Jean Suchsland Schneider & Donna Schumacher Douglas

Susan, a teacher who lives in a Midwestern city with much diversity, drives 20 miles to teach in a small town. She has driven and taught there for more than 30 years. When she first started teaching, the people and town reminded her of her own childhood spent in a small town. Susan has been comfortable in that teaching environment that, in many respects, is homogeneous. Sometimes, though, diversity comes to us even when we don't seek it. That small town is becoming increasingly diverse, and Susan has had to learn to embrace diversity as the students in her classes have changed.

When change occurs, our natural human tendency is to gravitate toward familiar people and places, as Susan did in the vignette above. For example, immigrants to this country have sought places that look like the lands they left, and they have often settled near people who speak their native languages. The novelty of a new nation, a new home, and new friends, while exciting, can also be stressful. Our nation's motto reflects the diversity as well as the spirit of unity...
on which the United States was founded: *E Pluribus Unum*, which means "Out of Many, One."

Members of the educational community, especially teachers and students, need to understand the roles of diversity, prejudice, and privilege in the educational community, but "an understanding of a multicultural perspective must begin with self-inquiry" (Levin & McCollough, 2008, p. 157). In addition to self-inquiry, brain-based research validates that long-term understanding comes through personal experiences, such as incidental experiences that occur in daily life, experiences that are sought out by the adventuring person, or simulated events in a "safe" environment (Sylwester, 2000).

This article describes how preservice middle level teachers at a small regional university planned and hosted a leadership conference for local eighth grade students to engage them in simulations and other learning experiences about diversity, social equity, and privilege. The goal for the teacher candidates, who served as the conference facilitators, and the eighth grade conference participants was to learn about and appreciate their own diversity as well as others' cultural backgrounds and experiences (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 1999). Although this particular conference was led by teacher candidates, this experience could benefit others who want to acquire a better understanding of diversity, social equity, and privilege. Middle level teacher leaders, student leaders, or principals could replicate these activities and ideas to benefit the teachers and students in their schools.

**A call to leadership**

The Student Association of Middle Level Educators (SAMLE) at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls is one of the nation's oldest active middle level student associations. At one meeting, the guest speaker, Dr. Geraldine Perrault, suggested that the SAMLE-UNI members host a middle grades student leadership conference. The members of SAMLE-UNI, intrigued by the possibility of this service-learning
opportunity, embraced Dr. Perrault's challenge.

What would planning a conference for young adolescents take? It started with leadership from the teacher candidates themselves. SAMLE-UNI members decided to set up a committee structure in five areas: program planning, sponsorship/budget, food, T-shirts, and publicity/registration. Officers and leading members of SAMLE-UNI then signed on as committee chairs or co-chairs.

At the first meeting of the chairpersons, they decided that understanding diversity was a critical component of leadership. "Social Equity" was the overall theme of the day-long conference, and the group settled on *E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many*, One as the conference title.

All the teacher candidates had been educated in various aspects of diversity. First, several of the leaders had undergone extensive training for the Residential Advisory Program and served as Resident Advisors of dormitories. They were trained to help others deal with diversity and develop skills in living with others. In addition, all of the teacher candidates had taken other courses that addressed diversity. A three-semester-hour course that dealt with human relations provided opportunities for them to experience and reflect upon their own understanding, dispositions, background, and awareness of diversity. In that course and others, students received extensive instruction in the characteristics of young adolescents and diverse groups, how to help children establish better relationships with their classmates, and the need for and implementation of differentiated instruction. Because of these prior experiences, the UNI teacher candidates were confident they could successfully provide guidance to middle grades students.

The SAMLE-UNI leaders extended invitations to the area's middle schools, in both urban and rural settings, seeking participants who had leadership potential and represented the diversity of the area racially, socio-economically, and linguistically. At each meeting, committee chairpersons reported back to the large group various possibilities for the conference: criteria for selection and number of student participants, places large enough to accommodate the
conference, potential keynote speakers, T-shirt designs, catering services in the area, grant funding sources, and activities for breakout sessions. Using input from the members at the large-group meetings, the chairpersons made final decisions for the conference in consultation with the student organization advisor.

According to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), when a leadership team embarks on a journey, they must do so with two overarching tenets: people must volunteer to serve on the team, and they must agree on operating principles. In a very real sense, the SAMLE-UNI leaders fulfilled these two tenets. First, the most active leaders from the membership took responsibility and volunteered for the leadership positions in the planning and implementation of the middle grades leadership conference. Second, their "operating principles" (p. 104) stemmed from two areas of commonality: (a) their dedication to the idea of hosting a leadership conference, along with their motivation to get the job done; and (b) their common field experiences working with students through a university-school partnership in a middle school with large numbers of high-poverty households and diversity of cultures.

**Planning and conducting a quality conference**

A strong leadership team, one of the key ingredients in school improvement, proved to be a positive factor in the success of the conference. Marzano and his colleagues (2005) suggested that the six operating principles of significance, quality, responsibility, integrity, ethics, and openness undergird the work of successful leaders. The SAMLE-UNI middle level teacher candidates' work proved those six principles to be pivotal, and, in turn, they developed activities that encouraged the development of those principles in the young adolescents selected to attend the leadership conference.

A budget committee strived to keep per-participant cost low, yet provide a program and amenities of high quality. Once a theme was developed, the SAMLE-UNI president and her advisors wrote a grant proposal for the event. To their surprise and delight, they secured more than $1,000 from a community philanthropic foundation. Each participant would be able to receive
a university folder; pen; agenda; evaluation form; T-shirt; and, commemorating the theme, a shiny, new penny that the federal government had already stamped with the conference theme—*E Pluribus Unum*.

With a written plan of action, the middle level teacher candidates in SAMLE-UNI addressed "questions that matter" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 105) when they decided to host a middle school leadership conference to provide a significant opportunity for learning and growth for a particular audience: eighth grade students with leadership potential from diverse backgrounds. Committed to quality and integrity, the middle level teacher candidates performed responsibly for "the public good" (p. 105) and asked for direct, honest feedback in the form of evaluations at the end of the conference. No course requirement compelled the students to facilitate the conference. Additionally, these SAMLE-UNI leaders paved the way for hosting future conferences—perhaps long after they have graduated.

**Responsibility established**

As more than 80 conference participants arrived with their chaperones, they were given a healthy snack to start the morning. After they finished their snacks, they entered a large lecture hall to listen to the keynote speaker. Unfortunately, no icebreaker activities had been planned—leading to dead space and a lack of engagement while students arriving early waited for last groups of students to arrive. Relying on their past summer experience as staff in the *UNI Camp Adventure®* program, two SAMLE-UNI members quickly took over the needed leadership role by engaging the large group of waiting students in interactive cheers, songs, and physical response activities. The atmosphere of shyness dissipated as everyone became talkative, active, engaged, and enthusiastic.

The event officially began when the SAMLE-UNI president explained the day's agenda, identified the schools of the various participants through a stand-up roll call, and introduced key people as well as the keynote speaker, Nichole Zumbach Johnson. Ms. Johnson inspired and motivated the participants by focusing on characteristics that distinguish leaders from followers. She finished with a challenge for the middle grades student leaders. She asked them to ask
their principals and student councils to hold a Mix It Up at Lunch Day, an initiative begun by the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) Teaching Tolerance Project. The SPLC found that 70% of the students they surveyed indicated that the school cafeteria is the setting where "social boundaries are most clearly drawn" (Tolerance.org, 2003, ¶ 9). On Mix It Up at Lunch Day, students leave their usual friends and eat with a group of people they don’t know well. Ms. Johnson's additional ideas for a school's Mix It Up at Lunch Day sparked the imaginations of the eighth grade leaders. She went on to challenge the students to carefully consider how their experiences at the conference could lead to a change in their sense of responsibility.

**Integrating integrity, ethics, and openness**

Following the keynote, the middle grades student leaders were strategically placed into three groups. The 45-minute breakout sessions addressed three areas: 1. examining privilege, 2. experiencing culture-based communication styles, and 3. developing an awareness of stereotypes. After each group had a few minutes to congregate, check group membership, and meet their SAMLE-UNI facilitators, they proceeded to their first breakout session.

Nine SAMLE-UNI leaders had volunteered to lead the three different sessions, while the middle grades student participants and their SAMLE-UNI facilitators moved from session to session. The session leaders helped students process their learning as they participated in the sessions by integrating the keynote points into group discussions, reflecting on leadership, and fielding questions. Each breakout session was repeated three times to accommodate all participants.

**A cross-culture simulation.** The stages of cross-cultural adjustment are relevant in our schools, since many students enroll in a school with cultural experiences (e.g., language, social norms, food) that are varied. This adjustment is not due solely to a student moving from another country, but even geographic changes within a county may introduce cultural expectations that differ from those with which a student is familiar.

We may be able to learn about cross-cultural adjustment in schools from
organizations that have long histories working to ease the transition when experiencing cultural change. For example, since 1961 the Peace Corps has assisted more than 180,000 volunteers adjust to cultural differences in more than 130 countries using the "Cycle of Adjustment" process (Peace Corps, 2007). Participants in this process typically move through five stages as they adjust to a new culture: the honeymoon, initial culture shock, initial adjustment, further culture shock, and further adjustment (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

Cycle of adjustment

Many of the middle grades students reported that the best session of the day was *BaFa, BaFa: A Cross-Culture Simulation* (Shirts, 2006). Many of the UNI teacher candidates had experienced for themselves the *BaFa, BaFa* activity during a course for education majors on human relations. The SAMLE-UNI session leaders divided the small group of middle level students into two smaller groups. The facilitators then moved each group to a separate room, where they learned the rules of a "cultural" group. The game of *BaFa, BaFa* was simplified from its original structure to accommodate the 45-minute time frame. Each culture had a few unique language and social customs the students were to learn. One culture was relationship-oriented, while the other was highly competitive; what was considered rude in one culture was valued in the other. One middle grades participant explained her experience in the other culture: "In *BaFa, BaFa*, I couldn't stop laughing when I went to the Beta Room, since they, like, stalked me!" which for the Beta community members was characterized as showing interest in all guests to your community.

Debriefing provided the opportunity for participants and teacher candidates to consider their own behaviors and attitudes toward others, examine their own biases and perceptions, and increase their personal awareness of cultural differences. The university teacher candidates discovered that many of the middle school participants actually had more real-life experiences with cultural differences than they had. This cross-cultural simulation allowed both participants and teachers to "experience" how language and cultural differences can profoundly impact people. Conducting the debriefing, then, was a learning
experience for both parties. In the evaluations at the end of the conference, one student wrote, "I learned what it was like to be someone who knows a different language and does not know what to do." Another realized "how uncomfortable new people can be" and "how it feels to be in a new community."

**Stereotype awareness.** While it is often assumed that only bigoted people succumb to the use of stereotypes, Mahzarin Banaji, a psychology professor at Yale University, makes the point, "Our ability to categorize and evaluate is an important part of human intelligence. Without it, we couldn't survive. But stereotypes are too much of a good thing" (Paul, 1998, ¶ 9). Humans need to feel part of a group, so one way for people to feel good about membership in a particular group is to denigrate those who do not belong. Even if there is some truth in a stereotype, John Bargh of New York University qualifies the use of stereotyping by saying, "In a democratic society, people should be judged as individuals and not just as members of a group" (as cited in Paul, 1998).

The stereotype session began with a dictionary-based definition of the term **stereotype.** Participants were then asked to reflect on their personal understanding of others through the three activities planned for this session. First, participants completed a written exercise in which they were asked to complete thoughts such as, "Men are ... " "Women are ... " "Americans are ... " "Asians are ... " and so on. A discussion followed about "kernels of truth" and the need to consider each person as an individual, not just as a member of a group.

Participants were then shown a picture of an African-American male wearing a necklace and sleeveless jacket and asked to think about or write their impressions. The leaders then provided details about the person's social, economic, or personal background—a successful financial analyst on Wall Street. Discussion followed about why people might draw the conclusions they did. This was repeated with several pictures. The leaders asked the students to share their changed perceptions if they wanted to volunteer. They also discussed experiences they have had with being stereotyped, such as being followed by security workers in retail stores as if they were teenaged shoplifters. Several students also shared times when they had stereotyped someone else and were
mistaken.

In the third activity of this session, participants were given balloons. They used markers to write the personal stereotypes they wanted to eliminate in their lives on the balloons. Then they "burst" their stereotypes!

**Privilege walk.** Dr. Ruby Payne (2005) has worked with adults and children of all levels of socioeconomic status. Most schools and businesses operate on a middle class set of values. It can be difficult for teachers and students to understand the values of those in a different class. To help the student leaders better understand the role of class in our lives, one breakout session involved the "Privilege Walk."

The Privilege Walk was modified from an activity most of the teacher candidates had experienced in the human relations course. The original outline of this activity appeared in an article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1990).

The Privilege Walk activity (See Figure 2 for Activity Outline) was held in a large room so that student participants, facilitators, and some of the chaperones could stand in a line across the center of the room, shoulder to shoulder. In this session, one of the SAMLE-UNI leaders announced an experience or circumstance such as "Someone in my household left school before high school graduation" or "Someone in my immediate family (aunt, uncle, parent, sibling) graduated from college." An experience or circumstance of privilege or opportunity warranted a step forward, while instances of prejudice or lack of opportunity resulted in a step backward. At the end of the 30 statements, few students, facilitators, or chaperones stood shoulder to shoulder with anyone else.

![Figure 2](http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/Articles/January2010/Article5/tabid/2104/Default.aspx)

Priviledge Walk

The leaders led a debriefing discussion, and students shared their feelings of
finding themselves in front of or behind the others. The UNI facilitators helped open the discussion by explaining how they overcame prejudice or lack of opportunity or circumstance and were able to attend college. One compassionate middle grades participant shared her feelings of embarrassment for being so far ahead, while another young participant expressed his determination to change his circumstances by going to college.

When the discussion ended after the Privilege Walk, the SAMLE-UNI leaders realized that the activity and subsequent discussion had only taken 15 minutes. They still had 30 minutes left! When the conference planners had participated in this activity themselves, it had lasted more than 30 minutes. The session leaders now had to make some quick decisions. They decided to use some small-group advisory activities they had learned in one of their middle level classes.

For future conferences, this session would have to be expanded. One suggestion was to read aloud and discuss the story *The Sneetches* (Seuss, 1961) and explore the concept of discrimination and prejudice. Another suggestion for a follow-up activity was explained by Keith O'Brien (2006, ¶ 4–5).

Have the students line up again and read a second set of statements ... this time, all based on choice. These second statements are all things they have conscious choice over, regardless of their starting point (privilege) in life.

It's incredibly powerful for the students who end up in the back of the line with the first statements and end up in the front on the second set. It's equally as awakening for the student who finished further back the second time than the first—a waking up to how they have perhaps squandered their opportunities.

**Closing activities.** Everyone involved in the leadership conference returned to the large meeting room after their third session. The closing activities were lead by Ms. Johnson, the opening keynote speaker. She summarized the day's sessions and helped students develop a call to action for their return to their schools.
One aspect of creating an environment of respect is to seek honest feedback and advice. The middle level students, SAMLE-UNI leaders, and chaperones were all asked to complete feedback forms about the conference addressing (a) what they learned about the topics in each session, (b) how they planned to use what they had learned to be a leader at their school, (c) the overall arrangement of the conference, and (d) other ideas they might suggest for future conferences.

**A Promising Future**

Effective school leadership begins with a strong leadership team and is centered on two generalizations: 1. voluntary membership; and 2. strong operating principles and agreements (Marzano et al., 2005). For the planning and implementation of the middle grades leadership conference, SAMLE-UNI members volunteered to chair committees and lead sessions. They developed a significant service goal to provide an important opportunity to middle grades students with leadership potential and then invited students from diverse backgrounds to enhance the experience. They planned quality experiences and learned important lessons; they took responsibility for the success of the conference; they trusted each other to do their respective jobs; and they acted openly and ethically throughout the process. Through this experience, the middle level teacher candidates are well on their way to becoming teacher leaders and making significant contributions to their future school districts, their states, and the nation.

Sponsoring a leadership conference pushed teacher candidates to reflect on their own experience as leaders. How would they function as reliable classroom teachers? How would their behavior model and encourage other leaders to develop, particularly promising students living in poverty? How could this leadership potential influence underprivileged students to recognize and strive for excellence? Could the experience of participating in the middle grades leadership conference be pivotal in young adolescents' lives?

At the end of the day-long conference, middle grades students' comments about their experiences were overwhelmingly positive. Select comments are listed
Educational!

Awesome experience!

[I liked] meeting all the people.

I learned a lot about diversity and some cool things.

Enjoyable experience that I will remember.

We got to [get] out of our shells and be ourselves.

It was great. It opened my eyes to stereotypes and other peoples’ feelings.

I learned a lot about personality and not to judge people by how they look.

We learned how everyone’s unique.

It helped me realize that you shouldn’t make fun of people based on first impressions.

We should do this again!

Did the conference make a difference? Several events took place at the school sites in addition to the more subtle changes in students' personal understandings of diversity, social equity, and privilege. The chaperones, who were school counselors, teachers, and principals, were asked to share what the student leaders did after returning to their schools.

Many of the student leaders reflected in their journals about their experiences both before and after the conference, focusing on the ideas of diversity and leadership. In one of the schools, the student reflections were compiled and became part of the student-produced school newspaper.
Others planned, developed, promoted, and implemented Mix-It-Up Days. One principal wrote about their event. The student leaders split up the middle grades students by using a color-coding system. The students labeled each table as red, blue, green, or yellow. Colored strips of paper were placed into a hat and the students picked out a color when they entered the cafeteria. This let them know where they would sit for the day.

"The plan was a great success. We had students from 6th, 7th, and 8th grade sitting together for the first time all year. ... There was a little apprehension at first, but by the end of the lunch period, most students were comfortably eating and socializing. Things went so well the first day that the student leaders decided to make "Mix-It-Up" Day an ongoing event that was held each Friday. ... Students looked forward to this day and the suspense of where they would be sitting and who would be sitting by them." (J. D. Cryer, personal communication, February 2, 2009)

Another school developed a "buddy system" for new students. Students at all grade levels were given the opportunity to volunteer to be a "buddy." When a new student was admitted, the buddy of the same grade level would become the new student's first friend, introducing him or her to other students, to teachers, and showing the new student around the school. The commitment lasted a week, although some of the buddies continued their friendships with the new students. One student reported that her experience from the culture simulation game had helped her realize how uncomfortable it could be in a new situation. This realization had motivated her to volunteer her services as a buddy.

In two schools, the student leaders organized an event similar to the Privilege Walk for the other eighth graders at their schools. The students developed the criteria themselves, with guidance from their counselors. The counselors described the exercise in developing the criteria as a significant learning experience for the student leaders. The task of determining social privilege and
social disadvantage solicited ideas, compassion, and discretion.

Feedback from all the stakeholders—middle school students, SAMLE-UNI facilitators, and middle school chaperones—encouraged the SAMLE-UNI organization to hold another middle school leadership conference in the future, assuring the leaders that the quality strived for was achieved. One person stated, "Great idea—I hope it continues." According to the chaperones who accompanied the participants, the eighth grade leadership conference, *E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One*, provided a context for leadership development that was beneficial because it provided a forum that crossed school boundaries and integrated students racially and across socioeconomic levels. One chaperone commented on how the theme developed the concepts of diversity and social equity, "Other leadership things I've been to have all centered on cooperation and teamwork. Leadership is about tolerance and working with everyone. Good message!"

**Extensions**

1. When students move into a new school, they have to negotiate old and new ways of doing things.

   In what ways does your school, team, or classroom community provide scaffolding for new students?

2. The authors describe several activities used to raise students’ awareness of diversity, social equity, and privilege.

   How can your school use these activities to engage students and faculty in meaningful discussion of these issues?

**References**


Jean Suchsland Schneider is an associate professor and coordinator of the middle level programs at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. E-mail: jean.schneider@uni.edu

Donna Schumacher Douglas is an associate professor and coordinator of the Education 2 + 2 program at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. E-mail: donna.schumacher@uni.edu

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