Walking the Talk:
The Credibility Factor in Teacher Preparation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter shares the experiences of a young teacher working in a large urban school district. In college classes she learned how to plan for instruction, write lesson plans, and design assessments that tied to lesson objectives. However, despite practicum experiences, including student teaching, what she was not prepared for were the realities of family struggles and their impact on students and their learning. Expectations of what "should" happen did not match with what occurred. By seeking to understand family circumstances, the author learned that building trust between students and teacher is necessary to further students' emotional and academic growth. Lessons learned from her full-on engagement with elementary students as a classroom teacher now inform her work preparing a new generation of teachers. For those in teacher preparation, the credibility factor matters. Having walked the talk, they can share actual classroom experiences—including their stumbles and successes—with teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to establish the importance of classroom teaching experience for those tasked with preparing the next generation of teachers. A critical requirement for instructors in teacher preparation is that they be role models with prior PreK-12 classroom teaching experience. Time spent in classrooms as a teacher provides a depth of understanding and insight that can be shared with teacher candidates. Teachers wear many hats. Not only are they responsible for students' academic growth, but also their social and emotional well-being. The narratives that follow present the author's recollections and reflections of her early years a public school educator. She describes the community and school context and then spotlights the stories of two students who taught her about what it really means to be an attentive,

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compassionate teacher. Her previous naive understandings of teacher-student relationships were disrupted as she learned the importance of meeting students where they are and working with them as individuals.

Milwaukee is a city of contrasts. In the 1950s, it was one of the ten largest metropolitan areas in the United States. Once home to the Allis-Chalmers machinery plant and two of the nation's largest brewing companies—Pabst and Schlitz—and their downtown complexes that occupied several city blocks—the city was an ethnic fusion. Neighborhoods, defined by religion, language, and other cultural aspects, were where people settled, worked, sent their children to neighborhood schools, and spent the sunset of their years. For decades, Milwaukee was a beacon for cultural and ethnic groups. Often churches served as the religious center for many ethnic neighborhoods. The St. Stanaslaus neighborhood was home to Polish immigrants, St. Patrick's welcomed the Irish, St. Rita's was where Italians worshipped, and St. Augustine's served German-speaking families. On Milwaukee's southside, the former Holy Trinity church, now Our Lady of Guadalupe, was a place of worship for Hispanics (Personal correspondence, Rosalyn Geenen, 2018.) Indeed, from the African-American neighborhoods to the north and Latino settlements to the south, Milwaukee was a little America, a destination for thousands upon thousands of families.

Schools are the heartbeat of every community, and that was certainly the case in this working-class, blue-collar metropolitan community. Based on enrollment, Milwaukee has always been one of the largest districts in the United States; today its 154 schools serve over 75,000 students (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2019). As the principal district in Wisconsin, for decades Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) offered its own annual mid-October teachers' convention long before it was fashionable for districts to provide local professional development for their teachers. Special education programs, English as a Second Language classes, and Spanish language-maintenance bilingual programs were housed in several schools. Diversity characterized neighborhood communities and schools.

Large districts often hire young, right-out-of-college professionals. It is in the best interest of school children that those hires be prepared for the complex realities of the classroom. Novice teachers need to know how to teach, of course, but they also need to know how to reach their students—how to make those vital connections that are the backdrop to learning and central to culturally-responsive teaching. Below I share my experiences as a novice teacher who learned valuable lessons from her students.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Situated at the intersection of 21st S Street and National Avenue—the broad angle street that cuts through the city's southeast section—is Longfellow Elementary School. An imposing three-story brick structure built in 1921, Longfellow has served the Clarke Square community for close to a hundred years. The second oldest school in the MPS system was named after poet and educator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In the 1980s, the school educated over 550 students and housed one of the district's few bilingual programs. In those days, there were two types of bilingual programs—transitional and maintenance—designed to meet the high percentage of Hispanics who flocked to the city in droves, motivated by employment opportunities. The former was a short-term program with an emphasis on pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) classes whereas the latter was a two-way Spanish bilingual program (TWB). In such a bilingual program, "mainstream and language minority students become bilingual and biliterate when instructed in both languages from prekindergarten on" (Calderon, 2007, p. 6). Longfellow, a designated Spanish bilingual school, featured regular education, i.e., English-only classes, and TWB

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