

**Drawing on Personal Histories
in Teacher Education:
Stories of Three African-American
Preservice Teachers**

By Connie S. Zitlow and Gary DeCoker

This paper represents a study with three African-American preservice teachers at a private liberal arts college with an enrollment of about 2000 undergraduate students. Beginning with a series of interviews, the case study research continued for three years, during which time the preservice teachers completed their graduation requirements, were certified, and began to teach. Although the data from the study led to the exploration of numerous issues, we will emphasize the role of personal histories in responses to preservice teacher education, the importance of various bases of support particularly for minority preservice teachers, and the value of co-curricular activities in the education of future teachers.

_____ Connie S. Zitlow and Gary DeCoker are assistant professors in the Department of Education, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, February 27, 1992, in San Antonio, Texas.

Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph, who were enrolled in the university's elementary education program in overlapping years, were 22, 20.5, and 19.5 years of age when the study began. Involvement in Upward Bound, and the desire to attend a small

African-American Stories

college instead of a large state university or an all-Black college, led them to this particular school. They received various scholarships, some designated for minority students as part of the university's efforts to recruit from diverse racial and ethnic groups. As a result, they shared the experience of being members of a minority group of students at an institution without a tradition of large minority enrollment. Specifically, minority students, including foreign students, comprised 16.35% of the student body; African-Americans comprised 4.32% of the total enrollment. Although described by the university as "African-Americans," the three preservice teachers themselves preferred to be called "Black." As Christoph said, "It would take time to get used to the term 'African-American.'"

Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph had been leaders in their respective high schools, in both academics and school activities. Yet, when speaking about the transition to the university, all three described feelings of alienation and spoke about the difficulties of adjustment. On campus, these undergraduates experienced being different, not only in racial identity, but also in their economic situation and academic preparation. They also noted they were different from the majority of the university students and those in teacher preparation. They were among the few preservice teachers from urban settings; they felt inadequately prepared for the campus environment in spite of having attended racially-mixed elementary and secondary schools; and they felt more concern than their peers about the overwhelming need to educate others about Black Americans.

In spite of their initial feeling of alienation, or perhaps because of it, they became involved in numerous co-curricular activities, assuming leadership positions and earning campus-wide recognition, as summarized in Figure One. Sonja was one of two finalists for the role of senior class trustee, the highest honor for a graduating senior; Laureen and Christoph were honored as "campus students of the month" for their leadership in black student organizations. During the course of our study, the preservice teachers repeatedly talked about how they honed their leadership skills in the supportive atmosphere of the co-curricular activities in which they participated. These activities allowed them to interact with faculty in a supportive setting. When considering the role of a teacher, however, they did not indicate that these skills were aspects of their university experience they might draw on in elementary school settings.

The Origin of Our Interest and the Development of the Study

This study grew out of a concern Connie had about the experiences of these specific preservice teachers. Laureen and Christoph were students in her education classes, and Sonja was on the Student Education Board. She watched their reactions to an incident on campus that was interpreted as far more serious to some people than to others. To Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph, the burning of a fraternity symbol

Figure 1: Three African-American Preservice Teachers

shaped like a cross was not a prank or an act of vandalism, but a serious racial incident. Laureen, as the president of the Student Union on Black Affairs (SUBA), was particularly involved in organizing meetings in response to the incident.

This incident and Connie's concern about low minority enrollment at private liberal arts colleges, particularly in teacher education (Runion, 1989), led to these questions: What was it like to be a minority student on campus at that time? What "landscapes" (Greene, 1978) or unique personal histories did these preservice teachers bring to their teacher preparation? What might be done in the teacher education program to recruit and retain more minority students?

Gary joined the faculty a year after the project began. During the previous 14 years, he lived in Japan for six years and Kuwait for two years as a teacher and graduate student. While working as an interpreter in Japan, he often observed people adjusting to a foreign culture. He was intrigued by the coming together of two American sub-cultures—that representing an urban, black experience and that of a primarily white college. When Gary joined Connie for the second series of interviews, he had come to know Laureen and Christoph in his classes and from his observations of their field work in local schools. After Sonja had begun her first year of teaching, he arranged to take students from his introductory education course on field trips to her school.

The initial approach to the study was based on previous work with preservice teachers (Zitlow, 1986). This research was grounded by the assumption that metaphors and images encompass and give insight into teacher candidates' conceptual frameworks (Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1983; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Oberg, 1984). The first interviews focused on the preservice teachers' experiences on campus and their images of teachers, students, and schooling. The second interviews, a year later, built on previously-expressed ideas, focusing on their use of prior experiences in new teaching situations, their thinking and rethinking about practice, and their career goals and concern. The interviews included discussion about broad issues such as what might be done to improve teacher education, particularly for minority preservice teachers.

Audio-tapes of semistructured dialogue from the extended interview sessions were our primary source of data. The interviews were structured so that the preservice teachers had the opportunity to talk in response to questions with as much detail as they liked. They also had the opportunity to raise other questions and issues. To both verify and extend the interview data, we used information from other sources: written work and conferences within the teacher education program, observations during field experiences and student teaching, and information about the participants' accomplishments and activities in campus organizations.

As we looked at the data, we noted that particular themes emerged repeatedly at various points in the study. Each individual, of course, was influenced by different family situations, early school experiences, and personality characteristics. A comparison of their experiences, however, revealed that the preservice

teachers attributed common factors as crucial to their success as college students.

The Preservice Teachers

Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph, the only African-Americans enrolled in the elementary teacher education program at the time, were also the only members of a minority group in their respective years in the program. Each shared information with the others about requirements and experiences in education courses and field work. They also participated in many of the same organizations on campus, particularly those concerned with minority affairs. As the study began, Sonja had completed her student teaching, graduated, and was job searching. Laureen had completed her junior year and would student teach in the fall. Christoph had completed his sophomore year and would take a methods course with a related field experience in the fall.

A predominant theme ran through our interviews with each of the three—Christoph expressed it as “the need to educate others about us, about Black Americans and black history.” They felt this concern, an important part of their work in campus organizations, set them apart from others in the education program.

The following stories about each of the preservice teachers include information about their personal histories, particularly about their educational experiences. These sketches give an indication of their views of themselves as developing teachers and serve as the background for our discussion about the role of various kinds of support and the value of co-curricular activities in the education of future teachers.

Sonja: "Look at me as a person first."

In the education department and throughout the campus, Sonja was known as a dependable leader and capable student. No one was surprised, therefore, when soon after graduation she had a teaching job. She taught second grade at a public alternative elementary school, a school focused on cooperative learning, risk-taking, and problem-solving. Sonja said that the transition from college to teaching was aided by summer meetings at the school where she met with the three other second grade teachers. She said, however, that some aspects of the first year were difficult, particularly dealing with certain parents and some staff members in the school. She contrasted her teaching situation with her own early school experiences: “I went to a parochial school so it was a totally different atmosphere.”

Sonja, the youngest child in her family, had two brothers and two sisters. Although her parents were divorced when she was young, she had support from her mother and grandmother to pursue her career goals. She also fondly recalled her second grade teacher as “why I am where I am. She cared about the whole child. I liked that.” She described her parochial elementary school as “white middle class, with about two black students per classroom,” and her high school as more

African-American Stories

integrated. Still she had been in only one elementary and one high school classroom taught by black teachers.

During her school years, it bothered Sonja when neighborhood friends focused on how she spoke rather than who she was as a person, accusing her of “talking white.” She responded, “it had nothing to do with black or white. It was how I was taught in school.” A successful and active high school student, Sonja participated in National Honor Society, track, and student council. Her high grades, which improved each semester, were a contrast to her low score on the ACT college entrance examination.

As an important part of her success in college, Sonja frequently talked about campus organizations for black students. She described activities in these organizations that provided her with the opportunity to develop leadership skills in the supportive environment of the black women’s sorority and the Student Union on Black Affairs. Later, in her junior and senior years, she honed these skills in campus student government. Neither her noteworthy success in the education department of the university nor her popularity on campus could keep her from feeling that it was difficult to be a minority, especially given her particular economic situation. Sometimes she became frustrated with the lack of awareness on campus about the black experience and repeatedly having to educate people. She expressed her impatience:

People just don’t know about black culture. All you can do is educate them, but I’m tired of always having to teach people when I’m trying to learn myself.

Some experiences during her job interviews led her to doubt her teaching ability. She was concerned about being hired to fill a quota and being put in a position where she would have to prove herself in a predominantly white school. At one point, when challenged by a teacher from another building in the school district about getting the position because she was black, she said, “I got the position because I’m a good teacher, and I happen to be black.” Again she wished the focus to be on her as a person.

As noted, Sonja’s personal experiences and educational background were very different from those of most of the students in her second grade class. These differences, however, were related to behavior, not the speech differences noticed by her childhood friends many years before. Although she taught in her home city, her words indicate she was not prepared for the behavior she witnessed:

I was shocked that second graders could be this way. I would never have spoken to my teacher the way they do. Some would steal, use profanity. I would never have believed a seven- or eight-year-old would do these things, but it happens.

The parents of her students also shocked her. “It was hard to understand when parents didn’t care and wouldn’t respond to calls or notes.” For some of her students, she realized, school was the safest place.

Her concern about racial identity and economic differences made her sensitive to these differences among her students. During her first year of teaching, she noticed how “Show and Tell” was used by some students as the time to show off new things such as expensive athletic shoes. Other students always seemed to be left out. For that reason, Sonja changed the focus to “Sharing Time” and made this part of the day an occasion for students to read journal entries to the rest of the class.

In spite in the differences between the settings, her recollections of her schooling continued to guide her as a teacher. Helping students learn subject matter was important to her, but so were establishing values and maintaining a comfortable teacher-student relationship characterized by mutual respect. She remembered how some of her teachers “had carried themselves in the classroom and really cared about the students.” She wanted her students to be “mentally and educationally prepared, but also to be good, decent people with social awareness.” She said a teacher must be willing “to learn what students already know” in order to help them link the subject matter to the outside world. She fondly recalled her favorite high school English teacher who taught in a relaxed, non-threatening manner, helping students relate “good literature to things in their lives.”

When pressed by those who wondered why she chose teaching, she described herself as a teacher and a role model, even out of the classroom: “I was teaching others in college about Black Americans and black history. I wanted to teach them. Someone’s got to do it.” She planned to continue teaching because she was “committed to help improve society. Teaching is what I’m supposed to do.”

Laureen: “Teaching, I guess it’s my call.”

At the first interview, Laureen looked ahead to her student teaching experience and joked, “I have to learn to get organized in three months!” Tall, athletic Laureen was inconsistent in her university class attendance and had difficulty completing written work and field experience hours. At one point, she “wanted to drop out of everything,” but said she “did not know where to go.” Large tears rolled down her cheeks when she talked with Connie about finishing her course work. Yet she completed her preservice requirements and was determined to “get organized,” she said, because she really wanted to teach.

By the second year of the study, Laureen completed her student teaching, graduated, and was the first in her class to find a teaching position. She considered herself “having matured” with more direction in her professional life: “I can’t use the attitude—the short temper I came to college with—in my classroom.”

Although Laureen, like Sonja, felt teaching was her calling, her early school experiences had been different. She repeatedly used the word “hated” as she talked about the large urban school district she attended. “I hated school until tenth grade.” Her first grade teacher told her she could move down the hall when she complained about a boy pulling her hair. “I hated her for that. I was always in the bad class. I was shy and picked on.” Laureen recalled being transferred to a different school in

African-American Stories

fifth grade, put into an honors program in sixth grade, and then, for a reason that was never explained to her, prohibited from attending the honors junior high. “So I went to a school that had a bad reputation and gangs.”

In high school, she began to realize her capabilities. She recalled her sophomore year as a time when she was the teacher’s pet. Attributing the favoritism to her good grades, she said, “the teacher would not let people pick on me anymore.” Laureen played basketball, was a member of the National Honor Society, and graduated at the top of her class in a school she referred to as “all-black except for three buses of white students.” Her standardized test scores were low. Her participation in Upward Bound and her high school record, however, strengthened her college application. She continued her association with Upward Bound, working as a counselor and becoming “like a mentor to some of the students” in the program.

Although Laureen thought of herself as independent and believed she lacked family support—a point that was so frequently mentioned by Sonja and Christoph—she did say, “Everybody expected me to go to college.” Laureen’s mother, however, preferred engineering as a career choice for her daughter. “She still doesn’t believe I’ll be a teacher.” Laureen’s friends, too, doubted her ability to manage a classroom. Her carefree attitude and good-natured bantering made her open to comments about her lack of purpose. Laureen talked about what her friends said:

[They] tell me I’ll never become a teacher. Christoph and Sonja—yes. Me—no. They see me as not organized or structured and the children wild.

Laureen also described how her early school experiences caused her to feel she was not as well prepared as other preservice teachers in the program.

I’m making up for what I missed—things I think I should have been taught. I can read but I have comprehension problems; I have concentration problems.

At times, Laureen seemed to enjoy presenting a less-than-serious front, but she was not casual about teaching.

My friends can’t see me in the classroom because I’m rough with them and they can’t see me as a teacher. I just laugh because it’s what I want to do.

Laureen had been trying out the role of teacher from the time she was a child, using old school books to teach her younger brother. She continued in her desire to teach. She wanted to “get the child before negative images about school were formed,” so that the students in her classroom would have very different early school experiences from her own school years. “I fantasize about how I want my classroom to be. I want it to be exciting and fun for the students.”

Christoph: “I know who I am and where I’m going, but push me.”

Like Laureen, Christoph attended urban public schools. His speech was

peppered with a black dialect never heard in conversations with Sonja, yet he said he did not even know what was meant by “Black English.” In the elementary teacher education program, he was in the minority as a male and as a Black American. Personable Christoph, described as “a rebel” by Laureen, was a leader in many campus groups even as a sophomore. The only one of the black preservice teachers whose father lived at home, Christoph had an older sister and younger brother. His mother worked as a receptionist, his father a mechanic. Born three months early, Christoph’s mother teased him about catching up and becoming advanced. From an early age, he recalled his parents and relatives stressing that he would go to college: “I always had that push.” Rejecting the idea of an all-black college (“I knew I needed to associate with whites”), he wanted to attend a private school and chose the university as a result of his participation in Upward Bound.

Christoph considered himself an average student until high school, where he became the top black male in his class. He often talked about a high school English teacher who, in his words, told him off for getting a “C-.” He explained that she had “put me in my place by telling me what I needed to be” and “brought me up to level.” Later she displayed one of his school projects. This experience had a profound effect on Christoph, who repeatedly talked about education as the way for blacks to get ahead.

In college there had been a period of time as a freshman when he felt he did not belong. He recalled a similar feeling in middle school when he was bused to a white neighborhood. He wondered if he were chosen only because he was “a black male with a high G.P.A.” He recalled arriving on campus determined not to let culture shock affect him. Still, he described the difficult process of blending his family’s values with those of the university. He said he had been a “naive” freshman who had to learn not to adhere rigidly to certain values from home.

I took them [that is, his family values] too literally. I walked around in a daze. Somehow I had to work at things that were thrown at me and rework them.

He also felt a desire to break out of his shell. “I have to be in the middle of things, not at the side.” His approach to campus concerns was

not to fight or combat them, but confront them. I should have a voice in anything that is done to my community. I’m going to be living here, so I might as well say something. I’m not going to just sit back.

It was also important to Christoph to be perceived as a good person on campus. He wanted the “black image” to be different

[from] all those stereotypes out there. We can have fun. We’re not all alcoholics or all studies. We can work in organizations. We’re not always militant. We can sit down and talk and discuss things.

As a member of the campus student association, Christoph felt others respected

African-American Stories

what he said, “They know I’m being honest...if I say something, I blatantly say it.” Yet he found it was hard at other times to be with people “who are not of my background. I can go to a meeting and talk if we have an issue to discuss, but it’s hard for me to socialize.”

Christoph attributed his plans of becoming a teacher to a push from an educator in Upward Bound who had helped him set goals and had opened his eyes by challenging him. He was especially bothered, therefore, when teachers did not push black students: “I had a good elementary school life, but some teachers didn’t give a hoot if you didn’t put your foot forward and you fell behind.” During field experience, he observed a black elementary teacher who let her students just sit and not do their work. He felt she should be pushing the students to do better work. “I feel very strongly about pushing students to achieve to their highest capacity level.”

As Christoph talked about his future plans as an educator, he often recalled the supportive encouragement of caring teachers such as his high school English teacher and his Upward Bound counselor. He believed those who cared would challenge students. To Christoph push and support were essential for success in education, particularly for black students.

Succeeding at the University

It is projected that within a few years only five percent of the teachers in the United States, contrasted to one-third of the students, will be minorities (Farrell, 1990). One way to begin to address this imbalance is to study successful minority teacher candidates. Their experiences can help universities develop programs that meet the needs of black preservice teachers. In our analysis, we focus on two issues: support and co-curricular activities.

Support from Family, K-12 Teachers, and University Faculty

Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph were sure they wanted to teach even though the decision to pursue teaching as a career was not an easy one for any of them. Laureen said, “You don’t get a lot of money and minorities want better for themselves.” Even attending college was not an easy choice because of economics. Laureen talked about students from her high school, “even those in the top ten,” who did not attend college if they first “got involved in working.” Sonja and Christoph agreed that “one has to be dedicated to go into teaching.” As the previous stories indicate, early experiences of success in school, often because of a teacher who was especially supportive, had an impact on their career choice.

It is not unusual or surprising that preservice teachers name individual teachers who were influential in their early school experiences. It is noteworthy, however, that Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph did not talk about the ethnicity of the influential teachers. They mentioned, instead, what the teachers thought about them and whether the teachers cared enough to be sensitive to them and to challenge them.

Their reflections about their teachers are similar to those stated by Shari Saunders, an African-American who said her own judgments were based on how the teachers treated her (Saunders, 1991).

My experiences in this school [a public elementary school] reinforced in my mind the reciprocal nature of respect and admiration. I learned that teachers could be encouraging and supportive. I learned that students representing various ethnic groups could develop positive relationships and work cooperatively as well as participate in friendly competitions. Our class really functioned like a community of learners. Finally through my sixth grade experiences I learned that one cannot judge the quality of one's education solely on the institution's public or parochial status. Teachers are a critical variable. (p. 43)

The influence of teachers does not end when students are in a university setting. As college students and preservice teachers, Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph mentioned the importance of support from individual teachers. This support made them feel they were taken seriously by faculty. As Christine Kraft (1991) found in her study of successful black students on predominantly white campuses, this support is not simply a "warm, fuzzy acceptance." Instead, what is essential is support that includes certain expectations and challenges that, when met, contribute to the self-esteem and confidence building that is also a part of programs such as Upward Bound—programs that fill an important need in young blacks.

In Sonja's classroom, as a new teacher, her ideas about interactions between teachers and students reflected the relationships she had experienced with some of her teachers. When asked what had helped her at the university, she said the "open door policy [of the faculty in the education department] where someone will listen if I have a problem." As her story reveals, academics were important to her, but she felt values such as mutual respect and good behavior were of equal importance. Her family upbringing and Catholic education seemed to lead her to emphasize "proper decorum," not in a rigid interaction between teacher and student, but in a comfortable, respectful relationship among all the members of the class. She felt such an approach should create a climate like a family in which good values and multicultural sensitivity would be modeled and nurtured.

Christoph's account of his approach to campus life focused on relationships with faculty and involvement in co-curricular activities. He enjoyed getting to know how others engaged the campus community. He also felt that reworking the values of his family to apply them in the new setting of the university required careful observation of faculty—seeing "how they do stuff...taking what I need."

Laureen, too, perceived herself as interacting with faculty in a more meaningful, or at least different, way than other preservice teachers: "I get to know teachers more than others." In contrast to Christoph's need to understand the meaning behind action, Laureen was satisfied to communicate with faculty in a more informal way. She thrived on personal contact. The content, however, was often an important issue, such as university course requirements, student teaching experi-

African-American Stories

ences, or career decisions. Compared with Christoph's seriousness, conversations with Laureen had a jovial tone. Both, however, often sought contact with the faculty and enjoyed opportunities where the interactions with faculty involved working together in campus organizations.

Co-Curricular Activities

Although Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph received support and encouragement from the education department faculty, there were other important experiences that helped build their self-esteem prior to entering college and also prior to their acceptance to the teacher preparation program. All three benefited from the support of family, individual teachers, and programs that helped them establish expectations for themselves as college-bound students. Nevertheless, they did not begin college with overwhelming confidence in their abilities as students.

Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph attributed much of their significant personal growth as university students to their participation in college activities, where they developed mutual student-support systems for themselves. In fact, they were more involved on campus than many other preservice teachers who often are deterred from campus activities by the time commitment associated with education courses, field experiences, and student teaching. When Christoph, however, found the demands of his extra-curricular activities conflicted with his school work, he chose what "would help in the long run. School work came out on top...most of the time."

Perceiving himself as well organized, Christoph said he learned organizational skills as a freshman from older students who encouraged him. During his junior year he saw himself as a mentor and suggested to someone in his fraternity who looked up to him, "Take what you like and make it your own." He also promoted teaching as a respected profession for blacks, "not just as a stepping stone." As his story shows, for Christoph education was the way for blacks to get ahead, and he used his work in campus organizations and his frequent conversations with faculty to help him reach his goals.

Although during his junior year he had chosen to live in the non-alcoholic and non-smoking House of Black Culture, one of the university's "small-living units," he had not limited his campus involvement to the black community. He selected activities that he felt would "help [him] in the long run," and where he could "see how the education classes can work in the university setting." Consistent with his deliberate approach, he watched other students and faculty members at various meetings where he "took it all in." Preservice teachers in the education department recognized Christoph's leadership skills (as they had two years earlier with Sonja) and elected him to the education department student board, which he chaired during his last year at the university.

When commenting on his growth since high school, Christoph indicated how his campus participation had affected him:

I've gone away and changed. People say I've changed. I know I've changed. I'm not a quiet person. I don't sit back. I've taken the reins; no one else can make my decisions.

He attributed this change to his involvement in organizations where he gained an understanding of his heritage. This knowledge of his own cultural background led him into the activities of the black community and then to other campus activities.

In contrast to Christoph's purposeful selection of co-curricular activities, Laureen ascribed her campus involvement to happenstance. "Going into my sophomore year, the person going to be president [of Student Union on Black Awareness (SUBA)] asked me to be vice president. It was okay, no speech or anything." Speaking in front of a large group of people frightened Laureen even in high school and kept her from becoming more involved. "I was shy all the way through high school. Like in ninth grade, I had to say a speech at our awards thing in ninth grade." Continuing the discussion of her high school experience, she added: "I ran for senior class president and I lost. It sort of really made it bad after I lost because...you know... Who likes to lose?"

Laureen told us about a first-year university experience that matched one from high school.

Basically, when I got into leadership it was sorta like I got pushed into it. Like with SUBA and everything; I was shy. I wanted to be president. I really wanted to be president.... Some things—I want to do it, but I was so scared of giving a speech.

Later, she described how she gained confidence during the process of pledging a sorority.

Then I pledged a sorority. That's when I stopped being scared because I learned so much at the time when I was pledging. That's when my leadership skills really came. I really came into myself that sophomore year. I learned so much from the pledge process and I learned a lot of leadership abilities because I had to talk when I was pledging. I had to speak and it made me feel better about myself to speak in front of a group of people. I don't know where it came from, but I felt so confident after that. I felt so good after I became a member of the sorority. I felt I could do anything. I just boosted my self-esteem. After that I ran for president of SUBA, unopposed, but said my speech anyway. That's when I really became confident.

Participation in such organizations as SUBA became a way for Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph to be a part of a small mutual, support system while on campus. Other black students have also found a need for such support systems when they attend mainly white universities where their opportunities to interact with other African-Americans are limited (Kraft, 1991; Saunders, 1991). As Saunders found, becoming involved in activities exclusively for African-Americans provided a support group where issues they confronted could be discussed in a social atmosphere "that required less emphasis on linguistic structure and less attention to European-American-based rules for interaction" (Saunders, p. 46).

African-American Stories

For Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph, involvement in campus organizations, particularly those with other black students, helped them develop the ability to “straddle the fence between two somewhat different worlds” (Saunders, 1991, p. 47), their co-curricular activities and their academic life on a small, predominantly white liberal arts campus. Their experiences highlight a concern expressed in a study reported by the Education Commission of the States (1990). Small institutions, the study noted, worried about whether they could create a supportive environment for minority students where it is less likely there would be large numbers of friends from various racial groups.

As important as activities were to Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph, however, they did not see them as directly related to teaching. When Sonja discussed the difficulties of her first year of teaching, she did not mention making use of the skills that she had developed in her campus leadership roles. Christoph said he sometimes took what he learned in courses to the co-curricular setting, but he never described things moving the other way as he learned about teaching. Laureen said that her activities were important to her teaching but only in a general way.

The activities I've been involved in, they really don't have anything to do with teaching, per se.... My leadership skills have helped me to be able to stand in front of people no matter what their age is and do what I have to do, but my classes have taught me what I need to teach and how to teach it and things like that. Sometimes you can use things to tie in a particular subject, something you've done.... I really can't tie anything into my learning to SUBA per se, but it was good for me, trying to educate the rest of the campus.

Implications

Broadening the Definition of a Professional

As they moved from the college environment to various teaching experiences, Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph encountered difficulties such as coping with students who were very different from what they expected and dealing with challenges from parents. Laureen wished she had been taught “how to get positive parent involvement. Also how to handle the not-so-positive parent. I had to learn the hard way.” These challenges for new teachers are not, of course, unique to African-Americans. Out-of-classroom experiences such as meetings with parents, or interactions with school faculty and administrators, present situations for which many new teachers feel unprepared. Indeed, much of the frustration of many beginning teachers arises from their inability to negotiate the social contexts of school (Bullough, 1989; Ryan, 1992).

Both student teaching and field experiences provide a context for preservice teachers to apply what they have learned and to develop an appropriate sense of themselves as teachers. The major focus of these experiences, however, lies within the school classroom. Teacher education programs provide less help in preparing

preservice teachers to meet their professional responsibilities outside the classroom. In the limited non-teaching experiences that do occur, such as parent-teacher conferences and faculty meetings, student teachers are outsiders.

The development of professional competencies, however, can take place through university activities. Operating within a familiar campus educational setting, students take leadership roles, develop decision-making skills, and work with peers for meaningful change. These experiences provide future teachers a context for rehearsing skills and developing attitudes necessary to operate within an educational institution.

The irony of this situation, particularly for black students such as Sonja, Lauren, and Christoph, is that they had met difficult challenges and had emerged as leaders as they negotiated the unfamiliar campus environment; but in the role of student teacher and beginning teacher, they saw themselves as subordinates whose direction must come from outside. Their desire to confront problems facing blacks did not extend to their confronting similar constraints facing teachers. In teaching, they were clearly more willing to accept the status quo. They had learned how to deal with the issue of “who am I as a Black American.” In the same way, they needed to consider the issue of who they were as teachers.

*Using Personal Histories to Inform Teacher Educators
and to Guide Preservice Teachers*

The outcomes of our study point to important considerations for faculty who advise, teach, and supervise teacher candidates. As others have also noted (Britzman, 1986; Zeichner & Liston, 1987), teacher educators must help their preservice teachers make the connection between their early educational experiences, their university experiences, and their roles as teachers. The stories of Sonja, Lauren, and Christoph add another dimension to the body of work showing the usefulness of exploring personal histories, including college experiences, as a part of learning to teach (see Bolin, 1990; Bullough, 1991; Greene, 1988; Grossman, 1990; Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Zitlow, 1990). The study of one’s personal history, and the assumptions about teaching shaped by that personal history, which is important to all preservice teachers, seems particularly acute for individuals who are part of a minority group.

The stories of Sonja, Lauren, and Christoph show that they would have benefited from more attention to developing a “consistent, grounded, and accurate understanding of themselves as teachers” (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1989, p. 231). It was often apparent in our conversations with the three preservice teachers that they did not realize how their personal histories had shaped their assumptions about teaching. As teacher educators, we must “acknowledge the impact that autobiography has on becoming a professional teacher” (Knowles, 1988, p. 711). The personal histories of Sonja, Lauren, and Christoph, particularly their experiences in school, were clearly “filters” through which they responded to the

African-American Stories

preparation as teachers (Bullough, 1991).

Without the use of their personal histories, we would not have been aware of the degree to which the perceptions Sonja, Laureen, and Christoph held about their early schooling influenced how they made choices about life on campus; what they needed from the education faculty; how they viewed themselves as teachers. Because our study points to the importance of campus involvement and faculty-student interaction, we feel teacher education programs should be supportive of meaningful extra-curricular activities for black students. These same issues, however, would seem to apply to other students as well. Personal histories showed us how we might more actively be involved in helping all preservice teachers succeed.

A total academic environment conducive to minority preservice teachers' success, an environment that includes student support groups (Henninger, 1989) and supportive faculty, is essential. As recommended by the Education Commission of the States (1990), higher education institutions need to recognize and reward faculty who are interested or gifted in assisting minority students.

We suggest that when educators look at the experiences of minorities on campuses (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Altbach & Lomotey, 1991) and consider ways to develop programs to attract and retain minority teacher candidates (Dilworth, 1992), they also consider issues expressed by the following questions:

How can we as teacher educators encourage students of teaching to enlarge their images of the role of a teacher?

How can preservice teachers' understanding be augmented in ways that lead them to consider multiple ways to draw on their whole repertoire of experiences?

Teacher educators need to consider the power of preservice teachers' conceptions about teaching and about what it takes to be successful as a teacher. The examination and expansion of preservice teachers' ideas of teaching gleaned from many years as students (Lortie, 1975) should be encouraged and supported. Unless challenged to look beyond a narrow view of teaching, preservice teachers see their preparation in methods courses and field experiences as the only opportunity to learn what to do in the classroom. If they are presented with a broader conception of teaching, perhaps preservice teachers will learn to transfer their whole repertoire of skills to the school and classroom setting.

References

- Allen, W. R., Epps, E. G., & Haniff, N. Z. (Eds.) (1991). *College in black and white: African American students in predominantly white and in historically black public universities*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Altbach, P. G., & Lomotey, K. (Eds.) (1991). *The racial crisis in American higher education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bolin, F. S. (1990). Helping student teachers think about teaching: Another look at Lou.

- Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1), 10-19.
- Britzman, D. (1986). Cultural myths in the making of a teacher: Biography and social structure in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4), 442-472.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr. (1989). *First-year teacher: A case study*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr. (1991). Exploring personal teaching metaphors in preservice teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(1), 43-51.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr., Knowles, J. G., & Crow, N. A. (1989). Teacher self-concept and student culture in the first year of teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 91(2), 209-233.
- Clandinin, D. J. (1986). *Classroom practice: Teacher images in action*. London: Falmer Press.
- Dilworth, M. E. (Ed.) (1992). *Diversity in teacher education: New expectations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Education Commission of the States. (1990). *New strategies for producing minority teachers*. Denver, CO: Author.
- Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher thinking: A study of practical knowledge*. London: Croom Helm.
- Farrell, E. J. (1990). On the growing shortage of black and hispanic teachers. *English Journal*, 79(1), 39-46.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher: Teacher knowledge and teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Henninger, M. L. (1989). Recruiting minority students: Issues and options. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(6), 35-39.
- Knowles, J. G. (1988). A beginning teacher's experience: Reflections on becoming a teacher. *Language Arts*, 65(7), 702-712.
- Knowles, J. G. & Holt-Reynolds, D. (1991). Shaping pedagogies through personal histories in preservice teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, 93(1), 87-113.
- Kraft, C. L. (1991). What makes a successful black student on a predominantly white campus? *American Educational Research Journal*, 28(2), 423-443.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oberg, A. (1984). Construct theory as a framework for research. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.
- Runion, G. E. (1989). A profile of minority enrollments at AILACTE institutions. *Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education, Views and News*, 2(1), 1-4.
- Ryan, K. (Ed.) (1992). *The roller coaster year: Essays by and for beginning teachers*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Saunders, S. (1991). Reflections on my educational experiences as an African-American. *Teaching Education*, 4(1), 41-48.
- Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (1987). Teaching student teachers to reflect. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1-22.
- Zitlow, C. S. (1986). A search for images: Inquiry with preservice English teachers.

African-American Stories

Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University.
Zitlow, C. S. (1990). "To think about what I think:" Inquiry and involvement. In G. Hawisher & A. Soter (Eds.) *On literacy and its teaching: Issues in English education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.