

March 10, 2009

## Stepping Out to Find Other Ways of Knowing

**A recent Associated Press news article** by Hope Yen reports that Hispanics make up one-fourth of the kindergarten population and one-fifth of all K-12 students. The article stated that in 2007 more than 40 per cent of all students in K-12 were minorities — Hispanics, African-Americans, Asian-American, and others. Educators are quite familiar with these statistics, not only from research, but also from experience. Many of our local elementary school classes have over 60 per cent minority enrollment.

**This demographic shift** in the student population presents a challenge to the “average” classroom teacher. “Average” in this context translates to female and European American. Gollnick and Chinn state that “84 per cent of the teachers are European-American and 75 per cent are female” according to the U.S. Census bureau statistics from 2006 (2009, p. 3).

**Why should this shift** in demographics be a challenge to our current teaching force? Gollnick and Chinn believe that “if a teacher fails to understand the cultural factors in addition to the intellectual and physical factors that affect student learning and behavior, it will be difficult to help students learn” (2009, p. 4). A teacher may interpret the behavior of an unresponsive student to be an act of defiance or disinterest, when in fact the student may be hungry, traumatized, or an English language learner — factors that new teachers may not consider.

## The Same, or *Not* the Same?

**A course in multicultural education (MCE)** is an attempt by Teacher Education (TE) programs to present data, strategies, and concepts for teacher candidates to consider as they step into a classroom where students are very much different from them. We often hear teacher candidates say they will treat all students the same, but in MCE, the premise is that all students are *not* the same and do not learn in the same way. Theories of learning support this contention, e.g. Vygotsky’s theory of social interaction and Bandura’s theory of social learning.

**Strategies for instruction** designed to reach all students abound in TE programs: differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, the inquiry method, the Socratic Seminar, and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). Teacher candidates are also instructed to consider students’ learning styles and multiple intelligences when designing lessons.

**Teacher Education programs** present a smorgasbord of ways and means to reach all students, but until teacher candidates internalize the fundamental

concept that each student brings a fund of cultural knowledge to the classroom, all the theories and strategies in TE programs are mere panacea to the greater challenge of recognizing the strength and value of other ways of knowing.

## **Toward Understanding and Respect**

**The MC Step Out assignment** for my teacher candidates is designed to help them experience another cultural world view in ways that add to their personal fund of knowledge. It requires them to attend an event that focuses on one of the variables of MCE — age, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and socioeconomic status, among others — and then reflect on the meaning and value of that event as it relates to their development as an emerging professional.

**The assignment develops** Scholar-Practitioner Tenet 3, *One who understands, respects, and values diversity*, which is one of seven scholar-practitioner tenets that frame the University of Arkansas' Master of Arts in Teaching Program.

**MC Step Out also provides** evidence for the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard 4, Diversity, which reads: *The unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn*, (NCATE, 2009).

**The assignment addresses** another requirement of NCATE's Standard 4 by offering candidates "the opportunity to interact with adults, children, and youth from their own and other ethnic / racial cultures throughout their college careers, and particularly in their professional preparation programs" (ibid).

**MC Step Out asks students** to "step out" of their comfort zones. By participating in an event that stretches their ZPD (zone of proximal development), teacher candidates become better prepared to acquire the "dispositions necessary to help all students learn" (NCATE, 2009).

**Teacher candidates** explore this experience by writing a reflective paper that:

- a) describes the event,
- b) connects the event to some aspect of multicultural education as described in the course text (Gollnick & Chinn, 8th ed.), and
- c) explores how the experience helps them as emerging professionals.

**Teacher candidates** are given a project description and a rubric to guide their "step out." They identify a multicultural event to attend. They collect evidence of their participation such as a ticket, news release, or program, to share in class. They write a report to address the three elements in the objective. Students are expected to follow all the conventions for writing in an

academic voice. Finally, students upload their report to a data collection software program, Chalk and Wire, for assessment.

**During the Spring 2008 semester**, my teacher candidates took the “first step” in the MC Step Out assignment. One of the students sent me this comment:

*I just remember my first all black play like it was yesterday. It made a HUGE difference in my consciousness of those who seem to be outnumbered or uncomfortable in a given situation.*

**I eagerly await the responses** from this year’s class to see how their Step Out makes a difference in their perceptions about the multicultural classroom.

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**Reference:**

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