"They're Not All Like Me!"
The Role of Educational Psychology in Preparing Teachers for Diversity

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I walk into the first class session of my introductory educational psychology course for preservice teachers and start writing on the board—the course number, my name, and the following statement: There are a thousand good ways to teach, and some really bad ones!

As we wait for the inevitable latecomers who are still trying to find the room or figuring out the bus system, students fill out a personal information sheet that asks for their names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, majors, and the answer to the question: "In your own experience, what things help you actually learn in classes? Please list as many factors as possible."

After everyone has a chance to think and write, we go around the room introducing ourselves. Starting with me, each person shares his or her name, career goal, and one of the things that helps him or her learn. As they talk, I write down each factor they identify, ending up with a list of thirty or so different things on the board. Then, looking at all of these, we talk about how different we are in what helps us learn. Some of us really benefit from an organized lecture, while others hate lectures and learn best through small group discussion. Some want notes in outline form on the overhead, while others understand visuals or diagrams better. But we also talk about how we are the same: no one ever says they learn best when they aren't allowed to ask questions, or when the teacher is disorganized, unenthusiastic, or gives no concrete examples of the concepts being taught. Finally, I point out that the different learning preferences my students have shared are only one aspect of the dilemma of student diversity that is common to all teachers: How can I try to meet all of my students' different learning preferences, needs, and goals in one class, one classroom? This then leads me into the syllabus and why I have chosen to structure the class as I have.

The Need to Prepare Teachers for Diversity

Our introductory educational psychology course is usually the first education course taken by preservice teachers at the University of Georgia. I teach one section of thirty-five students, mostly freshman and sophomore, and the graduate teaching assistants I work with teach ten more sections with similar enrollments, so each semester we have the opportunity to teach about 385 students, at least two-thirds of whom plan to become teachers. The above scene is repeated, with minor variations, on the first day in every one of our classes, and it introduces some of the main themes related to diversity that we will emphasize throughout the course: that students all learn differently, that no one way to learn is the "right" or "best" way, that there are, nevertheless, important commonalties in how we all learn, and that it is the teacher's art and responsibility to design instruction that, as far as possible, respects and values every student as a unique human being by enabling them all to learn effectively and to discover the potentials that lie within them.

Why do we feel it is so important to start preservice teachers thinking about student diversity that we begin our classes with this activity? Like most of their counterparts in teacher education throughout the United States, our students are overwhelmingly European American, middle-class, English-speaking, and female (Zimpher 1989). Almost all of them are also "good students," that is, students who have done well enough in traditional educational settings to be accepted to, and stay, at a major state university. Undergraduates admitted to the UGA College of Education in 2003 averaged a 3.71 high school GPA and combined SAT score of 1175. They are the honor roll students, the student

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council members, and the HOPE scholarship winners. Yet, in the future, they will be teaching many students who are not at all like them. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2003) reports that in the 2001–02 school year, 40 percent of all students in public schools were minorities, 41 percent qualified for free- or reduced-cost lunch programs, and 13 percent had Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) due to an identified disability. In 2000–01 (the most recent year for which these data were available), 9 percent of public school attendees were in programs for Limited English Proficient students, and 7 percent were suspended or expelled for unacceptable behaviors. Summary dropout statistics were not available, but individual states reported dropout rates (as measured by four-year high school completion data) between 10 percent (Wisconsin) and 35 percent (Louisiana).

These are the students, the "failures," the "troublemakers," or simply those whose ethnicity, economic class, or home culture does not match that of the mainstream school culture, who will need good teaching the most (Power 1991), and yet these are the students whom our pre-service teachers are least prepared to teach (Bakari 2003; Chizhik 2003; Hastings and Oakford 2003). A large number of our preservice teachers are simply unaware of how different the lives of many children are from their own. Others believe they will be able to avoid dealing with these differences by teaching in private schools or teaching only advanced classes. Still others are aware of and worried about the challenges that diverse students may pose to them as beginning teachers. Therefore, our course goals in relation to diversity are to raise preservice teachers' awareness of the sources and effects of many types of diversity, to foster in them the disposition to teach all of their students, and to help them begin to develop strategies for doing so. We do this by both what we teach and how we teach it.

Teaching about Diversity

Educational psychology, a field traditionally focused on theories about the learning and development of individuals, seems uniquely positioned to address these goals. Traditional topics in educational psychology can easily be taught in ways that help students gain a better understanding and appreciation of human diversity. In studying behaviorism, for instance, our students learn that, unlike rats and pigeons, human beings often interpret reinforcements and punishments differentially, depending the social context and their individual characteristics. In cognitive science, they study how people's schemas are constructed from their own unique life experiences and how these schemas, in turn, influence how people interpret and learn from new experiences (Anderson 1984). In studying the many factors affecting motivation to learn, students come to understand that student motivation is not primarily a matter of quantity, but of direction; there really are no "unmotivated" students, there are just students who are motivated by different means and toward different ends than the teacher had in mind.

We also teach on many topics specifically related to diversity. In addition to a regular textbook, students read from an extensive coursepack of articles on topics such as temperament (Kurcinka 1991), sexual orientation (Walker 2002), peer relationships (Shaffer 2005), and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson 2001). They are introduced to ideas about how culture affects schooling through articles by Heath (1982), Delpit (1988), and Hilliard (1991). They learn about the effects of poverty from Brooks-Gunn and Duncan's (1997) classic review and about the value of authentic tasks for reaching disaffected students from an article by the former director of the Foxfire Fund (Starnes and Paris 2000).

In addressing all these topics, we intentionally avoid the traditional psychological contrast between the majority of "normal" people and the few who are "exceptional." Our syllabus explicitly rejects this viewpoint from the outset, stating,

> [This course] will not tell you the one, best way to teach all children, nor will it lay out an organized sequence of stages through which all "normal" children can be expected to pass at certain known ages. This is in part because nobody, including educational psychologists, yet knows all we need to know about learning and development, and in part because many people, including us, believe that different children will "normally" develop and learn differently, especially in different situations.

Instead, we want preservice teachers to realize that they will teach no "average" students. Each of their students will have different areas of talent and difficulty, different prior experiences, learning patterns, interests, and goals. To teach well, they will need to know, value, and "make room" in their classrooms for all these differences. Often, different characteristics have differing advantages and disadvantages that tend to balance out. For example, people with "easy" temperaments—adaptable, optimistic, not particularly intense or sensitive—are often more cooperative and more pleasant to know or teach; but it is the intense, stubborn, sometimes "difficult" people—like Winston Churchill and Thomas Edison—who more often make their mark on society as a whole (Kurcinka 1991). In other areas, some alternatives are clearly more advantageous than others, but we emphasize that statistics are not fate, and people do grow and change. For example, although statistics show that on average children of divorced parents do worse in school, engage in more promiscuous behavior, take more drugs, and engage in more criminal activity as compared to children from intact families (Amato 2000), most children of divorced parents do very well,

avoiding all of these pitfalls. Others may engage in one or more of these behaviors, but then find their way out, with help or on their own, becoming stronger than ever at the formerly "broken" places (Shaffer 2005). In other words, while we want our students to understand the common causes and effects on learning of many different types of diversity, we also want to guard against their making unwarranted assumptions about the characteristics or potential of any individual student.

Finally, in treating practical topics such as curriculum, classroom management, and assessment, we offer our students specific processes and strategies they can use as teachers to meet the needs of the diverse learners in their future classrooms. We talk about the effectiveness of including in the curriculum materials that allow students at many skill levels to access and connect with a variety of their personal interests. Then, through class discussion, we generate examples of materials that could be used in the grade levels and subject areas that our students actually plan to teach. We give students a rubric for making classroom management decisions that focuses first on changing the physical or social environment of the classroom or the teaching methods and materials to eliminate management problems, before trying to change student behavior through more traditional rewards and punishments (Knapp 2003). In studying assessment, we analyze the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of traditional and alternative classroom assessment strategies for different types of students, and call attention to how the mixture of assessment types in our own class gives each student a better chance to demonstrate learning in ways that match individual strengths and concerns.

Practicing What We Teach

We often turn the mirror on ourselves in this way, inviting students to think about how we value and use their diverse experiences, learning preferences, and goals in our own introductory educational psychology class. Research on the "apprenticeship of experience" shows that new teachers tend to teach in the ways they themselves were taught (Buchmann 1989; Meier 1992). Because most of our students have had few prior experiences with classes that value and accommodate diverse learners, how we teach is at least as important as what we teach (Knapp 2000).

Student reflective journals and small group work are the main tools we use to help students explore their own experiences of diversity. For instance, even though most of them were compliant and successful in K–12 schooling, our students can all remember a time when they felt unfairly punished by a teacher. Writing about these experiences in their journals and sharing them in class helps our students begin to understand what school is like for students who are often "in trouble," and why escalating punishments are not likely to reach or reform these students (Shandler 1996). Students are often amazed at the diversity they discover among their classmates. During our work on culture and communication, for instance, students talk about the communication norms in their own families. One question that always generates a great deal of discussion is whether they were taught by their families to say "Ma'am" and "Sir", and if so, to whom? Our primarily Southern-raised students are sometimes appalled that their classmates from "decent" families in the North were never taught to do this. In turn, students from the North often tell vivid stories of being misunderstood by teachers and other authorities when they first "moved South" and were unaware of this custom. According to what they tell us on final evaluations, this one experience of finding out first-hand that many of their own classmates don't share their automatic assumptions about "polite" speech has a greater impact on our students than all our scholarly reading and talk about regional, ethnic, and class differences in conversational conventions.

To accommodate the different learning preferences students discussed on the first day of class, we use a variety of activity formats and groupings in instruction. Students might complete a short survey and then share answers in pairs or threes. Small groups of four to six students, based on student choice, teaching major, or just "counting off," might be asked to draw a metaphoric representation of a key concept or develop a list of potential causes or solution strategies for the problems in a case or vignette. In whole group sessions, we may go "around the room" collecting ideas, stories, or favorite passages, as in the example at the beginning of this article; students embracing opposite sides of a debate may be invited to present arguments alternately; or the floor may just be generally opened to discussion, with only loose moderation by the teacher.

Class mini-lectures are also designed to encourage and incorporate student input. For example, I begin my lecture on models of intelligence by asking students to write a few sentences describing someone they know "who is really smart." I write the different qualities they identify on the board and then use this list to exemplify the different theoretical definitions of intelligence they have read about in their textbook and coursepack (see Sternberg 1999). Thus, each student's experiences and ideas are validated and connected to the theories they have read about, but each can also see first-hand how and why different people might define intelligence differently. This technique of eliciting students' varying experiences and using them as a foundation for explaining the formal theories we study is one of our most effective ways of teaching to diversity. All of these different techniques not only help us accommodate students' differing learning preferences, but they also introduce students to a variety of instructional strategies they can use in their own future teaching.

Just as students bring diverse experiences and learning preferences to our classes, they also come with differing interests and goals, so we give them substantive, structured choices in much of what they do. All students read and talk in class about the main topics around which we structure the course, but sometimes they may choose from several different articles to read for a particular day. If they all read the same material, they may focus in self-chosen small groups on different parts of the reading or on using its principles in different settings, and then share their ideas or conclusions in a whole-group discussion at the end of class; in this way, all students benefit from the work of each group. In each biweekly journal assignment, after addressing a common question, students are also asked to write about "one other thing from class that recently 'struck' (surprised, excited, angered, puzzled) you," and are thus encouraged to reflect on an aspect of the class that was meaningful to them individually.

All students design, participate in, and write about an outreach project that contributes a significant amount toward their final grade. Since the only requirement is that they spend time in an actual educational setting, students undertake an amazing variety of projects. Many choose to observe or volunteer in a local teachers' class or even go home to work with a favorite teacher from their own past. Many others tutor or mentor disadvantaged children weekly through a variety of local community organizations. Some teach Sunday School or coach Little League teams. Some create completely unique projects: one designed a recycling program for a middle school; another did a photographic essay on diversity in a third-grade class, and a recovering anorexic designed and taught a two-day workshop on eating disorders for nurses at a local hospital. Whatever they do, most students tell us this project is the most meaningful part of the course for them.

Even our exams are designed to allow for student diversity. Typically, students are asked to write about potential causes and solution strategies for common educational problems portrayed in short vignettes or a longer case—our most recent exam used a case drawn from Quint's book, *Schooling Homeless Children* (1994). Students receive the cases and potential questions at least two weeks prior to the exam, they may bring in one page of personal notes (limited only to prevent the copying of prewritten answers), and they are given as much time on exam day as they need to write out their answers. Answers are evaluated not on how closely they match some predetermined "best" answer—just as in real teaching, there is no one best answer to these cases—but rather on whether they are specific, workable, and well-supported from course materials. No points are deducted for mechanical writing errors, as long as the instructor can understand the students' intention. Under these conditions, even ESOL students or others who struggle with writing usually have the time and confidence to generate thoughtful answers to significant, realistic educational problems (Knapp 2000).

Conclusion

Although we have collected no data that measures the impact of our student diversity emphasis on the behavior of our students when they actually start teaching, one way we gauge the effects and effectiveness of our instruction in the introductory educational psychology course is through our students' answers to another question on the final exam that asks students to write about "three important things" they learned in the class, and what they plan to do with this learning in their future work as teachers, parents, or just people. Although they cannot be construed as "proof" of the effectiveness of our methods, students' answers to this question do help us know if we are on the right track.

This fall, twenty-eight out of the thirty-two students in my class chose to write about at least one "thing" related to student diversity in answer to this question. Their answers demonstrated learning related to all three of the goals outlined earlier in this article: greater awareness of student diversity and its impact on learning, increased commitment to teaching diverse students, and acquisition of some initial strategies for doing so. To conclude this article, I want to share some excerpts from their answers and their final journals that demonstrate their learning in these areas:

> **Nicole**: Before this class, I gave little thought to teaching impoverished children. Even though I went to a city school in Atlanta, I knew few kids who were poverty-affected. . . . Honestly, I did not believe too many of these children existed.
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> **Julie**: Common sense tells us that if a person is hungry because they haven't eaten, . . . they are probably not going to be able to focus on learning science or math, but this thought had never really hit home to me.
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> **John**: Abby is definitely a child who has been drastically affected by divorce, [but] in most cases, children do not react in such a negative manner. Therefore, I have learned that you must treat all children of divorce in a case by case manner. It is important to familiarize yourself with each individual student's situation because each child will react differently and need different things.
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> **Latrina**: Your class is where I learned to think. This class has challenged me in so many ways. . . . I learned how to see other people's experiences versus my experience [and] that everyone counts, therefore their opinions mean something. . . . I learned that participating in class and accepting constructive criticism would help me learn [and] if I need help, it was OK to ask.
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> **Alicia**: [A teacher] might come across students who are very discouraged, harsh, mean, and negative. . . . I realize I will probably be offended and take what they say very personally at first, but I am going to try to get past

that and get to the root of the problem. You do not always know why students are acting the way they do, but it is your job to find out.

Audra: I have not truly learned how to go about integrating differentiated instruction into my classroom, but I *have* learned that I want to study more about it . . . I know there is more to differentiated instruction than just using visuals one day and hands-on activities the next. All I know is that I do not believe that all students learn in the same way and that I want to learn how to work with this fact in the most constructive way possible. (emphasis in original)

Rhonda: I have spent a lot of my academic career really cynical towards group work. . . . I have a lot of [old] memories of being in a group and having the whole workload fall on me . . . because I wanted to make sure it was done right so my grade wouldn't suffer. However, most of the group assignments we had were designed in such a way that it wasn't a matter of "who can get the work done fastest and most accurately." Instead I found that everyone's input was useful and interesting, and that everyone had something to say and to contribute.

Laurie: I feel like I've figured out a lot about myself this year. Instead of just knowing I want to teach, now I am actually having ideas and plans about how I am going to make things happen for myself and how I will help my kids. I really don't want to teach in an upper-class, ritzy school. I'm sure the kids there have problems too, but I want to be somewhere where I can really make a difference for my students. . . . I don't imagine the perfect classroom where every student loves my subject, but I imagine working hard and maybe reaching some kids. I have never been more excited about teaching!

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