

The Social Context of Educating Pre-service Teachers for Success with At-risk Children

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ABSTRACT

A research study was conducted to find reliable indicators of teacher dispositions that would provide at-risk children with effective educational outcomes. The research indicates that socio-cultural factors provide the best reference points for developing a true picture of teachers of at-risk children. In the U.S., there is a disconnect between the mainly white, middle class teachers, and the increasingly culturally-different students that they serve. The study provides students with an exchange of European and American students to explore socio-cultural factors in classrooms and the inherent dispositions needed by teachers to be effective with at-risk students.

Keywords: At-risk children, pre-service teachers, social context

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the conditions of at-risk children vary from state to state since education and social service agencies are considered state functions and are therefore decentralized under the auspices of each state government. One federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), has provided some measure of standardization and regulation in the support of at-risk children, since each state and local education authority (LEA), as a condition of receiving IDEA funding, must provide free and appropriate public education for eligible children and comply with federal regulations and reporting on the use of IDEA funds for at-risk children. In 2004, the federal government funding for the Grants-to-States Program was just over ten billion dollars, an amount that

has quadrupled since 1996. Yet, this funding represents only 18.6% of the estimated excess cost of serving children who are at-risk, and approaches only one-half the amount necessary to fully fund these programmes (Apling, 2004).

Financial support for the education of at-risk children, therefore, is a major social context issue. Poverty is a critical piece in preventing effective education, especially for at-risk students. For schools in high poverty areas, there is now the added pressure of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which mandates that adequate yearly progress (AYP) in test scores must be made, or school districts could face restructuring or closure. In this decade, LEAs face increased accountability, yet lack the funding to make substantive improvements in the education of at-risk children.

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AT-RISK FACTORS IN THE UNITED STATES

Socio-Cultural Factors

The socio-cultural factors that are most often identified with school failure are: poverty, absent or single-parent families, parents who did not graduate from high school or who are lacking full-time employment, welfare dependent or low income working families, households without a telephone or transportation, children having difficulty speaking English, teens who are high school dropouts or not attending school, and children living in high-risk families (Census Brief, 1997; Kids Count, 2000).

Poverty is the most widely used indicator of at-risk, since it is linked closely to outcomes in health, education, resilience, and delinquency. In the United States, the eight pockets of poverty include impoverished African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. Children are at-risk across all ethnic and racial groups (Shaw, 1996; O-Hare, 1996).

Children living in single-parent families pose another at-risk factor. In the U.S. in 2000, thirty percent of the children lived in single-parent families, up 25% in the last decade, and since 1960, a 200% increase. Since most single-parent families are headed by women, children in these households are less likely to have the economic and human resources that their counterparts who live in two-parent families would have (Kids Count, 2000). In addition, population surveys have found that 4 million children, about 5 percent of all children were living in the home of a grandparent. Only 14 percent of the children who lived in a grandparent's home had both a mother and a father living with them (U.S. Census, 2000).

Full-time employment by parents is another critical area for at-risk children. In 2000, nineteen million children (28%) in the U.S. (Kids Count, 2000) did not have a parent in the households who worked full-time, year-round. It has been found that when parents are fully employed that their children's psychological well-being and family functioning are enhanced

and stress is reduced (Federal Interagency Forum on the Child and Family Statistics, 2001).

Parents of at-risk children who have dropped out of high school create another at-risk factor. Parents without a high school diploma are less likely to provide their children with an environment that is educationally stimulating (Kids Count, 2000).

Changes to laws for child-care subsidies have also created more of a crisis for low-income families. Since 2001 in the U.S., changes to laws have decreased access to child-care subsidies. These include changed income eligibility thresholds and factors to narrow coverage, restricted access by starting waiting lists and/or stopping enrolment of new families, and increased co-payments, which all impact both transitioning families and other low-income working families. These changes in laws can be seen by the increase in the number of low-income working families, now at 22%, which is up 16% from the last decade (Kids Count, 2000).

Access to basic services, such as telephones and transportation, creates yet another issue for low-income families. It has been found that without any phone access, and the accompanying Internet connections so readily utilized in learning today, that children living in these households would have a more difficult time accessing assistance of any kind (Kids Count, 2000). Equally important is transportation. While the number of households without transportation, either a vehicle or mass transit access, has fallen 22% in the last decade in the U.S., there are still 7% of the households without readily available transportation. This figure has also been exacerbated by welfare reform measures, where families attempting to go from "welfare to work" are thwarted by lack of reliable, cheap transportation. These two areas also tend to increase isolation, especially in rural areas, where families are disconnected from economic opportunity and access to health care and other social support systems. Children from welfare dependent and low-income working families are at risk since families in

these economic circumstances are often unable to provide effective health and child-care as well as other critical services (Kids Count, 2000).

STRUCTURAL FACTORS IN SCHOOLS

There are several important structural factors which conspire to increase academic failure by children at-risk. Tracking, which is used to place students of matched ability in groups, has been found to be based mostly on social indices (Rist, 1970) and decisions made as early as kindergarten by teachers have resulted in students remaining in the same track for the duration of their academic life. By being placed in a lower track, students have been found to develop problems of self-esteem and have higher drop out rates. Meanwhile, over-reliance on standardized tests to make instructional and curricular decisions results in more labelling of at-risk children increased sorting and segregating of children, especially those who are English language learners (ELL). With the increase of English language learners in the U.S., schools that are not equipped to handle these students often place them in special education classes for lack of any other services. This also means inappropriate, limited, and rigid instructional strategies by teachers who are not trained to handle English language learners, and inappropriate texts and other materials used to instruct these children. Testing, and subsequent placement in special classes can also have the effect of narrowing the curriculum, so that there is a priority focus on basic skills and teaching to the test. Schools that use isolated pull-out programmes to service these at-risk children find that there is inflexible scheduling and lost instruction in the regular classroom (Hixson and Tinzmann, 1990).

The curriculum can also have a negative effect on at-risk children, if it does not address the context and content of their lives and realities, and too often, the curriculum serves as a source of social control (Bernstein, 1971). In the U.S., pedagogy and classroom control emanate mainly from a white, middle class praxis. When teachers

and administrators do not have direct knowledge of their at-risk children's socio-cultural context, their beliefs and attitudes toward these children are shallow and inaccurate. Effective parenting differs by culture, and what may be considered effective parenting in one culture is ineffective in the other (Benton, 2005). It has been found that in mainstream culture, authoritative parenting is most effective, but not so in Black, Hispanic, and Asian cultures. Therefore, when mostly middle class white teachers use their parenting styles to teach and control children, they lack effectiveness with many at-risk children who do not fit into the mainstream culture. When at-risk children are taught by teachers who lack sufficient understanding of their family and community contexts, the children and their parents also lack empowerment. When teachers and administrators make all curricular, pedagogical, and disciplinary choices and enforce them according to mainstream culture, the role of at-risk children and parents in the educational process is even more constricted.

SCHOOL-IDENTIFICATION FACTORS

Even if educators wait until children are in school to identify them as at-risk, they still make assessments based on their own cultural backgrounds. When they collect information, whether it is from tests, observations, interviews, or play-contexts, they are deriving conclusions based on their own notions of success and failure. Without full knowledge of the social context, it matters little where and what type of programme the child is placed into, e.g., mainstreamed into a regular classroom with support services, placed in a pull-out program or special class, or provided homebound or residential treatment. Successful interventions are less likely, as expectations of both teacher and students are that poor performance will continue. The entire foundational assumptions of special education instruction are based on mainstream beliefs and values. Until educators accurately represent non-mainstream children in the educational process, or mainstream teachers

are provided opportunities to be among the children in their communities, there is not much hope for improvement in the education of at-risk children.

NEED-BASED FACTORS

The focus of this approach is to view all students as at-risk or in need of special education, and assume that all students will have access to special services. Raising the bar even higher is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) which pushes for increased accountability of student performance and increased parent empowerment. Parents are now demanding that more funding be available for programmes that deliver results and more local control and flexibility at the state level to allow them more options for their children's education. Driving the process to identify at-risk children in school is the NCLB, which mandates annual testing of all public school students in reading and math, grades 3-8 and high school. Middle- and upper-class parents are also demanding privatization of education so that they do not have to pay both private tuition fees and school taxes for public schools, which has created an erosion of support for public education. As mainstream parents continue to dominate the discussions about accountability, at-risk children and their parents are left to fend for themselves. Voucher programmes, while enticing to low-income parents, do not provide sufficient funds to offer real school choice. Every day, loopholes in the NCLB are created. In 2005, more than half of the states received approval from the federal government to change the way they determine whether school districts are failing. In perhaps the biggest change, districts in the state of Georgia no longer must have all students in various sub-groups, including blacks, Hispanics, special education and limited English proficiency categories, to meet state testing goals. These rule changes help out wealthy districts with fewer minority students, but leave high minority enrolment schools stranded and accountable to making adequate yearly progress on their test scores. This change violates the core

philosophy of this education law, which is, as the legislation's name suggests, that no children should be left behind.

NATIONAL AT-RISK STANDARDS

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, originally intended to give all children a chance to succeed academically, is quickly being eroded by exceptions that are now being granted to the states by the Department of Education. Inadequate funding to carry out the law's provisions is also shifting resources to fewer school districts and once again providing wealthy suburban districts the opportunity to opt out of providing effective programmes for at-risk students.

While politics have played centre stage in the provisions for at-risk children, the National At-risk Education Network (NAREN) has begun offering school districts the opportunity to conduct self-studies of their own districts' at-risk programs as an elective process that would strengthen school districts' abilities to meet NCLB accountability standards. NAREN provides guidance and leadership in establishing effective design and implementation of quality interventions for at-risk children, which is beginning to be recognized as a valuable tool for improving programs.

Included in the proposed NAREN certification standards are key factors to enhance the success of at-risk children and a focus on protective factors for development, such as child/mentor relationships, personal school environments, and opportunities for children to learn about their own talents. Schools that use the NAREN standards can more easily become agencies of inclusion for all children, and advance an ethos of complex equality for all students.

The NAREN standards, as developed by Dallman-Jones (2002), emphasize a comprehensive view of working with at-risk children in four contexts. *Curricular Contexts* that are emphasized are: (1) accelerated academic curriculum, (2) a strong literacy component, and (3) personalized curriculum. *Structural Contexts* include (4) a deliberate

self-management program and (5) small schools and class sizes. *Community Contexts* focus on (6) project-experiential-work orientation and (7) a collaborative community model. *School Contexts* involve (8) a solid planning and administrative support system, and (9) a comprehensive staff development model.

An accelerated academic curriculum means that teachers should maintain high expectations through use of appropriate pedagogy. "Acceleration is accomplished by setting high and clear goals, with meaningful material, matched to learning style, signifying that each student has his/her learning individually prescribed (Dallman-Jones, 2002)." A crucial aspect of this curriculum is a strong literacy component, which includes effective procedures and strategies for assessing, prescribing, monitoring, and adjusting appropriate literacy activities. Another component lies in the personalization of the curriculum, which must shape itself to the student and which takes into account all of the aforementioned factors (socio-economic, structural, school identification, and needs-based).

Smaller schools and class sizes have been shown to improve student performance on grades and test scores, lower drop-out rates, and reduce violence and drug abuse (Noguera, 2002; Lee and Burkam, 2003; Deutsch, 2003). Small classes also have been found to "stimulate student engagement, allow more innovative instructional strategies, increase teacher-student interactions, reduce the amount of time teachers devote to discipline, improve teacher morale, and minimize feelings of isolation and alienation in adolescence that can come from anonymity (Tajalli and Opheim, 2004)." Resilience, which is a combination of having a strong relationship with competent, caring pro-social adults, an average or better IQ, good attention skills and knowledge of the streets, can be fostered in this type of environment to build students' self-esteem to persist in the educational process.

Building and exploiting the social capital that already exists in communities can be accomplished through four principles: interaction, responsibility, shared vision, and collaboration/

inclusion, and developed at four levels, namely the immediate and extended family level; the neighbourhood, communities of faith, school, and work level; the institutional and market level; and the societal culture level (Benton, 2005). Schools, teachers, and administrators who find ways to participate substantively in collaborative community activities will affect school outcomes for at-risk children. When combined with another NAREN standard, the project-experiential-work orientation, business, and community leaders can demonstrate the importance of a solid work ethic, which involves important life skills of decision-making, prioritizing, problem-solving, persistence, resilience, and accountability (Dallman-Jones, 2002; Matson, 1997).

School leadership on education for at-risk children is imperative. A collaborative, communicative, and supportive administration is necessary for teachers to be effective in their efforts. Comprehensive staff development programs are the "front lines" for effective at-risk interventions. When the majority of teachers do not come from at-risk home environments themselves, the possibility of disconnects between them and the development of appropriate curriculum is a likely possibility. Therefore, staff development programmes must work from many perspectives in order to provide teachers with effective pedagogy. In addition, these programmes must be deliberate and pertinent. They must be delivered in a variety of settings which involve a variety of activities including distance learning, in-house interactive involvement with experts, video-conferencing, attendance at conferences and trainings, and professional association membership (Dallman-Jones, 2002).

THE STUDY

Purpose of the Study

All these contexts (curriculum, structure, community, and school) require concerted effort by all stakeholders. As teacher educators, we have selected to focus our research on teacher's pedagogical development in the belief that this

is the central axis of at-risk children issues. With the advent of inclusion, all teachers must become proficient in working with at-risk children. Major issues in educating pre-service teachers for success with at-risk children are the disconnects between the social context of the pupils and that of the teachers. While the majority of teachers in the U.S. are female (75%) and White (84%), the pupils are progressively more racially, ethnically, and linguistically different. Current school enrolments indicate that over 35% of school-age pupils are culturally different, while only 15% of teachers are. A disproportionate representation of pupils in special education who are racially and ethnically different, poor, immigrant, non-English speaking and male also widens the gap. A variety of culturally-different parenting styles adds to the magnitude of the issues.

Therefore, when predominantly white, middle class teachers who have grown up with mostly trouble-free childhoods and intact families begin to work with at-risk children, they become overwhelmed by the degree and magnitude of the problems with which at-risk children come to school. Since these teachers have very few life skills to draw upon for work with at-risk children, their cognitive dissonance often creates feelings of guilt, shame, or anger with the mainstream culture that sustains this cultural underclass. Efforts by these white middle class teachers to reach out to these at-risk children are often met by withdrawal, hostility, and resentment by these pupils, who interpret the help as pity or condescension. The teachers, in turn, misinterpret the lack of responses to their gestures by redirecting their anger at the at-risk children, who are now blamed for their own academic failures.

While the theory behind best practices for work with at-risk children can be learned from textbooks, there is no substitute for direct practice. Our research focuses on developing effective ways to bridge the gap between the cultures of the at-risk and non-mainstream children and the teacher's cultures to foster positive dispositions and attitudes for work with at-risk pupils through informed experiences that develop *ethical caring* (Noddings, 1992), the

engagement of the problem, followed by action with and on behalf of the recipient.

During our 20 years of research on student teachers who had completed at least eight weeks of teaching in another culture, we found that these teachers displayed increased awareness of the world around them, were better able to cope in new situations, and were much more comfortable reaching out to people who were culturally and ethnically different from themselves. Yet, not all of these student teachers came back "changed." It was this vexing problem that we wanted to explore in our research. Our research questions focused on the following: What are the key dispositions that teachers need to work effectively with at-risk children? Are the dispositions of ethical caring key to teachers' success in their work with children? Does teachers' articulation of at-risk student problems change as a result of their participation in the program?

After going through the research literature on student teaching abroad, we found several variables that we believed would make a difference in the growth of teachers' positive dispositions toward "different children," i.e., children at-risk. The variables identified were the length of stay abroad, the intensity with which the student interacted with the culture, their involvement in the community, the school's connection to the community, the use of language other than one's own native tongue, the type of school placement, whether or not the student was in a setting with at-risk children, the types and kinds of school support the student teachers received, the modelling they observed, students' pre-departure preparation for teaching abroad, and students' pre-dispositions for wanting to teach abroad (Bryan and Sprague, 1997; Clayton, 1995; Clement and Outlaw, 2002; Jokikokko, 2005; Mahan and Cushner, 2002; Quezada, 2004; Quinn *et al.*, 1995; Stachowski and Chleb, 1998).

Participants

Through an international grant, six universities in Europe and the United States were able to form

a consortium to work together on this common issue as identified above. In the second year of the grant, the partners arranged to exchange 8-9 students each from their universities, with 26 American students going to the three European partner campuses and the 27 European students coming to the three American campuses, so that two-three students from each university were at each partner institution campus. Of the 53 students who were selected to participate in the program, the majority were second and third year students, with a few seeking second degrees in education. For the most part, the students had had only introductory teaching experiences in their own countries. Participants ranged in age from 19-35 years, with most being 21. Students were selected through an application and interview process, which screened out students with low GPAs and questionable academic records. There was also some measure of student self-selection, since the program was advertised as challenging and only students with the skills to tackle this program were advised to apply. Students were compensated with a travel stipend to participate in the program.

Research Design

For the student mobility semester, there were a number of common elements that were agreed upon by the consortium: pre-departure culture and language seminars, college classes, school placements, internet seminar, reflective journaling, general cultural visits, and a third-year evaluation conference. *Pre-departure Culture and Language Seminars* were held once a week during the preceding semester and covered the “nuts and bolts of travel,” broad aspects of culture as well as a specific focus on target culture, introduction to comparative educational practice and curriculum structures, and inter-cultural events and meals with students from the target cultures. Language classes were on-going for those students headed to Spain, and for those going to the Netherlands, language classes were begun a full year before departure. *College Classes* took place two days per week.

The content of the courses focused on “at-risk” concepts, as well as comparative aspects of education in another country, i.e., structure of the educational system, curriculum, philosophical, and theoretical underpinnings, pedagogy, etc.

Four types of *School Experiences* took place two to three days per week. The first experience was the main placement of two-three days per week in a school with a substantial at-risk pupil population with whom students worked for the semester. The second type of school experience was visits to schools with “successful” profiles for comparison among the students’ main placements and their home country schools. The third experience was visits to examples of existing programs that successfully addressed at-risk education, e.g. Reading Recovery, Parents as Teachers, and Early Years Enriched Curriculum. The fourth experience was to schools, which demonstrated cultural difference, e.g. Irish-medium schools, travelling schools for the Roma, English as a Second Language programs, and schools with strong parent-community programs. The main placement expectations of students were that they would engage in general class teaching, prepare lessons, identify a small group of “at risk” students for whom they would design a special curriculum, and act as an assistant teacher by proactively helping the teacher as needed to do classroom teaching, but not act as a teacher’s aide.

The *Internet Seminar* took place throughout the semester every week. All participants engaged in an online forum where they shared and compared their placements, ideas, issues, materials, and teaching strategies. Students kept *Weekly Reflective Journals*, which became part of the documentation of their experiences in working with at-risk children. Students took part in *General Cultural Visits* in order to get a broader sense of the culture in which they were working and living. Finally, students participated in an *Evaluation Conference* the following year to assist the consortium in developing effective strategies and programs for pre-service teachers to work with at-risk children.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected before, during, and after the mobility period. In the semester preceding the outward mobility, all students were administered the Global Awareness Profile to ascertain their baseline understandings of global awareness and issues. This profile was put on-line on the project web site, to which all students and faculty had access. It was administered again at the end of the mobility period. Before students left, the project directors at each site collected all work completed during the pre-departure seminars.

Once the students were in-country, the project directors began collecting the following types of data from the students throughout the mobility period: (1) reflective journals, (2) coursework papers, (3) lesson plans, (4) teacher work samples, and (5) on-line seminars. During the evaluation conference the following year, project directors collected (6) questionnaires, and (7) transcripts of conference outcomes.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Since the study is mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures are being employed. The only quantitative data analysis procedure is being conducted on the Global Awareness Profile. The universities use software that enables the researchers to view profile results in a number of ways, including a general description of the test profile and its properties, a pie chart to show distribution of scores for the profile, overall statistics for the test profile, individual student results on each question, summative results for each question, and a list of all the summative scores for each student. Each participant is to be assigned a gain score, equals to the difference between pre-test and post-test scores on the Global Awareness Profile. Gain scores will be expressed in positive and negative numbers. A sum of squares error test will be calculated to ascertain the standard error for the group. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to compare the gain scores among the U.S. and European participants. All quantitative analysis will be conducted using SPSS.

Qualitative procedures are being conducted through the use of Atlas.ti software. This tool facilitates the selecting, indexing, coding, and annotating of the qualitative data sources listed above that the project directors collected during and after the mobility period. The data sources have been indexed and are being coded to identify dispositions that would indicate students' attitudes, beliefs, and thinking about other cultures and their work with at-risk children. The software will assist in developing relationships among the data categories, which will be cross-checked by the researchers to provide for reliability and validity measures through triangulation of data. Before results of the study are fully made public, a random selection of student participants will read and respond to the text prepared by the researchers through written feedback of the data analysis. Written feedback will be included as a second-text, or inter-text, providing readers with an additional layer of analysis.

INSTRUMENTATION

Pre-departure instruments include the Global Awareness Profile (Corbitt, 1998), is a 120-item knowledge test related to global awareness across all geographic regions. Instrumentation used during the mobility period included the reflective journal prompts, which included the following questions: What surprises have you encountered while interning in this country? Describe a significant event that has happened to you and what you thought. What insights are you gaining about this society, its schools, and this university from this experience? What have you learned about your own society and its schools from this experience? What have you learned about yourself from this experience? Coursework papers, lesson plans, teacher work samples, and the on-line seminar are also mobility-period instruments. Post-mobility instruments include notes collated from group sessions at the Evaluation Conference, and a questionnaire with the following prompts: What new awareness and understanding do you have of your host culture's values and way of life?

Identify core issues about children at risk in your host country. Based on situations identified in earlier sessions, what approaches and strategies would you use with children at risk?

FINDINGS

At this stage of the research, some basic themes are emerging. Briefly put, we are finding that students are telling us that they are much more aware of the world outside their own and much more interested in learning about the world outside. These themes are to be expected, since research literature has reported this before. What is new, though, is that students are reporting their initial responses to the culture is one of feeling like an outsider, like the immigrants and at-risk children that they were teaching, principally because they did not have proficient command of the host language, nor really understand the covert and overt nuances of their host culture. Dispositions reported by students ranged from wanting to withdraw from the culture, not wanting to adapt to the culture by sticking to those from their own culture, and allowing themselves to be cut off from the culture as well as actively cutting themselves off from the culture. Other students reported the feeling of being at-risk. These dispositions were manifested by trying to guess what people were saying in a language that they did not fully understand, feeling guilty for “tuning out” in the classroom when they experienced language and cultural overloads and wondering why they did not care. Students also reported trying to act as though they knew what was going on and how they could hide their struggle to understand. Also reported were dispositions of annoyance, which really masked insecurity in the culture, and pushing away those that tried to help. These actions tended to further isolate and build resentment toward the people with whom they were interacting. While these responses, too, have been reported in the literature on culture shock, the difference in this case is the connections that students had with the programmatic focus of at-risk children. Feelings of guilt overwhelmed some students since they realized that they were the ones who were in the

schools to help the at-risk children, not become the at-risk themselves!

After this initial stage of about two months, the research data indicates that the students began to shift dispositions, some totally reversing their previous roles as the “oppressed,” to become the “oppressors,” and forgetting all the lessons they learned upon their initial entry into the culture. In their reflections, they reveal their struggles to keep these initial lessons in their minds so that they could monitor their efforts through the children’s responses and performance. Socio-cultural issues such as the role of families and the community, as well as the structural issues of tracking, disciplinary measures, retention, and curriculum surfaced as natural points of reflection and discussion without students reacting to specific prompts on these themes.

As the period of teaching abroad came to a close, students began to reflect on how these experiences of feeling like an outsider helped them to identify more strongly with their teaching, how to adjust instruction, how to notice when children were struggling, how to assist these children, and how to put preventative measures in place so that these children do not have to go through what other at-risk children before them had to experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION AND PRACTICE

Based on these initial glimpses of the data, some implications for action and practice are surfacing. The data indicate that there is no substitute for being “on the ground” in the target culture, where each student can be put in the role of an at-risk child, especially in the structural sense. Since not every pre-service teacher would have the resources to teach abroad, other possibilities that could reasonably substitute for this experience in the teacher’s home country would be residential student teaching placements in a high poverty area outside the students’ regional culture, arranged through cooperative arrangements with universities in those regions. By targeting at-risk children in the communities of the eight regions of severe poverty, our mostly

middle class, White students would be forced out of their comfort zones and into a “foreign cultural system.” In most cases, they would also have to have knowledge of the languages used by the people who live in these eight regions, namely, a number of Native American languages, Black English, Spanish, and other languages that may be represented in the northern cities, such as African, Middle Eastern, and southern European languages. These placements would then simulate the conditions that students experienced in the research grant, which would give students direct experience with all the presage factors discussed earlier. They would also be able to view the experience through the NAREN standards framework, which would provide additional opportunities to learn how to develop effective programs for at-risk children.

Acceptance and comfort in the culture are necessary before effective teaching can take place. When emotional responses by the students to their environments upon entry were replaced with cognitive responses through the shifting of the source of the identification as outsider to that of teacher, students began to develop the disposition of focusing on individual needs and characteristics and away from group needs and characteristics. This indicates the possibility that ethical caring can be fostered during these types of experiences.

While it is still too early in the data analysis stage to have definitive answers to our research questions, we believe that the study is helping to point us in the right direction of finding reliable indicators of teacher dispositions that would provide at-risk children with effective educational outcomes and that socio-cultural factors provide the best reference points for developing a true picture of successful teachers of at-risk children.

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