Criselda Carmenate is a preschool teacher for the Early Childhood Program at Riverdale Neighborhood House (RNH), a community service agency located in the northwest section of the Bronx. Originally from the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, Ms. Carmenate completed her undergraduate degree at the College of Mount Saint Vincent and her graduate degree in Early Childhood at Lehman College. She sat down with CIT to discuss her ten years of experience in the field of education.

What has changed about the education field since your first year of teaching?
“So many things have changed since my first year of teaching. When I began my career in 2003, the pressures that now exist on both students and teachers were not as apparent. Now that everything has changed with the common core, even in pre-k we have to make sure the children are "college ready." The great thing about my job is that the children’s interests come first and within that we include the common core standards.”

What would you describe as the basis of your teaching philosophy?
“The basis of my teaching philosophy first and foremost has to do with each child’s social and emotional support and growth. I remember choosing a quote for my portfolio that said you will always remember how a teacher made you feel and not necessarily what you learned. I try to remember that everyday in the classroom. The second part of my philosophy includes children learning through play and providing challenging and exciting activities. Most of all, if I am excited about a particular study I can transmit that to the children in my class.”

What inspired you to enter the teaching field? Why early childhood?
“I wanted to be a teacher since I was nine years old. I always sat my brother down and would "teach" him anything I knew already since I was older. Sometimes I would play the principal. In fourth grade, I had my first male teacher, Mr. Casey. I was horrible in his class but he took the time to talk to me and help me learn the multiplication tables. He even spoke to my parents and told them about my potential and how smart and bright I was. After the school year ended, Mr. Casey sent me a Precious Moments card in the mail (I still have it) just to say hi and how he knew I was so smart and I would have the best year in the top fifth grade class. In fifth grade, I went ahead and scored one of the highest scores in the math and reading state exams thanks to him. I always wanted to teach second grade so when I started teaching the three-year olds at RNH I thought it was going to be temporary. Well, little did I know I would love teaching the smallest and the brightest.

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What was the most challenging aspect of student teaching for you?

Amanda Rivas: “I had to reorganize and decide what had to go in order for me to succeed. I have learned to wear many hats; but student teaching is like a semester long interview and so the role model and teacher takes precedent over so much of your day and it becomes difficult to operate any other way for a while. The edTPA demands so much of your time, I think that creating a balance is very important and if you don’t prioritize and set goals it becomes difficult to handle very quickly.”

Wandaly Pena: “The most challenging aspect was due to the fact that I did student teaching along with two other courses, one being a methods course. This course alone needed a lot of time devotion, not allowing me to only concentrate on student teaching.”

What was the most rewarding aspect of student teaching?

Celeste Beards: “The most rewarding aspect is getting to know wonderful kids. A lot of people are intimidated by middle schoolers but the majority of the time, they just want someone to understand them and pay them attention. Knowing that I was able to help and reach students made me smile.”

Wandaly Pena: “The most rewarding aspect of student teaching was finishing before the new [certification exam] requirement kicked in! Also the relationship with my student teaching supervisor was really helpful, she was able to guide me through it all.”

How did your student teaching experience affect your perspective of the education field and of the teaching profession?

Celeste Beards: “The experience has taught me that teachers are under an enormous amount of pressure from their supervisors. There are constant changes being made to accommodate the needs of what the principal asks. Every week there was a new way of lesson planning and how it should be set up every day. People assume teaching is student oriented but with common core curriculum changes it makes it difficult to be a holistic teacher. When becoming a teacher one must find ways to teach the dull material to students who have never experienced half of what the main character in a story encountered.”

Amanda Rivas: “There is a lot of skepticism in schools today that I did not experience in school when I was that young. At times the energy from the teachers was negative and stressful. There are a lot of new practices and ways of doing things that they are not accustomed to and refuse. I think watching their reactions and listening to their frustrations helped me realize that this profession is strictly for those who do it because they love it. And that if I love it enough, I will make it work and be flexible so that my students would never feel like they were a burden.”

Ivanna Uquillas: “I went into student teaching knowing that I wanted to be an ELA teacher in a general education classroom. Being placed at Gregorio Luperon High School, having a student population made up of mostly immigrant students, my mindset shifted. My students reminded me of myself when I first came to this country and didn’t know the language. Having that connection with them made me work twenty times harder on my lesson planning, activities, and overall presentation. I wanted them to take what they’ve learned in the classroom out to the real world. This is why I’ll hopefully be going on to completing my masters in the TESOL program.”
If you could go back and change one aspect of your student teaching experience what would it be?

Celeste Beards: “I would have tried a little harder to work with the high school students. I found it difficult to work with them because of the level of patience I had with them. As an older group of children I assumed they would be more mature and I was sadly wrong. I was placed in a class with students who were classified as emotionally disturbed. I spent more time with classroom management than I did actually teaching the curriculum.”

Wandaly Pena: “There would not be anything I would change about my student teaching. If I had to change anything it would be the course load I took along with the student teaching.”

Ivanna Uquillas: “I would definitely change my personality in the beginning of student teaching. I remember being so shy and not really connecting with my students as much as I should. I feel like I always seemed so serious.”

Student teaching is a chance to put into practice all of the teaching methods you have learned about in your program at Lehman, what was that experience like?

Wandaly Pena: “As much as Lehman can prepare you for the different teaching methods, there is nothing better than self-experience. Through student teaching I did learn to value the lesson planning and writings taught by Lehman. It is something I continue to use, even after finishing the program at Lehman.”

Amanda Rivas: “At first I thought I had it all down to a science. I excelled in all of my classes and methods courses. I volunteer at schools and have my own children and family that I spend a lot of time with, and felt at ease when I was in the classroom. But then I was told I had student teach in the South Bronx in a tough neighborhood. The school is very supportive of teachers and aims to create an environment where everyone is in a safe space to learn. What was disheartening was the fact that you know that many of these kids are exposed to the ugliness of the streets. The innocence is fading and when the bell rings at three o’clock you can’t guard them anymore. Lehman adequately prepares students to instruct and teach children all the common core requirements. Lesson planning came very easily to me and including the right questions, activities, models and discussions were built into every lesson plan. Some of which went fantastic, others not so much. I felt very prepared for everything besides the classroom management and think that it would be great if in the future there could be a class that focuses on management and leadership building in the classroom. I think this would help a lot of kids.”

Ivanna Uquillas: “Being a teacher is no easy task. A teacher has to go beyond what is asked of them. Having read the books we were working on in class. I found myself going online to read multiple text analysis to keep in mind other points of view. This is such an important aspect of teaching I learned from my cooperating teacher. I also remember having to keep looking back at my lesson plans to make sure that I focused on my different kinds of learners and to see how much student interaction my activities included. I feel like I didn’t struggle much with classroom management. When my students went off on tangents I would always bring it all back to the lesson. I always thought that classroom management would be more difficult for me since I look so young and much like my students but I had my mind set on going in the school to teach! I also had the pleasure of working with wonderful students who respected their teachers, which eased that aspect of teaching. I have noticed though, this is something that student teachers want to keep in mind: the way you present yourself as a person and as a teacher affect your classroom management.”

Check out the full responses of our student teachers on the CIT bulletin board outside of Carman Hall, Room 176
Criselda Carmenate

I’ve been in this field now for ten years. You can see so much more growth between the ages of 3-5 than any other in my opinion. These children are so curious and excited!”

What challenges/triumphs did you face as a student at Lehman studying early childhood education?

“When I was at Lehman, I was working at RNH full-time and going to school for my MSEd in Early Childhood. The early childhood department was so welcoming and helpful. The professors were there to support you. The best thing was to learn something new and be excited to introduce it to the children! Challenges were really with scheduling and financial aid, etc. I had many frustrating moments with these departments in that no one communicated with one another!”

As a teacher, how have you grown within the last ten years?

“I have learned so much in the last ten years. I have learned that a partnership with both parents and the administration is necessary. Everyone needs to work together for the success of the children. I have learned to listen to the children, not just teach what I think they need to know but teach what they want to know and include that within the standards. I have learned that it’s always okay to have fun. That’s the best way to learn.”

What would you say is your teaching style, and how has your teaching method evolved?

“My philosophy is that every child is different. They have a right to be different. As a team, we make the adventures and learning happen. This has evolved from when I first began because I thought I had all the knowledge and the children had to listen to me.”

How much of an influence has the current education reform efforts played on your own curriculum in the classroom?

“Early childhood has definitely become more ‘academic.’ In my classroom, we strive for a balance of fulfilling the city and state standards, and being developmentally appropriate. Play is still very important in early childhood education. This is how young children learn. Within play we include things like patterns, measuring, sorting, magnets, etc. It is always challenging.”

Teacher Certification Changes From a Student Perspective

By Gregory Castro

The certification process for prospective teachers has changed dramatically; new New York State teacher certification exams have been adopted. For Early Childhood, Childhood (ECCE) and Middle and High School (MHSE) teacher candidates in mid-program or enrolling in the minor certification program, new assessments are in place. The sequence of classes has yet to change. However, in order to receive your initial certification you must take the Educating All Students Test (EAS), the Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST), and the Content Specialty Test (CST). I would suggest fulfilling both major and minor course requirements before even thinking of applying for student teaching; it would be less stressful and the experience would only involve student teaching and its current requirements, which includes the edTPA. The edTPA is both the most expensive and time-consuming.

I was one of those students that had taken the old assessment exams and expected them to count towards my certification. I am graduating in May 2014 and will be subject to the new exams. I am exempt from re-taking the CST, since it is the only exam undergoing revisions. The School of Education at Lehman is unable to provide waivers for students who simply wasted their time and money on the old assessments. It has been a frustrating topic of conversation for most teacher candidates.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Nancy Dubetz from the Department of Early Childhood and Childhood Education. According to Ms. Dubetz, ECCE students not graduating by the end of the Fall 2014 semester will be eligible for a new certification program. There will be an expected combination of undergraduate and graduate courses that will afford teacher candidates their initial certification. Ms. Dubetz noted that it is difficult to prepare teacher candidates to become effective teachers in the current undergraduate sequences. These changes, although inevitable, are still under revision. ECCE minors seeking certification are still subject to the new NYS teacher certification exams and necessary workshops. Please note that the MHSE department has not adopted these changes.

As a CIT student and current student teacher, I would not want other students to endure the stress that I did through this process. I believe it is imperative that ECCE and MHSE minors in the certification programs speak to their respective advisers for more information on upcoming changes in assessments and programs.