

Title:

Effective Instructional Supports for African American Teacher Candidates

Presentation Overview:

Through this poster presentation we seek to stimulate discussion of ways teacher education programs might provide effective instructional supports to African American teacher candidates to encourage greater recruitment and retention of this group of college students. Our poster will share data from a qualitative study framed within the scholarship of teaching context (Bain, 2004; Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 1993) and includes data gathered through interviews with teacher candidates as well as a content analysis of a required reflective assignment. The authors include a teacher education faculty member and an undergraduate teacher candidate. Through the poster we will describe the project, share preliminary results, and discuss possible instructional supports for African American teacher candidates.

Theoretical Framework & Context:

Census data indicates that the P-12 student population is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, especially in urban areas. More than four out of ten students in P-12 schools today are students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). By 2020, they are projected to be approximately half of the elementary and secondary population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). However, the teaching force is 87% White, 8% African American, and 3% Latino (National Education Association, 1992).

These demographic trends suggest that the number of minority teachers needs to increase. There is growing evidence that a higher number of teachers of color in a school – particularly African American and Latino – can promote the achievement of African American and Latino

students (Clewall, Puma, & McKay, 2001; Dee, 2000). Moreover, minority teachers serve as role models for minority students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1997; Clewell & Villegas, 1998). They are likely to provide culturally relevant instruction (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as well as offer alternate perspectives on appropriate and effective practices for all students (Banks, 1993).

Because of the large majority of White candidates, most research in this area has focused on how to prepare this group for urban teaching (del Prado Hill, Phelps, & Friedland, 2008, under review). Our interest for this project is how we might retain and support those African American college students who have chosen to enter the teaching profession and are interested in working in urban settings.

Within the childhood education program at Buffalo State College, out of 962 total undergraduates, only 62 identified themselves as African American (6.4%) as of fall 2006, even though the population of the city of Buffalo is almost 40% African American.

For candidates in the program, the methods courses are central to their professional development. These courses with corresponding field experiences are where candidates move between theory and practice through the process of reflection to develop into teachers ready for certification. Because of the crucial role played by methods courses we seek to better understand the ways in which the courses meet (and do not meet) the needs of our candidates. In particular, we are interested in the ways African American candidates experience these courses in order to develop systems of support to increase the number of African American teachers in childhood education.

Research Questions:

- What instructional activities (course activities, assignments, readings, student-teacher interactions, student-student interactions, and field experiences) support African American undergraduates in their goal to become certified childhood teachers for urban settings?
- What instructional supports are likely to help African American teacher candidates when they face challenges in the program?

Methods:

This project centers on the scholarship of teaching and learning (Bain, 2004; Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 1993) while also benefiting from undergraduate research. To better understand how teacher candidates experience the instructional practices of their methods courses, we believe the student voice is important as both subject of the research and author of the research. The faculty researcher (who is Latina) has taught two methods courses each semester since fall 2007. She interviewed other instructors who teach the courses to learn more about their instructional practices specific to the African American candidates in their courses. The student researcher (who is African American) was enrolled in two methods courses with a corresponding urban field placement in fall 2007, and she interviewed all but one of the candidates in the first step of the interview process. We believe that the student researcher brings great value to the project. As an African American candidate she has helped to identify areas of concern that were overlooked by the instructor. Moreover, other students in the courses seemed to be more forthcoming in their responses to a fellow student.

Participants:

For the first step of our study we sought participation from the six African American teacher candidates who took methods courses with the author during the past academic year (either fall 2007 or spring 2008 – this number includes the student researcher). This group includes the candidates who passed the courses as well as those who did not. In addition, we sought participation from two instructors who teach methods courses (either fall 2007 or spring 2008 – this number includes the faculty researcher). This sample helps us begin to understand the intended practices of the courses as well as the practices as they are experienced by African American candidates who successfully pass the course and those who do not. For the second step of the study, we will seek participation from an additional six teacher candidates and another teacher educator for a total of twelve teacher candidates and three instructors.

Data Collection:

The project began by the student researcher and the faculty researcher interviewing each other to practice data gathering techniques and to finalize the interview questions that would be posed to the participants. The data gathered from this preliminary step was included with the other data gathered from the participating candidates and instructors. Each participant was interviewed once using an interview protocol. We also requested a copy of the common reflective assignment from each candidate participant.

Preliminary Findings:

Upon a preliminary analysis of the data from step one of the data gathering process, several themes have emerged that are identified below.

Isolation – Due to their small numbers within the education program, African American candidates reported a sense of isolation in their coursework. They often found themselves as the only student of color in a course. Several methods blocks studied are located in urban areas, and these sections tend to draw a greater number of African American candidates; however, even in these sections there was a maximum of three students of color in each section. Because the methods courses emphasize the use of cooperative learning, students of color were often the only student of color within the smaller groupings as well.

Issues of Respect – Discussion of what constitutes respectful behavior between instructor and student and among students was expressed through a cultural lens in the interviews. The African American candidates expressed a criticism of professors and instructional practices that seemed too relaxed as well as a desire for professors to be clear about the authority that they hold. Interestingly gender seemed an important factor in definitions of respect. In those sections where there was a greater proportion of men (an underrepresented group in childhood education), there were more concerns about the lack of respect.

Addressing Standard English – The issue of Standard English raised a dual concern for the participants. First, the African American candidates were very uncomfortable by the negative view many White candidates held of the Black Vernacular used among students in the field placement and second, they discussed the anxiety they felt about their own use of Standard English, particularly in their writing.

Examining One's Own Bias – Several participants commented on the importance of the common reflective assignment as a way to examine the role of a variety of differences in their life. By exploring not only race/ethnicity, they saw the impact of other forms of difference such as

religion, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. As one participant commented, “I didn’t think that I could be biased as a Black woman, but the assignment helped me see that I do hold biases about certain kinds of differences.”

Personal Lives – Both instructors and candidates discussed the influence of personal lives on the success (and failure) to meet the course requirements. For all of the candidates involved in the study, there have been numerous family responsibilities, financial struggles, and issues related to being a first generation college student that led to attendance difficulties and difficulties meeting deadlines. Several candidates were required to redo the courses as a result. One candidate noted, “The challenges on the outside of school make it very difficult to meet the challenges on the inside.”

Preliminary Suggestions:

To address these many challenges, participants offered the following suggestions: (1) Identify African American teacher candidates who have successfully completed the program who can serve as mentors for those African American candidates beginning their methods courses, (2) Clarify expectations for respect and explore the cultural differences related to what constitutes respect and authority, (3) Discuss the politics related to Standard English and acknowledge the legitimacy of Black Vernacular as a language. Help all candidates understand the importance of students’ home language for their identity and school success. Provide non-judgmental feedback on candidates’ written work through the use of multiple drafts, (4) Continue to use the common reflective assignment as a means to explore the role of difference in teachers’ lives. Perhaps use this space as a way to explore issues related to Standard English, (5) All participants discussed the need for instructors to demonstrate a pedagogy of caring. Participants

talked about wanting instructors to reach out to their students and also acknowledge accomplishments. Rather than emphasizing how difficult the courses will be, the candidates wanted their instructors to inspire them to see the larger purposes behind the courses.

Educational Significance:

The number of students of color in U.S. schools is becoming increasingly diverse yet the number of teachers of color is declining (Nieto, 2002). In order to recruit and retain a greater number of teacher candidates of color, we believe we must examine the instructional practices of gatekeeping coursework in teacher education programs so that candidates of color are experiencing the supports they need. Although our study focuses on the instructional practices within the methods classes of one program, we believe our findings suggest relevant questions and a useful methodological approach appropriate for other institutions.

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Interview Questions for Instructors

- How do you define diversity?
- What are your experiences working with diverse teachers and P-12 students? Working in diverse settings? What have you learned from these experiences?
- Should teacher educators address issues of diversity in their methods courses? Explain. If so, what do you believe is the best way to address diversity issues and bias about diversity in the classroom?
- How does your own race, gender, social class, age, etc. influence the way you think about diversity, plan your curriculum, and interact with students in your methods courses?
- Describe the relationship you seek to create with your students in your methods classroom.
- What is the role of the field experience in preparing teachers for diverse settings?

- Which methods course activities, readings, and/or assignments are designed to address diversity? Are these effective? Explain.
- What strategies do you use to increase the respect for differences in your methods courses?
- Do you address the issue of Standard English in your methods courses? Explain.
- In thinking back over the semester, what are you most happy about with regard to your teaching in your methods courses?
- In thinking back over the semester, what would you want to change about your teaching in your methods courses?
- What challenges do you believe African American teacher candidates face in their teacher preparation programs? How might our program address these challenges?
- Any final comments?

Interview Questions for Teacher Candidates

- Why do you want to be a teacher?
- Describe your own schooling experiences – where did you attend elementary, middle, and high school? Do you feel you were adequately prepared for college? Explain.
- Describe your experience in the BSC education program. What has worked well for you? What has made your experience more challenging?
- Have you ever considered quitting the program? If so, why, and what led you to continue in the program?
- Where do you look for support in the program?
- What suggestions would you make to improve the program?
- What do you know about the experiences of other African American teacher candidates in the program?
- What kind of classroom works best for you as a student? In what kind of classroom do you learn best? What kind of classroom is more difficult for you?
- Describe the characteristics of an effective instructor for you. Describe the characteristics of an ineffective instructor for you.
- What was the impact of the following on your on your degree of satisfaction in the program? On your preparation to become a teacher? On your understanding of diversity?
 1. Field experience
 2. Field experience cooperating teacher
 3. Field experience classroom partner
 4. Methods course activities, readings, assignments, teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions
- How was diversity defined in your methods courses? (When people used the word “diversity” what do you believe they meant?) Do you agree with this definition?
- Do you feel the instructor addressed issues of diversity effectively? Consider the discussions in class as well as the instructor’s feedback on your written work. Explain.
- Was the issue of Standard English addressed either indirectly or directly? If so, do you feel it was addressed effectively? If not, do you feel that it should have been? Explain.
- Was the issue of respectful participation addressed either indirectly or directly? If so, do you feel it was addressed effectively? If not, do you feel that it should have been? Explain.
- Any final comments?

Common Assignment: Culturally Responsive Education Embracing Diversity (CREED)

EDU310W is a writing intensive course that carries a Diversity Designation. The goal of the diversity requirement is to prepare candidates to live and work in a multicultural society through an academic experience in which candidates can increase their knowledge related to one or more diverse groups, develop their inter-cultural cognizance, sensitivity, and commitment to social justice, and examine their personal perceptions, preconceptions and values and understand how they affect their relationships with others. (www.buffalostate.edu/intellectualfoundations/). Candidates will have the opportunity to work toward the aforementioned goal through class activities culminating in the writing of the CREED paper. The intent of this project is to support the development of culturally responsive teachers who embrace diversity through multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching.

Personal Profile: Present personal diversity profile. Examine influences of nationality, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, exceptionality, social class, and any other aspects that may influence how you think and act. Describe how these features are relevant to your personal perspective.

Reflections: Using the information from your Personal Profile, reflect on your own beliefs and biases. You may include professional reading that supports your ideas/thoughts in this section. Explain how this self-knowledge better prepares you to embrace and respect diversity among your current and/or future students.

School Composition: Using available data, present the make-up of different groups in your school and the perceived harmony levels among them. Begin thinking about how to create a culture in the classroom and the school that focuses on respecting and embracing diversity. You may want to visit the following website to find your school information:
http://emsc33.nysed.gov/repcrd2005/links/c14_dist.shtml

Curricula: Explore curricula that focus on diversity and tolerance. Use of high-quality children's literature and other activities and units of study related to the elementary core curriculum in the social studies can be valuable resources. Present information from educators that you may have interviewed or surveyed about helping students respect diversity and become more tolerant.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Describe the features of culturally responsive pedagogy. Make connections between CRP theory and practice as it impacts culturally responsive teaching. Explain the importance of having high expectations for all students. Talk about teacher behaviors that help create a culture that embraces diversity.

Action Plan: Write about the influences that will impact your efforts to teach tolerance. Explain what you have learned and how you will apply that knowledge to your own practice. Use real classroom examples in your plan. Determine how you will address personal biases as well as classroom instances of bias.

CREED Rubric

	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Target
Personal Profile	Three or fewer features of diversity are included in a personal profile. There is a failure to examine ways in which these features influence perspective.	At least 4-5 features of diversity are included in a personal profile. An examination of ways in which these features influence personal perspective is presented.	6 or more features of diversity are included in the personal profile. A clear, accurate, and precise examination of ways in which these features are relevant to personal perspective is presented.
Reflections	Reflections reveal a lack of understanding of personal beliefs and biases and their impact on future students. Little professional reading, anecdotal material, creative ideas, and/or insight are integrated.	Reflections reveal some understanding of personal beliefs and biases. There is an apparent awareness of the importance of self-knowledge to help one embrace and respect diversity. Some professional reading is included.	Reflections reveal a deeper understanding of personal beliefs and biases. An awareness of how this self-knowledge prepares one to embrace and respect diversity among students is shown. Outside professional reading, anecdotal material, creative ideas, and insight are integrated throughout.
School Composition	Student demographics and perceived harmony levels are unclear or inaccurate. There is a failure to present strategies for creating a classroom culture that respects and embraces diversity.	Student demographics and perceived harmony levels are articulated. Ways to create a classroom culture that respects and embraces diversity are presented.	Student demographics and the perceived harmony levels among groups are analyzed. Evidence of critical thinking about ways to create a culture in the classroom and the school that focuses on respecting and embracing diversity is elucidated.

<p>Curricula</p>	<p>There is a general lack of social studies curricula that focus on diversity and tolerance and/or low quality curricula. It is unclear whether or not educators have been consulted about their curriculum practices.</p>	<p>An exploration of social studies curricula that focus on diversity and tolerance is evident. Educators have been consulted about ways in which they have helped students learn to respect diversity and become more tolerant.</p>	<p>High quality social studies curricula that focus on diversity and tolerance are presented in meaningful ways. Information from teachers who have supported student diversity and tolerance is integrated throughout. Supporting data is presented. (Surveys, interviews, etc.)</p>
<p>Culturally Responsive Pedagogy</p>	<p>Some features of culturally responsive pedagogy are mentioned.</p>	<p>Features of culturally responsive pedagogy are explained. The impact of teacher behaviors on classroom culture is addressed.</p>	<p>In addition to the criteria for satisfactory performance, the writer has demonstrated a keen awareness of the connections of CRP theory and practice as well as the impact of teacher behaviors that create a culture of embracing diversity.</p>
<p>Action Plan</p>	<p>Few influences that impact efforts to teach tolerance are considered in this action plan. Little interest in teaching tolerance and embracing diversity is apparent.</p>	<p>Influences that impact efforts to teach tolerance are considered in the action plan. An interest in teaching tolerance is apparent.</p>	<p>Significant influences that impact efforts to teach tolerance are considered in a logical plan. Depth and breadth of thinking are revealed. A vested interest in teaching tolerance and embracing diversity related to personal practice is apparent.</p>

References	Irrelevant materials and resources are included. Less than five in-text citations are used. An inconsistent format for listing references is used.	Materials and resources that support culturally responsive education are included. At least five professional sources are cited in the text of the paper.	Rigorous and relevant materials and resources for supporting culturally responsive education that embraces diversity are included. More than five professional sources are cited in the text of the paper.
Conventions of Language	Vague, confused, muddled, and/or incoherent ideas are presented. Writing lacks discipline and critical elements. The paper is replete with grammatical and/or content errors.	Logical ideas that generally adhere to established usage are formulated. Few grammatical and/or content errors are noted.	Clear, coherent, and rational ideas that adhere to standards of established usage are formulated. The paper is free of grammatical and/or content errors.