

# Student Teaching Action Plans: A Context for Expanded Inquiry in Multicultural Education

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## Abstract

*In the 1980's, through the work of critical theorists, elements of social change were examined through action research. Using the principles of action research, this paper chronicles the development of reflective skills within the context of multicultural education during the student teaching semester. A baseline knowledge level was established as a beginning to the critical thinking and analysis process regarding multicultural issues. Multicultural goals were then established for the 16-week semester. Interaction and Dialogue in which student teachers shared multicultural experiences during two, four hour multicultural workshops followed. During the course of the semester, each student was then asked to document multicultural incidents through log entries. This paper reflects upon the qualitative data documented through critical incident log entries. Data revealed interesting dialogues as student interns became more sensitized to social and cultural differences that existed within their classrooms.*

Multicultural education has become a critical issue in education as our world changes. As teacher educators, our responsibilities to prepare students to meet the demands of a changing world have increased. It is important that we prepare pre-service students to be able to address issues resulting from living in a global community (Banks, 1988 & 1993; Swisher & Swisher, 1986)). Pre-service and in-service programs are being asked to respond to these issues but teacher educators often feel ill-prepared. Issues of diversity pose a real challenge for those in

education (Banks, 1988). Classrooms today represent children from different racial and ethnic groups, from different socioeconomic levels, with religious and age differences, as well as those students who exhibit psychological, physical or emotional problems (Jackson, 1993-94; Sparks, Butt & Pahnos, 1996). Is it possible for schools to create an educational program that responds effectively to the issues of diversity. Can traditional curricula integrate social change into physical education programs that includes games and traditions of people of varying backgrounds who have not been exposed to traditionally American physical education and sport? As an example, games and activities representing different cultures and traditions could provide a broader educational experience for students from majority cultures and would be a source of pride for children from minority backgrounds (Swisher & Swisher, 1986). As a means of gaining insight into effective methodologies to teach multicultural education, it would seem appropriate to investigate the impact of infusing multicultural experiences into the student teaching semester. The method chosen for this project was through a mentoring process where cooperating teachers serve as a mentor in supporting the efforts of student teachers in learning how to respond to multicultural issues that occur during student teaching. By adopting a mentoring process, beginning teachers can explore aspects of multiculturalism while they gain confidence in their teaching abilities but within a more secure environment. But the questions remains, can this methodology be considered research?

Although not your traditional method of scientific inquiry, the process adopted is ideal for investigating multicultural issues as it impacts the instructional process. It also allows beginning teachers to learn under the guidance of an experienced professional as they strive to develop a level of confidence that is important in becoming a successful teacher.

Many times though, educators have different perspectives regarding multicultural education. Multicultural education is a process of examining how schools respond to issues of diversity by acknowledging that racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination exist (Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Banks (1994) believes it is a teachers responsibility to not only teach reading, writing and mathematics but to teach “life skills” to be able to communicate with people of differing backgrounds. Therefore, rather than a periodic intrusion, multicultural education should be an on-going process in our classroom. Utilizing a method of inquiry that combines multicultural education with qualitative research techniques will provide an opportunity for pre-service interns to investigate educational problems with guidance from experienced public school teachers and university-based teacher educators. It is hypothesized therefore that pre-service experiences then become the forum for internal reflection leading to the development of an understanding of multicultural issues along with the emergence of a personal philosophy of multiculturalism as beginning teachers develop good instructional skills. It is suggested that this occur during the formative stages when student teachers are in the process of developing and refining personal teaching philosophies. Student teaching can then become a context for pre and in-service teachers to begin to work as a team in investigating multicultural education issues. Through this process they become partners by examining sensitive multicultural issues in a clinical context. This allows new teachers to better understand the relationship between theory and practice.

It is believed that this project provides an example of an initial effort to incorporate collaborative action research and critical thinking skills as a methodology in helping student teachers not only expand their knowledge base but reflect upon their personal multicultural attitudes and experiences. This was done while developing their instructional skills during their student teaching semester. All student teachers were asked to participate in this project. Although not specifically a part of their grade, student teachers were required to complete their project prior to finishing their student teaching semester.

### **Theoretical Background**

In examining the theoretical base for this project, certain assumptions regarding knowledge and inquiry were made. These assumptions were validated through analysis of contextual issues during student teaching. It was assumed that teachers have the ability to construct context specific knowledge that support the instructional process. It was also assumed that inquiry can play a significant role in altering the knowledge base of a student teacher within a clinical forum. Wells (1992) believes that knowledge is not a one—way transmission where the learner is required to only listen. On the contrary, meaning is constructed through the relationship of ideas to tasks and topics of mutual interest and concern. It is believed, therefore, that student teaching can become an environment where critical thinking and inquiry can be used as a tool for exploring important multicultural ideas and issues. Action research then becomes a forum for students to explore deeper into personal theories and values that emerge during student teaching. Within this context, using a team approach, student teachers have the advantage of having both experienced cooperating teachers and university-based teacher educators as mentors for collaboration and guidance.

### **Program Design**

Initiated in the Spring of 1994 and continued through the Spring of 1998, the collaborative

action research model was used as a basis for analyzing personal multicultural goals and success at meeting these goals at the conclusion of the 16-week student teaching semester. Presently, sixty-three student teachers have been involved in this project. Thirty-nine student teachers were male and 24 were female. Forty of the student teachers were of Euro-American heritage and twenty-three were of Latino, Afro-American or Asian-American heritage.

At the beginning of the student teaching experience, an intensive three-to-four hour workshop was initiated in which important multicultural concepts were reviewed. The workshop emphasized activities that encouraged participant dialogue and critical thinking. Most cooperating teachers were present during the initial workshops. They participated in some of the activities with the student teachers assigned to them. The purpose of these activities were to create some initial bonding and begin developing a trusting relationship. Those not present were sent workshop materials which were discussed when the university supervisor was on-site to visit the student teacher. The workshop was designed to provide an opportunity for students to gain insight into basic principles of multicultural education. Examples of some of the information explored included an introduction to multicultural terminology as well as several "hands-on" activities including role playing and case studies. These activities were designed to encourage the participants to use critical analysis and problem solving techniques in responding to sensitive multicultural issues. As an example, students explored and discussed how children from varied cultural or social backgrounds can provide a broader learning experience in physical education classes. As a means to understand multicultural issues, participants reflected upon the song "Colors of the Wind" from Walt Disney's story of Pocohontas. This song illustrates how multicultural differences can be a positive influence and help people explore new possibilities. The song encourages people to broaden their horizons, examine their

biases and develop an open mind to new experiences or new cultures. People then become enriched as individuals and learn about people different from themselves. A sample of other activities that were a part of the workshop included ethnographic profiles detailing participants backgrounds. This illustrated that all Americans have an ethnic background and through our ancestry we all are multicultural by birth. Demographic information that profiled population trends in the United States were used to illustrate that we are becoming a global community. Games that represented different cultures throughout the world were also included in the workshop to provide an example of various cultural traditions. After completing one month of the student teaching semester, a second workshop was completed. In this workshop the students shared multicultural incidences that occurred during the first month of student teaching. This exchange of ideas was excellent in revealing that all student teachers had experienced various multicultural incidences while they taught. Participants continued to explore their personal attitudes about cultural and social issues through role playing, group dialogue and case studies. As a medium for applying concepts learned in the workshop and as a means of documenting significant multicultural incidents that occurred during the 16-week student teaching semester, all student teachers were asked to maintain critical incident logs throughout the 16-week semester. Issues of race, language, physical ability, emotional and psychological health, religion, gender and culture served as a base for analysis and critical thought in the logs. It was hypothesized that through the log, student teachers could reflect upon multicultural incidents that occurred at their respective student teaching sites, their reaction to these incidents and actions they took as teachers in response to the incidents.

### **Collaborative Action Research**

Using the collaborative action research process, an important element of the project was the utilization of critical inquiry to reflect upon a

variety of multicultural issues encountered during student teaching. Four stages were used as a context for student investigation of multicultural issues. First, incidents from logs were reviewed and goals were identified. Prior to identifying specific goals, student teachers were asked to analyze each episode based upon three requirements. They were asked to think about their personal reaction to an episode. Student teachers were then asked to document what they did as a teacher to respond to the episode. The outcome was then recorded in the log book. This documentation included reflection upon their students behavior and its impact upon instruction. Once the student teacher had completed the reflective phase, they were asked to work with the cooperating teacher and university supervisor to identify specific multicultural goals. This included methodologies they might use to change negative behaviors they had observed with their students. The student teachers were asked to complete these tasks prior to the end of the a 16-week semester. The second stage included the development of a plan of action. During this stage, the university supervisor assisted the student teacher in refining the topic, acting as a sounding board and providing any necessary materials that were needed. From this exchange, came plans of action to change negative, offensive student behaviors. Student teacher seminars that were held monthly assisted each participant in refining their goals. By bringing student teachers together to discuss various multicultural incidents, dialogue helped the participants gain a fresh insight into possible courses of action. This interaction helped the student teacher move to the third stage. This stage focused upon implementation of the plan of action. During this stage documentation continued to be used to see if behavior had changed. The cooperating teacher was especially important during this stage. Using the cooperating teacher as a feedback tool, the student teacher could seek input/reaction to various courses of action that might be used as a response to multicultural situations that had developed during the early

stages of student teaching. But most important, the mentoring process by the cooperating teacher helped increase the confidence level of the student teacher. It was believed that this would lead to independent thought and behavior. Upon completion of the project, the fourth stage began. Through this stage, the student teacher, in collaboration with the cooperating teacher, assessed perception of their ability to meet their respective multicultural goals. A five-point Likert type scale was used as a base for this assessment. Questions such as were the multicultural goal(s) established at the beginning of the semester met? If not, what obstacles prevented accomplishment of those goals? Why did you evaluate yourself at a specific level? This dialogue with the cooperating teacher helped the student teacher assess their ability to meet personal multicultural goals. The student teachers that engaged in the project discussed their summertime multicultural evaluation at the last student teaching seminar. There were six seminars though scheduled prior to this during the 16-week semester. These seminars provided an excellent opportunity for student teachers to discuss their multicultural projects and their successes and failures in meeting individual goals.

During this project, the process used for making entries into the critical incident logs continued to be refined. The student teachers were required to make at least three entries per week for the sixteen week student teaching semester. But prior to the entries, the student teachers were asked to have and least one conversation with their cooperating teacher regarding specific incidences. They also were asked to reflect upon the specific incident that was entered and the language that was used. This occurred the day after the initial entry was made. By following this process, it required the student teacher to utilize tenets of critical thinking prior to finalizing the entry. The log entries also provided a basis for documentation of multicultural concepts learned in during the initial workshops. Thoughtful reaction to the incidents were encouraged. Cooperating teacher(s) served as a facilitator on-site to provide possibilities to

the student teacher in examining alternate courses of action in response to multicultural situations.

### **Multicultural Incidents**

A total of 418 incidents included in 94 individual multicultural projects were written by the 77 student teachers over a five-year period. These incidences were recorded within their student teaching logs. The number of incidences each student teacher cited within the log varied although the average was 5.4. Although fairly low, it is important to remember that these students were just beginning to explore multicultural situations in a real teaching environment. Multicultural concepts had only been just introduced to the student teachers during the workshops. Integration of those concepts throughout the student teaching semester varied among the student teachers. Integration was based upon individual student teaching situations and each individuals ability to include multicultural concepts within the context of specific instructional situations. It is also important to remember that each student teacher also had a multitude of other tasks that were required during the semester. Student teachers were also cautioned to only make entries if the incident truly represented a multicultural experience. In organizing the entries, various topical areas were grouped by subject or category. As an example, all incidents involving children with disabilities were grouped into one category for data analysis. Incidences involving children with motor differences were grouped into another. Other categories that emerged included incidences involving gender, race, socioeconomic status, language, culture and religion. Working with the cooperating teachers, initial log entries were used by all student teachers to identify specific multicultural goals. The goals also assisted the student teacher in concentrating in specific areas in making log entries.

Data were then analyzed by multicultural categories based upon log entries. If entries were

not clear, a discussion followed with a specific student teacher. After all entries were verified, each multicultural category was analyzed looking for patterns or themes. All entries were analyzed and reported as closely as possible using the language that appeared in the student teacher logs. Incidents involving students with disabilities were most frequent and occurred one hundred twenty-eight times. Incidences involving motor differences occurred eighty-three times. Sixty-one incidents involving gender roles were discussed. Forty-four incidents involving race were recorded. Socioeconomic status was discussed 26 times. Language involved 21 incidents. Cultural differences were identified 19 times. Religion was discussed 17 times.

### **Incidences Involving Students with Disabilities**

The majority of the 128 critical incidents that were reported that related to students with disabilities focused upon the student teachers' disappointments with situations in which students with disabilities were either teased or were ignored and not included in group activities by other students. An example follows of a student teacher's response to an incident involving a disabled student:

Sarah is in a wheelchair and usually arrives late. The student teacher wanted to include her in more activities because she usually would just watch while other students participated. She helped referee a couple of times during our volleyball unit. It turned out that Sarah worked with an adapted PE specialist where she does some exercises specific to her needs. As the semester progressed, the students became more comfortable with her and began including her in team strategy sessions during the volleyball unit. Sarah became more excited and seemed to enjoy P.E. more and continued to serve as a 'coach' during other team sport activities.

### **Incidences Involving Motor Differences**

Eighty-three critical incidents were cited in the area of motor differences. Student teacher concerns reflected their frustration toward highly skilled students who had no patience for or were unwilling to participate in activities with lesser skilled students. Student teachers who expressed this frustration worked throughout the semester to change this attitude.

Although most of the incidents cited reflected similar patterns, not all student teachers were able to empathize with lesser skilled students. An example of a male student teacher who empathized with lesser skilled students and acted to change the situation was cited in a log entry that read,

Students in my freshman boys class are always picking on this boy because he is kind of a geek and he has very few motor skills... Kids are kids. I don't like to see the kids pick on this boy because he doesn't bother anyone. I try to go out of my way to praise skills he shows. I also let the other kids know I am not pleased with the comments they make and that they should keep their comments to themselves.

### **Incidences Involving Gender**

Incidents regarding gender all related to the boys having more playing time, needing more attention or boys interacting in game play only with other boys. In all cases the student teacher empathized with the girls who were not given the same opportunities. The following log entry characterizes statements made by a female student teacher:

My 7th graders were playing ultimate frisbee. During they're [sic] play I noticed only boys were throwing to boys and the girls rarely got a chance to play. They started to complain ...I understood it. It's very common. I remember it happening to me when I was in grade school...it was very frustrating because I could play as well as the boys... I made

the students throw to the opposite sex. Boy, girl, boy, girl, etc.

### **Incidences Involving Race**

The log entries regarding race varied from a concern about young children using prejudicial statements to shock regarding the extent of prejudicial attitudes. As teacher educators, our concern regarding racial prejudice reflects how inadequately students are able to control personal bias. For example, one female Euro-American stated:

After receiving pictures a black girl responded that she looked white and didn't want to look white... I wasn't really sure what to say. I was really surprised to have heard that comment...I didn't say anything. [My cooperating teacher] said "well we know you're not white". I did not like this comment but I didn't know what to say.

A second entry also typifies this attitude:

We had a mother come into the gym and tell us (my cooperating teacher and me [sic]) that her son was to stay away from all the black kids because of an incident that occurred [sic] to them over the weekend...I couldn't believe a parent would actually say that to a teacher because of the emphasis that the school is placing on diversity...I did not know what to do...I tried to watch the child and keep him out of trouble... It appears that issues regarding race created the most discomfort.

### **Incidences Involving Culture or Religion**

The log entries that reflected culture and religion, indicated that students were surprised when these issues were raised. Once they understood the circumstances though the issues were not threatening. A typical log entries follows:

We were playing a "Christmas" holiday [game] and the person who was "it" was called Santa and the other students were

his presents. We ran into a problem - we have a Jewish boy in our class who got offended... It never even occurred to me that we would run into a problem like this so I was mainly "shocked"... We accepted the fact that we have different religions and took his feelings into consideration... We ended up just saying that they were manora [sic] and candles also...

Julia is one of the foreign exchange students from Germany. We asked her to choose a game, from Germany and explain/show us how to play it... Julia is such a good sport and a lot of fun!!! She got a little discouraged when we didn't catch on at first. I felt bad and really began to realize what it is like to not speak a language... we have so much slang we use that it must be hard for her to pick it up and understand... Once I understood I helped Julia break it down into small simple steps so we would understand and be able to play.

### **Results and Discussion**

The 77 student teachers engaged in a total of 94 student teaching action plans within the context of the five year log entries. The most frequent multicultural differences identified were issues that impacted students with disabilities. A total of forty action plans focused on issues relating to the principle of mainstreaming and the acceptance of those students by into the physical education program. Using a Likert type scale, all of the projects were self-evaluated by the student teachers using a scale of one to five, with a one indicating no success, a three, some successes and a five, successful. The cooperating teacher participated in this evaluation session. The range of scores ran from 3.5 (some successes) to 5 (successful). No student teacher considered their projects a failure. As an example, one student summarized his project as follows:

My objective was that all students (including those who are mainstreamed)

have an equal amount of practice and play time... Initially my cooperating teacher marked down how many trials the three mainstreamed students took and how many trials three of the average kids took... I was surprised at how few times the mainstream kids tried to participate... For my project I came up with stations for basketball and had several partner activities as well as many levels to participate in... This helped but I also made sure that I paid a lot of attention to the three mainstreamed students... I was successful! The number of trials for the mainstreamed kids, after three weeks averaged the same as the average kids...

In the final tabulation, there were eighteen collaborative action research projects or action plans initiated that focused on culture.

Nineteen action plans focused on gender differences. These projects included circumstances involving girls during game play as well as the amount of feedback given by the student teacher to girls in comparison to the amount of feedback given to boys. One male student teacher of Euro-American descent noticed that he gave more feedback to the male students in his class than to the females. The cooperating teacher participated in this experiment by coding data during a specific class period for ten sequential classes. He discovered that although there were only nine males and 24 females in the class that he gave the males a higher percentage (68%) and the feedback was specific rather than general. He also noticed that he divided the general positive feedback equally between the boys and the girls. John's objective was to give a proportional amount of specific, corrective as well as general feedback equally to students of both genders. John rated the success of his collaborative action research project as a 3.5 on a 5.0 scale. He indicated that specific and corrective feedback improved over three weeks by 10%:

Although I am still favoring the boys, it has improved and my total number of

feedback [sic] has increased by 5%... I will continue to work on this...

Fifteen action plans focused on students who were either athletically gifted or were students of average or low motor skills. Seven action plans looked at socioeconomic issues, four examined religious issues and two focused on racial issues. The same student that analyzed feedback patterns involving gender also examined feedback patterns that involved students of different race. John found that although he had 73% “white” students in class, initially 65% of the feedback he gave was focused exclusively on the “black” students. As an example he stated:

I also noticed that although blacks only make up 27% of my class that they received over half of the feedback . . . I honestly thought that the results would be reversed. I assume that I was over—compensating my comments subconsciously.

In the future, I will try not to show favoritism. The logs indicated that categorical areas that student teachers focused upon through their individual action plans were varied. Generally a variety of multicultural topics were explored. In reviewing the log entries it was revealed that the entries demonstrated thoughtful analysis by the student teachers. The entries also revealed a deeper understanding of the anxieties experienced by minority cultures. The writings suggested that student teachers were becoming more sensitive to all of their student(s), especially those who exhibited characteristics different from those represented by the majority population.

### **Conclusions**

Using an approach where student teachers were asked to employ critical thought and problem-solving techniques in examining student behaviors, individual multicultural goals and thoughtful interventions were created by the student(s). It was evident that the student teachers that participated in this project became more

aware of their own bias and developed a more sensitive attitude toward minority populations within their classes. Of course, at times, there was some frustration. It was difficult for some student teachers to overcome value systems or bias that had emerged over a number of years. It helped though for the student teachers to use log books as a diary to record their thoughts and reactions. It also was helpful for the student teachers to engage in dialogue with their peers within the student teaching seminars. Boyer (1990) has suggested that we need to expand the definition of research where the solution to problems better meets the needs of society. These projects represented an effort to develop a process where students entering the teaching profession could examine the challenges of teaching in a multicultural environment. It is important to note that this was a new experience for many of the student teachers in that they had lived only in a monocultural environment. This project challenged many of their beliefs but it also allowed each individual an opportunity to work through their own feelings and attitudes. The project also provided an opportunity for the participants to use critical thinking skills in analyzing student behaviors, in particular the dynamics of a diverse social group. It was fascinating not only to read their log entries but to listen to discussion during the seminars. The approach used in this project is compatible with Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1992) who advocates an active approach to research where one examines problems that exist within the context of their own teaching. Using the collaborative action research model, where the cooperating teacher, the university supervisor and the student teacher worked as a team in discussing a variety of multicultural issues proved to be effective. It was fascinating to observe student teachers work through difficult situations using good judgment and thoughtful response in bringing potentially harmful situations to a positive conclusion. The most significant aspect of this project though was the utilization of log entries and seminar discussion as a medium for

critical analysis of difficult, uncomfortable multicultural situations. The initial workshops also provided an opportunity for student teachers to examine a variety of multicultural issues through group interaction and discussion. This expanded and refined the multicultural knowledge base of the participants prior to the seminars. Following the workshops, the public school setting became an inquiry site where student teachers could examine multicultural concepts, identify personal multicultural goals and implement an action plan to respond to socially divisive situations. But most important, it is believed that this process served to sensitize beginning teachers to the challenges of teaching in a diverse environment. This seemed to be especially significant in helping student teachers examine their own personal bias. When asked to discuss some of these feelings during the workshops, it initially was very difficult. As the semester continued and a sense of trust was developed, it became easier and the participants allowed themselves to become more vulnerable. They then would participate in group discussion at a higher level. This process also created a unique mentoring system by providing a specific role for cooperating teachers. Through this role, the student teacher, the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher developed a sense of trust. Their working relationship therefore was strengthened as the semester continued. Smith (1998) believes that serving as a cooperating teacher for student teachers is a "...win-win situation...". Cooperating teachers win by serving as a mentor for the student teacher. In doing so they must analyze their teaching strategies and therefore improve their own teaching. Student teachers also win because they are provided the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have gained through their undergraduate experience. Within a framework of multicultural education, both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher became more effective in teaching in a diverse environment. In conclusion, it is believed that this project not only provided an example of

how to integrate the basic tenets of research, critical thinking and multicultural issues into a practical context but also served as a method of problem solving and reflection for the student teacher in examining important multicultural issues they might encounter as they enter the teaching field. Theoretically, this process reinforces the premise that knowledge acquisition is a result of interactions with others where teachers learn from their experiences and adjust their beliefs according to these experiences (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989) Thus the process becomes the primary focus where collaborative action research is used as a tool for developing critical thinking skills and employing self-analysis by integrating and examining multicultural issues during a critical phase in the professional development of young teachers. Through this process, student teachers developed a sense of self by examining their own bias while working toward treating all of their students as equals.

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