Preservice Educators' Perceptions of Teaching in an Urban Middle School Setting: A Lesson from the Amistad

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Objectives and Theoretical Framework

Preparing European-American preservice teachers for diverse urban school settings poses multiple challenges. Of primary concern are the differences in race, culture, and community between teachers and students (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1992). Because new teachers prefer to work where they grew up (Quality Counts, 2000), most preservice teachers want to teach students who are like themselves in familiar settings, and they are often uncomfortable interacting with families from ethnic and language minorities (Gomez, 1996; Zeichner & Baker, 1995).

Pre-service teachers begin their preparation programs with strong beliefs about what it means to teach in urban settings, and these beliefs are connected to their own educational, working and middle class, suburban, and European-American experiences (Tiezzi & Cross, 1997). Responding to the challenges associated with a potential mismatch in the culture, class, and community between teachers and students, theorists such as Ladson-Billings (1994) maintain that teachers who choose to teach in diverse urban settings need to be cognizant of their students' race and ethnicity. They need to validate students' heritage, use their culture in the classroom, and assist students in negotiating the mainstream culture. Because many new teachers are not familiar with the culture nor the history of diverse groups of students, they need to become aware of the cultural communities where they teach (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999), and they need positive field experiences in diverse urban schools (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996; Reed, 1998).

Preparing preservice educators for middle school teaching also poses numerous challenges. Preservice teachers prefer high school to middle school (Sage, 1989-90), viewing the middle school adolescent as an "uncivilized beast or as a disembodied hormonal surge" (Finders, 1988-99, p. 256) as well as "inherently unruly, unteachable, or perplexing" (Midgely, Feldhauer, & Eccles, 1988, p. 206).

Preservice teachers also perceive middle schoolers' high energy levels in a negative light, and control is often the focus of the conversations about teaching in the middle grades (Finders, 1998-99; Sage, 1989-90). Because preservice teachers' attitudes seem operationalized before student teaching begins, personal contact and first hand experiences help to influence positive attitudes toward middle school students and lead toward a greater understanding of the characteristics of middle level students and middle level teaching (Sage, 1989-90; Stahler, 1995).

The literature strongly suggests that preservice teachers hold numerous assumptions about both urban and middle school settings. This article describes a field experience activity, set in a culturally diverse urban middle school, that examined the culturally charged historical event, the *Amistad* uprising. In this article we explore what the experience revealed about pre-service teachers' understandings (and perhaps misunderstandings) of diverse populations of urban middle school students.

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Methods and Data Sources

In this project, urban eighth graders learned about an important event in U.S. history through a combination of historical re-enactment, film, and an expository trade book. The *Amistad* story centers around a group of Mende people illegally brought to the U.S. from West Africa in 1839. The Africans' struggle to regain their freedom involved great personal courage and initiative on their part, as well as determined support from American anti-slavery advocates in the lengthy legal battle that ultimately set them free.

In September 2003, these eighth-grade students read *Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom* by Walter Dean Myers (1997), visited a replica of the *Amistad* ship, and viewed the Spielberg film, *Amistad*. After students visited the ship and read the book, several teacher education candidates met in small groups with the children to engage in pre-viewing discussion. The participants then viewed the film and discussed the movie in the context of the ship visit and Myers' book.

Participants

The participants included 90 eighth-grade students attending a culturally diverse urban school and their four core subject area teachers (three European-American, one African-American). Fifty-five percent of the students are African American, 27% are European American, and 18% are Latino/a. College participants included five teacher education faculty (four European American and one Latina, three of whom are the authors of this paper) and 38 teacher candidate volunteers from a variety of certification areas, primarily English, social studies, math, and the sciences. Of this group, 35 are European American (92%), 2 are Latino/a (5%), 1 is African American (2%).

Procedures

The eighth graders read and discussed *Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom* (Myers, 1997) and the historical events associated with it in their English and social studies classes. Students and teachers then visited

the replica of the *Amistad* ship where historical information about the incident was provided. Two days after the ship visit, the eighth-grade students and teachers along with the teacher candidates and teacher education faculty viewed an adapted version of Spielberg's *Amistad* film.

Teacher candidates were given an outline of the *Amistad* events before meeting with the eighth-grade students. Before viewing the film, the teacher candidates met in small groups with two to three students for one-half hour in the eighth-grade classrooms and asked questions designed to activate and determine students' prior knowledge. After viewing the film, the students and the teacher candidates engaged in further discussion. Teacher candidates recorded students' responses to the questions and discussions and then wrote out field notes after the event.

Approximately three months later, the researchers individually interviewed six teacher candidates. This group was selected because of the interesting issues they raised in their field notes. Five were European American and one identified himself as a mixture of Italian and Puerto Rican heritage. Open-ended questions prompted them to elaborate on how the *Amistad* experience contributed to their preparation for teaching, their view of middle school students, and their interest in urban teaching. They were also asked about their prior knowledge of the *Amistad* story and their role as discussion moderator with the eighth graders.

Data Sources

Data sources included teacher candidates' discussion notes and field notes as well as transcriptions of the six teacher candidate interviews. Three teacher candidates did not return their notes, so the data set includes 35 sets of discussion notes and 35 sets of field notes. For data analysis the authors also used their own field notes kept throughout the planning, execution, and follow-up to the project.

Data Analysis and Results

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was ongoing throughout the study. The authors regularly read and re-read the data and discussed patterns, themes, and issues as they emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Ongoing analysis throughout the project followed a pattern of independent reading of the data, independent writing of analytic memos in response to the data, group discussion to reach consensus on emerging themes, re-reading the data to confirm, refute, and/or elaborate initial conclusions.

The three authors read all 35 teacher candidate field notes independently. Following this reading, analytic induction (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993) was used to identify the emerging themes. After discussion to reach consensus on different points of understanding (Maxwell, 1996), the authors conducted a close analysis of the data using the following coding categories that emerged from the preliminary readings:

- Working in a culturally diverse setting
- Experience with middle school students
- Prior knowledge of the *Amistad* events

The authors followed up on these coding categories with probing questions during the teacher candidate interviews. Each author read the interview transcripts and noted where the preliminary findings had been confirmed, refuted, or elaborated.

Results

To distinguish between the data collected through the teacher candidate field notes and the teacher candidate interviews, the interview transcripts identify the speaker through the use of a pseudonym and they generally follow the reporting of the field note data in the text for each section.

Working in a culturally diverse setting. Six teacher candidates (17%) reported that they enjoyed working with a culturally diverse group of students noting the "interesting," "magical," and "unique" quality of the experience; however, one of these six believed she "lucked out" by getting a "good group" and didn't think every experience would be as "wonderful." Six (17%) felt that the cultural backgrounds of the students did not influence the teaching and learning in the project. Four (11%) had previous experience with culturally diverse students and as a result felt comfortable in with this experience. Of the 35 teacher candidates only one felt he experienced difficulties because of the students' culturally diverse background. Significantly, 21 teacher candidates (60%) did not comment on the cultural diversity of the students even though the field note guidelines specifically asked them to do so.

Three candidates (8%) noticed language differences between themselves and the students noting that decoding was difficult due to students' use of Non Standard English. One teacher candidate was particularly interested in students' code switching depending on whether students were discussing academic or personal issues.

In response to questions about the cultural and racial backgrounds of the eighth graders during the interviews, several teacher candidates discussed the topic through the dichotomous lens of urban schools (which are cultural and racially diverse) and suburban schools (which are culturally and racially less diverse). Moreover, the teacher candidates connected the differences to issues of classroom control and student needs. Connie noted,

> I remember it being really loud and I used the word 'boisterous' but I think that's sort of typical in an urban setting, isn't it, as opposed to maybe a suburban setting…I walk into those schools and the kids are…expected to be more quiet and remain in their seats and stuff.

She saw other differences between teaching in urban and suburban settings.

> It's a drastic difference. I don't like that it is, but I think there's a major benefit that I can pull for them and for myself if I teach in an urban setting. I've also heard it takes a very special person to be able to keep a positive environment…Unfortunately a lot of the children bring things from home and they have a lot more challenges at home.

James also identified the assumptions associated with urban teaching,

> The urban myth, it's like bad settings, bad schools, and right away I found that with these kids it's not that at all. Maybe it's this particular school but it wasn't anything like from what I hear…People pretty much tell you, 'Oh, you don't want to teach in an urban school.' Well, if you prepare like you're walking in…like a lion tamer, then you're going to be a lion tamer. You just have to prepare to walk in there and just have some order and tell them that…I'm not going to be here to control you, I just want to be your teacher. I want to have a great relationship with you.

In considering the role that cultural and racial diversity might play during the discussions with the eighth graders, James worried about potential conflicts.

> I wanted to make sure that the kids watched what they said…I didn't want them to offend anyone…I tried to make that as clear as I could to them…just give me what you feel without trying to hurt

> someone else…I didn't want the racism factor, or putting down the other race, I didn't want any of that to occur.

Ellie and Janie, on the other hand, seemed to want to avoid assumptions connected to the cultural and racial backgrounds of students. Ellie noted,

> Their diversity didn't seem to be an issue at all…It wasn't like something that was conscious. [Their cultural background] was just something that they carried with them.

Janie said,

> I guess it depends on your background… my parents never talked about that stuff. They didn't judge like that so I just didn't think in that way. I mean, both my students were Black kids and…it just didn't really faze me that much.

Experience with middle school students. The teacher candidates seemed generally positive about their experiences with the students, and several were quite enthusiastic. Students' knowledge of the *Amistad* event seemed to positively impact candidates' perceptions. Six teacher (17%) candidates cited students' responsiveness and willingness to learn. Other descriptors included "thoughtful," "bright," "outgoing," and "respectful and polite."

During the interviews Janie talked about her initial assumptions about the middle school students.

> When I first got in there, there were a few kids in the corner who were just completely acting up, out of their seat, and I just said to myself, "Please don't' give me one of those kids," and of course one of those kids was my kid so I immediately thought he wasn't going to answer my questions. He doesn't want to be here because my first impression of him was he's maybe a bad kid or he just doesn't want to be there that day or didn't want to participate, but that's not how it turned out…He was the one who answered all my questions.

Connie's initial expectations were also challenged by the experience.

> They were more mature than I would have thought. Like young adults. I don't remember being like that in eighth grade, so mature.

Other teacher candidates saw the energy often associated with middle school students in a positive light describing it as an enthusiasm and willingness to participate because of (or in spite of) the fact they are at the middle school level. For example, Jessica noted, "I loved these students because they participated and they listened." James described the eighth graders as "definitely rambunctious… they acted fidgety and antsy…but other than that they showed a willingness to learn." Ellie commented,

> I came away with a positive perception…these kids are so curious and they were really open and they didn't have any walls built up and they were goofy and they were silly, but they seemed to be very much, very honest and open. So I liked that and I thought…maybe this is the place for me.

The unpredictability associated with middle schoolers is what engaged Jessica,

> They're so interesting at that age. I think they're so interesting because in a span of 15 minutes you are spending with them, they'll flip flop back and forth between needing you to give them directions and needing you to be the teacher and then they'll go back to, "I'm an adult, I know everything."

Prior knowledge of the Amistad events. Nineteen of the teacher candidates (54%) said they were "surprised" or "impressed" by students' abundant knowledge and opinions of the *Amistad* story. One candidate said they "dazzled me with all the interesting things they knew...[the *Amistad*] is clearly a topic they care about."

In contrast, ten of the teacher candidates (28%) reported little or no knowledge of the *Amistad* story prior to this project, including one African American teacher candidate. Eleven teacher candidates (31%) acknowledged that they learned new things about U.S. history from this experience, and several felt they had learned more from the students than the students had learned from them.

Three teacher candidates (8%) had prepared for the project by reading about the event or renting the film, and two others said they knew about the *Amistad* because they had taken an African American history course. One candidate said that learning about the *Amistad* was the "best and most rewarding aspect of the project." Three teacher candidates (8%) said they had gotten new insights into the institution of slavery.

One teacher candidate said that honest discussions about race are possible in culturally diverse settings, but only one teacher candidate acknowledged her race relative to the students, wondering how Black students would feel about discussing slavery with a White teacher. We interviewed this teacher candidate (Ellie) who elaborated on this comment,

> I do feel compromised as a White teacher with some of my students. I do feel that I can't relate to them culturally because they need to be interacted with on a certain level that I have no experience in doing that and I think it would probably be more effective for them.

When questioned on this issue during the interview, James said,

> Maybe they looked at me different [as a White teacher], that I might not know where they came from. Like I don't know what they went through or how they actually feel…I think like being a White teacher over them…like I was a minority in the group so I think they were kind of looking at me like, iffy, like does he really know?

Throughout the interviews, all the teacher candidates mentioned how little they knew about the *Amistad* event, especially relative to the eighth graders whose knowledge they saw as extensive. For example, Jessica said, "I didn't really know much of anything." Connie concurred,

> [I knew] very little. All I knew was that it had to do with terrible treatment of slaves, but I didn't know that…I knew they were coming to America but I didn't know the historical outcome, that they were sent back.

Ellie seemed to feel disadvantaged by not knowing of the *Amistad* from both a personal and professional standpoint:

> The only thing that I found intimidating about the whole experience is that I kind of walked in there and I, honestly, I didn't know anything about the *Amistad*, and maybe it's because I had flawed education or maybe it was because back 15 years ago they didn't do stuff like that, but they were telling me things and I was learning from them. And I kind of felt guilty about not being able to broaden their knowledge. I mean I think we each can add to each other's experience, but I don't know how much I contributed to their knowledge…I didn't know the ship was in town which is kind of sad. It's embarrassing…As an educator you want to know everything, know about all things, be able to answer any questions. And you feel compromised. It's very intimidating…I never even heard of the film.

James and Janie both felt they learned a great deal from the experience. James commented,

> I actually learned a lot from the experience. I learned a lot more than I thought I was going to learn. Not just from the

> students but from the movie because that was actually the first time I'd seen it.

And, Janie said,

> All I knew is that it was a ship that transported them and it was just something that was not right. They weren't allowed to take those men from that area, that's basically all I knew. Then [the students] taught me a lot more than that.

Andrew sought information about the *Amistad* prior to the movie and discussions with the eighth graders, but his knowledge was limited, too.

> I heard the name, maybe the movie…I never watched it…The day before I just did a quick Google and familiarized myself with the whole story, but…I learned a lot that day myself to be honest.

Discussion

Because of the frequent cultural mismatch between teachers and students as noted at the start of this article, preservice teachers need more knowledge of and experience with culturally diverse ideas and settings to be more effectively prepared to work in schools, particularly culturally diverse urban schools. As Ladson-Billings (1994) explains, teachers need to be familiar with the culture and history of their students.

However, teachers may be hesitant to approach culturally charged topics with diverse groups of students. For example, in the area of social studies, teachers (and the textbooks they use) appear to avoid conflict, and topics dealing with diversity are seen as potentially charged with conflict (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Banks & Banks, 2004; Loewen, 1995; Percoco, 2001).

The teacher candidates involved in the *Amistad* study provide insight into why teachers, particularly new teachers, might be hesitant to address issues related to cultural diversity. For example, several teacher candidates noted the stereotypes connected to teaching in urban (and culturally diverse) settings which indicate concerns about a loss of control. McNeil (1987) notes that teachers avoid certain topics to maintain control over the classroom setting. Teachers may avoid discussing topics where the outcome of the discussion is unpredictable because of a fear of losing control over the class.

The ability to include culturally-relevant topics in the curriculum is often cited as a necessary ingredient for successful teaching in urban schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Reed, 1998; Tatum, in press).

Significantly, the teacher candidates in this study had little knowledge of the *Amistad* events which may represent a lack of knowledge about the history of oppressed groups. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. Candidates' lack of knowledge about the *Amistad* events suggests a need for more thorough preparation in the history of cultural diversity in the U.S., although their statements of interest in what they learned implies an openness to learning this kind of information.

More knowledge of America's cultural history may help mainstream teacher candidates to be more culturally aware and better prepared to offer culturally relevant curricula. Furthermore, well-structured field experiences during their preparation can help preservice teachers develop a comfort level and strategies for working in culturally diverse settings and discussing culturally charged topics.

The *Amistad* study suggests another reason why new teachers may have difficulty addressing culture in the classroom and curriculum. In this project, of particular importance is what the teacher candidates did *not* say. Most of them did not comment on the cultural diversity of the students even though they were specifically asked to consider this issue, while others said they believed the students' cultural background did not influence their experience.

This apparent lack of attention to the diversity of the students seems to reflect a "colorblind" perception of students' cultural backgrounds whereby teacher candidates see themselves as treating students equally by claiming that students' differences do not matter (Schoefield, 2004; Tatum, 1997). Guiding teacher candidates to explore their own culture relative to the culture of their students in teacher education courses may better prepare future teachers to address the role of culture in the classroom and in the larger society, thereby facilitating effective teaching.

The *Amistad* study also raises important issues relative to preparation for middle level teaching. When teacher candidates talked about these middle schoolers as *students,* irrespective of culture, their responses were generally positive and enthusiastic. They were impressed by students' knowledge, enthusiasm, and demeanor. Moreover, they talked about how the *Amistad* experience changed their thinking about middle school students and caused them to reconsider working with this age group.

It seems that well-crafted field experiences can dramatically change preservice teachers' perceptions about middle schoolers. The majority of the teacher candidates specifically said that they had a positive experience as discussion moderator. This may be in part because the candidates had a set of guiding questions for the discussion and because the eighth graders had adequate background information on the *Amistad* events, two conditions for effective small-group discussion (Alvermann & Phelps, 2005).

Candidates also identified a number of strategies that they felt helped them to have a successful experience, such as listening carefully to students, making connections, and demonstrating enthusiasm. These are similar to the qualities that adolescents themselves cite as contributing to the success of small group discussions (Alvermann, et al, 1996). The opportunity for close contact with middle school students in an informal but structured small group setting appears to have been a contributing factor in the positive feelings that teacher candidates took away from the *Amistad* experience.

Also significant in this project was the surprise and respect the teacher candidates had for the eighth graders' knowledge of the *Amistad* events. Putting the preservice teachers into a position where students knew far more than they did caused the teacher candidates to view these urban middle school students as smart, interesting and interested rather than as "at-risk" or through another deficit concept.

This finding suggests that preservice teacher preparation programs might consider developing field experiences that allow urban students to show their strengths first. The effects of tutoring programs where preservice teachers and others work to help students overcome weaknesses is well established (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Shanahan; 1998). However, there may be great power in developing field experiences in which students have opportunities to show what they know.

Experiences such as the *Amistad* project can be valuable in the preparation of teachers for urban middle schools. The combination of a relatively structured experience, small group interaction, and an interesting and culturally pluralistic topic appears to have had a positive impact on candidates' attitudes toward urban middle school students, as well as on their own self-confidence.

Including such activities in teacher preparation programs can only help pre-service teachers better understand themselves and the students they will teach. What we hope for is that teacher candidates feel the way Ellie did after this

experience: "So as an urban educator, yeah, it left me with a positive experience that I could possibly do this because ya know what, it's not intimidating…."

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