Being There: Social Service and Teacher Education at the University of Houston

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ABSTRACT: As the school-age population grows in its ethnic and economic diversity, those who become teachers remain overwhelmingly white, female, and middle class. To assist teacher education students understand a world that is largely unfamiliar to them, the University of Houston teacher preparation program offers a volunteer experience in an urban social service agency for its students as part of a cultural awareness requirement. The results of this program suggest that it may help preservice teachers to understand better the lives of the children they will face and hence better prepare them to teach, perhaps diminishing the "revolving door" of teachers in urban classrooms.

Education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness.

John Dewey (1916, "Democracy and Education")

Think of the way that the world must look to beginning educators working in the urban centers of our society. Children go to school in neighborhoods with rising homicide rates; they often come from families victimized by sinking wages, a lack of job opportunities, and curtailed government assistance. Some of them are homeless, many are in despair. For all, a prevailing sense of social disaffection combined with high incidences of drug abuse and open access to guns provides the admixture for a fearful and hopeless street climate. Significantly, the children of poverty and violence are, more often than not, children of color.

Now think of the way that the world looks to many teacher education programs in the United States. Popular references to time-on-task, to various pre-set models, taxonomies, and generic teaching strategies, to recipe-like discipline and management techniques, to narrow concep-
tions of lesson plan design, and to a general mentality of matching learning behaviors with prefashioned learning objectives (Ginsburg, 1988), all underscore the fact that teacher education is too often removed from broader socio-political considerations.

There are, of course, many thinkers who have sought to broaden the analytical sights of teacher education and who have brought the causes of justice and equality to the forefront of educational studies, particularly and quite appropriately, to teacher education. Unfortunately, many of these thinkers and their students, are self-described radicals whose notion of cultural diversity, social disaffection, and urban blight is little more than an abstraction. We find ourselves in agreement with Richard Rorty (1985) who suggests that the intellectual interests of radical commentators do not have much to do with the oppressed. It is not reasonable to suggest that there is a goodness-of-fit between the interests of the so-called oppressed and the commentary of those who have chosen to speak for them (Bowers, 1991).

Those who promote "reflective" teacher education also hope for teachers who will look broadly at the profession of teaching and at the social consequences of the teacher's influence. We maintain, however, that deep reflection can only occur when students have something meaningful upon which to reflect. We suggest that preservice teachers broaden their view not by simply reading about disaffection and not by simply agreeing to have a discussion about race and class issues, but by actually working in the interests of all youth in our city. We also hope that our students will come to find joy in helping those students in most despair and commit to teaching in urban settings, instead of opting for suburban teaching positions. Our views are confirmed by teacher educators such as Martin Haberman (1992) who maintains that urban teachers must receive their professional preparation in the urban environment, although we do not agree with his stand on alternative certification. To this end, we have sought to recover the socio-civic ground of teaching at our institution by placing our preservice teachers in social service activities throughout our city.

**Being There**

Fall of 1991 was the inaugural semester of our newly developed teacher education program. It was marked by fitful stops and starts, questions about the worth of various assignments, and an unfulfilled sense of what was really appropriate for beginning teacher education