An Urban Field Experience for Rural Preservice Teachers:
"I'm Not Afraid—Should I Be?"

By Carol E. Marxen & Gwen L. Rudney

This study examined the impact of an urban field experience for 25 preservice teachers. The project took place between a small public liberal arts university in a sparsely populated rural community and a large urban school district. The questions were: (1) What did our students learn from a one-week, supervised urban field experience? and (2) How did our students apply their learning? The research is part of a larger self-study of the effectiveness of the Human Relation Competence Program, the model used to meet Minnesota state licensure requirements by the teacher education program at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) (Rudney, Risku, & Marxen, 1996).

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Perspectives

Contemporary demographic data paints a picture of the sharp contrast between the nation's overwhelmingly white teaching force and an increasingly diverse student population. The discontinuity will broaden in the future with more degrees in education awarded to middle-class white women, a further developing majority/minority population, and a decline in the number of minority teachers (Sleeter, 1990). In short, unlike their predecessors, the major-

ity of future teachers have monocultural, middle-class backgrounds (Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Fuller, 1992; Grant & Secada, 1990).

Unless teachers have an effective multicultural component in their preservice education, the profound differences between teachers and students will result in cultural conflicts and minimal student academic achievement. Geneva Gay believes that "some of the most crucial cultural discontinuities in the classrooms occur in the areas of cultural values, patterns of communication and cognitive process, task performance or work habits, self-presentation styles, and approaches to problem solving" (1993, p. 289). The difficulty lies in changing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values that are embedded in preservice students' real life experiences (Haberman, 1991; Santos, 1986).

In 1973 the Commission on Multicultural Education of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Educators provided a preface to experiential models in its *No One Model American* when the group stated that "multicultural education programs for teachers are more than special courses...grafted on the standard program. The commitment to cultural pluralism must permeate all areas of the educational experience provided for prospective teachers" (p. 264). More recently, the 1994 Refined Standards for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that teacher education programs prepare their students to understand and use teaching and learning strategies which are appropriate for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. In other words, teacher education programs must include more than a course in human relations in which students listen to lectures, memorize terminology, and read textbooks.

Multicultural coursework that includes theory, curriculum modifications, and teaching strategies for diverse learners should be expanded to include field experiences in diverse settings (e.g., Fuller, 1994; Garibaldi, 1992; Jordan, 1995; Shaw, 1993). From another perspective, Joseph M. Larkin and Christine E. Sleeter (1994) caution that field experiences in diverse settings may reinforce students' stereotypes rather than modify them. Martin Haberman and Linda Post (1992), in their study of 23 preservice teachers placed in low-income minority field experiences, found that the students select and confirm their previous beliefs rather than gain awareness and appreciation. Others (Jordan, 1995; Wayson in Grant & Secada, 1990) maintain that in order to be effective, field experiences must be paralleled with immediate, in-depth, and personal debriefing sessions. Immersion into culturally diverse settings causes feelings of disequilibrium. Growth takes place when students discuss and reflect on their experiences and are able to move from assimilation to accommodation.

UMM, a small public liberal arts university located in a sparsely populated rural community, has continually provided a multicultural component in its teacher education program to help prepare our students for the schools in which they will teach. However, given our isolated location, it has been difficult to provide our education students with diverse field experiences. This is further complicated by the

fact that students of color make up only 11 percent of the student population in Minnesota and a majority of that 11 percent live in the metropolitan areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991).

The education faculty at UMM is committed to offering a program infused with multicultural education despite the geographically isolated and largely monocultural setting of the campus. A newly restructured teacher education program draws from research in multicultural education which advocates field experiences in diverse settings in addition to taking courses and reading textbooks. The new program requires all teacher education graduates to complete a field experience in a community different from that with which they are familiar. The challenge, given our isolated location, is to provide our students with a wide choice of diverse opportunities that would fulfill this requirement.

The Education Division at UMM places students in field experiences internationally through our Global Student Teaching Program. However, we needed options for students who wanted to remain in the United States and Minnesota. Accordingly, centers working with diverse populations were established in Willmar and Osseo in Minnesota, in El Paso, Texas, and in Chicago, Illinois. This study assesses the effectiveness of the Chicago field experience.

Project Description

How Did We Begin?

When the Education Division began looking for field placements in urban locations, it was natural to strengthen our existing ties with Chicago through the Minority Resource Center (MRC) recruitment effort. With the help of our MRC contact, we visited a few Chicago schools in the spring of 1994. Our idea to place Minnesota students from a rural university into an urban field placement was met with puzzled looks, disbelief, and some rejection. Our initial journey eventually led to the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Department of Human Resources (DHR). The director of DHR listened to our request and saw potential for a collaborative effort. The CPS needs effective teachers who will consider teaching in an urban setting, and UMM needed to educate our preservice teachers about urban schools and diverse ethnic groups. A partnership was formed and plans began.

In the fall of 1994, the director and a coordinator from the DHR traveled to UMM. After touring our campus and community, they met with elementary and secondary teacher education students, prospective education students, MRC personnel, and students on campus who were from Chicago. They brought along video tapes of three Chicago elementary schools, a promotional tape on Chicago, and information about teaching and living in a large city. The results of the visit were positive: it piqued education students' interest in Chicago schools, provided the CPS information about our teacher education program, and gave them a feel for the rural quality of our students' environment. A return visit was made by the coordinator in the winter of 1995.

Who Participated?

Senior elementary education students enrolled in a block of methods courses were invited to participate in an intense one-week field experience in Chicago's elementary schools. Over a period of two years, a total of 25 preservice teachers (seven women in 1994; 15 women and three men in 1995) eagerly volunteered to participate. Most of the students who participated had grown up in rural or suburban communities, and the majority of white students had limited contact with people of color before coming to the university. The students and other elementary education majors completed over 180 hours of field experience before their ten weeks of student teaching. The program requires that one of their field assignments be in a culturally diverse setting.

How Did We Prepare?

Nuts and Bolts. Transportation, lodging, and placements in schools took many hours of planning, phoning, and faxing between UMM and the Chicago schools. Personnel from the DHR helped with the plans every step of the way. On the home front, the Education Division demonstrated its support for the program in philosophy and also provided university vans for transportation to, from, and around Chicago. Food and lodging were the students' responsibility.

A list of the students, their grade level requests, and other special requests (e.g., ESL schools) were sent to a coordinator in the DHR. The coordinator contacted schools which agreed to participate. The principals of the participating schools were sent letters for the cooperating teachers which explained the purpose and requirements of the practicum experience. They also received our students' autobiographies and student evaluation forms to complete at the end of the week. Each school hosted at least two of our preservice teachers. The location of the schools ranged from far north, west, and south Chicago as well as from low-income public housing to relatively upscale neighborhoods.

Students. We prepared the students by reassuring them, and in some cases their parents, that they would be safe. Other questions the students had about the schools, students, and neighborhoods were answered to the best of our ability. Decisions were made about roommates, drivers and vans, time lines, what to wear, and how many suitcases were allowed. It was important that we had drivers who felt comfortable driving a van to, in, and around Chicago.

A Week in Chicago: "I'm Not Scared—Should I Be?"

Our 600 mile, 11-hour trip to Chicago began before dawn on Sunday morning in a university parking lot. Suitcases, pillows, and students were loaded into the vans along with one or two sleepy professors. Maps were handed out to each van with directions to the hotel. A plan to meet three hours down the road for breakfast at an

agreed-upon restaurant was finalized. The caravan left the parking lot, and the adventure began.

Eleven hours later, when the last van pulled into the hotel parking ramp, we professors gave a sigh of relief. Although everyone had a story to tell, the long trip was happily uneventful. After checking in, we met in one of our rooms (also known as the debriefing room) for the first of many in-depth discussions. A call was made to the Chicago coordinator for last-minute instructions. We distributed maps, directions to schools, and a highlighter. The assignment for the evening was to get in "school groups" and figure out the route to each school. More questions were asked and some were answered. The students were reassured that we would visit all the schools the next day.

School Days. On Monday morning, our students were off to their schools, and we began our journey around Chicago. Our map and urban driving skills were also sharpened. We met or were reacquainted with the principals and cooperating teachers in the schools, and visited our students in their classrooms. We and the students returned to the hotel after school and our first intense debriefing session which lasted two hours. Monday was the most difficult of all the sessions. Most of the students' nervousness was gone and they were full of stories, questions, excitement, amazement, and disappointment. Finally, we headed out for a well deserved dinner and some Chicago nightlife.

On Monday and Tuesday most of the students observed and helped the teachers. By Wednesday, they were teaching some math, reading, language arts, science, social studies, or health lessons. Consequently, the students' days were getting longer. Not only did they spend all day in the schools followed by debriefing session, but they added writing lesson plans to their already full agenda. Many nights we would get a call or there would be a knock on our door for consultation about a lesson for the next day. Collaboration was alive and well among the students and professors.

One debriefing session during the week was held with personnel from the CPS, participating school principals, cooperating teachers, and students. This gave our students the opportunity to ask and answer questions and verified for the CPS administration that the experience was worthwhile. It also provided the DHR a chance to seek out anyone that might be interested in teaching in the Chicago schools.

Debriefing Sessions. Current research emphasizes the importance of in-depth debriefing sessions so preservice teachers do not reinforce their negative preconceptions. These immediate dialogues with the students were a time for the students to express their inner feelings without being judged—in other words, a time for them to "let it all hang out." Their comments and questions revealed the disequilibrium they were feeling. They were struggling to accommodate their experiences to their existing schema. As their mentors, we listened, and asked questions such as "What do you think accounts for the fact that..." "What might that tell you about the

child's culture?" "What do you think should have been done?"

As mentioned previously, Monday was the most difficult debriefing session. Each student had to share a story or reflection about their day. Many of the preservice teachers perceived a harshness in the classroom discipline they observed and were disturbed by it. On the other hand, they were amazed at the attentive, well-disciplined students. Loud, direct voices were also upsetting to many of our students. Others expressed their surprise that the dominant strategies for teaching were lecture, direct instruction, and textbook-based lessons. Some of our students cried and others questioned if this was really the experience that they wanted. It was definitely not what they had expected.

Despite their doubts and the initial shock of being a minority for the first time in their life, the preservice teachers were surprised at how readily the children, staff, and faculty accepted them. They "loved" the children and wanted to "rescue" them from an inequitable educational system.

By Tuesday, the debriefing session had a different tone. Our students felt more comfortable in their schools and classrooms. They were learning their way around the school and interacting with the children and faculty. Although their comments and questions were still about discipline and instructional strategies, the majority of students were more positive. On Wednesday and Thursday the students' comments focused on their lessons, specific students, daily schedule, and the school's environment. Most students felt comfortable in the schools and with the children and teachers. They were also feeling more relaxed about surviving in a big city—but not totally. As one student said to another while walking downtown for dinner, "I'm not scared—should I be?"

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources for the analysis included both observational field notes and participant self reports. The primary data source was the Human Relations Competence Document (HRCD), a licensure requirement for UMM teacher education graduates. This licensure requirement is based on the state of Minnesota's human relations goals which ask students to: (a) understand the contributions and life styles of various racial, cultural, and economic groups; (b) recognize and deal with biases, discrimination, and prejudices; (c) create learning environments which contribute to positive interpersonal relations; and (d) respect human diversity and personal rights (Minnesota Board of Teaching, 1990). To complete the HRCDs, students wrote two reflective essays in which they described what they had learned from their field experiences in culturally diverse settings and their implementation of human relations goals during their student teaching experiences. This document, completed six months after the Chicago experience, allowed us to discover what students remembered from the experience, what learnings they attributed to the experience, and what patterns of goal implementation they exhibited. Other self-

report data included written and spoken reflections shared throughout each field experience and in follow-up interviews. Field note data included debriefing notes, observations, and interviews.

To answer our questions (What do our students learn? and How do they apply it?), we first employed standard inductive methods of content analysis of the HRCD essays. We summarized the knowledge, attitudes, concerns, and actions present in each set of essays. Interrater validity checks were performed to establish consistency. In independent readings, we identified patterns of response repeated across the essays. We then compared patterns and developed tentative themes. We reread the full set of essays to categorize all responses and note counter examples. Percentages of responses were included to represent accurately the scope of student response. After completing the careful analysis of the HRCDs, we looked for changes in understanding over time by comparing the results to field notes taken during the week in Chicago.

Results and Discussion

Results are presented below for each of the research questions. In describing and interpreting the results, we recognize the importance of the context of the data source. The HRCDs are a licensure requirement for the UMM education students. Given the function of the document, we expected and received papers that were generally positive and supportive of the human relations goals. Even so, differences in attitude and knowledge levels were revealed.

What did students learn from a one-week supervised urban field experience?

Student descriptions of their learning from the Chicago experience were unique and personal. As expected, they varied in description, interpretation, and analysis. Still, three categories of response were consistent for all participants. They wrote of Self, of Students, and of School. Within the categories, interesting patterns of response were revealed.

School. Field notes from debriefing sessions record the importance of the neighborhood and school environments as topics of concern to the students. Even after six busy months, 60 percent of the participants reported their memories of the neighborhoods in which their schools were located. The memories were strongest for those participants placed in areas of lower socio-economic status. They described what the neighborhoods looked like as well as their reactions to what they saw. One student described her feeling of panic as she approached her school. "Most of the buildings were run down and boarded up. They also had bars on the doors and windows... I could tell that I was in for a very eye-opening experience." Two students described their sadness that the children were not allowed to go outside for recess because of danger in the neighborhood. Participants remembered also the

environment of the school itself. Many (n=15) described the racial composition of their school. Each student remembered and reported different details about their sites. For example, they recalled student uniforms, number of children in classrooms, or the condition of buildings. The most prevalent theme about the general school environment, however, was the participants' sense of welcome and safety at their schools. Participants (n=12) described the contrast between what they expected and what they found, between what they saw in the neighborhood and what they saw within the school. One student described how gang activities in her school's neighborhood created tensions which seemed to disappear once inside the elementary school. "When I walked in the school, I was surrounded with smiling faces, people ready to greet me, and a warm safe learning environment."

Participants commented on the classroom environment as well. Curriculum and discipline, major topics during debriefing sessions, remained so when the participants reflected on the experience in their HRCDs. Participants (n=8) remarked on the strictness of the discipline methods used by the teachers at the school, and some (n=4) perceived it as harsh. Students attempted to explain the discipline in different ways. For some, a simplistic and narrow explanation seemed to suffice: "If they do not get discipline in school, many times they will get none at all." Others, perhaps benefitting from debriefing sessions, considered multiple perspectives and issues. Several noted the love and respect for students that underlay the discipline. One wrote,

> I do see the benefits of that type of discipline system in that culture however, and I understand that it might be the only way to gain the child's respect. At the same time this is happening however, it s clear that the teacher has a great deal of love and respect for the students. He is only looking out for their best interests because he knows they must be well prepared to survive in the world that they live in.

Participants discussed teaching and learning in the classrooms. In debriefing sessions, they noted Afro-centric curriculum and other cultural emphases, instructional adjustments for Spanish-speaking students, and a reliance on direct instruction by teachers. In the HRCDs, over half of the participants included comments on curriculum and instruction. For some (n=7), comments about instruction were implicitly or explicitly linked to discipline. One student wrote that in a "tough area" a harsher instructional style was needed. Another student wondered if the teacher's reliance on direct instruction was linked to discipline issues. Participants placed in schools with Spanish-speaking students stressed language effects on teaching and learning. They described the difficulties and opportunities present in a dual-language classroom environment.

Students. Every participant, in discussions and in essays, reported positive interactions and attitudes toward the children they had encountered in the Chicago schools. Participant reactions to students mirrored their reactions to the school environment. One wondered about her students, "Do they learn like I do?" Another described a commonly expressed reaction:

> Midway through the test one of the little girls in the fifth grade class asked me if I always had a smile on my face. Although I usually do, I think that I was smiling because of the way that the class received me. They were so welcoming I honestly thought that I would be encountering reckless children—like the inner city children that I've seen on T.V.

Many of our students (n=14) reported a common reaction to cross-cultural experiences, "Kids are kids." For some, the related comments appeared superficial and unsophisticated. But for most, the statements seemed to go a bit deeper. They described the desire and *right* of all children to learn. They noticed inequities in materials, technology, and building conditions among schools in different locations. They recognized that shared characteristics and needs did not preclude special needs. One student wrote:

> They all have needs and dreams, but that is where the differences begin. In each area I was in I had to deal with a variety of issues.... For every school I had to change my teaching style to best reach out to the particular group.

Many participants (n=15) wrote of the families and culture of their students. The comments and observations varied from student to student. We were particularly puzzled by what three participants, all in the first or second grade classrooms at the same school, had to say about the Mexican culture of their students:

One participant wrote, "The students and their families were warm and giving." This statement was based on the actual interactions that our student experienced. She further described how much she had learned from her cooperating teacher, a Mexican-American woman.

A second reported, "The Hispanic community is based on a paternal system where the father in the family is revered and often feared." The young man who offered this comment was in a first grade classroom where all the students spoke only Spanish. He respected his cooperating teacher, a young Mexican-American man.

From the third participant, "Students don't have much of a home life. Culture doesn't allow for much emotional attachment." This student, a young woman who cared deeply about children, never expressed this idea during debriefing sessions. In her HRCD, she showed evidence of *incorrect* information.

What could explain the diversity in understandings? Perhaps what they perceived and learned was framed by what Haberman (1991) called selective perception. Our misinformed student clearly demonstrated a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding. She may have entered the classroom with a set of beliefs and then perceived situations which supported them. We wonder, too, whether her cooperating teacher may have influenced her beliefs.

Self. Much of our students' learning, evidenced in discussions and reflective essays, centered around themselves. For one third of the participants, their experience in the urban setting was the first time they had been "a minority." They consistently described how their initial discomfort was eased as they spent time in

the schools. One young white woman was placed in a 100 percent African-American school and wrote,

> I felt intimidated for now I was the minority and there was no way to hide my differences. After the initial shock wore off, everything went smoothly...the students accepted me for who I was from the very beginning.

Other participants also described the easing of initial discomfort. Our students described the feeling as one of "walking in the shoes" of their students. They promised to remember the feeling when working with minority students in their classrooms.

The participants reflected on their own lives. They described the contrast between what they were seeing and what they had experienced as students in schools. Many (n=10) spoke of what they had taken for granted. One wondered if she "as a Caucasian, had an equal right to teach the children." Despite discomfort and doubts, the commitment to do well with all students was consistent across the entire set of essays.

Every participant expressed gratitude for the experience and described profound effects on their lives by getting to know the students. Interestingly, some students (n=5) also wrote with pride about their effect on the students. They described how the experience was cross-cultural and allowed the students in the schools to learn about places and things they hadn't ever experienced. Our students shared their rural background by talking to the city kids about cows and corn and farms. One student said that "her life and their lives will never be the same." We suspect that their sense of influence is inflated, but it resonates with the powerful feeling of engagement that our students experienced.

How did students apply their learning?

In a previous study of our graduates' implementation of Minnesota's human relations goals, we learned that our students met the required goals by making curricular, instructional, and environmental adjustments (Rudney, Risku, & Marxen, 1996). Analyzed as a group, the graduates in that study revealed a substantial amount of knowledge about working with culturally diverse students. They described incorporation of multiple perspectives into their curriculum and claimed to use a variety of methods to do so. They reported adjustments to instruction that took into consideration general needs of students (e.g., cooperative grouping and writing to learn) as well as individual needs (e.g., individualized assignments and lesson adaptations). Comments tended to be generalized and superficial, though individuals differed greatly in their understandings.

The group of students from the Chicago experience reported actions similar to those in the previous study with one interesting exception. Nearly half (44 percent) of the Chicago participants described an instructional intervention not present in the original study. These students, all but one of whom were student teaching in diverse settings, described their purposeful efforts to adjust to cultural differences of

students, to use student interest and experiences as the basis for lessons, and to respect the knowledge that students can bring to the classroom. They seemed to avoid the trap of having a minority "speak for her entire race" and instead made use of true student expertise. One student wrote, "I found that diversity [of students] taught me.... Many of the best resources are the students in your classroom."

We can't claim that the Chicago experience accounts for this growth, but we have evidence that it may have assisted. One student wrote: "I believe my experiences in diverse settings have transformed me into a person who is no longer apprehensive about moving to new places, meeting new people, and teaching in non-rural settings."

In the fall of 1996, we interviewed six of the seven participants from the first cohort group. We wanted to find out if and where they were teaching, and if they were using the knowledge and skills they learned in Chicago in their current positions. We learned that two are teaching at an Indian Reservation school in South Dakota; two are teaching in Minnesota rural schools; two are substituting, one in a diverse suburban school district in Minnesota and the other in small rural towns in Wisconsin; and one is a Site Director for a YMCA in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In interviews with the six participants, we found that the three who are working with a diverse population transferred and applied what they learned in Chicago to their current teaching job. They talked about how the Chicago experience helped prepare them for working with students from cultures different from their own. One participant said it taught her to build on her students' prior knowledge and to take students' culture into consideration when planning the curriculum. Another participant reported that being in a Chicago school which emphasized an African-American curriculum helped her to see how important it is to give children a sense of pride in their heritage. She commented, "It is imperative that we understand our students' culture and where they come from." The participant who is substituting in the diverse suburban school district said that the teachers she has come into contact with have had professional development from the district to help them implement diversity into their curriculum.

From another point of view, the three students who are teaching in rural communities talked about having an open mind and no longer stereotyping people. They mentioned implementing multicultural education by helping students accept responsibility and taking pride in themselves and their country. One participant said, "I do not have any diversity in my room, but there are a few Hispanic students in the school." These three teachers did not mention the importance of infusing multiculturalism into their curriculum.

The findings from these interviews demonstrates that the participants have used the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they learned in their Chicago experience if they are in an environment that they view as diverse. If they see their school as having no diversity, they do not seem to view multicultural education as a curricular priority.

What have we learned from our experience? Implications for Programs Like Ours

From the quality and nature of student comments during the field experience, in reflective essays at the end of student teaching, and in conversations with participants who are now teaching in their own classrooms, we believe the experience is valuable. We know that we need to encourage and support our students who pursue teaching opportunities in diverse settings because they are the most likely to provide culturally responsive teaching to their students. We know that we need to encourage our graduates who teach in monocultural settings to continue to think about their urban field experience and consider its relevance to their students' lives. Our students and graduates need our patient support as they examine their beliefs and knowledge of human relations. Though we recognize that we need to base our expectations on their developmental level, we also have learned that we need to challenge the notions of students who have "learned it wrong." Our belief in the importance of debriefing sessions is unwavering. Students need time to question and to reflect. They needed us to listen, and they benefit from group discussions and questions.

The Chicago experience is designed to meet student needs, but as designers and implementers of the project, *our* learning curves are as steep if not steeper than those of our students. We have learned about Chicago. Our ideas of the cultures of the schools have been challenged and expanded. We know real principals, real teachers, and real students who are glad to see us when we come. We have mastered road maps and conquered "directional dyslexia." We have come to appreciate the similarities and the true differences among schools in rural and urban settings. Our motivation to learn more is tremendous. We have sought out new information and made new contacts. We have copied newspaper articles on Afro-centric curriculum, ESL, and urban education. Our need to know is strong.

Our need to share is also strong, but we have come to question the wisdom in doing so. Our third cohort of 17 eager and intelligent students recently returned from their week in Chicago. We had prepared them to the best of our abilities. We had told them that they didn't need to be afraid. The schools were safe. The schools were very well disciplined and the teachers cared about the students. The neighborhoods varied for each school, and some were in poverty-stricken areas. No matter what the area, we explained, the schools would be safe. The city is fun, we said. We suggested places to eat, to shop, even to dance. During the first day of debriefing, the students expressed (as we expected) discomfort at some of the strict discipline policies. We wanted to say—and sometimes did—that students always feel that way at the beginning of the week, but that by Wednesday you'll feel ok. We also noticed that we became frustrated that the students weren't learning faster. And that is when we had to remind ourselves of what we believe about how our students learn. We were trying to transmit knowledge that we should be helping them construct. We

need to allow our students to observe, reflect, and process. We need to give them the chance to be confused and to discover. We need to allow them to experience disequilibrium, for this is how they will learn.

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