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Using Community Asset Mapping as a Means to Develop an Understanding of Diversity in Teacher Education Students

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Middle level philosophy instills the idea that middle schools should be inextricably linked to the communities in which they reside (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Honig, Kahne & McLaughlin, 2001). Students need to see local institutions as supporting their social and academic development while community agencies should be represented in the overall mission of the school. In this manner the relationship between school and community is symbiotic; students thrive off the partnerships with local institutions while local agencies, both business and not-for-profit, reap the benefits of having educated citizens.

Middle level teachers, therefore, need to be educated not only to instill the values of school-community partnerships in their classrooms, but also must actively pursue means in which they can develop these partnerships. To do this, the middle level educator must be willing to acquaint him or herself with the community surrounding the school. He or she must acknowledge and be willing to incorporate the community into the daily life of the classroom.

While this sounds like a logical extension of best practice, the integration between classroom and community becomes more difficult when one takes into account the demographics of the teaching population coupled with the growing diversity of the student population. Ample research supports the idea that the teaching corps is largely made up of white females from middle-class backgrounds while the student population is increasing in its cultural and linguistic diversity (Sleeter, 2001; Shen, Wegenke & Cooley, 2003; Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989). If we accept that classroom demographics

are representative of the communities they are built in, we often find a mismatch between the backgrounds of teachers and the make-up of the communities in which they teach.

It is questionable how well teachers with limited cross-cultural experiences can teach and reach students hailing from varying cultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. Research conducted by Obida and Manheim Teel (2001) suggests that teachers, in order to best serve the diverse students whom they teach, need to acquire cross-cultural skills to best meet the learning and social needs of the children in their classrooms. While in-service education may be provided to teachers, the question arises of what role can teacher education programs take to assist in this process. Can teacher education programs be harnessed to increase future teachers' ability and desire to work with the varying student populations and the surrounding communities they will find at their eventual schools?

Ripon College is a 4-year undergraduate liberal arts institution located in central Wisconsin. In its rural location the college serves approximately 1000 students, 110 to 130 who are engaged in the study of education in combination with a subject area major at any given time. The social foundations core in the Department of Educational Studies includes at least one course in diversity issues in education, and further elective options include coursework in international education, two programs in which students can visit and work in schools abroad, an option to student teach in Chicago through the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, and a future proposal to allow students to

complete their student teaching internationally. A minimum of thirty clinical hours must be spent in working with diverse populations including students designated as EEN, ethnically diverse, bilingual, and economically disadvantaged. In addition, wider college coursework, and the mission of the college itself, supports global studies, foreign language acquisition, service learning, and race and gender relations study.

Despite these efforts, a survey of recent Educational Studies graduates demonstrated a perceived lack of instruction and experience in dealing with diverse populations. Upon Department examination of our program we addressed and continue to develop means of addressing this issue of teaching future teachers to work with diverse students and communities. For instance, while students are required to spend a clinical experience working with diverse students, this clinical has traditionally been completed by self-placement, and is not supervised by college faculty members as other clinical experiences are; instead, the experience is approved by a supervisor at the school, agency or program where the student completes the requisite hours. In addition, supervised clinical experiences are often completed in the area immediately surrounding the college where, while diversity has increased over the years, the community make-up is not representative of what our students would find in a more urban environment as future teachers.

As a partial means of addressing this issue, new projects have been placed in the required course addressing diversity in American education. One of these, the Community Asset Mapping Project (CAMP), attempts to bridge some of the perceived gap in student ability to work with diverse students and communities while still acknowledging factors such as location which impact the college. In addition, CAMP goes beyond solely addressing the dynamics of teaching in a future classroom by requiring teachers to learn methods of mediating community environments that can encompass a number of cultures our students may not have previously

encountered. While CAMP does not mandate contact with diverse groups- something difficult to mandate within our rural location, it instead gives students a method to mediate community culture in a manner to harness community strengths and apply them to classroom curriculum. The method is portable in nature and its use is applicable in any locale.

Community asset mapping is not a new idea. Developed by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight (1993) as a means of fostering grass-roots neighborhood development, the model initially sought to curtail the disillusionment that often followed early efforts to address local problems. In essence, Kretzmann and McKnight found that after first meetings where community members identified numerous local troubles, neighborhood residents then began to see themselves as mired in problems that could only be solved by outside agencies via "deficiency-oriented" policies and social programs. Once seeing itself as an entity whose existence becomes dependant upon the benevolence of others, the community had little chance of breaking out of the view of neighborhood as both victim and client. Community asset mapping approaches grass-roots neighborhood development differently in that, instead of starting with problem identification, community members begin by identifying local assets- including individuals, organizations, and physical assets. Once strengths have been identified, contacted, studied, and catalogued, citizens begin to address problems and link them to assets in existence that may be utilized as a means to solve problems. The community is initially viewed as systems already in place that may bolster the environment and that there are strengths in any environment, even those that may be riddled with other economic and social problems.

CAMP gives students the opportunity to apply Kretzmann and McKnight's community mapping idea to the education curriculum. Each semester, a local community is selected to serve as the basis for investigation. At this point five separate communities within a twenty-five mile radius from the college

have been selected. The student investigation involves three phases. First, students are placed into random groups of four or five, each group tasked with listing and describing the work of a family of organizations in the community. Organization families in the past have included health and emergency services, recreation and leisure, business and economy, the arts, cultural and ethnic groups, fraternal groups, and civic organizations, and others. Educational organizations and schools are excluded from the investigation because if participants were to become teachers, their professional work would naturally lead them to find these groups on their own. The investigation is purposely limited to organizations and agencies not immediately associated with education in order to have the teacher-education students work outside their comfort zones. For a similar reason, students do not get to select which group they will work with. Often times, a theatre major will want to work with the arts group because this is where his or her individual interest lies. However, if interest lies there initially, placed as a teacher in a new community, the student would usually seek out organizations that align with their personal interests on their own. The point of CAMP is to teach students how to create knowledge of and partnerships with organizations that students would not seek out on their own.

Student work usually begins with web-based searches to identify specific agencies in each organizational family, and either through on-line research or personal contact, groups then determine the mission statements and activities of each specific group. For instance, students in the health and emergency services group usually start with agencies they are familiar with such as fire/police services and hospitals. They then determine the mission statements, activities and assets associated with this group. Through study and contact with the group, students continue to find other agencies such as shelters and food banks also within the organizational family. The student group is tasked with becoming experts concerning the

organizational family in the community the class is studying. After a two-to-three week period the group must present their information to the class. This can be done via formal presentations, but using a 'jigsaw' method (Aronson, 1978), where groups are reformed to include one member from each organizational family where each expert then presents their information to the rest of the groups works particularly well. After this session, all students should leave with solid information concerning each organizational family in the community studied..

From this point, each student selects one area for further study. Unlike the group investigation, this further study can be linked to a special interest of the individual student or it can come from something that piqued his or her interest during the presentations. In either case, individual students are tasked with further researching any organizational family by finding a participant who works or volunteers in an agency and conducting an interview with this person. The interview focuses on the interests and skills of the individual with a smaller amount of time addressing his or her involvement in the organization. The interview is meant to be personal in nature and uncover the history of the individual and the goals this person has for both the agency and the community at large. Students must turn in a recording of the interview as well as a brief summary of what they learned in the process. There is an informal class session where students discuss what they have gained from their interviews and how this further illuminates their earlier discussions of community organizations.

The third phase of the CAMP allows students to apply all of their knowledge of the community to classroom practice. Cast as first-year teachers in the community studied, they must create a lesson that both meets the content standards of their specific subject area and incorporates the strengths of community assets in the lesson in a meaningful way. For example, a health teacher might choose to incorporate their knowledge of the YMCA's role in the community

in the lesson. However, simply mentioning that organizations such as the YMCA exist would not meet the requirements of the assignment. Instead, a health teacher might find herself creating a lesson in which students study YMCA program offerings to determine the organization's role in addressing community health issues such as childhood obesity, and then work with the organization to advertise activities to local youth. A social studies teacher might introduce the work of the League of Women Voters (or have a member come to class) to identify a specific local issue and how politicians address this issue at the state or national level. While the possibilities are endless, the lesson must include a meaningful incorporation of community assets. It is in this manner that the teacher can demonstrate to students the positive attributes of the immediate community in which they reside.

The focus of CAMP is on community- not specifically on ethnicity. However, by detailed investigation of community assets, in any location, the students interact with the people and agencies that support the environment in which a school is situated. Since, in most instances, schools mirror the population of their surrounding environment, by using the CAMP methods students will interact with people from all backgrounds in the information gathering process.

In the time the CAMP has been included in the diversity course, teacher education students have taken a more active role in the community surrounding the college. Many have formed associations with individuals or have volunteered time with the organizations they have studied. This is quite the opposite of what was seen before. While our students have always sought out volunteer opportunities at local schools and day care centers, they rarely have become involved in the local community outside of the college in any other manner. Now, many have become Big Brothers or Sisters, work with the 4-H program, work actively in Chamber of Commerce programs or volunteer at the local historical society. Their presence in the community extends beyond the college and the local schools.

Our students have also found that diversity comes in many forms. While Ripon and the surrounding communities we access for the CAMP are not representative of what our students will eventually find if they were to teach in Chicago or Milwaukee, they have learned that diverse populations abound in our locale. They have learned about groups that assist with migrant worker populations, associations that help new immigrants learn English, and agencies that provide shelter and care to women and children fleeing from domestic abuse. Furthermore, while the students' initial assumptions encompassed the belief that these services were something necessary and available in more urban environments, presence in our local rural communities did not register with them before the CAMP.

The CAMP is not perfect. It still does not alleviate all the problems associated with our students having limited first-hand contact with the diverse populations they would see in large urban centers. However, the methods of community asset mapping are portable and can be taken into any teaching environment our student may encounter. The Community Asset Mapping Project has given our students a greater understanding of the agencies that make up the area surrounding local schools, and how to access these assets to provide the best possible education for students in a manner that demonstrates to that any community has strengths to be lauded in the educational process. It is just these skills that allow teachers to demonstrate that school-community connections are important to both the education of children and to the relationship of the school with the wider community.

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