine our world and our lived experiences (Mosher and Sia, 1993, p. 28).” According to these two authors, classes that develop a sound knowledge base understanding of other cultures increases the likelihood that preservice teachers will accept and respect people who are different. How these classes are presented and taught has adverse effect on the preservice teachers cultural perceptions and attitudes. It is therefore important to carefully

present cultural information and materials in non-biased and realistic ways (Harrington & Hathaway, 1995).

**Incorporate more multicultural teaching strategies.** To be successful in helping culturally diverse students attain academic excellence the interns indicated a need to learn content that would be applicable in culturally diverse environments. Ladson-Billings (1994); Banks and Banks (1997); and, Delpit (1988b) support culturally relevant teaching strategies such as use of cooperative learning, individualized instruction, open classroom discussions, hands on experiences, and culturally sensitive assessment tools. They see these practices as some of the teaching and learning strategies that need to be incorporated in a culturally diverse classroom. Preservice teachers need to become aware of the various strategies that are applicable in a culturally diverse classroom and that are effective with all learners.

The interns in my study also felt there was a need for more skills that would increase preservice teachers intercultural competence in teaching English as Second Language, multicultural education, and children with varying learning differences, abilities, and experiences. Included in this area is an increased attention on how to deal with diverse cultural behaviors, and how to work effectively with linguistically diverse and African-American students.

**Teacher education programs should be willing to adapt to ongoing diversity changes in the schools.** The changing classroom demographics create a critical need for preservice teachers to be skilled in educating children from Gay and Lesbian parents, bi-racial families, foster homes, teenage parents, drug addicted parents, linguistically and racially diverse populations and poor families. Through faculty diversity seminars and multicultural workshops, the teacher educators would become up-to-date with the changing face of the American classroom. In return, the teacher educators would be able to address these ongoing classroom changes with their preservice teachers, and prepare these beginning teachers on how to address diversity in ways that would be enriching for both them and the culturally diverse learners.

Preservice teachers also need to see their teacher educators as role models who value and accept diversity (Colville & MacDonald, 1995). The teacher educators' beliefs and values about multiculturalism are reflected through their thoughts and actions, which in return influence the thoughts and actions of preservice teachers. Therefore how teacher educators address

cultural diversity should reflect their knowledge, tolerance, and real concerns with multiculturalism.

**Increase collaborations between the university and the schools.** The interns pointed to the dichotomous relationship between the university and the schools and they felt the two were very disconnected. They expressed frustrations about what they had learned in their preparation programs on one hand, versus what the classroom teachers taught them. They gave examples of working with children who portrayed behavioral and learning problems, and stated that, the teaching and learning strategies learned in their teacher preparation courses differed from the strategies used in the classrooms. They felt that the “idealism” of the preparation program differed from the “realities” within a culturally diverse classroom. The interns suggested that, increased collaboration between teacher educators and classroom teachers would help prepare them (interns) in accordance with the teaching and learning realities of the public school settings.

**Teacher educators should encourage a supportive and informative environment.**

Hand-in-hand with their recommendations, the interns expressed the need to encourage a supportive learning environment. Interns should be seen as students, learning not only how to teach but also how to teach in culturally diverse environments. For the majority of the interns interviewed for this study, working in culturally diverse classes was a new experience for them. They, therefore, felt they were in need of support and encouragement from their mentors, supervisors, and cooperating teachers as they learned how to work in culturally diverse settings.

**The university should encourage and support cultural diversity, cultural awareness, and cultural appreciation.** Finally, to facilitate and incorporate diversity and multicultural awareness, the university should make diversity a priority through infusion of a multicultural perspective into each discipline. Through creation of platforms for discussions among the members of the university community, elementary school administrators, and classroom teachers, a strong cultural awareness program for preservice teachers would emerge. Furthermore, the university should provide resources and support for cultural diversity by encouraging a community of scholars who promote and encourage the discussion and engagement of diversity issues among and between the students, faculty, and the university community.

These recommendations suggest serious attention needs to be given to preparing preservice teachers to develop better ways of perceiving, behaving, and responding to diversity. There is no one approach that will prepare preservice teachers to meet the needs of all students. However, even though teacher education programs cannot fully prepare preservice teachers for the variety of diverse settings they will encounter, these programs should provide them with general and basic understanding of diversity, through redesigning curricula and instructional practices to reflect culturally responsive concepts. Understanding cultural differences is a life-long process. Teacher educators therefore must continuously seek for opportunities and ways that will help the preservice teachers to become more effective teachers of culturally diverse learners.

### **Suggestions for Future Possibilities**

From the findings of the study, several issues emerged and offer suggestions for further research.

To effectively prepare preservice teachers for an increasingly diverse student population, more research on cultural perceptions is needed. One important issue that was not explored in this study is the role that cooperating teachers, the university supervisors, mentors, and other teachers played in the interns' perceptions of culturally diverse students. This issue warrants further research. Also research about working in economically diverse settings is needed. Studies conducted about cultural diversity issues center on the Race and Ethnicity of students. There is limited research on poor White children. This study shows that socio-economic issues are becoming a major concern with the rural and suburban teachers. More research is therefore needed in this area.

Since more and more communities are becoming culturally diverse, most of the interns in this study are expected to teach in such settings. My study shows that whether it is a rural or a suburban community, cultural diversity is becoming an important issue for all communities. How will future interns handle diversity? How will teacher preparation programs address cultural diversity? Will future interns feel better prepared for diversity than the eight interviewed for this study? Also, longitudinal studies exploring the changes of perceptions among these eight interns would help understand better how cultural perceptions change overtime.

Life histories offer the potential for understanding how past experiences contribute to cultural perceptions. Studies that explicitly explore what preservice teachers bring with them from their lived experiences would benefit teacher educators who would understand better the cultural experiences and perceptions of interns, prior to the student teaching placements. Interns like Karen, Mary, and Linda who expressed the most difficulties teaching culturally diverse students would probably have felt differently had their cultural experiences prior to the internship been explored and information about diversity been offered through their teacher preparation classes and seminars.

Finally, more research that relates success stories of working with culturally diverse students is needed. Interns like Christina, and Jessica and the narratives of Amy, Michelle, and Doreen reveal an emerging understanding of cultural diversity. It is critical to hear the voices of these preservice teachers who work successfully with culturally diverse children because their experiences would empower others as they learn how to work in diverse settings. It is also important to explore ways that would encourage these preservice teachers to work in culturally diverse environments.

### **Closing Thoughts**

This study explored eight interns' perceptions of culturally diverse students. How they perceive these students was explored and drawn from their classroom narratives and personal experiences with diversity. Life history as it relates to experiences with diversity appeared to be a significant influence in shaping the interns cultural perceptions. Teaching preparation in college largely contributed to these interns' perceptions of their readiness to teach in culturally diverse environments. Even though five of these interns portrayed a growing interest, commitment, and understanding of diversity throughout their teaching internship, in the end they all perceived teaching culturally diverse students as presenting special challenges and felt they were not adequately prepared to address classroom diversity. For this reason, the eight interns indicated a preference for working with children from backgrounds similar to their own.

As beginning teachers, the preference to work in homogenous school settings may have been caused by the fears, concerns, and negative perceptions of the unknown, which in this

case centered on racial, linguistic, cultural, and economic makeup of diverse classrooms. Culturally diverse classrooms were seen as presenting special challenges that the eight interns felt unprepared to handle. This fear of the unknown was summed up by one of the participants:

My favorite saying is from William Faulkner who said, “We fear what we do not understand.” I was in fear of this year because I did not understand everything it was about. I did not know I would love teaching so much or that I would lie awake in tears because of the pain I saw inflicted on these kids. I know that selfishness has to become selflessness in order to become a good teacher. I am still seeking answers to a lot of questions in my mind. Why? Why? Why? I always want to know why. Do I stand a chance of making a good teacher? (Weekly reflection Dec. 12<sup>th</sup>).

This intern and the seven others in this study do not stand alone in their fears, hopes, dreams, and teaching challenges. Studies after studies that are directed towards preservice teachers (Dorene & William, 1994; Hall, et. al 1995; Mapp, 1997; and, Sudzina, 1993) show that the majority of preservice teachers go into teaching because they love children and love teaching. However, preservice teaching experience is a crucial and challenging time for many interns and inspires many fears and concerns. This is even more so for interns teaching in culturally different and unfamiliar settings. This study contributes to the urgency of the need to prepare all preservice teachers for the cultural diversity they will encounter within the public school classrooms.

In closing, I am once again reminded of my *otherness* and of my experiences as a culturally diverse child out in the school who is saying:

In order for you to know me, you need to know my world. To know me, is to know my experiences, my culture, my values, and my beliefs. To know me, is to understand my history, and my background. Take me, as I am. Do not want to change me. Accept me, with my faults, my experiences, and my limitations. Measure me as I am, not as you would wish for me to be.

Dewey (1859-1952) expressed a long time ago that to attend to the individual, to do so truly and with understanding is to become aware of where they come from. For preservice teachers

to understand their culturally diverse learners and be able to attend to them, they need to become aware of the different experiences of culturally diverse learners.

Preparation for cultural diversity can be achieved in many ways. Through preparation programs that offer the necessary cultural content; support, and cultural preparation; through research that explores preservice teachers prior experiences with diversity; through research that presents success stories of preservice teachers working with diverse children; and, through community partnerships between schools, universities, teachers, parents and children.

By articulating programs that enable interns to develop the skills necessary to work in culturally diverse settings, these teachers-to-be will feel more empowered with multiple ways of perceiving, behaving, and believing in essence, helping them feel better prepared to address the classroom cultural diversity.

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## APPENDIX A

### VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

#### Informed Consent for Preservice Teachers

**Title of Dissertation:** Exploring Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Cultural Diversity.

**Investigator:** Rose Kimani., Doctoral candidate, Dept. of Teaching and Learning

**Dissertation Advisor:** Dr. R. T. Graham., Dept. of Teaching and Learning

#### **Purpose:**

The goal of this exploratory study is to provide a broader understanding of your one-year student teaching experience. I will further seek to understand what classroom cultural diversity has come to mean to you this year. Using a life history approach I will explore how your past and present, personal and professional lived experiences influence and shape your identity as a teacher, teaching in a diverse setting.

#### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. There will be between one to three major interviews within a period of seven weeks. Each interview will last about 90 minutes. I will conduct the interviews between March 1999, and May 1999. The interviews will involve talking about your one year student teaching experience, your experience of working with culturally diverse students, your life history, and your growth as an educator. All interview will be conducted at your own convenience.

#### **Risks:**

No major risks are foreseen from your participation. You are free to choose not to answer any questions that I might ask without any penalty.

**Benefits:**

Direct benefits cannot be assured by from participation in the study. However, the study will be another step towards filling the gap in understanding the dynamic process of student teaching experiences, especially as this relate to teaching in diverse settings.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:**

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used. I will assign you any name of your choice. Also other names will be used for the schools and any other identifying information. Tapes used in the study and any other identifying documents will be destroyed after the data analysis. You will have the opportunity to review all the information used about you in the study.

**Compensation:**

There is no compensation for your participation in the study.

**Withdrawing from the study:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without penalty. To withdraw please contact me directly on the phone number or e-mail address provided below. You can also withdraw by contacting my advisor Dr. Richard Graham at the phone number and e-mail address provided below.

By signing below, you indicate that you have read and understood all the information provided for this project, that any questions or doubts have been answered, and that your participation is voluntary.

I have read the information and agree to participate. I can withdraw anytime without penalty.

---

Signature

date

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **Preservice Teacher Interview Guide Part I**

**Purpose:** To gain a sense of preservice teachers

- Experience of working with diverse students
- Their understanding of classroom cultural diversity
- The meaning of the student teaching experience

As we walk through your student teaching journey, I am interested in learning how you deal with diversity in your classroom. In your response to the following questions, please provide in as much details as you can about your classroom experiences with diversity.

#### **Classroom experiences**

1. Tell me how you decided to become an early childhood education teacher.
2. Tell me the grade levels you teach.
3. Describe the cultural diversity within your classroom.
4. How was your initial experience as a student teacher?
5. What are some of the teaching strategies you use in your classroom?
6. How do you go about dealing with the individual learning difference among your students?
7. How do you incorporate the cultural traditions of the different groups in your lesson plans?
8. Would you say teaching is difficulty? Have you had an occasion during your student teaching year when you had to deal with a teaching problem?
9. Have you had an occasion during your student teaching when you had to deal with a behavioral problem?
10. How would you describe your relationship with your students?

### **Support Services**

1. What kind of support does your school provide you with working in a culturally diverse setting?
2. Have you had an occasion when you met with a parent to discuss the learning of a particular student? How was this experience?
3. Have you had an occasion when you engaged a parent of child from a different culture in learning about their culture?
4. How does your school address cultural diversity?

### **Teacher Identity**

1. I would imagine that from your teaching experience you recognize your strengths and your weaknesses. How would you describe yourself?
2. Tell me what you like most about teaching? What are the rewards for you?
3. Although you have been in this classroom for a short time, what have you learnt about the children you teach, since you started teaching that's different from what you thought?
4. Do you think your ideas about teaching are different from other educators around you? How so?
5. Overall, how would you describe your student teaching experience?
6. Where do you imagine you'll be teaching one year from now?

## APPENDIX C

### **Preservice Teacher Interview Guide part II**

**Purpose of the interview:** To gather information on:

- Educational background
- Family Background

#### **Educational background**

1. Where did you do your elementary, middle school and high school education? Tell me about the diversity of the community that your schools were located. How was diversity addressed in your school? What images come to mind of your teachers? Do you recall experiencing cultural diversity at that time? How did you experience it?
2. Describe some of the courses you've taken for teacher preparation. Do you feel what you were taught was relevant to you and the children you are teaching?
3. Do you feel your college experiences prepared you to work in a culturally diverse setting? How so?
4. How was cultural diversity addresses in your teacher education program?
5. What would have made your teacher training experience better?

#### **Family Background**

1. In what year were you born?
2. Tell me about the diversity of the community where you were born and raised.
3. What occupations do your parents engage in?
4. How is diversity addressed in your home?
5. If you were to describe yourself in terms of ethnic background or cultural orientation, how would you do so?
6. If you were to think of a person or persons who has influenced you into becoming who you are today, who would these people be?
7. Do you think it is important to be concerned about your students especially your diverse students? Why so?

## Vita

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#### **Academic Education:**

Ph.D.: 2000: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Blacksburg, VA.

*Major*- Curriculum and Instruction (Elementary Education)

M.A.: 1994: Stockholm University, Institute of International Education

Stockholm, Sweden.

*Major* - International and Comparative Education.

B.A.: 1991: Shivaji University, Kolhapur, India

*Major* - Sociology; *Minor* - Psychology

#### **Professional Experience**

Aug 1999: Graduate Assistant, Department of Teaching and Learning.

- Mentoring of area elementary schools student teachers
- Evaluations of the internship experience

Aug 1998: Graduate Assistant, Center for Academic Enrichment and Excellence.

- Undergraduate academic advising and support
- Mentoring freshman and sophomore students
- Monitoring academic progress of freshman and sophomore students
- Student Referrals to intervention programs

Summer 1998 & 1999: Instructor, Undergraduate Virginia Program (UVP)

- Instructor, career summer program
- Advising and monitoring UVP students academic progress.

Aug. 1997: Graduate Teaching Assistant, College of Human Resources and Education.

- Teaching assistant, career preparation seminar for undergraduate students in the College of Human Resources and Education.
- Administrative duties, Undergraduate Assistant Dean's Office, College of Human Resources and Education.

Aug. 1996: Graduate Assistant, Department of Leadership and Policy Studies.

- Administrative Duties
- Conducting Research

Summer 1996 & 1995: Student Tutor/Counselor, Upward Bound Program, Virginia Tech

- Resident assistant, for Upward Bound students
- Counseling and Mentoring

Aug 1995: Project Assistant, Office of International Research and Development.

- Assistant Program Coordinator, NAFSA project on women in international development
- Program assistant, SANREM Project on Gender Development in the Philippines

Aug 1992-1994: Research Assistant, Institute of International Education, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

### **Internships**

Aug 1994: The Swedish Institute.

- Program evaluation on Self-Help Education with Production in Tanzanian

March 1992: The Swedish Red Cross Society.

- Program Coordinator, Red Cross Program for East African Refugees Camps.

### **Membership in Organizations and Offices Held**

- Chapter Secretary, Phi Beta Delta, Honor Society for International Scholars (1997-1998).
- NAFSA Organization for International Educators (1996-1999).
- International Students Association, Stockholm University, Sweden (1992-1994).
- Swedish Red Cross Society (1992-1994).
- National Association of Early Childhood Educators

## Honors and Awards

- Study Grant by the Swedish Institute.
- Red Cross Project Support through Internships
- First Class with Distinction, MA in International Education, Stockholm University, Sweden.
- First Class with Honors, BA in Sociology, Shivaji University, India.

## Presentations

Kimani, R. W. (1999) Making meaning of diversity: Exploring preservice teachers perceptions of classroom cultural diversity. Initial study findings presented at the College of Human Resources and Education. *Research Symposium*.

Kimani, R. W. and I. Fägerlind (1994). A general appraisal of the education component in Kenya's 8-4-4 educational reform. *Master's thesis*, Institute of International Education. Stockholm University: Stockholm, Sweden.

Kimani, R.W. (1993). Towards the Year 2000! The 8-4-4 system of education in Kenya: implementation, failures, and aspirations. *Seminar paper, Institute of International Education publication*, Stockholm University. May 1993, p. 1-32.

Kimani, R. W. & P. Pawar (1993). The debate on the State and its implication for the provision of basic education in Kenya. Theoretical discourse. *Seminar paper, Institute of International Education publication*, Stockholm University. July 1993. p. 1-19.

Kimani, R. W. & P. Pawar (1992). The changing role of public universities and their implications for female students. The cases of Kenya and Zimbabwe. *Seminar paper, Institute of International Education publication*, Stockholm University. October 1992 p. 1-28.