PREPARING TEACHERS FOR THE CROSS-CULTURAL CLASSROOM

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This paper presents a rationale and a description of a course designed to prepare teachers for the cross-cultural classroom. This course differs from the traditional focus of anthropology and education courses on cultural differences. It focuses instead on fundamental learning principles and how the application of these principles in a cross-cultural classroom requires taking into account cultural differences and also other factors relevant to the background and educational history of the particular student group.

Courses designed for cross-cultural teacher preparation usually reflect the scholarly tradition of the "anthropology and education" sub-field of anthropology. Anthropology as a discipline is concerned with such subjects as cultural differences between Indian, Eskimo, and White groups, for example, differences in value orientations or differences in styles of socialization.

The lack of conspicuous success of this approach in suggesting better teaching methods has recently led to a questioning of the value of this theoretical perspective. As Ianni and Storey\(^1\) point out in the preface to their 1973 textbook, Cultural Relevance and Educational Issues, how the child of "Z" tribe learns and is taught is not always relevant to contemporary American educations. School children who are "culturally" different, on the other hand, are not in every case best understood as alien, as being so different as to be more remnants of obscure tribal histories than as American citizens, or as mysteries only an anthropologist can fathom (1).

\(^1\) F. A. Ianni and E. Storey, Cultural Relevance and Educational Issues; Readings in Anthropology and Education Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973, x, xi.
My own research on characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers of Indian and Eskimo students suggests that the traditional focus on cultural differences in anthropology and education courses may not only fail to suggest educational solutions but also add to the problems.\(^2\) The "sophisticate" teacher who emerges from these courses is often so concerned with cultural differences that he places Indian and Eskimo students in a special category where they are exempt from standards and demands made on other students. Deviant behavior among Indian and Eskimo students may be viewed as an expression of their culture which the teacher should be very hesitant to change. For example, one teacher described the case of a Native girl who stole money from the teacher's purse and took things from the desks of other students in the class. The teacher viewed this behavior as an expression of traditional cultural values of sharing and communal ownership. She felt that if she interfered with this behavior she might be destroying the child's culture.

Another problem with the traditional focus on cultural differences in preparing cross-cultural teachers is that it can so easily lead to a preoccupation with interesting cultural detail and draw attention away from fundamental principles of education. It is important to take cultural differences into account in designing education but, I would like to suggest that cultural differences are important in the second stage. The fundamental learning principle is likely to be the same

for both cultural groups; the application of this principle may be
different depending on many factors—background, prior educational
experiences—which makes the particular group of children in the
classroom unique. To use a very obvious example in bilingual
education, where the need for cultural adaptation is quite clear,
the fundamental learning principle may be that children generally
learn better when taught in a familiar language that they understand.
Applying this general principle to the specific situation, it is evident
that for bilingual Eskimo children, this language is Eskimo and for
monolingual white children, this language is English. To use a
perhaps less obvious example in the area of classroom climate, the
fundamental learning principal may be that children generally learn
better when taught in a relaxed, non-threatening classroom atmosphere.
For village Indian and Eskimo students, the typical atmosphere of an
urban classroom, where the teacher is impersonal and the white students
derisive, may be more threatening than to urban white students. Thus,
in an integrated urban classroom, it is especially important for the
teacher to know how to establish a friendly classroom climate,

In sum, the more productive focus in terms of cross-cultural teacher
preparation may be to reverse the traditional emphasis of the anthropology
and education course and ask not "What are the cultural differences and
how can educational methods be adapted to them?" but rather "What are
the fundamental principles important in accomplishing a particular
educational goal and how should these principles be expressed in a
classroom situation in view of particular cultural differences?"
At present, I am in the process of designing a course for cross-cultural teachers which reflects this emphasis. The course begins with an analysis of representative teaching styles presented on videotapes. The students analyze the videotaped teacher's behavior in terms of such categories as non-verbal communication style, verbal communication, relevance of lessons, and unintended messages that the teacher is communicating to students.

Following these videotaped analyses, a central educational concept is presented and how this concept can be adapted to different types of cross-cultural teaching situations. The students then prepare and present to the class for analysis a mini-lesson demonstrating the concept. The concepts presented include:

1. Establishing a positive socio-emotional climate in the classroom: Use of non-verbal communication.

2. Adapting verbal communication to the learning style of different classroom groups: Vocabulary and sentence structure.

3. Designing lessons which take advantage of differing cognitive abilities: Use of visuals to increase learning among students with high perceptual abilities.

4. Constructing relevant lessons: Cultural differences and cultural commonalities.

I have experimented with these types of lessons in university courses and in-service education. Generally, students grasp the concepts on an abstract, verbal level quite well but have difficulty in constructing
mini-lessons that apply the concept in teaching. Students have special
difficulty with the final examination which consists of teaching a short
lesson expressing several concepts and developing a lesson plan
explaining the rationale for the instructional behavior chosen.
We hope to gain more experience in presenting this material and then
evaluate to what extent, if any, this approach to cross-cultural
teaching preparational improves teacher behavior in the classroom.