

Sample Proposal

We offer the following as an example of a strong proposal. Please feel free to use it as a model, adapting it as necessary to suit the needs of your own proposal.

I am writing to inquire about NCTE's interest in a book, nearing completion, which I have developed with a group of experienced East San Francisco Bay teachers, all of whom worked in inner city elementary schools. Our collaborative project was sponsored by the Spencer Foundation, the OERI-funded Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, and the Oakland Unified School District. Our topic, as suggested by the title of our enclosed first chapter, is "what difference does difference make?" We wondered, from teachers' perspectives, when and how sociocultural differences figured into the experience of teaching, specifically in the language arts curriculum.

Our project is nearing completion. In fact, condensed versions of the opening chapters of our book will appear as the May issue of *English Education*. This letter, then, serves as a prospectus. I'll explain the rationale for and contents of our book, including an overview of the chapters (information that is presented in more detail in the opening chapter), our audience, the specifics of the planned book's length, figures, and appendices, and the way in which our effort complements other publications in language arts education.

Rationale and Content

Teaching amidst sociocultural diversity is a matter of great current concern in preservice education and staff development. Teachers, it is argued, need to be more adequately prepared to teach children in urban schools. In writing pedagogy in particular, many educators have written of the need to examine pedagogical practices and the ways in which they may not exploit the language and experiential resources of our diverse population.

On the other hand, it is also argued that, in this work of rethinking pedagogical practice and, more broadly, urban teaching, experienced teachers are an untapped resource. As Montero-Sieburth (1989, p. 336) argues, urban school teachers often "have to live down" media presentations of negative images of city schools and, indeed, of their students. And yet, experienced teachers have much accumulated knowledge as the "frontline workers" (Connell, 1994, p.138), the "cultural brokers" (Heath, 1983, p. 369), the "mediators" of all who have "a stake in literacy education-- teachers, parents, children, administrators, politicians, textbook publishers, and the press" (Florio-Ruane, 1991, p. 252).

In order to make explicit some of this accumulated knowledge, we gathered every other week during the 1993-94 school year to reflect on our collective teaching experiences and, more particularly, to ask, in effect, what difference does "difference" make in our experience of the daily work of teaching? Our group was formed with the assistance of who helped recruit a multi-ethnic group of ten experienced teachers, who were themselves working with children from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Included in our group were teachers working primarily with working class Asian American children of diverse ethnic heritages, Latino children, also of diverse heritages, African American children, and European American children. In our meetings, teachers

presented case studies of their children, and these studies formed the basis for our ongoing reflections. (Enclosed chapter describes our procedures in detail.)

Our curricular focus was the teaching of writing, one common interest of group members. Over time, our discussions of difference, children, and literacy broadened, became deeper, as we became more comfortable with each other and with the topic of difference itself. Our question evolved into more specific ones:

- What do we mean by "difference"?
- Who decides what or who is "different"?
- How and when do we experience "differences" in the course of our daily teaching? Are there particular dimensions of classroom life in which differences become salient in positive or problematic ways? What makes them "positive" or "problematic"?
- How do we make literacy curricula open to children's diverse experiences and resources? How do we keep our activities flexible and our expectations forward looking?
- How do we help children themselves live in a world of differences?

This document is, in the main, the report of our meetings, supplemented with observations, audiotaped records, and photographs made in the teachers' schools. It is an examination, from the teachers' perspectives, of the ways in which sociocultural differences become salient in our teaching. Our intention is to offer a framework for teacher reflection, a framework grounded in our own reflections on classroom experiences and one that will help other teachers of young children respond to the complexities of human learning.

Our framework consists of a set of nested themes that present teaching as a matter of responding to children within the day-to-day enactment of classroom activities and, at the same time, that place those moments within the larger contexts of the classroom community and the school as an institution. Because most group members were interested in talking, we decided to base our work on audiotaped and collectively analyzed transcripts of our dialogues. The group as a whole worked to identify segments of our discussions and classroom observations that illustrated most clearly our framework--our set of nested themes. As group chair and editor, I wove these illustrations together in the book chapters; other group participants responded to drafts--commenting, revising, or elaborating as they so chose. In this document, then, we discuss teachers' interactions with individual children, in the context of the school and the school district as institutional structures, in the community of the classroom, and in the immediate context of particular classroom activities. And throughout, we consider how these interactions are informed by issues of "difference."

We emphasize the ways in which "differences" are highlighted in school life, rather than any particular group of "different" children, in part because we are sensitive to a complex of interrelated differences, differences that may or may not become salient in the course of our daily work. Among these differences are those of economic class, of language, of cultural background tied to ethnic or racial heritage, of physical abilities and demeanor, of age and age-related culture, of gender, and on and on. Indeed, it is this complexity of differences that may make it hard to understand where children are coming from, so to speak. In O'Loughlin's words:

Each student possesses multiple frames of reference with which to construct knowledge by virtue of their ethnic background, race, class, gender, language usage, religious, cultural, and political identities.... The potential for knowledge construction depends very much on how schools react to students' attempts to employ these diverse frameworks for meaning-making. (O'Loughlin, 1992, p. 5)

Thus, we worried both about stereotyping children, reducing complex individuals to simplistic examples of one kind of difference, and about being ignorant of the particular home cultures and socioeconomic circumstances of the particular children in each school.

Further, we avoid simple prescriptions for practice. Again, exactly what and how differences figure into teaching and learning depends, in part, on the particularities of each school population and on the institutional characteristics of each school--its ways of organizing time and space, of distributing resources to teachers, teachers to children, and of evaluating the efforts of both (e.g., Florio-Ruane, 1989; Leacock, 1969; Lightfoot, 1978).

Through our document, then, we hope to support other teachers' reflections on their own teaching lives, on the ways in which difference figures as problem or resource in--or, conversely, as a taken-for-granted aspect of--the everyday work of teaching. In our chapters, we ask: When and how in the course of teachers' experiences, do differences reveal institutional flexibility or rigidity, classroom cultural richness or sociocultural tension, permeable activities or ones needing rethinking, where children's language and experiences seem stymied, unengaged, or undirected?

Chapter 1: "Introduction: Teaching in City Schools." This chapter presents the above description of our ways of working in more detail. We address the overriding issues of difference that interweave all the chapters to come, then briefly explain the procedures through which we explored differences, and, finally, introduce our group in action, presenting segments of group discussions that illustrate our collective feelings about the challenges and rewards of urban teaching.

Chapter 2: "Relationships In and Out of the Classroom:"Who Am I to Them?" In Chapter 2, we address the institutional context of teaching and the ways in which it mediates relationships with parents, colleagues, and children.

Chapter 3: "Building Classroom Communities: I'm From Texas, Who are You?" In Chapter 3, we focus on teacher and peer relationships within the classroom community itself, including how children themselves address issues of difference.

Chapter 4: "Negotiating Permeable Activities: "At First I Didn't Understand." Chapter 4 centers on writing activities themselves, considering the ways in which they are adapted for and made permeable to a diversity of child resources and needs.

In each of these chapters, we introduce key themes--the ways in which differences become salient in our teaching experience--through presentation of particularly illustrative stories and transcript excerpts from our meetings. And we conclude each with a summary of issues for teacher reflection.

Chapter 5: To bring together these multiple levels and to illustrate their interrelatedness, in Chapter 5 we present four portraits of children, edited versions based on the original oral presentations.

Chapter 6: In Chapter 6, we hear from other educators who will help connect our experiences to those of teachers in other parts of the country. Responding to our conversations are key professionals who are experienced with public schooling, teacher study groups, and issues of sociocultural diversity. They infuse their own voices into our dialogues, extending key themes that are particularly important to their own work. These responders include:

Epilogue: Finally, we use our own changing lives to discuss the way in which our professional histories have been shaped by the changing demographics and politics of urban schools.

Bibliography: We provide a list of resources individual group members and respondents have found helpful.

Audience

Our intended audience is quite broad. First and foremost, our audience is other teachers and, also, teacher educators. An important segment of this audience is urban teachers. We were interested in trying to get a handle on what makes inner city teaching in particular so challenging and rewarding for us and to do so in a way that might "up" the respect given inner city teachers (who often only see their schools depicted as "problems" and "blights"). Upping respect is important, since one problem in our schools is the transience, not only of children, but of disaffected and discouraged teachers.

At the same time, we feel our efforts are relevant to teachers no matter where they work. In many ways, urban teaching is not a distinctive breed. But urban schools are sites in which teachers' mediating role is boldly outlined. Common instructional clichés--building on what children know, creating a community of learners, educating for democracy--assume new complexities. The always-present gaps between the life-space of adults and children, between the authority and the governed, the teacher and the student, often are complicated by social, cultural, and linguistic gaps, among other possible differences. The need for teacher flexibility and imagination--and for schools that allow teachers negotiating power, as it were--are all writ large, as is, of course, the potential of teachers to ally themselves with the rich possibilities of the young.

Length, Figures, and Tables

The book will have six chapters, each approximately 30 double-spaced, typed manuscript pages. Photographic records of the teachers' classrooms and of our working group will be included. Tabular material providing an overview of the demographics of our school sites will be given in the appendices.

Comparison to Other Publications

Our document complements well existing publications, without duplicating any. For example, there are a number of important books on and/or contributed to by teacher study groups; one of the most influential is Cochran-Smith & Lytle's *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*. Most such collections are about teachers' independent projects in their own rooms, rather than their collective pursuit of a single goal. There are also terrific books that consider the

rewards and challenges of teaching amidst differences; a recent one receiving much attention is Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Most such books are studies of teachers (e.g., Ladson-Billings' book), syntheses of research (e.g., Au's very helpful *Literacy Instruction in Multicultural Settings*), or individual educator contributions to a themed collection (e.g., publications of the newspaper *Rethinking Schools*).

To my knowledge, no book has featured the collaborative product of teachers from a diversity of urban school sites. The value of this approach is that it makes irrelevant and, indeed, harmful, any potential narrow prescriptions for practice, and it makes exceedingly relevant the larger institutional contexts of classroom teaching. For me, as group member and editor, it was this latter quality--this need for us to situate our teaching experiences within the possibilities of our school sites--that was particularly exciting. As teachers, we are key to the successful schooling of children, but we are also social actors in societal dramas that infuse our classrooms. We hope to illustrate the quality of our individual experiences, the collective power of teacher reflection, and our ultimate interdependence with the larger community around us.

I look forward to hearing from you about NCTE's interest in publishing our work.

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