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Student teachers gain experience in culturally diverse setting

PLATTEVILLE, Wis. – In order to provide University of Wisconsin-Platteville pre-service teachers with the opportunity to experience teaching in a culturally, ethnically, linguistically and socio-economically diverse school setting, UW-Platteville’s School of Education has forged a new partnership with the Institute of Urban Education, a UW System program housed at UW-Milwaukee whose mission is to advance the field of urban education and to recruit, promote and retain high quality educators for urban districts.

In late March, six pre-service teachers, working side-by-side with veteran teachers in the Milwaukee Public School system, delivered 80 hours of whole, small group and individual instruction to over 100 elementary students from Lincoln Avenue Elementary.

Lincoln Avenue Elementary, located in southwest Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is home to over 500 pre-K to fifth grade students, 70 percent who identify as Hispanic, 20 percent as African-American and 7 percent White. Conversely, the demographics at Westview Elementary School in Platteville are 86 percent White, 6 percent African-American and 2 percent Hispanic.

“For the most part, our UW-Platteville students have grown up in a world that looks like them, that is built around social and cultural norms they understand,” said Dr. Jennifer Collins, assistant professor of education at UW-Platteville. **“In the majority of their practicum settings, they have taught students from that same world, who speak their language and share their values – there isn’t much disconnect there. The challenge comes when you and the students in your classroom don’t share those similarities.”**

At Lincoln Avenue Elementary, 95 percent of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged, a term used to denote poverty levels within a school, and 30 percent of the student population receives English as a Second Language services. The school houses an optional bilingual (Spanish-English) program at each grade level for families wishing to preserve and build home language skills alongside English language development.

The UW-Platteville Urban Middle Childhood Practicum course provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to build the knowledge, skills and dispositions to meet the diverse needs of students and to gain increased awareness and understanding of how to use culturally responsive teaching methods to effectively engage students in diverse urban school settings.

Pre-service teachers learned about the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and had the opportunity to develop and implement lessons that incorporated those practices. Using culturally appropriate picture books, UW-Platteville students created and delivered a series of standards-based reading lessons that focused on the social and academic needs of their students.

“Culturally responsive teaching isn’t so much a series of things ‘to do’ in a lesson, but as one of our school collaborators put it, it’s more of a mindset,” said Collins. “How do you, as a teacher, connect with students of color when most of what you know about their culture comes from movies or the news? How do you identify **and build on students’ strengths in a second language and not get caught up in what they don’t bring to the classroom? That’s culturally responsive teaching and** that is what we are trying to expose our teachers to as part of this experience. The collaboration we are building with the IUE and Milwaukee Public Schools is essential to our goal at UW-Platteville of developing a more culturally competent **teaching workforce.”**

In addition to teaching, UW-Platteville students attended IUE professional development on classroom management, participated in school-based planning and staff development sessions, and took part in a STEM parent night, preparing

and sharing math and science activities with students and their families. They also participated in an IUE-sponsored community service project, which asked them to serve food as well as create an obstacle course for neighborhood kids to enjoy.

“I learned so much from this experience,” said Karly Koch, a senior elementary education major at UW-Platteville from **Dixon, Illinois**. **“Being in such a diverse school has taught me to really think about the student first, not just the academics. No matter what school setting you walk into, you need to keep an open mind and heart because the environment you create for your students can be life changing.”**

“The IUE’s partnership with UW-Platteville is beneficial as it provides an opportunity for students to experience Milwaukee’s culturally and linguistically diverse schools, families and communities prior to student teaching,” said Dr. Tracey Nix, director of the Institute of Urban Education. **“Our hope** is that this practicum experience will give students a taste of what it is like to teach in an urban setting and inform future decisions about student teaching and working in **the Milwaukee Public School system.”**

Collins began to envision the partnership through her work as the UW-Platteville **representative of the IUEs Governing Body**. **“As I began to understand their vision, it just seemed like a perfect fit. We have a need to broaden minds and experiences; they have the resources to help us realize that vision. A year of conversations and planning later, here we are!”**

The following individuals were key to the collaborative teaching effort: Nix; Amy Gutowski, program coordinator, IUE; Yaribel Rodriguez, principal, Lincoln Avenue Elementary; and Ray Curry and Misty Ellen Kreider, school support teachers, Lincoln Avenue Elementary.

UW-Platteville students who participated in the practicum teaching experience included Koch, Caitlin Acker, Marissa Keating, Jacqui Purple, Lydia Schalch and Brook Smith.

For more information about the UW System Institute for Urban Education, go to: <http://uwm.edu/education/community/partnerships/institute-urban-edu/>.

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