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ABSTRACT

This collaborative action research effort was designed to assess whether a change in university students' attitudes toward inner city children and schools could result from interventions in selected graduate and undergraduate classes in teacher education and educational leadership. Three faculty members used writing exercises, texts, videotaped presentations, field site visits to inner city schools, and other learning activities to confront racial and social stereotypes held by both preteacher candidates and inservice teachers. The study revealed that the very term "inner city" triggered deep-seated myths reinforced by media images. Researchers saw significant shifts over time in self-reported perspectives toward more complexity and openness with respect to the inner city. Teacher educators are urged to deal with the reality that preteachers of the dominant culture are astonished that an inner city school can be clean, bright, and orderly, and that inner city children are positive and highly motivated in school if learning is structured in a way that respects and affirms them. (Contains 12 references.) (JDD)

PREPARING MONOCULTURAL TEACHERS FOR A MULTICULTURAL WORLD: ATTITUDES TOWARD INNER CITY SCHOOLS IN EDUCATION CLASSES

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Abstract

A collaborative action research effort to assess whether a change in university students' attitudes toward inner city children and schools could result from interventions in selected graduate and undergraduate classes in Teacher Education and Educational Leadership. Three faculty members used activities, texts, video taped presentations, and field site visits to inner city schools to confront racial and social stereotypes held by both pre-teacher candidates and in-service teachers. This project was designed to find ways of challenging students to experience contradictions between their own unexamined assumptions and the reality of children in complex contexts, while supporting university students through that shift in world view.

INTRODUCTION

As teacher educators we are troubled by the persistence of stereotyping based on race and social class among our graduate and undergraduate students, and by the routine practicing of biased behaviors and attitudes within the schools and classrooms to which students are assigned for their pre-professional clinical experiences. Graduates of teacher education programs themselves report feeling inadequately prepared to work in inner city or schools (Self-Study, 1991).

In response to the challenge presented by this circumstance, three faculty members began a semester-long project investigating student attitudes about inner city schools. The purpose of the project was to determine if it makes a difference when opportunities are provided within teacher education courses for students to confront their previously unexamined assumptions about children in inner city schools, especially in terms of race, ethnicity and social class. The literature identifies what the researchers experienced: in the absence of sustained and supported cognitive dissonance, many adults never get to the de-centered stage of social/moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Haberman, 1992; Kohlberg, 1972; Piaget, 1980) which is the precondition for the development and practice of multicultural awareness (Collins, 1990; Banks, 1987; Nieto, 1992; Phillips, 1990).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative action research study was conducted during

the fall 1992 semester in selected elementary Teacher Education and Educational Leadership classes. The purpose of the study was to identify which particular intervention strategies could be the most effective in helping both prospective and practicing teachers to examine and broaden their perceptions of inner city schools and the children who attend them. The objectives were to: a) have students examine their own preconceptions about inner city schools; b) challenge the sources that distort information about inner city schools, by testing all assumptions with the question, "How do you know what you know?"; and c) influence traditional thinking patterns of pre-service and practicing teachers by expanding their educational experiences and encouraging them to be conscious of multiple realities.

The majority of the students in this project reflected the dominant culture population that historically has chosen teaching as a profession: European American, and the first in their families to attend college. The majority of the students were female from homogeneous suburban communities and from schooling experiences that were traditionally structured in both content and process. Having neither traveled nor read widely, and having had few alternative experiences, they tended to assume their own intellectual, social, family and moral life to be the norm, and that their task as teachers would be to socialize the next generation of children to that norm.

In the opening class of the semester, professors/researchers asked students to free-write their first impressions on the topic,

"What would you expect to see if you went to an inner city school?" The writings were anonymous, ungraded, saved and, according to previous coding, returned at the end of the semester to see what changes students would make in what they had originally thought. Returning students' own words provided the opportunity for re-thinking at the end, thus forming the pre and post framework for the study.

Finding ways of challenging students to recognize contradictions between their unexamined assumptions about inner city schools and the complex realities of children, while supporting university students through that shift in world view, was a persistent challenge for the researchers. The researchers in two elementary education courses infused into required content material activities designed to confront pervasive stereotypes and expectations, especially as represented through media, textbooks, and deeply entrenched habits embodied in school curricula as well as unconscious teacher behavior. The researcher in the graduate course used case studies for students to practice making decisions and solving problems they may confront in inner city schools.

Certain questions directed the study:

- What kinds of intervention strategies would be the most significant in expanding their perceptions?
- Which experiences would not be effective, and why? What are the most accessible and stimulating readings that provide perspectives traditionally left out of Eurocentric curricula, even through college?

- What texts and activities, and what forms of dialogue, imagination, simulation, and direct experience are available to engage students on a dimension deeper than traditional information-gathering and reproduction?
- How do professors choose and structure activities with enough balance between personal engagement and distance so students do not feel threatened even as they cannot merely intellectualize?
- Does it make sense to sequence activities in a certain way?
- What kind of advance preparation is useful before a trip to an inner city school?
- How can genuine change in attitude be measured? How can changed consciousness be maintained after students leave university classes?
- Is it all worth the effort, even if not everyone is reached?

In addition to the pre and post freewrites, subsequent classroom activities included student reflective writings, group brainstorming notes, and the professors' field notes taken after class discussions. To varying degrees, the researchers provided dialogic feedback on student writing (Friere, 1970). Other resources included selected texts, supplemental readings, projects, videos, and guest speakers. The researchers used cooperative groups, as well as the traditional lecture-discussion class format. The greatest difference in the approaches used among the

researchers involved the quantity and nature of writing; how many and which particular videotapes were used; and whether, at what point in the semester, and what number of supervised group visits to inner city schools were conducted.

Analyzing the students' initial written impressions, the researchers grouped their comments into the following categories: 1) physical descriptions of buildings, classrooms, and neighborhoods, 2) descriptions of children and parents, and 3) perceptions of teachers and other school personnel. The majority of the monocultural university students anticipated observing elementary school children "out of control", who "don't want to learn as much as kids in suburbs and have negative attitudes toward school".

Undergraduate Perceptions. The undergraduate students reported expecting to see "minority" students, as "disruptive", "disrespectful of teachers", and as "having more problems" and "exhibiting worse behavior than suburban children." Although a few pre-teachers in each class indicated they expected to see "kids just like any other kids", the expectations that most of the elementary education students had of inner city children were negative. These ranged from the mild -- "more talking out of turn" to "all diagnosed as special education", "short attention span", "unruly", "talking back", "wise guys", "harder to deal with", -- all the way to "aggressive", "all crazy", "abuse the teachers verbally", "dirtier", "neglected", "have abusive parents", "involved in drugs", "out on streets late at night", "mostly punk

kids", "delinquents", "rough", "tough", "violent", "in gangs", "may have weapons", "have criminal records", "rowdy", "wild--the standard stuff". In both undergraduate classes, the dominant expectation was that teachers in inner city schools would have a hard time working with the children because they would "have to spend time being baby sitters and police officers, have no control, be frustrated and burnt out".

The undergraduate pre-teachers assumed that inner city parents would not be supportive of education, and that children would generally lack parental support. Other descriptors of parents were: "low income", "didn't finish school", "not much family life", "aren't concerned", "don't take education seriously". Except for one student, the assumption that inner city parents do not care about their children or their children's education was universal in the three classes.

The undergraduates expected an inner city neighborhood to be "a slum," with "run-down buildings." They expected "chaos," "dinginess", "dirt", "darkness", "large paved fenced-in playgrounds" and "not much grass or many trees or flowers in the schools." They assumed that inner city schools would be significantly different from the schools they themselves had attended: classrooms would be over-crowded, with minimal one-on-one attention, few white students, and different languages. The differences they expected would include "violence", "drugs", "racism", "fighting", and "not as many decorations--teachers are afraid to leave them out".

One student, who had attended a suburban school that was beginning to desegregate, expected "cultures clashing". Several acknowledged, "I've never been there; I don't really know". The one undergraduate who had attended an inner city school, had the only different perspective:

> There were many minority students. Enough to make me feel like the minority. There was also an open classroom setting. Those were the only real differences I noticed. As far as recess, the playground was a blacktop. No grass or fenced-in yard for us to run in. We played 4-square and hopscotch and jumped rope. We still ran and played tag and things. We just had a few more scraped knees than the children in the suburban schools.

Graduate Perceptions. The graduate students, more than undergraduates, wrote about inadequate funding resulting in the lack of equipment, and of unequal representation of people of color in positions of authority. As the following statement suggested, graduates were more open than undergraduates to viewing schools like their own:

> In many respects I envision that the inner city school would be much like mine. Rooms, classroom, etc. would be decorated, but the themes might differ. I think that as teachers, we would deal with similar problems--hall duty, cafeteria duty, breaking up potential problems....

Nevertheless, common misperceptions of surface realities were

revealed regarding the purported a "lack of values" families of low income:

> ...There may not be a lot of cooperation between the home and the school and I could see where this could create many problems. If the children do whatever they want in their homes, they'll try to get away with that in school too....

These responses suggested that graduate students expected to see a particular and negative "environment in which children are brought up." Like the undergraduates, university graduate students assumed this environment to be characterized by "lack of a proper upbringing".

INTERVENTIONS. Several interventions were used to encourage students to see beyond the media portrayals which all students acknowledged to be the primary, unquestioned source of their "information."

At the University. In the graduate class the professor/researcher concentrated on understanding cultures other than the dominant culture, and on looking at techniques for empowering all children through creative teaching. Videos, journals of observations, and selected readings were the basis for class discussions. The personal history of one graduate professor enlivened classroom conversation, providing a direct and passionate understanding of the impact of discrimination on one person who had survived it.

In one undergraduate class the professor/researchers used the "Stereotypes Worksheet" from Anti-Bias Curriculum (1989) for

discussions. Tapes of television news shows that consciously explored instances of racial bias were shown, as were "normal" advertisements and cuts from "regular" shows. Time was allotted for discussion of these visual images. Students were then assigned to watch TV, as well as being aware in their own communities, for what they now might recognize as instances of bias.

Another intervention required undergraduate students to reflect on and then write about their own first experience of difference in their lives. Some interpreted the question in terms of race or racial conflict while others looked at other kinds of differences. Analyzing their reactions to certain situations raised a troubling question of personal responsibility. This set the stage for their ambivalence toward Jonathan Kozol's hesitancy to speak out against racism in the school where he taught, as described in his Death at an Early Age (1967).

In all three classes, university students experienced inequity in society by playing the card game, "With the Odds Stacked Against Them", from Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Lives (Schniedewind and Davidson, 1987). Enough time was given for the students to feel the impact of trying to play with a stacked deck. The discussion, provoked by the interactive game, helped students process and extend meaning to the concept that the decks are indeed stacked against certain individuals because of circumstances entirely beyond their own control. When playing the game, some groups, though not disadvantaged, looked down on others that were not scoring well, making assumptions about a "lack of values"

within the groups with low scores. More than one from the group that had been dealt all the royalty cards and no obstacle cards gloated in their privilege. Many in the other groups without advantage quite openly cheated, or talked of cheating.

In only one of the classes did anyone above the lowest group even consider sharing their wealth with other groups, in order to include them, and that only when the people in the lowest group gave up in genuine discouragement before the second round! Generally, those in the higher scoring groups were not aware of the distress of the lower scoring groups, or, if they noticed, were too busy raking in the points to care.

The effectiveness of this experience was revealed when several students later referred to the card game as they either wrote or spoke with more understanding of what it must feel like to have no real options in one's life, no matter how hard one tries. The card game thus provided a set of convenient metaphors for talking about inequal ty.

Field Visits. The freewrites from the class that visited an inner city school earlier in the semester reported their feelings as they drove to the school: "fearful", "nervous", "afraid", "wary," and "expecting danger in various forms". Some indicated that they locked their doors. More than one reported, - "My mom said "there'd be no one to turn to if I got lost." One said, "My father tried to forbid me to go there," and another said, "My boyfriend warned me it was such a bad section". Several students reported seeing "people hanging out on the streets in the middle of

the day". It had not occurred to them until later through extensive dialoguing, that this area was where people **lived**, that perhaps the people were relaxing on their porches or steps with neighbors or worked a shift other than nine to five. Many reported their worst fears' being reinforced by having to park within a locked parking lot, and by seeing graffiti and no windows on the building, and no playground.

Once inside the school, however, students experienced the shock that accompanies a contradiction between expectation and reality. Students reported finding the building "clean", "bright", "orderly", and "attractive". Many said they were "amazed" to find the children "mannerly", "polite", "friendly", "welcoming", "eager to learn", "confident", "intelligent", "talented", "positive", "attentive", and above all respectful of themselves, each other, and the adults in the building, who also seemed respectful of them. They found the classroom inviting, beautifully decorated with children's art work, well stocked with multicultural literature books (which, they later learned, the teacher herself had bought), "so unlike my own elementary school" in its freedom of movement and teacher trust of students.

However, students from another elementary education class reacted differently when visiting an older and more "run down" building. They were amazed and astonished that these schools were "clean", "in control", and characterized by "good discipline, good teachers, and good kids". One group reported that inner city schools they visited were "civilized".

Another significant intervention in one of the undergraduate classes was the required three hours of tutoring in a diverse setting. That assignment followed the viewing of a video called "The Truth About Teachers", showing creative teaching strategies with diverse populations.

FINDINGS. Our collaborative study revealed that the very term "inner city" triggered deep-seated myths reinforced by media images. In assessing the patterns found in the university students' responses, the researchers saw significant shifts over time in self-reported perspectives toward more complexity and openness in respect to the inner city. More than graduates, undergraduate students initially expressed apprehension and fear regarding inner city schools, but students in all three university classes reported a change of consciousness about children and the schools. By the end of the semester, students also reported that their own original reactions had been deeply influenced by stereotypes conveyed by parental figures or significant others, but also and significantly by history, media, rumors, inexperience, parental figures or significant others, and their own isolation from the inner city. Several students in both undergraduate classes expressed interest in teaching in inner city settings, whereas they said they would not have previously that as a possibility.

In reviewing the data, the researchers concluded that the only real way for pre-teachers and in-service teachers to overcome their own racism and classism within their classrooms would be to focus

on believing that all children can learn, and operating fully on that assumption. The majority of the university students reported no longer assuming that inner city schools were so different from the schools they attended, except for those confronted by budgetary limitations. Most of the students, by the end of the semester, reported being more personally comfortable with the idea of being around children of color, as suggested by the graduate student who had expected blank bulletin boards, but now had a more positive perspective:

> I would now expect to see and hear the same as I might see and hear in a suburban school. Laughter, bulletin boards, graffiti in the lavatory and perhaps fewer supplies....I imagine them to be noisier because of higher enrollments, but in some ways livelier--a positive noise so to speak.

The researchers consider it important for pre-teachers to be placed in situations about which they have held such distorted but absolute convictions and fears, and for the professor to be there with them, initially, to help them process the changes they will be undergoing, both during the visit and in follow-up dialogues in class and in writing. Several such experiences might be more useful rather than a single one placement, once students have stepped over the threshold and into an inner city school. Several such experiences in inner city school environments will help to keep university students from over-generalizing from one positive situation and then over-reacting if they find themselves in a

situation which in any aspect reinforces their initial assumptions.

Current educational practices underestimate the need which research such as ours uncovers. The findings of this study suggest a direction for teacher educators. We need to deal with the frightening reality that pre-teachers of the dominant culture are astonished that an inner city school can be clean, bright, orderly, and that inner city children are just children, alive and positive, and highly motivated in school if learning is structured in a way that respects and affirms them.

The researchers clearly recognize that one semester will not undo the damage of centuries of racism and classism. Moreover, changing university students' attitudes may be temporary, considering that when they leave the classroom, they return to the environments--dorms, homes, neighborhoods, schools--in which the stereotypes were originally generated and sustained. Without established support systems that allow prospective teachers to continue to use as information the bias they might now recognize, the probability is that for most pre-teachers one brief semester of such awareness might be washed over by the familiar and cumulative effect of the larger society. Nevertheless, the researchers recognize the value of providing a rich and varied set of experiences through which European American university students are forced to confront their fears and biases. As with all creative teaching, a seed may have been planted.

The urgency of this research cannot be overstated. With the Sheff vs. O'Neill case* about to come to verdict in Connecticut,

increasing numbers of people in that state--and nationwide--are predicting that school integration is imminent. Monocultural schools may no longer be the locus of teacher placements. In the interim, most of the very few teaching jobs available seem to be in inner cities. For both situations, it is crucial for teacher educators to do whatever they can to prepare students so that incoming and practicing teachers will be knowledgeable and caring teachers for all their students.

*Sheff vs O'Neill is the name of the law suit against the State of Connecticut which charges that it supports and condones segregated educational systems between certain urban and suburban communities.

APPENDIX

Video taped Programs

The Truth About Teachers. (1992). Pyramid Film & Video, 2801 Colorado Avenue, Santa Monica CA, 90404

Prejudice. (1992). Insight Media, 2162 Broadway, New York, NY 10024.

Beyond Hate. (1991). Insight Media, 2162, Broadway, New York, NY 10024.

Relevant texts for this study

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