



## IN THE CLASSROOM

### “Dimensions in Diversity”

by Elizabeth Gehrman

#### “Will you clap for us?”

The first reaction of the graduate student asked this question seems to be, *Huh?* But he gamely attempts to comply, putting his hands together a few times in a sporadic rhythm.

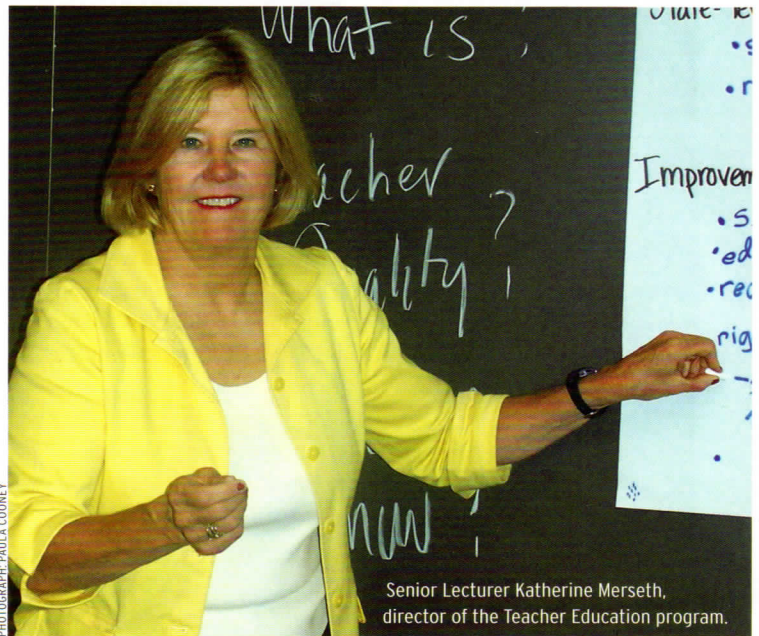
The puzzlement around the room only grows when Jon Nordmeyer, a lead instructor for HGSE’s “Dimensions in Diversity” class, turns to graduate student Christina Feo and asks her to rate the clap of the next student in line. She seems to almost randomly select “B-plus.” “I thought she was clapping a little sarcastically,” she says. Both of her fellow judges give the clapper a “C.”

Nordmeyer then turns to a third student and asks him to clap. And so on down the line. With each performance, the students learn a little more about what Nordmeyer is looking for and how the student judges perceive his instructions. By the end, outgoing Kenny Johnson, the fifth student to clap, does a rousing hambone, slapping his chest, belly, arms, and thighs in an exploding percussion.

What does this have to do with diversity? “It raises awareness in the participants and the observers of the important connection between assessment and performance,” says Nordmeyer. “It’s easier for students to hit the target when they understand what the target looks like, and teachers have to be sensitive to explaining things in terms that everyone in the class can understand.”

“Dimensions in Diversity” is a two-credit summer module designed to help prepare graduate students to educate urban children. “We try to design summer coursework so that it both complements and bridges the scholarship and the practicum of our students,” says Vicki Jacobs, a lecturer in education and the associate director of the Teacher Education Program. “The summer component is meant to bring forward the things most important to successfully addressing the student-teaching they’re starting to do—and two things that come up immediately are special-needs kids and English-language learners [ELLs].”

Jacobs is quick to point out that “Dimensions in Diversity” in no way equates special-needs students with ELLs; rather, the class addresses the sensitive nature of students’ needs that newly minted teachers now confront in urban classrooms. “It’s pretty well accepted now that the practices for special education students are practices that work for all students,” says Jacobs. “They



PHOTOGRAPH: PAULA COONEY

Senior Lecturer Katherine Merseth, director of the Teacher Education program.

remind HGSE interns that students are not only learning *what*, but *how* and *why*. In other words, they’re learning to learn as well as learning the content.”

The course was implemented two years ago by Senior Lecturer Katherine Merseth, director of the Teacher Education Program, in response to Massachusetts’ adoption of “sheltered English immersion”—as opposed to bilingual education—for English-language learners, and to the particular needs of urban youth. It is taught in two segments: At the beginning of the session,

Tom Hehir, professor of practice and former director of special education at the U.S. Department of Education, addresses working with special-needs students. “Wow, he had a lot of information,” says Feo, a master’s candidate from Long Beach, California. “It was obvious that he really understood physical and learning disabilities. And I liked his outlook on

getting us to see where regular-ed teachers fit into special-ed, and how we can use our resources in ways that best serve students.”

In the second half of the summer session, the needs of English-language learners are addressed, first in an overview given by assistant professor Nonie Lesaux, and then in three participatory sessions led by Nordmeyer, the director of the ACCESS (Actively Connecting Content, English Students and Standards) Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, and two of his colleagues.

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—Senior Lecturer Katherine Merseth

The clapping exercise Nordmeyer did in one of the final class sessions was typical of the ACCESS method. "It's an experiential approach," he says. "A lot of professional development consists of someone lecturing about how you shouldn't lecture in your classroom." Other classroom activities include having a portion of a lesson in Turkish or another language—again, to help students identify with the English-language learners they will encounter—and doing a "jigsaw" activity in which each student becomes an "expert" on one part of a text, and the students teach each other in small groups until the whole emerges.

"We try to anchor learning in experiences," Nordmeyer points out. "These are activities they can do with their own classes, but also they help them to understand how the kids in their classes learn. We model activities then deconstruct them through discussion and reflection."

It's an approach that Merseth endorses. "All the theory in the world will not help beginning or even experienced teachers teach well if they don't have a picture in their minds of what effective practice looks like and a repertoire of practices upon which to draw," she says. "In all of our courses in the Teacher Education Program, and in this one in particular, we stress the practical—the hands-on—in order to prepare our students for the real world of teaching."

Students say they can see themselves using these practical strategies in their own classrooms—and in fact, some already have. Feo, who did a practicum this summer teaching math at the Cambridge Harvard Summer Academy, brought in the concept of graphic organizers as soon as it was introduced by Nordmeyer. "Several times I'd teach something and it was obvious that what I was saying was going over their heads," she says. "And I'd go home and organize it in a more graphic representation, and I found the students could follow the lecture easier."

Feo has also tried Nordmeyer and Hehir's pointers on the language she uses in the classroom, trying hard to be clear in her directions, defining and explaining concepts as they arise in conversation, watching her use of slang or idioms, and using fewer words to get her point across. "These are things that really help the learning-disabled and ELL students," she says, "but that don't water down the curriculum."

It also helps, she believes, to be starting her teaching career with this sort of heads-up training. According to Nordmeyer, most of the teacher-training he does is for experienced teachers who graduated long ago and sometimes find it harder to adapt. Feo is thankful she was exposed to these ideas before getting out into the "real world."

"I'm not coming into the classroom with preconceived notions," she says, "or any ideas of 'this is how it's always been done.' I'm pretty much a sponge. So to have instructors who are very knowledgeable and adamant about the importance of the issues of ELLs and students with disabilities is wonderful. I'm very receptive to it."

## EDUCATION BY THE NUMBERS

60

PERCENTAGE OF KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS IN 2001 WHO ATTENDED FULL-DAY SESSIONS

51  
IN 1995

40  
IN 1989

5.3

STUDENTS FOR EVERY TEACHER IN AMERICAN PUBLIC AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN 2003

8.5  
IN 1997

2.4  
IN 1992

31

PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS OF HOMESCHOOLED K-12 STUDENTS WHO CITED "CONCERN ABOUT ENVIRONMENT OF OTHER SCHOOLS" AS THEIR MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR HOMESCHOOLING IN 2003

30

PERCENTAGE WHO CITED "TO PROVIDE RELIGIOUS OR MORAL INSTRUCTION"

16

PERCENTAGE WHO CITED "DISSATISFACTION WITH ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION AT OTHER SCHOOLS"

1,096,000

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF HOMESCHOOLED K-12 STUDENTS IN 2003

850,000

IN 1999

SOURCE: CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY

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SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS