

## **Preservice Teacher Learning in an Unfamiliar Setting**

**By Alyson Adams, Elizabeth Bondy, & Karen Kuhel**

Although field experiences are considered an important component of multicultural teacher education (Fox & Gay, 1995; Grant & Secada, 1990; Holmes Group, 1995), especially community-based experience (Sleeter, 1995a, 2001), some have raised questions about their impact on preservice teachers' (PSTs') long-held beliefs in general (Kennedy, 1997; Melnick & Zeichner, 1995) and racial stereotypes in particular (Ford, 1999; Goodwin, 2001; O'Loughlin, 2001). Evidence from recent studies indicates that course content and pedagogy need to be linked to field experience and "interwoven with multicultural course work to foster the aims of culturally responsive teaching" (Vavrus, 2002, p. 96). Both time to reflect and connections to course work give PSTs in field experiences opportunities to construct new understandings that directly affect their personal and professional beliefs about others and their own self-conceptions.

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The focus of this study is the first field experience in a teacher education program developed around themes of equity and social justice within a larger framework of inclusive education. The community-based field experience entails one-on-one mentoring in which elementary PSTs work with African American children in local public housing neighborhoods. This field experience challenges PSTs to work with

and get to know children, families, and communities that are unfamiliar to them. The courses students take concurrently emphasize multicultural themes, as do courses and field experiences that they take in the next two-and-a-half years in the program. How do the PSTs respond to this unfamiliar experience? In particular, how do they respond at different points in time following completion of the community field experience, and what factors influence their responses? Our findings, we believed, would have implications for how field experiences are structured and for the kinds of scaffolding PSTs require throughout a teacher education program to promote the skills and dispositions of culturally responsive teaching.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study we approached preservice teacher learning in an early field experience from a social constructivist perspective, recognizing that learning is shaped by a variety of factors and forces that come before and that exist in and around the activities in which people engage (Lampert, 1997). This framework of learning provides a backdrop for investigating why PSTs respond as they do and what factors influence their responses. In particular, we drew on the social constructivist perspective known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as articulated by Wells (2002) and Wells and Claxton (2002).

Based on the work of Vygotsky (1934/1987, 1978) and Leont'ev (1981), CHAT has been influenced by the work of scholars such as Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), Cole (1996), Lave (1988), Lave and Wenger (1991), Tharp and Gallimore (1988), and Wells (1999). From the perspective of CHAT, cognition is shaped by the settings in which learners participate and the activities that take place in those settings (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1988). As Lave and Wenger (1991) have explained, the setting is not another term for "physical context." Rather, it is composed of people and events that have social and historical meaning. This explains why "two people in a room are not inevitably identically situated" (Brown & Duguid, 1996, p. 53); their histories and the interaction of their histories with the other elements of the setting may be dramatically different.

All elements of the setting — the activities, the forms of assistance from instructors or peers, the participants — are interdependently involved in a change process. Wells (2002) explained that an individual's learning depends not only on the "nature and quality of the assistance provided but also on his or her learning dispositions and potential" (p. 4). This explains the differential impact on learners involved in the "same" lesson or activity. The view of learning and knowledge as situated in activity yet influenced by participants' histories has important implications for our understanding of preservice teacher learning and also for the design of instructional experiences in teacher education.

In conjunction with CHAT we also considered Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to help us interpret the PSTs' responses and

the factors that shaped them. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the distance between a learner's individual competence in a specific area and his/her capacity to perform with assistance. In the ZPD, PSTs can perform "those functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation; functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state" (p. 86). CHAT and the ZPD have implications for teaching and learning in teacher education.

## **Methodology**

### ***Background of the Study***

This study was based on the Bright Futures Mentoring Project (BF), the first field experience in a unified elementary and special education teacher education program at a large university. BF was chosen as the focus for this study because it is often the first experience our students have with students and families who are different from themselves. This field experience occurs in the first semester of the junior year, the first semester that students are admitted into the College of Education.

The mentoring project is a collaborative effort between the university and a local housing authority and has been supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development since 1991. Mentor-child pairs meet twice a week for an hour each at a local school or a community center within each of six public-housing neighborhoods. The program aims to help bolster children's school performance while giving PSTs the opportunity to develop intercultural competence, commitment to teaching low-income and minority children, and awareness of teaching skills (Bondy & Davis, 2000).

During the semester that students participate in BF, they are enrolled in four core courses: (1) Teachers and Learners in Inclusive Classrooms; (2) Family and Community Involvement in Education; (3) Child Development for Inclusive Education; and (4) Children's Literature in Childhood Education. The courses are taught by teaching teams in an effort to maintain consistency of content and themes across multiple sections of the same course. Students are organized into cohorts that attend classes together. While all of the courses have some connection to BF, usually through related assignments and projects, none of the four courses is totally responsible for administering the program, which is handled independently by a coordinator. In addition, there is not a related seminar that accompanies the BF placement.

The teacher education program is designed to prepare teachers with a dual emphasis in elementary education and mild disabilities as well as expertise with students who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). It is organized around complementary themes of equity, social justice, and knowledge of content and inclusive pedagogy. Coordinated course work and field experience is a highlight of the program, which includes a master's year in which students complete a full-time internship and specialization coursework in general or special education.

***Design of the Study***

The purpose of the study was to examine PSTs' responses to an early community-based field experience in an unfamiliar community and the factors that influenced their responses. We used a descriptive and interpretive qualitative approach to help us explain not only how participants responded, but also why they responded as they did. Our research questions were as follows:

1. How do preservice teachers at different points in a teacher education program reflect on an early community-based field experience?
2. Why do preservice teachers respond to the experience differently?

Based on the nature of these questions, we used construct or theory-based sampling (Patton, 1990) to select study participants. We chose three groups of PSTs who were at different points in the five-year teacher education program. Group A, classified as juniors, entered the program in Spring, 2001, and had just finished the BF semester. Group B entered the program in Spring, 2000, and were seniors who had completed one year of coursework and fieldwork beyond BF. Group C entered the program in Fall, 1999, and were master's students who had completed their internships.

Initially, only groups A and B were invited to participate. However, during analysis of preliminary data, it was unclear whether time in the program was an overriding factor in how students responded to BF. Therefore, we decided to add participants from group C, which was the cohort farthest along in the teacher education program.

Recruitment of participants and collection of data for Groups A and B occurred in Summer, 2001. All 120 students in those two groups were contacted by email and offered the opportunity to participate. Six students from Group A and seven from Group B volunteered to participate. Recruitment of participants and collection of data for Group C occurred in Spring, 2002. All students in this group were contacted in the same manner as the initial groups, and six students volunteered to participate. Since the participants were all volunteers, the sample is not likely to represent the general population of students; instead, the sample is a pool of participants who were willing to talk about their experiences in Bright Futures.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that ranged from 45-60 minutes in length. All interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any references to students were replaced with pseudonyms. The researchers moved back and forth in a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) between data collection and analysis. Interview questions were added and revised throughout the study, and in some cases, participants were contacted again to clarify and/or elaborate on earlier comments.

Interview questions were open-ended. Students were asked to talk about the BF experience in general terms, as if they were reporting for a newspaper article, asked

about their expectations and whether they were met, and also asked how they (and their program) would be different if they had not participated in BF. The three groups of participants were asked similar questions, but the two groups farther along in their program were asked additional questions about coursework and field placements they had completed since the BF semester.

Data were coded related to how students responded to the field experience, and the following categories were developed: Perceived Purpose of the Experience; Personal Reaction to the Experience; Resulting Benefit/Learning; Links to and within Coursework; and Background/Prior experience. The first three categories related to purpose, reaction, and results were used in a second pass through the data, resulting in identification of the seven kinds of student response. A third pass through the data using the remaining categories helped identify the factors that may explain student responses. At this level of interpretation, the principles of CHAT and the ZPD were particularly influential. In each round of data analysis, the three-person team of researchers met to discuss codes and categories, then returned to the data to find evidence to support or disconfirm emerging themes.

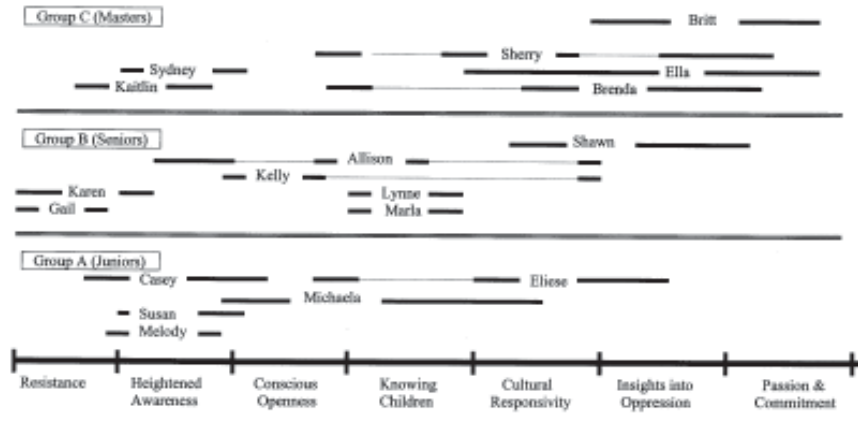
## **Findings**

Preservice teachers (PSTs) responded to the BF experience in a variety of ways that we characterized as follows: Resistance, Heightened Awareness, Conscious Openness, Knowing Children as Learners, Cultural Responsivity, Insights into Oppression, and Passion and Commitment. Names for the second and third responses are borrowed from Brown and Kysilka (2002), who described a process that teachers must go through to apply multicultural and global concepts in classroom teaching. We present them in an order that aligns with the teacher education program goals of helping teachers (a) create supportive and productive environments for diverse students and (b) work with school personnel, families, and communities to educate all children. That is, while the first kind of response, Resistance, represents considerable distance from the aims of the teacher education program, the seventh kind of response, Passion and Commitment, is closer to those aims.

Although we identified seven kinds of responses and found that PSTs tended toward a particular kind of response, we found that individuals often responded in more than one way. The range of response for each participant is presented in Figure 1. The lines for each participant indicate the kinds of responses they revealed and the degree to which they responded in each way. That is, some PSTs responded consistently in one way while others had hints of other kinds of responses. For example, although Alison's responses are characterized primarily as revealing heightened awareness, she also showed glimpses of conscious openness, knowing children, and cultural responsivity.

From a CHAT perspective, a range of reactions from a single PST is not surprising. Differing constellations of factors in learning environments can facili-

Figure 1.  
Range of Preservice Teacher Responses to the Bright Futures Mentoring Project



tate different responses from the same person (Hammer & Elby, 2002). Even brief responses that were more in line with the equity and social justice goals of the teacher education program were an indication of a zone of proximal development in which assistance could promote more sophisticated responses from the PST. In the case of BF, PSTs have a variety of experiences in the program and receive varied forms of assistance at different points in time.

In this section we describe each kind of response. In a subsequent section we describe factors that explain why PSTs may have responded as they did.

### Seven Responses to Bright Futures

*1. Resistance.* PSTs who responded in this way provided no indication that BF led to any insights about the impact of socioeconomic status and race on children's lives. In fact, these students tended to view the experience as a waste of time. Their responses were sometimes characterized by a preoccupation with self. For instance, Gail, a senior, complained about the Caregiver Interview assignment where she was required to go to the home of her mentee to interview the caregiver: "A lot of people felt uncomfortable. Maybe having them [meet us] in a neutral place, like the university, a library, or a bookstore, maybe, or like a café for coffee. Maybe that would have made it better" (Gail: 259-261).

Like Gail, Karen was interviewed a year after her BF experience. However, neither PST could think of a time during that year when they looked back on their BF experience. Gail said, "Honestly, I didn't even think about it" (Gail: 300), and Karen said, "I don't see anything connecting with BF that much" (Karen: 310). Kaitlin, a master's student, also found little connection to BF during the subsequent two years of the program. She believed that BF was irrelevant to her professional

development because it was a one-on-one experience with a child and “not realistic...because it wasn’t in a classroom” (Kaitlin: 132, 242).

Like Kaitlin, Karen was also quick to dismiss the BF experience when it did not fit with her future plans as a teacher. In fact, Karen dismissed the experience largely because she did not intend to teach kindergarten, and her mentee was in that grade. She said, “Ummm, well, I do wish I hadn’t requested a younger child because I don’t think that benefited... for me, there was nothing” (Karen: 270-273).

It could be that for students like Gail, Karen, and Kaitlin, BF was not structured adequately to help them feel more comfortable in unfamiliar settings and discover much benefit for the experience. Regardless of the cause for their resistance, responses looked and sounded much like the responses here. To summarize, PSTs who responded in this way dismissed the experience as having little to no value and did not make connections to course work or future field work. They resented having to go into an unfamiliar setting that did not match their expectations of what they needed to know and do and voiced numerous concerns often focused on their own comfort and convenience.

*2. Heightened Awareness* (Brown & Kysilka, 2002). PSTs who responded in this way appeared to recognize that there were indeed differences among people and the ways they lived their lives, but this recognition did not seem to affect their long-held beliefs about the characteristics and potentials of people different from themselves. These responses were characterized by “Aha moments” and included phrases such as “opened my eyes” and “I was shocked.” Sydney, a master’s student, remembered thinking, “It’s so much different from what you experienced at home....It was like, ‘Whoa,’...I couldn’t imagine a house that had rooms separated by sheets. I never had any idea” (Sydney: 235-237, 332-333).

Alison, a senior, was able to team up with a peer, which allowed her to get to know two different mentees and their families. She described this as “interesting” and remembered thinking, “Wow, their moms are totally different!” (Alison: 179). She said it was interesting to see the differences in how she was brought up and how they are being brought up, but was almost more shocked by the similarities she discovered. She talked about her surprise at the strong sense of community in the neighborhood. When asked if this was different in the neighborhood she grew up in, she said, “No. Not necessarily different than what I grew up in, but it wasn’t what I expected so I was really surprised to see that” (Alison: 105-106).

Students also expressed surprise when their expectations about the people involved were exceeded. Susan, a junior, remembered being surprised that her mentee’s mother actually wanted to do her homework with her daughter: “I didn’t really think that her mom would really be into her education like my parents were, so that was kind of a shock for me. . . . I really didn’t think she would be like that” (Susan: 201-203). She also said, “What was really shocking was that [the niece] was in the gifted program . . . and they were really proud of her” (Susan: 218-220). But



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even though Susan made these observations, she did not go beyond pure shock and amazement to examine her pre-existing beliefs about people and their lives.

Like Susan, students responding in these ways appeared to keep their eyes and minds open, but they often admitted that this experience did not change them substantially. When asked how her teacher education program would be different without BF, Casey, a junior, responded, “Well, I’d have a lot more time in the afternoons” (Casey: 160).

3. *Conscious Openness* (Brown & Kysilka, 2002). This kind of response suggested that PSTs were beginning to challenge their own personal beliefs and previously held stereotypes, and did so by consciously withholding judgment about people different from themselves. These responses showed signs of empathy, which has been identified as necessary (Parsons & Brown, 2001) but not sufficient (McAllister & Irvine, 2002) as teachers learn to work with culturally diverse students. However, empathy and consciously withholding judgment seemed to help PSTs open themselves to the lessons of BF. Michaela, a junior, talked about how her mentee did not seem to want to be in the program, and his mother did not seem to want him there, either. Her initial feeling was hurt and disappointment, but she came to realize:

She was a single mother who I think had three sons and it’s not that she didn’t want him in the program, I just think she had more to worry about, like getting food on the table, than worrying about what after school program he was in. (Michaela: 34-37)

Kelly, a senior, also talked about how BF affected her thinking. She said:

I have a different perception of...students who are at a disadvantage [and] how their families feel about education. I wouldn’t have that stereotype of “Oh, they don’t care and that’s why the kid’s not doing well.” I remember with Stephanie’s mom I saw that even if parents care a lot, kids can still be having a hard time, especially if they aren’t in a financial situation where they can make things better. (Kelly: 293-298)

Sherry, a master’s student with mixed heritage and originally from Jamaica, told us that even though she associated herself with Black culture, she realized during BF that thinking she could relate to all people in that culture was wrongheaded:

Sometimes Black is all we see, White is all we see. Since I associate myself with [Black culture] I think that usually I can relate or people can relate to me... I think I might have a perception that all Black people have a firm religious foundation, and that’s not always true. I think that’s just a stereotype that I myself have. I generalize and I say that everyone that’s Black has a strong religious background, and that’s something that Andre [BF mentee] did not have.... I have to remember that I cannot always relate on all levels to someone in my culture. (Sherry: 435-444)

This openness to the lessons of the experience is the hallmark of Conscious Openness. Sherry and the other PSTs approached BF with an open mind, withholding judgment and challenging their previously held stereotypes.



4. *Knowing Children as Learners*. These responses were characterized by an intense drive to understand children as individuals in order to meet their academic needs. PSTs talked about the need to learn about children in order to make lessons meaningful and relevant. While these responses sometimes hinted at insight into the importance of the larger social contexts surrounding the child, this awareness remained unvoiced and unexamined. Instead, these PSTs appeared to view the child through a colorblind lens, seeking to know individuals in order to meet their needs, but to do so by assuming that knowing children's personalities, interests, and academic needs was sufficient for helping them succeed.

This kind of response is similar to the resistance response because PSTs did not talk about sociocultural lessons they learned. However, the *Knowing Children as Learners* response is markedly different because the PSTs learned a great deal about children and connected what they learned to effective teaching practices. Marla said:

Some kids are going to have a hard time comprehending and understanding – even your ESOL kids. You're going to have to find ways that make the content that you're teaching fit all of your students. . . . I think with LaShawna, I could have helped her learn the letter *J* better by putting a picture of her brother Jason on there. (Marla: 194-199)

Alison told us how it is “really important for students to make connections to things that have to do with their backgrounds and relate to their lives” to make instruction relevant (Alison: 122-123). She talked about learning this during the BF semester when she took her mentee to a basketball game, where he was suddenly able to do complex addition and subtraction problems in his head because they related to the score of the basketball game.

Lynne said that without the BF experience teachers would not be as effective. “With the one-on-one basis you could identify strengths and weaknesses with that student and modify your instruction by becoming aware and targeting it. . . . Without BF they would view their students more as a group instead of an individual” (Lynne: 196-201). Lynne had the opportunity to work with a peer, and they were assigned to two sisters in the same grade level. Lynne noted how different each girl was, and said that she worked really hard to find out about her mentee's needs and interests even though they sometimes planned lessons together.

These three students talked about the importance of knowing children in order to teach them better. However, they focused on a personal and cognitive kind of knowing, a knowing that was stripped of sociocultural influence. For example, Marla said that teachers who have had BF will be

making the constant effort to reach the student in every possible way, whether it be going up to them and sitting down next to them and asking if they need help, or if they want to stay after school for extra help, or contacting the parent, or sending letters home, or emailing them if they have that access. If you watch them, they make every effort that they possibly can to make that child's education better. (Marla: 273-278)

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Although they expressed sincere interest in children and helping them succeed, they stopped short of recognizing the role of sociocultural factors in shaping both children's and teachers' identities.

*5. Cultural Responsivity.* The importance of culturally responsive teaching for multicultural students has been documented in the literature (Bennett, 1999; Kea & Utley, 1998; Utley & Obiakor, 2001; Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998). This kind of teaching requires certain dispositions (e.g., commitment to student learning), knowledge (e.g., subject matter, student, and pedagogical content knowledge), and skills (e.g., community building, instructional scaffolding) (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The dispositions, knowledge, and skills of culturally responsive teaching are grounded in an understanding of the role of culture in the teaching and learning process.

PSTs who responded in this way began to see that knowing each child well required becoming familiar with the broader contexts of his or her life, and that this kind of knowing was at the heart of effective teaching. These responses represent a step beyond the previous kind of response in that PSTs recognized the connections between sociocultural factors and children's priorities, expectations, and cultural capital, and the relationship among these sociocultural constructions, teaching, and learning. For example, when asked how she might be different as a teacher if she had not had BF, Michaela, a junior, responded:

I might have just dismissed him as, you know, he's got problems at home and he doesn't like to learn. But by working with him, I discovered that I just need to take the extra time to find out how he can learn and really make him interested in learning. And I think without having that one-on-one I never would have made the changes I needed to make in my classroom to include a child like him. (Michaela: 151-157)

Eliese, also a junior, talked about how her mentee's mother interacted with her children in a very authoritarian way. She said:

I think that's just the way they interact, that's the way some families are, and you just have to know that that's what they respond to. If you are the teacher of a bunch of kids and you know this is the way they were brought up, and what they respond to, you are going to act accordingly . . . you just have to adjust and you have to know your kids. (Eliese: 96-103)

Furthermore, she explained that BF is an important experience for White PSTs:

We are part of the majority; we're White people in a White student body, we are all the same. It's pretty much homogeneous. You grow up in an area where people are pretty much the same as you. For a lot of people this is a one-on-one experience with a student who very possibly is very different than you are and it's important to know that there are going to be students who are very different from you in your class . . . you just have to adjust and deal with it. (Eliese: 112-121)

Sherry, a master's student, also talked about the importance of teachers

knowing more about all the aspects of a child's environment and background as they relate to classroom teaching. She said, "When you see how people interact within their community . . . it totally changes how you view or how you might view a child coming into your classroom" (Sherry: 247-251). Meeting her mentee's parents and "just being able to see the circumstances that a lot of . . . our students . . . are faced with when they leave their home . . . is extremely beneficial" (Sherry: 73-75).

Shawn, a senior of non-traditional age, had extensive experience with children of poverty. He served 900 volunteer hours with AmeriCorps in two challenging urban schools. Therefore, he talked about BF as an excellent opportunity for people who have not had his background:

If you weren't exposed to the situations I was exposed to and you were a student fresh out of high school, really never had a lot of experience outside of this small little university world, if you weren't exposed to working with different minorities, then this was a great opportunity . . . [to learn] what it was going to be like to work with a minority caregiver, or a caregiver with a different sexual orientation than ours and different from the norms of society, and maybe physical impairments. (Shawn: 125-130)

For Shawn, the sociocultural lessons of BF were old hat, but he recognized the importance of those lessons for future teachers, nonetheless. PSTs who responded with Cultural Responsivity recognized that insight into children's lives and the lenses through which they interpreted the world was closely linked to good teaching.

*6. Insights into Oppression.* Although they did not always use critical theory terminology, PSTs responding with insights into oppression began to recognize ways low-income, minority students were being marginalized by the structures of schooling and society. Kelly, a senior, talked about the oppressive nature of pity that had served to keep her mentee, Stephanie, from getting academic help on the skills she needed. She said:

[The previous mentor] told me, 'Oh, poor Stephanie. Her life is so hard and I felt so sorry for her.' She just let her do fun things instead. . . . [Stephanie] has been done a disservice. She had this opportunity to be mentored and she was too caught up in the fun stuff. (Kelly: 48-49, 75-77)

From her experience Kelly learned:

not to get too caught up in the emotional aspects just because a child has a disadvantage because she's a minority and her parents are at or below poverty line — not to get caught up in that. Because if she doesn't get an education she's going to be stuck right there doing the same thing. (Kelly: 110-113)

Ella, a master's student, told us she learned a lot by getting to know both her BF child and the children in a higher socioeconomic (SES) school during her internship. Being at schools of different SES levels "gives you an idea of where the inequalities lie. How can you expect to do well in school, when you see these other

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kids come in so prepared, their parents are so on top of things” (Ella: 203-205). Seeing these low SES schools, especially for people without that experience, “makes the inequalities in education palpable for you” (Ella: 157).

For Brenda, this experience was filled with insights about people from backgrounds different from hers, and she took all these lessons in, even when they conflicted with her family’s beliefs and values. Brenda, a master’s student, came from an upper-class background. She told us that her parents had bought her a house for a graduation present. She remembered being speechless when her mentee made her reconsider her long-held belief that hard work can conquer all.

I think I said something like, if people work hard enough, they can do anything they want to. And she told me it wasn’t true. I was like, “Ooooh. She’s in third grade and she has more insight into it than I do!” (Brenda: 63-66)

Brenda also went on to say:

BF was very much an eye opener for me to go in and see that they can’t [overcome all of life’s challenges through hard work]. Some of them can, so you know, they can try hard, but when you didn’t eat and you didn’t sleep the night before, it’s really hard to concentrate no matter what. (Brenda: 317-320)

Brenda told us she argued with her father about this idea: “I said, ‘No, you’re wrong. You can’t make something out of nothing. There’s nothing there, they can’t advance themselves without help.’ He doesn’t think the government should help them in any way” (Brenda: 323-326).

Like Brenda’s, Eliese’s BF experience helped her understand how the way society is structured can lead to marginalization and oppression. Her drive to the community center helped her realize how far the family lived from stores, banks, and other services. She remembered “some people saying, ‘ugh, not that area’, but they can’t get away from that area if they don’t get a good education, good jobs. They are kind of locked in” (Eliese: 197-198).

*7. Passion and Commitment.* These responses were characterized by intensely emotional expressions of commitment to the education of marginalized students. PSTs responding in this way often spoke of social activism and change, as well as the need for restructuring and redesign of teacher education to prepare teachers who can teach all children. These PSTs had a great deal of hope for the future. They appeared to be highly efficacious, clearly indicating that they intended to go out and make a difference for children immediately.

These responses usually began with some insights about oppression, but rather than stopping at verbalizing these insights, students responding with Passion and Commitment indicated that they assumed responsibility for change. Rather than just looking at society as oppressing children, Ella also directed a lot of her criticism inward:

How am I helping? Or, How [do I present obstacles to] my students’ learning? I am

more open-minded about learning about a culture. Do I think I know everything there is about at-risk, minority students? Not at all, and I don't think you ever gain that, since there are so many different elements. . . . How I can remedy that is by learning more and becoming more educated. I'm always battling with myself. Are the preconceptions that I have hampering these kids' understanding? (Ella: 342-352)

Britt, also a master's student, talked with passion about her desire to help students:

How do I take these kids that think they are not good at math and not good at science, because of their race — that they aren't as good as the other kids because of where they come from — and change their thinking? Not just teach them the material, but help them to redo their mindset about who they are and where they are going. (Britt: 123-127)

Britt recognized the important purposes BF could serve for PSTs, but it bothered her that BF “worked well for that purpose, but it was OUR purpose. . . . I felt that the purpose should have been for the children. The child's learning should have been the priority” (Britt: 203-205).

Sherry expressed deep commitment to BF as a mentoring program. She said, “I was helping this young man, developing good social outlook or character. I felt like it was something that was good for him . . . and I was also benefiting because I was helping my community or the people around me” (Sherry: 48-51). Throughout the interview Sherry reinforced her commitment to and belief in the powers of mentoring. She told us she actively recruited her peers to mentor children and did so herself through scouting programs. She asserted:

We need more mentors. A teacher can't do everything. [Parents] have to understand that we do mentor your children while we are teaching, but that for low SES children, there needs to be something more. . . . I think [mentoring] should be a normal part of everyone's life. I think we should mentor at least one kid throughout our lifetime. (Sherry: 310-313, 327-329)

Sometimes a passionate stance to BF and education in general seemed to require a great deal of courage. As mentioned previously, Brenda began questioning her own family and their beliefs, and confronted her father, whom she referred to as “prejudiced”. She said that she entered the program with beliefs similar to his, but told him he was wrong after she started thinking differently. She also said this experience was meaningful, but not for everyone: “If you had an open mind and you let it affect your beliefs and values, then it will affect your teaching, but some people didn't let it” (Brenda: 144-145).

Some PSTs responding with Passion and Commitment had extensive suggestions for us about ways to improve BF so that students would “get it.” These students “got it” and were passionate about ensuring that others did, too. Britt told us:

I was really shocked at the reaction of my classmates. . . . We had people that were afraid to go because it was in the projects and I found that really curious. I remember looking at them thinking, what is wrong with you?” (Britt: 55-58)

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She explained further:

If we have students going into BF with culture shock, we need to do something. We need to pull their feelings out of them and find out what's going on with them. . . . It's not a matter of changing the beliefs, but making teachers aware of the fact that they have those beliefs and that if they are intending to make a difference then they are going to have to actively work on developing a way to overcome that when working with the students. (Britt: 373-375, 460-463)

Britt even noted that with some of her peers who were not able to get past the culture shock, experiences like BF just perpetuated their stereotypes “without ever delving into the underlying beliefs” (Britt: 546).

The PSTs who responded to the BF experience with Passion and Commitment seemed to be the type of teachers to whom Fried (1995) referred when he wrote:

To be a passionate teacher is to be someone in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class every day – or captivated by all of these. (p.1)

In the words of Sherry, “As [teachers] we are supposed to be courageous and we are supposed to be willing to accept a lot of these fears and challenge ourselves to step outside the box” (Sherry: 486-488). These PSTs seemed ready to do just that.

#### ***Factors that Influenced Preservice Teachers' Responses***

We designed this study using three groups of PSTs at different points in their teacher education program because we wondered if length of time in a program with recurring themes of inclusion and social justice was related to how students reflected on the Bright Futures Mentoring Project. While there was a difference in the way the three groups responded that could be attributed to time in the program, we found no definitive pattern based solely on that factor. Instead, we found more explanatory power by examining students' responses through a social-constructivist lens (Wells, 1999) that recognized the role of what students brought to the field experience as well as the role of the kinds of assistance they received during and after it. We identified two factors that affected individual student response: (a) prior knowledge and experiences with diverse populations, community volunteering, and/or activism and (b) opportunities for scaffolding/mediating the experience.

*Prior Knowledge/Experiences.* Some PSTs had extensive prior experiences with diverse children or families, and some students had already engaged in social activism. On the other hand, for some students this community-based field experience was the first encounter with unfamiliar families and communities. PSTs' prior experience played a role in their responses to BF. However, there was not always a direct and obvious connection between a PST's background and his/her response to BF. For instance, Casey and Sydney, who responded with some

resistance, both told us they attended private high schools. However, Brenda, the master's student who rebelled against her father's prejudices, also came from a privileged background. Generally, however, PSTs who already had experience with people different from themselves responded in ways more closely aligned with program goals than those for whom BF was a novel experience.

Eliese, who responded with Conscious Openness through Insights into Oppression, remembered high school being very influential in how she viewed people from different backgrounds. She remembered being friends with students from Pakistan, who were ostracized by peers because of religious differences. She explained, "Some of the different ways they were treated bothered me...just because someone is different doesn't make it wrong" (Eliese: 148-150).

Britt, at 42 years old, came into the teacher education program after a career in nursing. She told us she had worked with adults of diverse backgrounds and that this had given her a sense of the different priorities in people's lives. Likewise, as mentioned previously, Shawn and Sherry had experiences with AmeriCorps and Scouting, respectively. In addition, Sherry and Ella were both active in church-related services for low-income students.

For some of the PSTs in our study, commitment to a cause was not a new idea. Ella told us that her mother started a grassroots organization in Venezuela in the mid-1980s for families with children with disabilities. Her family organized free workshops where general and special education children could interact, often attracting "low SES people and single mothers abandoned by their husbands" (Ella: 322). When Ella moved to the United States before college, she spent a year working in a literacy program for low SES families and also taught English to Hispanic adults. Then, in her freshman year of college, Ella began working in a tutoring program for low SES minority children at a local church. She later became director of the program. Given the resources she brought to BF, it was not surprising to find Ella responding with Cultural Responsivity, Insights into Oppression, and Passion and Commitment.

The PSTs' personal histories played an important role in creating the contexts for learning in Bright Futures. Although personal history did not determine what was learned — a welcome finding for teacher educators — it was an element in the complex relationship between experience and learning. According to the principles of CHAT, learners' histories interact with other elements of the setting to produce different responses to what may appear to be the same learning opportunity.

*Opportunities for Scaffolding.* The second factor that affected the PSTs' responses was the kinds of opportunities available to scaffold or mediate their learning in the field experience. This scaffolding was provided through the teacher education program, either through program structures (such as thematic coherence, complementary or contrasting field experiences, and the cohort structure) or instructor effort (class discussions, readings, and assignments). Students who did not perceive that they were receiving scaffolded assistance in these ways registered



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responses that were less aligned with program goals than students who perceived that they were well supported.

It appeared that extensive support from peers and instructors, usually through formal and informal conversations, helped students respond to the BF experience in ways that they might not have without that support. When Michaela expressed frustration with her mentee's poor attendance, she said her peers in the cohort really supported her and encouraged her not to give up. She also said that sometimes it was just good to hear that others were having difficulties, too (Michaela: 168-175). Michaela said that professors helped her work through some difficult times. The instructor

just led me away from the negative thinking of 'she doesn't love her kid'. You know, she kind of helped me see that it was a lot deeper than . . . my feelings getting hurt within this program. I think she helped me not personalize it. (Michaela: 185-186)

Without this instructor's careful assistance, Michaela's negative stereotypes about her student's mother may have persisted.

Sometimes the support that instructors offered was in the form of assignments to link the experience to coursework. In fact, when asked how courses were related to the experience, almost every student immediately responded by referring to specific class assignments. Shawn said:

I don't see how you CAN NOT see the interrelatedness of this, when we're asked to write these things. . . In three classes we had to write something specifically on this experience. So if nothing else, I feel as if [the university] was forcing us to look for depth. . . . In Child Development we were learning theory, so we had to apply two of the theories we were learning to our [BF child]. (Shawn: 21-28)

Many students also mentioned one assignment in particular, called the Caregiver Interview, where they were required to interview their mentee's caregiver and interview their own parents and discuss similarities and differences. Gail, like other students responding with resistance, found this assignment uncomfortable and expressed frustration and blame when the caregiver did not respond to her request for an interview. Yet other students found that this assignment helped them get to know their mentees and their families. It could be that the more positive students had instructors who used more extensive scaffolding to help students succeed with this assignment.

Assistance PSTs received during and following BF was another component of the learning landscape. It is clear, for example, that Michaela's response to BF would have been different were it not for the guidance of her instructor. For teacher educators who wish to prepare teachers to work well with unfamiliar students and families, this insight into the role of scaffolding in PST learning is encouraging. Instructors who can meet their students in the ZPD of their multicultural understanding may be able to facilitate the development of more sophisticated beliefs and practices. In addition, teacher educators who reach out to resistant students may discover ways to assist them and make the activity more meaningful to them.

## **Implications**

The study of PSTs' responses to Bright Futures, a mentoring experience in an unfamiliar community setting, provides clues for teacher educators who seek to improve the multicultural education of teachers. BF is an early field experience; in fact, it is in the first semester of the junior year, the PSTs' first semester in the College of Education. After this semester, students have two-and-a-half-years remaining in the teacher education program. Although it is disappointing to find some students responding with Resistance or only Heightened Awareness, it is not surprising given the varied background experiences the PSTs bring to the program. Insights into their responses and the factors that influenced their responses help us see what we must do during and following BF in order to promote responses in line with the teacher education program's goal of developing commitment to and skills for teaching diverse children.

### ***Implications Related to Program Structure***

Interviews with students who were one and two years beyond the BF field experience were particularly helpful in pointing to elements of program structure that can scaffold PSTs' learning in BF. Such program structures include the cohort system, thematic coherence in the program, and team teaching.

In the cohort system, students are organized in groups that follow the same blocked schedule during a semester. In the BF semester, for example, cohorts are together for four courses. Sometimes, cohorts remain together for a second semester. More often, for a variety of reasons, cohorts are reorganized each semester. Being a cohort member means that a PST spends the majority of her/his day with the same group of about 25 peers. Typically, the members of a cohort bond strongly with one another and come to see one another as resources for emotional, academic, and social support (Stafford, Ross, Church-Pupke, & Bondy, 2003). These relationships create a climate in which students feel safe to discuss potentially volatile topics. Particularly when instructors facilitate the development of relationships and an inclusive environment, cohorts can provide an effective setting for multicultural education (Stafford et al., 2003).

Many have argued that multicultural teacher education must be a systematic, multi-layered, across-the-curriculum effort (Vavrus, 2002; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). The interviews revealed that program coherence did have an impact on some of the PSTs' responses to BF. A few, like Shawn, were acutely aware of connections across courses and field experiences and viewed those connections as reinforcing key lessons of the teacher education program. More students pointed to particular courses during and following BF that helped them make sense of their observations and experiences in the unfamiliar setting. For example, students talked about Family and Community Involvement in Education, a course they take during the BF semester that helps them understand the unfamiliar families they encounter.

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Following the internship (two years after BF), students take Democracy and Schooling. The course focuses squarely on issues of equity and social justice and promotes reconsideration of BF and lessons learned during the first semester in the program. This program-wide effort is crucial to multicultural learning because extended pedagogical time is required for students to learn and maintain transformative perspectives and actions (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Vavrus, 2002).

Faculty, graduate students, and adjunct faculty are organized into cross-departmental teaching teams in the teacher education program. The main reason for organizing for instruction in this manner was to ensure consistency in course content across sections, a particularly important issue in a large program with a revolving door of graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty (Webb, Ross, & McCallum, in press). Teaching teams develop syllabi together and coordinate readings and assignments. Although there is certainly variability in pedagogy across classes within the same teaching team, the collaborative planning appears to guarantee that students generally are exposed to the same content. In addition, the team structure makes it more likely that core program themes are maintained over time.

#### ***Implications Related to Content and Pedagogy***

Although some PSTs were able to draw on their own resources and the resources provided in the teacher education program to respond in ways closely aligned with program goals, others clearly required more scaffolding. Student references to particular instructors, readings, and assignments pointed to the power of program content and pedagogy to influence student learning in the field experience. What kinds of content and pedagogy have the potential to support PST learning? The literature provides a variety of suggestions, including edited texts on the subject (e.g., Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; Martin, 1995). Several recommendations are particularly relevant to the Bright Futures study.

*Promote awareness of racial identity.* In order to understand their reaction to the unfamiliar people and events in an unfamiliar community setting, PSTs need insight into their own identities. Racial identity, or one's "sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1990, p.3) is not something of which most White people are aware. In fact, White people are not accustomed to seeing themselves as racial beings (Carter, 1995). If they do not examine their own identities, they may continue to assume that their lives represent what is right and normal, while criticizing others who are unfamiliar. Although the data provided some evidence of PST self-analysis, they more often indicated PST insight into other people's lives. The students' learning could be bolstered with gentle scaffolding related to their own identities.

*Promote multiple perspectives.* Helping PSTs gain insight into lives that are different from their own can enable them to learn the multicultural lessons of BF and similar field experiences. This can be accomplished through direct dialogue among

students from diverse backgrounds. When direct contact is not possible, instructors can use narratives and films to accomplish this purpose. Vavrus (2002) refers teacher educators to the journals *Multicultural Review* and *Multicultural Perspectives* for multicultural resources of this kind. It is clear from our student interviews, however, that merely viewing or reading and discussing these materials does not ensure that all of our students will make the connection to BF. Some students need instructors to be explicit with them about how class content and activities apply to field experience.

*Monitor student resistance.* Greenman and Kimmel (1995) asserted, “The road to multicultural education is paved with good intentions, but rutted with potholes of resistance” (p. 1). While teacher educators have documented the defensiveness and resistance of PSTs toward multicultural content and pedagogy (Ahluquist, 1991; Wiggins & Follo, 1999), little has been written about the pedagogy required for effective teaching of multicultural concepts and dispositions. Insights from teacher educators such as Pohan and Mathison (1999) and Ukpokodu (2002) provide some guidance. They advocated that teacher educators focus on creating a psychologically safe environment by helping PSTs get to know one another; using cooperative learning activities; referring to the class with the first person plural pronouns of “we,” “our,” and “us;” emphasizing that the class will focus on challenging ideas, not people; and focusing more on sharing experiences and listening than lecturing. Achieving this kind of environment requires that instructors work on getting to know their students and understanding their level of multicultural literacy. Whatever specific techniques they use, Pohan and Mathison urged teacher educators to recognize that PSTs will experience multicultural teaching differently based on their prior experience with diversity. Furthermore, defensiveness and resistance, argued Pohan and Mathison, are natural elements of the change process. When PSTs experience disequilibrium, they need adequate support to be able to deal with the emotional effects of having their assumptions rattled. If teacher educators can approach PSTs with the openness and compassion with which we want them to approach the unfamiliar, we can create an environment in which they feel safe enough to analyze their beliefs, explore differing perspectives, and consider new ways of thinking.

*Facilitate discussion of experience.* A growing body of research suggests that PSTs in racially diverse settings need time to reflect critically upon their experiences (Armaline, 1995; Bassey, 1996; Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Sleeter, 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Wieczorek & Grant, 2000). The students in this study spoke favorably of those instructors who made BF the subject of class discussion, and some voiced disappointment that they were not able to do more of this. Discussion alone is not sufficient to promote understanding in all students; and, not all kinds of discussion are equally effective. The students’ comments suggest that instructors who helped them interpret strange and unfamiliar experiences (e.g., the behavior of a child’s parent) helped them learn important lessons from BF. Productive discussion, then, might draw on the strategies for monitoring student resistance.

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Our examination of PSTs' responses to BF and the factors that affected their responses points to the importance of careful and continuous examination of the scaffolding we provide our students during and following BF. Although it is unrealistic to expect all of our students to respond with the passion and commitment of Brenda, Britt, Ella, and Sherry, it appears we can promote more critically reflective responses by bolstering the supports we provide our students. By meeting the students in their ZPDs, we can draw them toward perspectives that will help them become the culturally responsive educators we want them to be. This requires the patience and cooperation of all of us who are responsible for the initial preparation of teachers.

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