Sharing Stories:
A Study of African American Students
In a Predominantly White Teacher Education Program

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Jessica Smith and Donna West (fictitious names), two African American students in a predominantly white teacher education program at “Midwest University.” Interviews and field observations illuminated these students’ frequent encounters with overt racism, as well as what J. King (1991) calls “dysconscious racism”—a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant white norms and privileges. Jessica’s and Donna’s experiences with racism at MU underscored for them the importance of addressing issues of diversity and racial inequality in their own classrooms. Moreover, both women noted that the interviews conducted for this study deepened their resolve to bring diversity issues into the classroom by helping them to put their experiences into perspective and to clarify their own beliefs and goals. Instructors and researchers need to continue this effort to hear the stories that students of color have to tell.

Special thanks to Jessica Smith and Donna West for their participation in this study.
Introduction

Racial homogeneity characterizes the elementary education program at Midwest University (a fictitious name for a large midwestern university). While there are a few African American undergraduates in MU’s Elementary Education department—24 out of a total 825 students during the 1993-1994 school year—many classes (of approximately 35 students) are entirely comprised of white men and women. There is no question that at MU, Teacher Education is a white major.

In the spring of 1993, I had two African American students in my social studies methods class. Looking at these students amid a sea of white faces on the first day of class, I found myself wondering about their lives at MU. Did being black affect their experience in the elementary education program? What impact would their experience have on their teaching and their vision of what a teacher should be?

Scant research exists which examines these questions about African American preservice teachers. While there is considerable data (e.g., Irvine, 1988; S. H. King, 1993; Waters, 1989; Witty, 1982) regarding the reasons for the decline among Blacks in teacher education, numerous studies citing the factors that influence African Americans to choose the field of education (e.g., Brown-West 1991; S. H. King, 1993), and voluminous calls for an increase in the recruitment of African American teachers (e.g., Cole, 1986; Franklin, 1987), few researchers have attempted to understand the lived experiences of black college students once they enter the teacher education programs. Surveys and other quantitative studies (e.g., Allen, 1988; Nettles, 1988) offer us what Erickson (1986) calls “abstract universals” about African Americans’ experience on university
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campuses, but such quantitative studies fail to provide any profound sense of that experience.

Delpit’s (1995) qualitative study of six African American teachers (plus six Native American teachers) exemplifies the raw power of respondents’ personal statements, which leave indelible images of the negative experience of black preservice teachers. Their stories, taken together with Delpit’s analysis, provide convincing evidence of the racism that pervades predominantly white institutions, and the consequent alienation that African American students suffer in teacher education programs. Yet even this study, with its short vignettes of students’ experiences and impressions, does not communicate the full complexity of their lives as preservice teachers. There is a pressing need for studies of African American preservice teachers which convey, in a deeper sense, the lived experience of individual students. Only by first understanding who they were when they entered the teacher education programs can we begin to understand the impact of those programs on their sense of self, their world views, and their plans for the future.

This article addresses these issues by reporting the findings of a study of two African American students in a predominantly white teacher education program. Following a discussion of the methodology involved in this participatory study, the findings are presented in narrative form: from the students’ relatively sheltered lives before they entered Midwestern University, to their painful adjustment to the “dysconscious racism” (J. King, 1991) in the predominantly white milieu of MU and alienation in the teacher education program. As a consequence of their experiences at MU, by the conclusion of their course of study, these black students were bringing strong political agendas to their work in the elementary classroom. Thus, their negative experience at MU actually served to inspire them to find their voices and stimulated their determination to foster substantive changes in the schools. The article concludes by advocating a more affirming way for university instructors to help minority students find their voices.
Methodology

The Setting and Participants

The two respondents in this study, Jessica Smith and Donna West, were the two African American students in my social studies methods class, part of a “cluster” of three courses plus a field practicum that seniors were required to take in their final semester before student teaching. Early in the semester, Jessica and Donna each came to my office to discuss course requirements, many of which relate to diversity issues and multicultural education. As our conversations evolved, each showed an interest in telling me about her experiences and impressions during three years at MU; each exhibited a strong desire to educate me regarding her perspectives as an African American in a predominantly white teacher education program. Ethnographer Robert Orsi asserts, “I never have to recruit respondents; they are self-selecting” (personal communication, November 11, 1993). This was my experience with Donna and Jessica. When I approached them with the idea of taking part in this study, both students were more than eager to participate.

Data Collection

Wolcott (1988) writes that there are four basic methods of collecting data in interpretive research: interviewing, acting as participant observer, using written resources, and using nonwritten sources. He reminds researchers that we should try not to rely on just one of these methods, that “the strength of fieldwork lies in its ‘triangulation,’” (Wolcott, 1988, p. 192). Heeding Wolcott’s advice, I made use of this “multi-instrument approach” (Pelto, quoted in Wolcott, 1988, p. 192) in this study.

Interviews provided the most important source of data for this study. During February and March, I met once per week with each student for 1-2 hours. In April, I met twice, for two hours, with the students together. And in May, after the conclusion of the semester, we met separately one final time. During the first month, interviews were primarily unstructured (“when the interviewer does not know what he or she doesn’t know and therefore must rely on the respondent to tell him or her” [Lincoln &
Guba, 1985, p. 269]). I began with “grand tour” questions (Spradley, 1979) which helped me to get a sense of the respondents’ biographies, beliefs, and aspirations. Then, as I began to develop a sharper focus and a need for clarification of previous conversations or phenomena I had noted in field observations, interviews became increasingly more structured and formal. I used interview questions to learn the impact that the students’ race had on their perceptions and experiences at MU, particularly the time they spent in the Teacher Education program.

Participant observation was another significant research method in this study. During the social studies methods class, which met twice weekly, I operated at the participant end of Glesne and Peshkin’s (1992, pp. 40-41) participant-observation continuum, which runs from the totally uninvolved observer at one extreme to full participant at the other. Conversely, in the other methods classes, as well as in the respondents’ field experience placements in the public schools, I remained strictly an observer. Field observation enabled me to note how the respondents interacted with their colleagues, instructors, cooperating teachers, and students; in addition, it gave me the opportunity to compare my impressions with the feelings and perceptions that they had discussed in interviews.

Finally, written and nonwritten resources included papers, projects, and presentations that students produced during the semester; respondents’ plans for the units they taught in the elementary schools; and notes that they took in their classes.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing the data throughout the study was an evolutionary one. Early in the semester I began delineating categories of phenomena that were emerging from field notes and interviews. My goal in creating these categories was to find meaning in and connections between the innumerable pieces of documentary material that were accumulating, and to develop working hypotheses arising from these connections. The emerging themes would help to direct my inquiry and, eventually, provide the foci for my write-up. From then on, my research took on the “funnel”
structure that Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) describe: through “progressive focusing” I was able to clarify, and at times even transform, those preliminary categories and working hypotheses. As my research progressed and my focus narrowed, the categories that I concentrated on underwent continued refinement and division into subcategories; new data provided confirming and/or disconfirming evidence (Erickson, 1986) for my working hypotheses, necessitating further refinement and revision. Finally, member checks helped me determine the extent to which the respondents’ perceptions concurred with my findings.

Writing Up the Data

The most fascinating studies can be stripped of their original vitality in the final write-up. In the sections that follow, I have made a concerted effort to avoid the scenario of the “skillful ventriloquist” (Harrison, 1993, p. 1) who inserts apt quotations or cites specific instances to prove assertions, thereby removing any sense of time, place, respondent individuality, or researcher presence from the text. We need to hear stories of these preservice teachers, tales which attempt to convey their experiences in the context of their own personal histories, ambitions, and perceptions. For this reason, the data assumes, as much as possible, a narrative form which chronicles the respondents’ lives before MU and takes us through the semester that they were in my class. In each of the following sections, we see how each student reacted to particular aspects of the environment at MU—sometimes very similarly, while other times surprisingly differently. The intent has been to show them as real people, not as a couple of statistics or a few disembodied quotations. I relate the two students’ stories and impressions and contextualize their experiences within a broader background of relevant research. Thus, the study’s write-up is not exactly Donna’s and Jessica’s stories; only they could have written their stories. The narrative tells their stories filtered through my questions, perceptions, and interpretations as researcher.

The Problems and Promise of Participatory Research
In a participatory study like this one, the professional detachment traditionally expected of researchers would be extremely difficult to maintain. Acting as both instructor and researcher, participating in as well as studying the students’ lives, I blended two roles that usually remain separate. The blurring of traditional researcher/participant boundaries required that I be especially mindful of my own subjectivity as I engaged in conversation with my respondents, recorded and analyzed the data, and wrote up my findings. To this end, I followed Peshkin’s (1988) advice and kept track of my “subjective I’s” throughout the process.

But rather than being a liability to a study, the researcher’s inevitable involvement in participatory research can lead to new possibilities for both researcher and respondents. Over the course of the semester, my interviews with Donna and Jessica evolved into dialogues about race, education, the dominant culture, and minority perspectives. What I learned from these students had an impact on my teaching, which, in turn, had an impact on their experience in the teacher education program; what they learned from me in our conversations influenced their perceptions of themselves, of their instructors, and of the university. Schwandt (1993) writes of the emergence of a new kind of researcher, one whose aim “is not to produce knowledge of the social world as an entity but to engage in knowledge-making as a human activity” (Schwandt, 1993, p. 19). In this participatory study, I have tried to manifest the qualities of this new researcher. Research is not just a solitary quest for abstract knowledge, but a dialogue in which knowledge “takes on meaning in the context of conversation and deliberation” (Schwandt, 1993, p. 20). Thus, my conversations with Donna and Jessica were not just an attempt to discern an existing reality in teacher education programs; they were part of an attempt to help connect the worlds of researcher and respondent, of white instructor and black student, in order to generate a better reality.

Jessica and Donna: Life Before MU

Jessica Smith
Before arriving at MU, Jessica Smith had lived her whole life in what she called a “little city.” “Blacks live on one side, Whites on the other,” she told me. Although many of its residents found employment with the auto industry, gangs, drugs, and prostitution were common in her neighborhood. The youngest of nine children, Jessica was part of a close-knit family: uncles, aunts, cousins, and her grandmother all lived on the same block where she lived with her mother and siblings. “I have a little of everything in my family,” she said. “One brother’s on drugs, two are unskilled workers, one sister has two kids and lives on welfare, and my other sister graduated from college and is an engineer.”

While growing up, Jessica never thought much about race. She lived in a black neighborhood. Her elementary school was entirely African American, but Jessica never even thought about that fact until one day in the sixth grade “I looked up and suddenly took notice that everyone was black.” Secondary school was racially mixed, but “everyone got along. I liked it because mixed is more like the real world.”

Although Jessica didn’t particularly like school, she told me that she studied hard:

Seeing what I saw in my neighborhood was enough to motivate me.
Seeing two of my brothers in LD classes--I never wanted to be like that.
So I did what I was told in schools. And Mom wanted me not to get pregnant in high school like my sister. She wanted me to go to college.
When you see your mom go through stuff with the older kids, you want to do right.

In spite of her good intentions, Jessica would never have come to MU had it not been for the efforts of others. “A lady from MU recruited me. She sent me all the forms, and I just threw them away; but my mother got them out of the trash, filled out all the stuff, and sent it off. . . . When I got accepted, my mom talked me into going.”
Donna West came from a different city than Jessica, the largest urban area in the state:

We moved there for the steel jobs when I was little. The first place I lived was a project. There was a lot of negative influence around. I guess you could say I come from the “stereotypical” black family--a single parent home and three kids. We were latchkey kids, coming home to an empty house until Mom got home from work.

Donna enjoyed school much more than Jessica did. “I was always in accelerated classes, you know, honors student, student council, all that stuff. I always knew I wanted to go to college.” Unlike Jessica, Donna’s choice of MU was a deliberate one: “I’m all for black colleges, but you have a better chance of getting hired if you go to a white school. Anyway, I figured I’m going to have to learn how to deal with white people in this world. I may as well start learning in college.”

Silencing at MU

Jessica’s Introduction to MU

For Jessica, arrival at MU proved quite a shock. Although less than two hours’ drive from her home, it was a different world: small college town with no inner city, rolling green hills all around, and very few people of color either in the town or on campus. From the very first day at MU, life was difficult. She found little in common with her fellow students. Mostly small-town Whites, they not only looked different, but their southern-midwest drawls differed markedly from Jessica’s inner city dialect. Jessica tried to make friends with the white students, but met with little success. Until entering the university, she had never felt isolated in a school environment, but time and again MU students would snub her.
Like during my first week in the dorms, everyone would be introducing themselves and asking each other questions about where they’re from and all that; then I’d come over and they’d stop talking. Just stop talking! Either that, or they’d keep talking to each other and ignore me completely. I’d tell them my name and they’d just nod and maybe smile but not say anything at all to me.

Often there was no question in Jessica’s mind that such snubs, or overtly rude or thoughtless comments, were racially motivated; but other times she wasn’t sure. “I’d get paranoid, you know. I’d never know if somebody was doing something because he was a racist or because he was just a jerk.”

While the dorms seemed like enemy territory, classes usually felt at least neutral. “You sit, take notes, and leave--usually it wasn’t so bad.” But, she explained to me, sometimes the classroom was not so safe a place. “I’d sit down next to somebody and he’d just look at me--you know? And I knew what he was thinking.” While most of the time, instructors were a benign presence, occasionally they were not. “One time I asked a question, and the professor totally ignored me. Then somebody [a white student] asked the same thing, and he answered it right away.”

Jessica’s experience is not unique. Many black students arriving at predominantly white universities have a difficult time adjusting to the new life (Allen, 1988). For Jessica, coming to MU was like moving to a foreign country. Without support services, guidebooks, or translators, she had no choice but to try to navigate her way though this world on her own. As she explained to me, she soon devised ways to avoid humiliation and survive at MU. “Before I came to MU I was outspoken, you know? In school I’d ask a question or speak my mind when I needed to. Here I felt nervous about speaking up. People would ignore me or judge me by what I say and how I talk.” It was far less risky to just stop talking.

Fine (1989) writes about this “silencing” of minority voices in schools, that “undesirable talk” by students is “subverted, appropriated, and exported,” obscuring “the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students’ daily
lives” (Fine, 1989, p. 153). Fine blames the silencing on educational policies and procedures; for Jessica her fellow students were primarily responsible for “shutting her down,” though, she told me, the university as well offered her no support in dealing with her peers.

Donna’s Introduction to MU

Donna’s adjustment to MU was not nearly as painful as Jessica’s. She had expected to have to deal with white people; rather than taking offense at racial barbs, she was philosophical. “It’s not their fault if they don’t understand. They’re from small towns; they don’t know any better.” Donna faced many of the same situations that Jessica did, but Donna viewed them as a kind of challenge. “I have an attitude, you know. I would go into large lecture halls . . . cocky. If somebody gave me a look, I’d give it back.”

Donna’s immediate concerns were academic: she worried she might not be able to compete with students who had attended more affluent high schools. “But when I listened to everyone else, I realized that no one was smarter than me. I looked at the quality of their work, and I said, hey, I can do this. So I stopped being intimidated. I figured it’s OK to speak up.”

Donna did not allow the university environment to silence her. She explained to me,

As the only African American in class, I felt it my duty to speak up—to give them a different perspective. People have come to expect it of me. Some of my friends don’t like to disagree with people. . . . I try to disagree with people in a way that won’t insult anyone. . . . I’m ready to react. Sometimes people think I overreact—but you’ve got to say what you’ve got to say.

Survival at MU: The Divided Self
For the average white student at MU, race usually was not something to think about, much less talk about. Whereas white students could go for weeks without ever consciously considering their racial background or ethnicity, Jessica and Donna had no choice but to be aware of their race on a daily basis. As Donna remarked, “Race is always an issue for me at MU. I have to deal with it all the time.” Sometimes they had to face overt racism—snubs, rude comments, racial epithets shouted out of car windows, and so on (both described several such encounters at MU). More often, though, they experienced what J. King (1991) calls “dysconscious racism,” a form of racism that tacitly accepts and thereby reifies dominant white norms and privileges. For example, one day Donna told me,

Yesterday we were talking about gender bias in schools. A student brought up affirmative action, saying ‘I know my boyfriend didn’t get a job because he wasn’t a woman or minority.’ Jessica and I just looked at each other. . . . Nobody--including the professor--disagreed or argued with the student. . . . When people say something like that in class, what are they saying out of class?

Unlike Jessica, Donna usually confronted such attitudes directly; but in this case she chose not to challenge her classmate’s statement. Frequently responding to such manifestations of dysconscious racism requires tremendous energy; sometimes Donna responded, and sometimes she let the comment go by. “It depends on how I’m feeling that day,” she told me. “Either way, I don’t let it get to me. If you let it get to you, it gets to you.” For Jessica, however, these daily barbs could become almost unbearable.

The only way for Donna and Jessica to find respite from the daily racial issues was to spend time away from white people. Early in their years at MU, each of them sought out and established friendships with other African American students with whom they could be themselves and not have to deal with or think about race. For Jessica, her social world at MU was a place where she did not need to be silent. Before the end of their freshman year, both Donna and Jessica were living two distinct lives at
MU: their academic lives as minority students among Whites, and their social lives with African Americans.

Pinar (1975) writes that the schooling experience is a dehumanizing one, that the lived experience of the learner (thoughts, feelings, etc.) is ignored; instead, the learner must learn to turn against himself and model a personality accepted by the dominant society. Jessica and Donna experienced these pressures every day. In order to survive at MU, they had no choice but to become, “divided selves,” living one life among their friends and another in the classroom. Donna had little trouble making this transition, and was actually able to maintain, relate, and project much of her lived experience into her school experience; but she did concede to me that “in class there’s a certain way to act.” For Jessica, maintaining her equilibrium was far more difficult. “I’m not a religious person,” she told me, “but there have been times I had to pray before class.”

Language contributed to this “dichotomous nature of . . . existence” (Saunders, 1991, p. 45) at the university. To compete in MU’s academic world, they felt they must be essentially bilingual, speaking one dialect of the English language in class and another among their friends. Donna explained to me,

When I get together with my friends, the way we talk people might call it an ignorant dialect. When you come to school you have to speak more correct English. If I were to explain something in class like I do with my friends, everyone would say, ‘what?’ I have to watch my speech--I don’t want to be stereotyped. I’m not saying not to be yourself, but I’ve been in class with other African Americans who spoke that way and people acted like that person was ignorant.

Jessica worried that her academic language was not up to university standards. “When I’m with my friends I relax and talk differently. That way of talking creeps into my speech in class.” Like many black college students (Hedegard, 1972), Jessica worried that she was being judged by the way she talked. “When I have to work with other students in a group, they sometimes won’t even let me be the recorder. Maybe I need
help with grammar, but that doesn’t mean I can’t write.” Jessica’s way of talking further silenced her among her white colleagues.

In Teacher Education: Still Silenced

Political Motivation for Entering Teacher Education

Jessica had no definite career plans when she arrived at MU. It was her Afro-American history courses that inspired her to go into the field of education. In her sophomore year, Jessica took her first “Afro” course, which introduced her to an academic environment that she had not known existed. First of all, the professor was black. For the first time, “it was kind of like an at-home situation. It was more comfortable” than courses with white professors. Secondly, that course, and subsequent Afro-American history courses, had a profound effect on Jessica’s political consciousness.

Afro-American history courses helped build me up and make me want to learn. Learning about the history of black people and going home and seeing how things are, how things haven’t changed, seeing parallels between the past and the present . . . that opened up my eyes.

Scott (1981) affirms the value of developing and strengthening the Black perspective of African American students. For Jessica, Afro-American courses gave meaning and direction to her education. “In the Afro courses I’d see how hard it used to be for Blacks, then I’d go home and see where they’re at today--I’d think, oh, man, these people need an education. I decided to come here to the School of Education.”

While Donna had known for longer than Jessica that she would like to be a teacher, her reasons for entering the teacher education program were quite similar to Jessica’s. “I want to have the greatest possible impact,” she told me. “I want to give people from the cities a chance to go on to higher education--to help them want to go--to change their minds about higher education.” For most people in Donna’s home town, higher education was never even a consideration. “Grades or money get in the
way. . . . They get frustrated and end up in the military or serving fast food. I want them to want to go to college so they’ll come back wanting to build up the inner cities.”

**Dysconscious Racism in Teacher Education Courses**

Much to their disappointment, Donna and Jessica found that education courses had little to do with the experiences and perspectives, or the political agendas, that they brought to them. Donna told me,

I bet that when Caucasian students hear the instructor or do assignments, they picture a nice white suburban school. That’s what the instructor imagines too. I am trying to picture an urban school. The activities we learn about in our methods courses would have no meaning to inner city Blacks.

Instructors seemed unaware or uninterested in Donna’s and Jessica’s points of view, but Jessica usually chose not to offer her perspective. She said to me, “Why bother speaking up? Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I figure they’ll just think, here she goes again.”

From what I observed in my class, Jessica’s concerns were not mere paranoia. Several times over the course of the semester, Donna did speak up to present her perspective: invariably it provoked a negative reaction among at least some of the students. For example, one day in my social studies class, she told her classmates, “You have no idea what black students have to deal with every day,” and she proceeded to give some specific examples. “I wasn’t trying to make any kind of statement,” Donna told me later. “I’m not trying to say, ‘I’m Black, I’m Black!’ I just wanted them to be aware that not everything is hunky dory.” Nevertheless, after class, several students were angry and defensive about Donna’s comments. “What am I supposed to do about it?” one student said to me. “It’s not my fault. I’m not a racist. She’s just stirring up trouble. She complains about the problem, but she doesn’t tell us how to make it better.” Said another, “She’s blowing things way out of proportion. What about black racism toward Whites?”
Ahlquist (1991) writes that a great majority of white preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with these racist values about which they are either unconscious or in denial. Jessica and Donna acknowledged that not all their classmates displayed racist attitudes, but, like Delpit’s (1995) respondents, they still encountered varying levels of racial prejudice quite often. Much to Jessica’s annoyance, people frequently expected her to explain the “black perspective.” “I hate having everyone expect me to represent black people. That’s stereotyping. I don’t like to be put in the position of ‘you’re black so you’re the expert.’” At the same time, she worried that if she didn’t present a black perspective, who would? This ambivalence plagued Jessica and Donna on an almost daily basis.

In my social studies class that semester, each student modeled an activity for the class which could be implemented with kids. Jessica chose to do an activity designed to raise children’s consciousness about diverse perspectives; Donna opted not to do this kind of lesson. While Jessica heard some students muttering to one another, “it figures she’d have us doing something about Blacks,” Donna heard, “what’s the matter, why didn’t she do something about her people?” They were damned if they did, and damned if they didn’t.

While there is no reason to assume that preservice teachers are more racist than students pursuing other majors, Jessica and Donna did have a more difficult time in education courses than in most of their other courses. First of all, elementary education courses at MU had fewer Blacks than the university as a whole. In the relatively small education classes, the difference between 2.9% in elementary education and 3.9% university-wide often translated into one more African American in a class. That made a tremendous difference to Jessica:

Sometimes you need someone else in class who knows where you’re coming from, who understands you, who will give you some support. Like last semester I read an article for class and I would have commented on it, but I needed someone else to comment on it too. Everyone wouldn’t be watching me representing black people by myself.
Education courses inadvertently exacerbated racial tensions through the many group projects required of the students. More than in any other department, Jessica and Donna frequently had no choice but to work closely with other students in their education courses. “Every day, for practically every class I can expect to have to work in a group, both in class and on homework assignments,” Jessica told me. “A lot of times in group experiences people have shut me down.”

In addition to such overt rebuffs, Jessica often experienced more subtle rejection. “When we have to choose a partner, I feel left out. Sometimes I end up working alone.” Donna added, “The Whites go out together, get in touch with each other as friends. It’s hard for us to find people we want. Definitely the group situation is bad for us.”

Obviously, in their courses, not all the goals of cooperative learning were being met.

**Lack of Commitment to Diversity Issues**

Many teacher education courses at MU, including my social studies methods course, addressed more than just the dominant white perspective, bringing up issues of diversity and multicultural education. But neither Donna nor Jessica believed that the messages of multicultural education were getting through to their white peers. “Ed courses are not really preparing us to deal with diversity in the schools,” said Jessica. “It’s talked about, we read about it . . . but we’re not really getting at how to deal with it.” In several conversations, Donna cited the example of a class field trip to observe an inner city school:

My white colleagues hated it in that school. They were shocked and uncomfortable. But I had a great time. Except in the teachers’ lounge the teachers were so negative about the kids. Even the teachers counted the kids out before they ever had a chance to be successful . . . . My white colleagues had the same bad reaction to the kids at the school. They need to learn more about that stuff.

Cohen (1993) suggests that in order to get students to understand and appreciate the importance of diversity issues, the curriculum must incorporate the experiences,
questions, and criticisms of diverse persons in the classroom. In most of their education classes, however, Jessica and Donna, like Delpit’s (1995) respondents, did not feel that their perspectives were welcome. On the day Donna told the class about the slights that she endured on a daily basis, she later heard a student say, “It’s not as bad as that. Why doesn’t she just try not to think about it? She’s just paranoid.” So in education courses, the frequent reference to diversity issues merely reminded Donna and Jessica that in most cases they were safest remaining silent.

Addressing Diversity in the Field

The semester that Jessica and Donna were in my class, they were able to spend considerable time away from MU at their practicum site, which they had hoped would be more relevant and rewarding than their coursework. The fact that Lincoln Elementary was as predominantly white as MU did not deter either student from pursuing a political agenda. After witnessing the attitudes of their peers at the School of Education, both Donna and Jessica resolved to address diversity issues in the units they would teach at Lincoln. Jessica wanted to implement a unit on racism, but her cooperating teacher advised that she stick to the 4th grade curriculum and teach the state’s history. I suggested that she ask to do a unit on the Ku Klux Klan, which figures prominently in the state’s history, but Jessica declined, explaining, “I don’t want to get her mad at me.” Instead she opted to do a unit on a religious minority group that lives in the state; but she did make sure to include a lesson on the persecution of that group. So although she did not get to teach exactly what she wanted, she was able to address issues that she considered important.

Donna chose to do a unit on pioneers with her fifth graders, and, like Jessica, made sure to address issues of diversity: “I want the kids to gain a lot of perspectives, how a lot of people contributed to the expansion of this nation--Asian immigrants, Native Americans, black cowboys.” Still, she was ambivalent about how much to emphasize diversity to her relatively homogeneous class.
I thought I’d tell the African American contribution, but I thought, if I were white, would I do that? But I’m not white, so why not? Besides, there are two African American students and they deserve a different perspective, and it will benefit everyone else too. Right now the whole class’s image of the west is the TV show *Little House on the Prairie*.

From the very first lesson, Donna followed through on her resolve. She initiated a lively discussion in which students discussed the relationship of Native Americans to the pioneers. While many of the children expressed stereotypical views of the “savage redskin,” Donna was able to elicit dissenting opinions from others who presented the Indians’ point of view. Whatever their opinions, Donna got all the students thinking about the relationship of marginalized groups to the dominant culture.

Jessica and Donna seemed much more prepared to deal with the needs of diverse individuals than most of the other students in their social studies methods class. After a few weeks at Lincoln, Jessica said, “You know, it’s an all-white class, but there are plenty of kids who need an extra push: kids with parents going through divorces, poor kids, lonely kids... I’m seeing a lot of diversity there. It’s not all that bad.”

Jessica welcomed this diversity in the classroom and the chance to help students with problems. This attitude stood in stark contrast to the experience of most white students in my class. As one student explained to me,

My class is a difficult group. I have at least two children who have been molested by parents. One came to school with bruises, and when I asked her what happened she said that her mother had beaten her up. Now what was I supposed to do with this information? I went to an all-white middle-class school in a middle-class town. I never knew anything like this. We talked a little about these kinds of problems in some of our classes at MU, but it’s not the same as having a kid that’s dirty and hungry and needy call me every name in the book and storm out of the classroom.
Most preservice teachers feel unprepared to deal with these types of problems in the classroom. Donna argued, “There need to be more classes that talk about inner city problems, because a lot of those problems are everywhere.” Both Donna and Jessica were convinced that their lives in the inner city had helped to prepare them for teaching. Donna told me, “Our experiences--at home and at MU--have helped us to understand different types of people better than middle-class Whites.” Knowles (1988) emphasizes the role that past experiences have on teachers’ actions in the classroom, noting that one’s experiential education can either enhance or detract from one’s success with students. Jessica and Donna arrived at their field experience with valuable knowledge and understandings about people that they acquired not at MU, but in their home towns. As Donna said to me, “Our upbringing taught us more about kids than any course could. Most of our classmates will have to learn about diversity on the job.”

**Conclusion: Regaining Voice**

**Negative University Experience Stimulates Political Consciousness and Action**

Although the courses in MU’s elementary education department seemed to exacerbate issues of racism and helped sometimes to censor Donna and silence Jessica, once they made it into the elementary school--even an atmosphere as foreign as Lincoln--they managed to find their voices again. As Fine and Weis (1993, p. 1) write, “Silencing as a practice does not totally work.” How did this important transition take place?

When Jessica arrived at MU she had little consciousness about racial inequality and little interest in diversity; but before long it was one of her most pressing concerns. Her negative experiences at MU--especially in education courses--actually helped to make her a more proactive teacher, more aware of the need to teach children about diversity, and more determined than ever to address issues of racism. Moreover, having to face adversity on a daily basis stimulated these students to emerge from their education stronger than their white counterparts. Both Donna and Jessica were more assertive in Lincoln School than other students were in their field experiences. Donna
remarked to me, “I’ll be more aggressive as a teacher because I have had to learn to be more aggressive to survive here.” Few students feel comfortable doing exactly what they want in the classroom, since they are, in essence, guests of the cooperating teacher. But Jessica and Donna, more so than most of the other students in their cohort, made sure that they were able to include issues of interest and importance to them in their units. As Jessica explained, “Sometimes I have to say something. If I don’t say anything, it could be on my mind forever. In the classroom, where I’m my own boss, I’ll show kids the way it really is. I have to take back a little of myself at a time--get back to where I used to be.”

Fostering Student Voice through Communication and Conversation

Thus, from Donna’s and Jessica’s descriptions of their experiences at MU, it might at first appear that the only way for silenced preservice teachers to regain their voices would be to make life in the university classroom so painful for them that they resolve to make things different in their own classrooms. Fortunately, however, through the ongoing interview process which the students and I engaged in throughout the semester, and Jessica’s response to our conversations, the students found a more affirming way to reassert their voices.

Late in the semester, after Jessica had already completed her field experience, she raised her hand in my social studies class and began talking to her classmates about what she had gone through during the semester, how difficult it had been for her at MU and in her field experience. She described an incident at Lincoln School when she was getting video equipment out of a closet in the gym and she overheard some children saying, “Look: that black lady is stealing the equipment.” Then she related her experiences with one pupil in her class at Lincoln who had given her a particularly hard time. “Here comes that black lady--don’t talk to her,” he would say to his classmates; or he would imitate the way Jessica talked and urge the other children to do the same thing. Jessica told us, “One day I decided to bake a cake, but I wondered if I should mention it to the class--maybe they wouldn’t want it.” My students asked Jessica why
not: why wouldn’t kids want the cake? “Well, you know, because I’m black,” Jessica answered. My students were incredulous. How could that make any difference? they asked. “Well,” Jessica continued, “when I brought the cake to school that boy wouldn’t eat the cake, and said, ‘I’m not going to touch that cake--she touched it with her black hands.’”

My class was speechless after that story. This was the first time that Jessica had ever described to them the obstacles that she faced in her all-white field placement. When they had recovered, suddenly they had a lot of questions for Jessica and Donna about their field experience and their lives at MU. Most of them had never really considered what people of color go through all the time, how much perseverance it sometimes takes just to make it through each day. One student remarked, “I never understood that it’s not big incidents that wear you down; it’s the little ones day after day after day. I learned more from Jessica today than I learned in a semester of Multicultural Education.”

By bringing her own life into the classroom, what Giroux (1989, p. 150) calls “the language of student experience,” Jessica accomplished two very important things. First, many white students in the class gained insight into the prevalence and destructive nature of racism, both in elementary school and in the School of Education. As Delpit (1995, p. 127) asserts, “organizing the university classroom so that all students’ stories are heard and all opinions valued may make inroads into that persistent scourge of American society, racial prejudice and discrimination.” Secondly, Jessica made a major step toward recovering her voice: she said what she felt and most of the class listened, responded, and supported her. As Pinar (1975, p. 361) would say, that day there was “an ambiance which is confirming and affirming, i.e., schooling for sanity.”

When Jessica and I talked after class that day, she cited several reasons why, after keeping things inside her for so long, she felt safe enough to speak out that day. She told me that after a semester of being in the cluster of four courses with the same group of students, she felt pretty comfortable with everyone. Jessica even cited all the groupwork, as painful as it can be at times, as helping her to trust her classmates. Yet
all these elements characterize many classes in the School of Education. Why was my class different from all other classes?

The answer, Jessica explained, lay in the personal relationship we had established over the course of this semester through many hours of interviews and discussion. “All our talks made it possible for me to bring up stuff in class. It helped make me comfortable: you know what’s happening with me, you know the background. I knew somebody was interested. That was important.”

Simply listening to Jessica and Donna and trying to understand their experiences at MU helped break down barriers and make their education, and the education of their classmates, more meaningful. This is not to say that every student of color should spend many hours with every white instructor, nor that white students wouldn’t benefit as well from such personal interaction; but it graphically illustrates the importance of establishing communication between students and instructor, and of encouraging students to bring their personal experiences into the classroom. As a white instructor, I could never truly see the world from Donna’s and Jessica’s perspective; but what mattered was the fact that I was asking them to explain it to me and trying as best I could to understand. Delpit’s (1995) interviews with minority teachers yielded the same conclusion, that non-minority faculty can reduce minority students’ sense of isolation simply by providing individual attention and encouragement. Teacher educators and researchers need to continue this effort to hear and respond to the stories that students of color have to tell. It is not enough simply to wait in our offices for these students to show up at the door; we need to create frequent opportunities for them to share their ideas, experiences, and perspectives with us--and with their fellow students.

Even if teacher educators ignore the plight of black students in the elementary education program and do nothing to alter their painful initiation into the profession, there seems to be a reasonable chance that students like Donna and Jessica will emerge strong and able to thrive in the teaching world. But everyone will benefit--white students as well as minority--if instructors and researchers make a point of actively
soliciting and listening to the stories they have to tell. Thanks, in part, to our many conversations, Jessica says, “Finally I’m just getting back my voice.”
References


Biography:

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All place names and people’s names in this article have been changed.

The situation at MU characterizes a nationwide decline in the percentage of black education majors (Delpit, 1995). In 1980, minority teachers comprised 12.5% of the teaching force; and by 1987, only 4.3% of elementary education majors were Blacks (Witty, 1989), a drop of over 50% in 10 years, in spite of numerous calls for increased minority representation in the teaching profession (e.g., Franklin, 1987). Studies (e.g., Irvine, 1988; Waters, 1989; Witty, 1982) cite several factors responsible for this trend. First, college attendance rates among Blacks are dropping. Secondly, many of those Blacks who do go to college are pursuing more lucrative career options that once were closed to African Americans--which may explain the 2.9% Black enrollment in MU’s elementary education department in 1993, a full percentage point lower than the university-wide percentage of 3.9%. Thirdly, teacher certification examinations and other “gatekeeping” prerequisites to teacher education programs reduce the percentage of black teacher candidates, since a higher percentage of Blacks than Whites fail such tests. African American preservice teachers certainly are an “endangered species” (Cole, 1986).