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# Coping and Growing: Peace Corps Fellows in the Urban Classroom

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In this article, I report on a study of the first semester transition of three returned Peace Corps Volunteers from their overseas third world teaching assignments into United States urban classrooms. I look at their first semester teaching in the light of a basic Peace Corps Fellows/USA Program assumption that their overseas teaching assignments will enhance their transition. Based on my development and analysis of three mini-case studies, I question the validity of the assumption and provide a set of implications for this and similar programs.

## Peace Corps Fellows/USA Program (PCF/USA)

The Peace Corps Fellows/USA Program (PCF/USA) is an alternative certification program for returned Peace Corps Volunteers (called Fellows) who have taught in third world nations. The program places Fellows into an urban or rural classroom as permanent, full-time substitutes after as few as two weeks of orientation. While teaching, Fellows also attend university classes. They earn a teaching certificate in their area of specialization at either the elementary or secondary education level and a Master of Arts Degree in Education. DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund pays most of their tuition.

Each of the 17 universities involved in the PCF/USA establishes its own curriculum. At the midwestern research university associated with this study, for example, first year Fellows in the secondary certification program attend a three-semester seminar in pedagogy specifically targeted for their cohort. They also attend a subject-area pedagogy class during the fall semester, a literacy class during the winter semester, and a multiculturalism class and an educational psychology class during the summer semester. Fellows in the elementary certification program have additional pedagogy classes and two mathematics classes. Second year Fellows attend a curriculum course, a research course, and

any methods and content-area classes necessary to meet certification or degree requirements.

Fellows simultaneously attend graduate school full time and teach full time in an urban classroom, no easy task for a new teacher. In the following section, I discuss why the Fellows are perceived as particularly suited to the special challenges of an urban classroom.

## Making Explicit the PCF/USA Claim

PCF/USA claims that the Fellows will *enrich the [U.S.] classroom with their experiences from overseas and that returned Volunteers come with much needed cultural sensitivity towards children from a variety of backgrounds* (Peace Corps Fellows/USA Program, 1992). Implicit in this claim is the belief that overseas experiences and cultural sensitivities help the Fellows succeed even in particularly challenging inner-city teaching assignments with their unequal share of problems such as marginal students, discipline, violence, and drugs (Bullard, 1992). Some inner-city schools have a teacher turnover rate as high as 50% and a paucity of certified teachers willing to fill their vacancies, especially in math, science, and bilingual education (Colbert & Wolff, 1993). PCF/USA offers a pool of uncertified but culturally sensitive teachers experienced in teaching overseas who they believe can immediately function in these classrooms.

## Initial Questions

What actually happens when Fellows with overseas teaching experience are placed in metropolitan school district's classrooms? How does the overseas experience affect their first semester of teaching? How does the overseas teaching experience shape the Fellows' initial responses to the most common problems of beginning teachers such as classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, and assessment

(Veenman, 1984)? Bullough (1989, p. 46) points out that *the skills, understandings, and attitudes a beginning teacher brings into the classroom as well as the work context itself* will largely shape how teachers handle these issues. Fellows developed certain skills, understandings, and attitudes during their two to three years teaching overseas. Does evidence refute or support the implicit assumption of the PCF/USA that these overseas experiences enhance the Fellows' initial teaching performance in an urban setting? Before I turn to these questions, I show why they are important.

### Significance

The Fellows are a part of a larger, rapidly growing cadre of teachers entering the profession through alternative certification programs. These programs, specifically designed to bring post-baccalaureate adults into the teaching profession, have grown tremendously; 20,000 people have been licensed through alternative certification programs since 1985; between 1989-1991, more than 12,000 people entered an alternative teacher certification programs (Feistritzer & Chester, 1991). Educators are calling for closer examination of the programs and their students, especially the effect of students' previous life experiences. Zeichner and Gore (1990) state that *as a result of changing demographics in U.S. teacher education institutions, many nontraditional students are now entering teacher education programs. At least some of the students now coming into teacher education have had previous teaching experience... [and] the influence of these experiences on teaching conceptions and practices... [needs] much more attention* (p. 340). This study of three Fellows coping and growing during their first semester in inner-city classrooms is a response to Zeichner and Gore's call.

### Methods: Sampling, Data Sources, and Data Analysis

My assignment as a mentor/supervisor in the PCF/USA gave me entry into the schools and an opportunity to work with three beginning science teachers. The three Fellows, all Caucasian, included one female assigned to a middle school and two males assigned to high schools. All three had taught biology in secondary science classrooms overseas. I assigned each of the three Fellows pseudonyms.

I used multiple sources of data in this study. I made weekly observations in the inner-city classrooms followed by one-on-one on-site consultations during the Fellows' first semester of teaching, mid-September through the end of January. These single-class-period observations took place on various days of the week and during different class periods throughout the day. I looked for ways that the Fellows exemplified their understandings of how to teach in their choice of curriculum and teaching methodology and documented them in two ways: written reports containing observations and suggestions I gave to the Fellows, and field notes I wrote during the observations and immediately afterwards. I also kept field notes of one-on-one lesson-planning sessions, ad hoc discussions, and telephone calls concerning teaching problems, which occurred an average of four times a month. Sometimes I initiated these interchanges; sometimes the Fellows did.

I augmented classroom observations with two open-ended interviews per Fellow at the beginning and end of the semester. These one-hour interviews focused on several topics: their overseas experiences, attributes of a good teacher, current classroom activities they were using and why, and current classroom difficulties and successes.

I also gathered data on the Fellows' evolving ideas of pedagogy by observing them as students in their university classes. I interacted as teaching assistant during two sessions of their pedagogical seminar, observed them during two of their classes in their secondary science methods class, and kept field notes. The methods class was a rich source of data because the Fellows shared with me their portfolios including their journals describing their teaching experiences.

Finally, I discussed my findings with the Fellows to check my understandings of their experiences against their own understandings. I also interviewed the instructor of the science methods course.

I organized all of the data—the seven interviews, seventy-four classroom observations, the Fellows' portfolios, and ad hoc discussions with the Fellows—in three notebooks with dates and page numbers. The citations after direct quotations in this article refer to an audit trail that gives the source of the quotation. For example, *IE. 10/23/93. 25* refers to page 25 of the interview with Elaine on

October 23, 1993; PJ. 08 refers to page 8 of Jonathan's portfolio, and FN. 11/17/93. 88 refers to page 88 of my field notebook's entry for November 17, 1993.

I analyzed data as an ongoing process following Kirby and McKenna's (1989) suggestions that qualitative researchers *look to analysis grounded in the data and to pluralist possibilities to gain meaning* (p. 149). After I began to recognize certain themes embedded in the data, I consulted the literature to find out how the work of others addressed these themes.

### Results: Three Case Studies

Before they went overseas, the typical Volunteers spent much of their lives in classrooms serving what Lortie (1975) calls an *apprenticeship of observations* (p. 17). Like many contemporary American high school science students, Volunteers experienced a transmissive model of teaching and learning (Gallagher, 1991). The following mini-case studies illuminate some of the Fellows' experiences in their overseas teaching. These overseas teaching experiences, coupled with their previous school experiences and personal background, strongly affected their first semester in the urban classroom. Three salient factors—the Fellows' expectations of student respect and classroom decorum, the Fellows' models of teaching, and the Fellows' interracial experiences—emerge from these stories.

#### Jonathan

*I was posted to a small, isolated village in the northwest corner of Cameroon* wrote Jonathan (PJ. 02). *I was the only expatriate in the village and was four hours away by Landrover to running water and electricity. My school had three administrators, 35 teachers and 1000 students. Each classroom averaged around 70 students. The anglophone Cameroonians adopted the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) from the British. Thus, just as British children are expected to pass the G.C.E.'s ordinary and advanced-level exams given after five and seven years of secondary education, respectively, so are anglophone Cameroonian children* (PJ. 02).

Jonathan's portfolio entry continued: *Teaching in Cameroon is almost entirely done by lecture and notes. As a result, students learn by rote and gain*

*little idea about the applicability of science. When I was shown the syllabus for ninth grade biology and tenth grade chemistry, I was told that my primary objective must be to finish the syllabus. So I did what other teachers were doing: I prepared notes on a topic, wrote them on the board for each of my three biology classes and each of my three chemistry classes and explained the notes and asked questions later. There was little room for creativity or innovation* (PJ. 2-3).

Jonathan emphasized the importance of covering the syllabus again during one of our interviews: *There was so much material that you had to cover that those quality lessons were lacking. It was pretty much give them the material, let them get it in their notes, study it on their own, go on to the next topic. And that was the only way you could cover that syllabus and that was key. Because if you didn't cover a syllabus in one year then the teacher next year had to pick up where you left off and cover the rest of your syllabus as well as their own* (IJ. 11/7/93. 5-6). When all the syllabi had been covered, Cameroonian students took the British test and *invariably only about 30% of the students pass that test and then they have to take it again the next year* (IJ. 11/7/93. 06).

Jonathan wrote in his portfolio that he was considered a successful teacher largely because he *came very close to completing the year's required syllabus... despite a student failure rate of fifty to sixty percent (normal)* (PJ. 03). His claim of success is substantiated by his staying in his Cameroonian assignment an additional year.

Jonathan brought a strong science background to his overseas and urban assignments. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Jonathan was enrolled in public schools where *only one or two Blacks attended* (IJ. 2/4/94. 18). He then earned a degree in biochemistry at a private, southern research institution.

Despite Jonathan's strong academic background and successful overseas teaching, he initially had major problems in the urban classroom: *I have had so much difficulty with class management over the course of the last four months that it is a wonder that I was able to accomplish anything. I tried discussing individually with problematic students, I called parents and I did a lot of shouting in class. My goals centered around what the state required for high school science students. With an attitude of 'this is what you are supposed to learn whether you like it or not,' I pushed my classes along, battling discipline problems all the*



way. For me to deviate from my planned content coverage in the beginning was not an issue to be considered. I do not feel that I actually considered whether the students were interested in the material or no. The state required them to learn it (PJ. 05).

For Jonathan, adjusting to the urban classroom meant relearning what was important. Instead of prioritizing the curriculum, Jonathan began to realize that he would have to make his classroom an inviting (IJ. 2/4/94. 06) place by being patient with students. He learned to help them more with assignments, not take their truancy as a personal affront, and give them more credit for their efforts to do the assigned work (IJ. 2/4/94. 05). *I thought that I'd become patient in Africa waiting in the hot sun six hours for a vehicle to pick me up, but I've learned here how to be patient with people, especially with these students* (IJ. 2/4/94. 02).

Coming to these realizations was not easy for Jonathan. Students smashed his car windshield. *I know that wasn't just happenstance, a 22-year veteran teacher commented to me. It's not random.* (FN. 11/4/93. 19). Jonathan concluded that *students will try to get back at a teacher... by breaking my car window and by giving me the grief that they did, they were successful [in causing me to change the way I teach]* (IJ. 2/4/94. 08).

Unfortunately, Jonathan's realizations did not come soon enough, or perhaps thoroughly enough, to satisfy his department chairperson. *My department chair told me that if a certified teacher is rotated into the building at the end of this semester, I will be the one to go instead of anybody else even though there are staff members with less seniority than me* (FN. 12/3/93).

### **Elaine**

Elaine did not major in science; her English major included an honors thesis at one of the northeastern Seven Sisters schools. Elaine's minor in biology qualified her for teaching science overseas in the Peace Corps.

Of her middle school years, Elaine confesses that *I can't remember even one middle school teacher* (IE. 2/4/94. 04). She ascribes this memory loss to the fact that *we moved around a lot... and you're dealing with a lot of other stuff like how to make friends... so you're just staying by yourself the first half of the year* (IE. 2/4/94. 04). Elaine's family moved

during her second grade in middle school and during her sophomore year.

Elaine's Peace Corps teaching assignment was in Zaire. *I taught in a lycée which is a middle school and high school combined, Elaine explained. My particular school was in the same town the president was from so it was a pilot high-school geared toward science and we had more money to get things like books for the library. There was a lab but it was in complete disorder and there were hardly any chemicals or equipment. I was a science teacher of biology. But there, it definitely was not hands-on science... [it was] more the teacher just writing on the board and lecturing and the students were very accepting of that... and real reticent about asking questions. [Teachers] went from classroom to classroom and students stayed in one classroom. The classrooms were completely bare. It was just like desks and a teacher's desk with nothing in it and you carried your own chalk around with you.* (IE. 10/31/93. 5-6, 16).

Like Jonathan, Elaine had a syllabus to follow. Her class sizes, however, were considerably smaller than Jonathan's classes of 70 students. *The curriculum used was based on the French system. We were given a curriculum that we were asked to follow so I based more or less my curriculum on that curriculum. This was a pilot school so I never had more than 28, 29 students, but there were teachers in other schools who had as many as 50. People would talk about writing on the walls trying to get the information down. However, by the time you're at the upper level so many people have dropped out that you end up having smaller and smaller classes. One class that I taught had only five students. The system was really for the honor students and it was an elimination-type system. I became proficient at writing very difficult exams to distribute students' grades on a curve. A 58%, for example, would be a high score* (IE. 10/31/93. 13).

Elaine had to maintain a very strict student-teacher relationship in her overseas assignment because of her gender and age. *Most Zaire women do not receive a college, or even high-school, education and most teachers are not as young as me. Some of my upper-level [all male] students were 22-23 years old* (IE. 10/31/93).

Elaine's inner-city placement was in an open enrollment middle school geared toward science. Open enrollment or magnet means any student in the district can apply. The school, therefore, selected the most promising candidates based on their GPA, letter of recommendation,

promise of volunteer time on the part of parents. I thought originally I would be teaching high-school; I never thought I would be teaching middle school, Elaine explained (IE. 10/31/93. 15). In spite of the switch, Elaine likes her middle school and appreciates that there is *less violence* (IE. 10/31/93. 15) than in high school. Her eighth graders, however, have been a problem in that *they question me as a teacher a lot. Like, 'You're not supposed to be doing this.' And they have a huge sense of justice which I don't remember even my upper-level African students bringing up* (IE. 10/31/93. 16).

For Elaine, the question of authority and maintaining control in an orderly classroom is paramount. *I'm not saying that you need that silence all the time but there are times that you expect it. And when you don't get it then it's frustrating* (IE. 2/4/94. 07). Because Elaine has certain expectations for how a class should be run, she was very reluctant to try group work and less teacher-directed ways of learning (FN. 11/19/93. 25). Her efforts to keep 35 middle schoolers focused on teacher-led discussions and activities, however, did not result in the learning she expected of her students: *It slows down everything when you spend a half hour of the class period just disciplining to get things going then lose the last ten minutes because everyone is almost done. That leaves just ten minutes of time to work* (IE. 2/4/94. 08).

Elaine's difficulties with classroom discipline have led her to doubt her ability to reach African-American students. In Zaire she was not aware of racial issues in her classroom teaching, but her U.S. classroom is different. *I will never be an effective teacher for these students, you know, just because of miscommunication and language and culture. I just don't come from the culture. I have changed so I can communicate better with my students. But for the most part I know there are a lot of things that I do that students just don't understand. I guess that's why it's even more important that I continue reinforcing what rules I've set up or what expectations I have for them even though they might not hear it the first time* (IE. 2/4/94. 11).

Elaine's school's emphasis on science fair projects has also caused her difficulties. Although Elaine is expected to assist all of her students on a project, she finds it difficult to get even the most basic guidelines she needs concerning dates and how the fair is conducted from her African-American teaching colleagues. *I guess I'm sort of doing this*

*blind. When stuff comes up I do it but I haven't ever seen the big picture yet; no-one has really told me.*

Elaine's African-American principal feels that Elaine is doing satisfactorily and that her discipline problems and difficulties with the science fair are not unexpected: *She just has problems handling the students and getting started like most beginning teachers*, he said when Elaine and I stopped to speak with him in the hall one day after school (FN. 12/15/93. 34). In spite of her principal's support, however, Elaine feels discouraged after her first semester. *I'm really frustrated. It has to do with behavior problems in the classroom. I'm feeling kind of disappointed. I just don't feel like I'm doing a very good job of teaching science right now* (IE. 2/4/94. 12).

### David

*It's kind of ironic that I find myself in the profession of teaching considering how much I had always hated school. I never caused too many problems in my science classes but I graduated by the skin of my teeth. I always cut classes and stuff. I was a miserable student. I was a holy terror! That's why I don't get phased by much my students do; I've probably done worse. Honestly! That's how I know a lot of them. That's probably why I relate well with a lot of kids* (ID. 11/10/93. 23, 26).

Unlike the other Fellows in his cohort, David had a *big conflict with the principal* of his overseas school because he tried to present so much lab work and other activities rather than *preparing students enough for the test* (ID. 11/10/93. 06). David believed he could best prepare students by helping them achieve understanding through hands-on experiences; his Western Samoan principal, however, demanded the more traditional, didactic model of lecturing by the teacher and note taking by the students.

When he returned to the United States, David listened carefully to his students: *My students have been the biggest help in my learning how to teach in the urban classroom... [they] taught me a lot* (ID. 1/28/94. 05). David's department chair feels that he has *learned a lot* also. In fact, he says that *David has a home at our high-school for as long as he cares to stay* (FN. 2/16/94. 58).

David's success in the inner-city classroom is more noteworthy considering his job assignments. He began as a sixth grade teacher in a newly reopened middle school. The official four-week

census taken in October showed that too many teachers had been placed in the school. *I walked in Monday morning and the vice-principal shook my hand and said 'It's been nice working with you!'* recalled David. *And I was let go from my job just like that with no forewarning at all* (FN. 10/22/94. 15).

This same census resulted in the opening of a new position at a high school and, after a few weeks of working as a building substitute teacher, David was offered the job. Since the position opened six weeks after school had begun, David's classes were made up by taking three to five students from each of the science classes already in session. The teachers of these classes chose the students to remove from their classes, and David ended up with a preponderance of students who had been failing in other classrooms: *When I came in it was the time of the first grading period and I saw on their grade-cards that most of them had failed... I was dealt a lot of rough students* (ID. 11/10/03. 13).

David worked with what he had. He quickly adjusted his ideas of what and how to teach in accordance with his belief that *a good teacher cares about his students and obviously knows his subject matter well enough to teach it and make it both interesting and fun* (ID. 1/28/94. 05). He listened to what others had to say as well. The African-American chemistry teacher gave him tips on African-American culture; the special education teacher gave him help in understanding students having difficulty learning; his department chair gave him *criticism that is very just and I don't mind criticism if it's like that* (ID. 1/28/94. 25).

After listening to his colleagues and making friends with his students, David made some radical changes in his expectations of class decorum. *Some of the biggest problems were just not having the class regimented. I was so used to having a regimented situation when I was overseas. You know, all 50 of them standing and saying 'Good morning.' Then they would sit down and get down to business. Here a kid can walk in a half hour late and think it's perfectly fine. I used to get crazy angry if students came in late or weren't doing their work. When I started at the middle school and a student stuck their head in the door, I would really chew them out. Now I just invite them in. I do! If they're not going to be disruptive and they want to learn something, 'Come on in!'* (ID. 1/28/94. 11, 13).

David also has made radical changes in what he thinks appropriate to teach his students: *All that ridiculous stuff that I tried to teach when I first arrived here! You know, 'Calculate the number of neutrons in an atom of lithium.'* Yuck. *Now what I teach is so much better. Stuff that they can do and see and really think about* (ID. 1/28/94. 13). David collects all the curriculum materials he can get his hands on in order to make up his hands-on science lessons (FN. 1/8/94. 35) and discusses his lesson plans with his science chair whom he characterizes as a *walking encyclopedia of good ideas in science teaching* (ID. 1/28/94. 25) before trying them.

In spite of his success, however, David still has some difficult times. *If I don't get my work done [i.e., if there isn't enough time to plan his lessons], I really get stressed.* Also, racism can be a problem. *The kids have pointed out on numerous occasions that they think I'm prejudiced. They've said that: 'You're prejudiced. You have to be'* (ID. 11/10/93. 11). In spite of these challenges, David believes he is making progress. *My 6th hour? They use to drive me up a wall. I use to just sit in my lunch hour and dread coming in there. It's fun now. And learning. I'm learning a lot more about the Black culture. The more you learn about the Black culture, the easier it becomes* (ID. 1/28/94. 14). One of the things David has learned well is the agile art of *capping* in which remarks are exchanged extemporaneously. He uses his dexterity in these verbal exchanges to win the cooperation of his students (FN. 12/3/93).

## Discussion

The three case studies contain several patterns related to the effect of the Fellows' overseas teaching experiences on their transition into the urban classroom. In this discussion I focus on three salient factors: the Fellows' expectations of student respect and classroom decorum, the Fellows' model of teaching, and the Fellows' interracial experiences. I discuss each factor in relation to Veenman's (1984) list of four common teaching problems of beginning teachers: classroom management, motivating students, dealing with individual differences among students, and assessing students' work.

## Respect

The three Fellows experienced almost constant acknowledgment of their respected status



during their teaching assignments abroad. For example, in their overseas classrooms, students stood up each time the teacher entered or left the room. Even Jonathan's large classes of 70 students were never rowdy; strict classroom decorum was automatic; the Fellows never had to enforce it.

During their two or three years teaching abroad, the Fellows rarely had to deal with classroom discipline, the most commonly cited problem of beginning teachers in United States (Veenman, 1984). Jonathan's disproportionate number of student referrals for insubordination indicates his largely unresolved problems in handling classroom discipline. Elaine also felt overwhelmed and by the end of the semester began to question her ability to work with African-American students. Her constant struggles to do so left her *totally drained of energy* (IE. 10/31/93. 15). Even David, largely successful by semester's end, had experienced times of disillusionment when trying to cope with urban students whose respect for each teacher, he acknowledged, *has to be earned rather than taken for granted* (ID. 11/10/93. 28).

### **Teaching model**

The overseas schools in which Fellows taught utilized the didactic model of teaching. Jonathan taught in a British-type system in Cameroon, and Elaine taught in a French-type lycée in Zaire. David's school followed the New Zealand curriculum, which is heavily influenced by the British system. All three Fellows relied heavily on lecturing and writing notes on the board. Prawat (1992) characterizes the didactic model as an *outmoded form of instruction that emphasizes factual and procedural knowledge at the expense of deeper levels of understanding* (p. 354). It consists largely of lecturing, writing notes on the board, and giving written tests. Because the overseas schools emphasize preparing students for extremely high-stakes national tests, teachers must cover large amounts of curricular material. The school system discourages group work and innovative teaching styles. David's overseas principal, for example, severely reprimanded him for trying to introduce laboratory work.

All three Fellows started out using the didactic method to teach abstract science concepts to their urban students. Jonathan, who had the strongest science background, persisted in using the

didactic method the longest. His early teaching style supports Lederman, Gess-Newsome, and Latz's (1994) finding that beginning science teachers' pedagogical knowledge structure will have *primary influence on instructional decisions* regardless of their subject matter knowledge structure (p. 129).

Fellows had difficulty switching to less didactic teaching methods; it took them from two months in David's case to four months in Jonathan's case even to begin the switch. A major problem the Fellows grappled with was lack of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). They were not adept at making subject-specific representations (McDiarmid, Ball, & Anderson, 1989, p. 194) or *transformations... and classroom activities* (Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987, p. 112) and lacked knowledge of *not only what is most important for students to know from a disciplinary perspective, but also what students are best equipped to learn* (Prawat, 1992, p. 388). Their limited pedagogical content knowledge is not surprising, given the overseas circumstances in which they taught. The large syllabus that all three Fellows were held accountable for covering in their classes did not allow time to present material in multiple ways and to help students integrate it. Because they had almost no time for questions, they had little opportunity to learn where their students' misunderstandings lay and how to address them.

The Fellows' limited pedagogical content knowledge, a residue of following the didactic teaching model overseas, affects at least three of the four beginning teacher issues: motivating students, dealing with individual differences among students, and assessing students' work.

### **Motivating students**

Like classroom discipline, motivating students was largely a non issue overseas. Overseas students were automatically motivated to learn because education was closely linked to upward social mobility and economic gains (IE. 10/31/93. 13). In the urban classroom, on the other hand, students not only must be motivated to learn when they are in the classroom, they must be motivated to come to class on time or even to come to class at all. David was taken aback with students walking in a half hour late. Truancy is an endemic problem in some of the urban high schools; attendance can



depend on both weather and the day of the week (FN. September 1993-January 1994).

Teachers must have a repertoire of effective teaching methods to develop student expectations of their own success (Ames, 1992). Because all three Fellows used a didactic method at the beginning of the school year, they did not provide the scaffolding students needed. David, for example, told me when he started teaching his new classes: *I have all my notes on the board and it's a really dry subject, atomic structure. But I believe that there is a time that you have to get the raw information in... and I haven't found exciting ways to present totally boring information yet* (ID. 11/10/93. 03). The majority of Jonathan's inner-city students received Fs and Ds during the first quarter when he used the didactic method.

### **Individual student differences**

The lack of pedagogical content knowledge that limited the Fellows' ability to deal effectively with student motivation also limited their ability to deal with individual student differences. When David had classes of 50 students overseas and covered large amounts of factual information, he could easily overlook the spectrum of individual student differences. In his urban classroom, however, individual differences make lesson planning much more complicated. David recognized this difference when he said toward the end of the semester, *One of the hardest things is this really diverse level they [the students] bring into the class... it's hard to do your lesson when you have that whole spectrum in there* (ID. 1/28/94. 08).

### **Student assessment**

The test-writing skills Fellows used overseas do not serve them well in the urban classroom. Elaine had reported in her interview that an acceptable exam in the overseas schools in which the Fellows taught is one distributing student grades with the highest grade being approximately 58%. The school system authorities expected only 10% of the student population starting the first grade to pass the final baccalaureate, as in Elaine's Zaire system, or 30% to pass as in Jonathan's and David's British-type systems based on the General Certificate of Education test. Therefore, when teaching overseas, the Volunteers honed their exam-writing

skills to deliberately come up with very difficult questions most students would be unsuccessful in answering, thus conforming with school system expectations.

In the United States, teachers must help all students master the material being taught and encourage all students to stay in school. Jonathan's department chairperson, for example, told me he was displeased with the number of students receiving low first quarter grades in Jonathan's classes.

### **Race**

Many Peace Corps Volunteers, like Jonathan and Elaine, teach in African villages where they may be the only Caucasian present. However, they did not believe their race was an issue, perhaps because their host nationals attributed the Volunteers' *differentness* more to their nationality and educational level than race. At any rate, Volunteers generally did not find their difference in race an issue in their overseas classrooms.

In the urban classroom, however, with predominantly, if not totally, African-American students, the Fellows found race to be an issue. All three Fellows experienced difficulties related to racial issues, including David, who unlike Elaine and Jonathan, had attended a multiracial high school. Fellow staff members may also subtly or not-so-subtly let the Fellows know that White teachers are less welcome than African-American teachers. This may be why Elaine had difficulty getting the information she needed about her school's science fair. Because the Fellows were unprepared to cope with racial issues, they found their teaching assignments difficult.

### **Summary**

I began this investigation with the question of how the Fellows' overseas teaching experience affected their transition into an urban classroom. I looked for evidence of how the overseas teaching experiences might shape the Fellows' initial responses to the most common problems of beginning teachers such as classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, and assessment. This study suggests that Fellows' overseas teaching experiences impeded their initial performance in the urban classroom in three major ways. First, the high status and respect that the

Fellows and schooling automatically were accorded largely eliminated the problem of discipline in their overseas teaching. The Fellows entered the urban classroom with unrealistic expectations of classroom decorum and a lack of techniques for achieving orderly classroom management. Second, the didactic model of teaching the Fellows practiced daily overseas prevented them from building a repertoire of effective teaching methods and representations. This limited pedagogical content knowledge interfered with their ability to motivate students and deal with individual student differences. Instead, the teaching skills the Fellows learned, such as how to spew out large amounts of information in a short amount of time, had to be unlearned before they could forge a more effective teaching model. Finally, since the Fellows did not come across overt racial prejudice in their overseas classrooms, they were not experienced in how to handle it when it arose in their urban classroom.

Despite these problematic areas, one should not conclude that all Peace Corps Volunteers' experiences impede their transition into the urban classroom. Some of their experiences, such as adapting to a very different culture, learning to adopt a simpler lifestyle, and attaining fluency in a foreign language, may be assets. Further studies may illuminate this more fully.

### **Program Implications**

Awareness of the Fellows' potential limitations and strategies to ameliorate them should be built into the PCF/USA to ease the Fellows' transition into the urban classroom. One of the biggest problems is the Fellows' limited pedagogical content knowledge. No quick fix is enough; strong efforts should be made during orientation to give the Fellows tools and experiences in pedagogical content knowledge to help them get started. In science, for example, Fellows should spend several of the orientation days exploring alternative ways of teaching science. This would provide them with many thought-provoking activities for their one-day stints as building substitutes as well as lead-ins for their units of studies when they have their own classes. By working together in pairs or small groups and doing the activities of whole science units, the Fellows would gain familiarity with a science curriculum that could be adapted for a number of

grade levels and incorporated into a variety of science curricula. Having sets of materials available that the Fellows could borrow and use in their classrooms would increase the likelihood that they would use them in their teaching.

Classroom discipline is another problem for the Fellows. This problem could be addressed in the orientation and seminar by having effective urban classroom teachers, both Caucasian and African-American, share their classroom discipline techniques with the incoming Fellows. Graduating Fellows could also lend insight. Dramatizations and peer critiquing might help incoming Fellows anticipate some of the common discipline problems and racial issues that could arise and give them confidence for handling them.

Another way to assist the Fellows' transition into the urban classroom is to provide them with computers, printers, and modems. This could make available networks such as Genentech, which would be a further avenue for gaining pedagogical content knowledge and an aid in Fellows being able to communicate and learn from each other. Telecommunications is an effective way of reducing teacher isolation and providing a vehicle for staff development (Katz, Inghilleri, McSwiney, Sayers & Stroud, 1989). Having a computer at home significantly increases a teacher's use of it (Weir, 1992). The mutually supportive network of the cohort of Fellows is one of the strengths of the PCF/USA. Having a home computer with a modem would build on that strength and assist the Fellows in completing their university assignments and preparing classroom instructional materials.

In conclusion, teacher education can model good teaching practices by taking into account the background experiences of the Fellows and changing our teacher preparatory programs accordingly. The profession should build opportunities into programs for the Fellows to reflect and analyze their previous experiences as students in the U.S. and as teachers abroad. These opportunities should include critical discussions of the social implications of multicultural, antiracist science education. Like the Peace Corps itself, the PCF/USA is founded on ideals. All classrooms deserve good teachers. The cadre of Fellows who have applied to the PCF/USA are willing to serve where they are needed; they are a special group of people. It is now up to the teacher-preparatory institutions hosting the PCF/

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USA to take into account the background of these Fellows and help them in the best way possible to meet the needs of their students.

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