An American Dilemma:
Using Action Research To Frame Social Class as an Issue of Social Justice in Teacher Education Courses

By Renée J. Martin

Conceptual Framework

In the middle of the 20th century the noted Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal called attention to an American dilemma. Myrdal wrote that America has continuously struggled for its soul by waging a battle to effectuate the ideals upon which American society was founded (Myrdal 1944, 4). He asserted that the political and judicial frameworks governing American institutions were at war with the personal desires and individual actions of many Americans. Myrdal observed that although the United States has a rich history of established legal rights for historically marginalized groups, conflicts arise when individuals are called upon to enforce and support the rights of such groups.

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Scrutiny of the dilemma to which Myrdal called attention indicates that as we enter the 21st century, America is continuing to struggle with the disjuncture between the ideals it espouses relative to issues of social justice and the institutional practices it allows. Perhaps nowhere is the evidence of this struggle more apparent than in America's public schools. American ideals purporting that citizens are entitled to a free and equal education have fallen

woefully short of the intended goals, particularly as they relate to social class and educational outcomes. It is incumbent upon those who educate America's teachers to enable them to align ideals and practices with the democratic ideals that we have generated and the educational systems that we perpetuate.

The Relationship of Education to Social Class

McLaren (1989) defined social class as "the economic, social, and political relationships that govern life in a given social order" (p. 171). In the United States a person's ability to achieve the American Dream has typically been characterized by how much wealth, income, and power over economic resources one has been able to accrue. Those who do not inherit wealth or power rely on an adequate education that will enable them to attain a job in order to secure social status.

The social class of America's students is a salient factor in their ability to achieve desirable academic outcomes in schools. Scholarly research has unearthed numerous links between teachers' expectations of students from various social classes and students' academic outcomes. Anyon's 1980 study called attention to the social and cultural contexts of schools and to the ensuing expectations teachers have for their students relative to their social class status. She found that

> Differing curricular, pedagogical and pupil evaluation practices emphasize differ-
> ent cognitive and behavioral skills in each social setting and thus contribute to the
> development in the children of certain potential relationships to physical and
> symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work. School experience...
> differed qualitatively by social class. These differences may not only contribute to
> the development in the children in each social class of certain types of economi-
> cally significant relationships and not others, but would thereby help to reproduce
> this system of relations in society. In the contribution to the reproduction of
> unequal social relations lies a theoretical meaning and social consequence of
> classroom practice. (p. 225)

Later Banks and Banks (1993) wrote that

> ...social class backgrounds affect where students go to school and what happens
> to them once they are there. As a result, lower-class students are less likely to be
> exposed to less valued curricula, are taught less of whatever curricula they do study
> and are expected to do less work in the classroom and outside of it. Hence, they
> learn less and are less well prepared for the next level of education. (p. 82)

Jonathan Kozol's (1991) late 20th century exposé of wealth and poverty in America's schools dramatically underscored the dismal socio-economic policy issues that plague schools. Further he highlighted the effects of social class upon academic outcomes as well as on the personal well being of students. These inequities continue to haunt American schools in the 21st century.

It has long been understood that knowledge, power, and social class are inextricably linked and that the best predictor of one's occupational prestige and

socioeconomic status are governed by the education once receives. "The resources a person starts with, the opportunities open to that person, the circumstances in which the person lives, and the way others react to that person all depend to a significant extent on the groups of which that person is a member" (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994, p. 179). To gain membership to a group is to be conferred with access to power. Power here is interpreted in the Foucauldian sense to be a relational concept rather than a commodity. Orner, (1992) has written that Foucault shifted the focus of power away from questions such as "Who is powerful?" or "What are the intentions of those with power?" to questions regarding the processes by which subjects are constituted as effects of power (p. 82). Thus it is important to question what the relationships are between power and knowledge and what are the effects of social class power as it has been constructed by and for various institutions, such as public schools and their constituents?

The Nature of the Study

This discussion offers insights about how we might best educate future teachers to comprehend the relationship of social class to power and success in American institutions, especially schools. It chronicles my efforts to educate prospective teachers to better understand how their perceptions of social class have the potential to influence their ability to effectively educate students. I will highlight excerpts from action research assignments in multicultural education courses. The assignments help illustrate how the attitudes of students have been challenged to better understand the complex socio-cultural environments in which we work and live.

The work was conducted in a mid-western, metropolitan university with enrollment of approximately 20,000 students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses that address issues of social justice and cultural diversity in contemporary American society. While the students enrolled in the courses tend primarily to be students from the College of Education, the courses also attract students from the Colleges of Engineering, Law, Pharmacy, Business, and Arts and Sciences.

Nature of the Pedagogy

Gore (1992) has asserted that helping others exercise power means that empowerment must occur in sites of practice: i.e., the empowerment must be pedagogical, a process of knowledge production (p. 68). She further notes that first, discourses of critical and feminist pedagogy need to pay much closer attention to the contexts in which they aim to empower, and that second, they need to provide better guidance for the actions of the teachers they hope to empower or they hope will empower students (p. 68). The present study is an investigation of discursive practices in teacher education that might result in more emancipatory and equitable school pedagogies. This particular pedagogical strategy challenges students to

reflect upon the composition of the value structures that they have internalized and to assess their perceived images of themselves and others relative to social class. They are encouraged to determine how they make meaning of their own lives and what the relationship is of their lives to the lives of others in the society, as well as to discern how the educational constructs they will apply in the future are derived from the meanings that they make of such relationships (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002).

The following questions guided the development of my pedagogical strategies about social class in the course: How can we help students frame social class as an institutional rather than an individual issue? What systemic conditions permeate social institutions that influence students' perceptions of social class relative to schooling? How do we lay bare social class inequities and the assumptions surrounding them? And in particular, how do we do this when most teacher education students appear to rely primarily on individualistic ideology and lack the discourse to challenge the American social class structure?

Multicultural Social Reconstructionist Education (MCSR)

Sleeter (1996) has written that multicultural education that addresses issues of social justice can be viewed as a form of resistance to oppressive social relationships (p. 10). She has called upon educators to challenge oppression and to use schooling, as much as possible, to help shape a future that is more equal, democratic, and just and that does not demand conformity to one cultural norm (p. 15). In particular, multicultural social reconstructionist (MCSR) education (Martin 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1988) provides a possible avenue for addressing the aforementioned pedagogical questions. It establishes classrooms as democratic sites of empowerment and underscores the need for critical dialogue and the enactment of counter-hegemonic principles. Multicultural social reconstructionist education enhances the possibilities for the transformation of traditional relationships of power and domination, and simultaneously calls attention to the representative voices of historically marginalized groups. It is particularly efficacious for investigating the foundations of practice regarding social policy in American institutions, especially schools.

Multicultural social reconstructionism has been linked to critical theory and is grounded in liberatory principles as well as critical democracy and ideals of social justice and equity (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Banks & Banks, 1993; Parekh, 1986). According to Sleeter and Grant (1988) an approach that is multicultural and social reconstructionist : (1) views culture as a product of power relations; (2) helps students investigate issues of inequality in their own environments and encourages them to take action regarding those conditions; (3) conceptualizes culture and identity as complex and dynamic; (4) considers all cultures to be an integral part of curriculum; (5) organizes a curriculum that incorporates students' backgrounds, learning styles, and experiences; (6) uses schools as laboratories to prepare students to participate actively in a democratic society; (7) builds a curriculum that enables

students to become change agents in society; (8) creates an environment that celebrates diversity; and (9) teaches students to build coalitions and develop cooperative learning strategies.

Positionality as an Educational Construct

Maher and Tetreault (1994) discuss positionality as "an idea in which people are not defined in terms of fixed identities but by their location within shifting networks of relationships which can be analyzed and changed" (p.164). Positional knowing is the ability to understand location, embodiment and perspective and to recognize that position is partial, locatable and critical (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Positionality avoids binary opposites and questions rather what happens when positionalities are depicted as mutually exclusive. It also asks what occurs when multiple positions exist? What tensions arise as a result of the interplay among various positions? Or as Haraway (1988) has further inquired: How should one be positioned in order to see in this situation of tensions, resonances, transformations, resistances, and complicities? (p. 588).

Betz and Garland (1974) have written that educators hold dual class identities derived from their class of origin as well as from their occupational positions as teachers, administrators, counselors or other roles. They further note that those identities frequently overlap in the sense that many teachers are considered middle class and occupy a rung in the middle of the occupational status hierarchy, and that large numbers of them come from middle-class families.

There is evidence to suggest that many teacher-education students regard their positionalities as fixed and normative. As primarily middle class, heterosexual women from European American backgrounds, teacher-education students are rarely given opportunities to investigate those positionalities. For example Maher and Tetreault (1994) have written of white middle-class students whom they observed:

> Most likely, they entered and left the class with a picture of society that was drawn from personal experience, organized largely in terms of money and status, and based on an ideology of individualism upward (and downward), mobility, and an unquestioned acceptance of the rigid and hierarchical demands of the American dream. (pp.184-5)

In order to better understand how social institutions (especially schools) have functioned to marginalize groups, we must first comprehend our positional stances as individuals in those institutions. A first step in helping students understand cultural identity and, in this case social class is creating an understanding of their own positionalities. Doing so means that students must acknowledge that we are all raced, classed, and gendered and that these identities are relational, complex, and fluid positions rather than essential qualities (Alcoff, 1988; Bartlett, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Maher & Tetreault 1993,1994).

Critical educators have called attention to the idea that the identities of students

and teachers are mediated through the process of schooling. In addition it is clear that teachers construct their pedagogy and their voices as a function of position. According to Maher and Tetreault teachers fashion themselves in terms of their awareness of others in their particular classrooms and institutions and in terms of their individual and group relationships to the dominant culture (Maher & Tetreault 1994, p.165).

Orner (1992) has urged us to ask:

> How do we speak as teachers and as members of various social groups? How do we understand our own embodiment of privilege and oppression, both historical and current? How do we teach as allies of oppressed groups of which we are not a part? (p. 75)

In order to respond to Orner's questions teachers must become aware of the embodiment of their privilege and of the relational identities of theirs and others' positionalities. To better analyze cultural issues and the social contexts in which they have been educated, they must understand that their viewpoints are partial truths, oppositional, and that they exist within socio-cultural contexts and relational matrices (Maher & Tetreault, 1994).

Creating an understanding of the complexities of socio-economic identity is an especially daunting task. For a variety of reasons those students who enter teacher education appear to be routinely unprepared to acknowledge social class as a salient factor in either their lives or the lives of their potential students. For example, many lack an historical understanding of the context of social class and specifically of poverty in the United States. Zinn (1980) cautioned that history has rendered issues of class and classism practically invisible. Most teacher-education students have been raised in white middle class neighborhoods, and few if any are aware of any civil rights initiatives to ameliorate social class disparities such as the "war on poverty."

The average prospective teacher grows up to believe the prevailing mythology about issues of social class. Most assume that poverty is the result of personal inadequacy and many are strongly invested in the bootstraps myth. They believe in meritocracy which asserts that it is hard work rather than family background and social class affiliation that determine one's success in American society. This ideology informs their perceptions of themselves and their students and has implications for the pedagogical strategies and curricula they develop.

The Role of Action Research

The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy issued the report *A nation prepared: Teachers for the 20th century* in which it advised

> The focus of schooling must shift from teaching to learning, from the passive acquisition of facts and routines to the active application of ideas to problems. (Carnegie Forum, 1986, p. 25)

The Carnegie report advocated active learning strategies. Action research is one attempt to fulfill such goals. Johnson (1995, p. 90) laid out a format for the implementation of this form of research. In action research, the practitioner identifies a question to investigate, develops an action plan, implements the plan, collects data, and reflects on the findings of the investigation. Critical action research that incorporates an MCSR approach helps students investigate issues of inequality in their own environments, encourages them to take action regarding those conditions, conceptualizes culture and identity as complex and dynamic, and uses classrooms and communities as laboratories that will prepare them to participate in a democratic society. Further, action research that is critical enables students to reflect upon their own possibilities for becoming change agents in society.

When combined with the concept of positionality, action research has the potential to promote greater understanding of the role of the teacher as raced, classed and gendered while concomitantly instilling in the teacher an understanding of how those identities are mediated by the social institutions in which she or he functions. When conducted critically and reflectively, action researchers interrogate value structures, political dispositions and social contexts with an eye toward redefining schools and the larger society. Doing so creates possibilities for teachers to rethink epistemological and pedagogical choices in schools. Carr and Kemis (1983, p. 152) noted that action research has the ability to enable teachers to understand their own practices and the situations in which these practices are enacted.

Quoting the work of May and Zimpher (1986), and Hultgren (1987), Kincheloe (1995) acknowledged the implications of action research for social change:

> Obviously, critical theory-based action research attempts not simply to understand or describe the world of practice but to change it. Proponents of such inquiry hope teacher education students will learn to use action research in a way that will empower them to shape schools in accordance with well-analyzed moral, ethical, and political principles. Teachers who enter schools with such abilities are ready to make a cognitive leap: indeed, the stage has been set for movement to the realm of a postmodern practitioner thinking. As critical action researchers endowed with a vision of what could be and a mechanism for uncovering what is, these teachers are able to see the sociopolitical contradictions of schools in a concrete and obvious manner. Such recognition forces teachers to think about their own thinking, as they begin to understand how these sociopolitical distortions have tacitly worked to shape their world views and their self-images. With a deeper appreciation of such processes, practitioners recognize the insidious ways power operates to create oppressive conditions for some groups and privilege for others. (pp. 77-78)

Enacting Action Research

Action research projects that are bounded by MCSR act as critical filters through which students become better acquainted with unfamiliar positionalities and juxtapose them with their own (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). Students are

encouraged to step out of their own experiences, to analyze the unfamiliar and compare and contrast it with the familiar.

The action-research scenarios reported in this paper represent an array of work about social class that my students have created during the past decade. The assignment occurs as a result of a unit on social class during the first five weeks of a semester. In the unit students are exposed to scholarly films, class discussions and research about social class by authors such as Jonathon Kozol, Donna Gollnick and Philip Chinn, Jean Anyon, Michael Parenti, and Robert Terry. Students are introduced to action research as a conceptual tool, receive guidelines for developing an action-research project and formal paper, and are invited to read sample papers of work students have previously created in the course. Students choose from social-class assignments that fall into three broad categories: comparing and contrasting two social institutions, one in a high-income area and one in a low-income area; altering their personal lives by participating in an event, institution, or activity that differs significantly from their experiences in their own social class; or creating a volunteer project that responds to a perceived social-class need.

Students then identify a question to investigate, develop an action plan, implement the plan, collect data, and reflect on the findings of the action research investigation . Finally students share the results of their findings and their formal papers in class after which they form small groups and devise lists of common themes that emerged; then they discuss the implications of their action/research for their understandings of the lives of the students whom they will teach as well as for the pedagogy that they will create.

Analysis of the Assignments

Analysis of the action-research assignments involves the use of several criteria. If the student has chosen the comparative activity, I determine how they arrived at the choices they made regarding their sites of investigation. Students are encouraged to locate and incorporate the latest census data and to choose which institutions (libraries for example) lie in various income-level areas of the city. Students are given sample suggestions for evaluating the sites. However, I do not give them a checklist because an important component of this type of research is to develop their own observations through alternative lenses and to observe as many aspects of the environment as they can. Some of the observations that have occurred at the libraries focus on the building's cleanliness, number of parking spaces, facade and architecture of the edifice, age of library books, numbers of computers and technological elements, library hours, numbers and kinds of furniture, study rooms, presence or absence of police officers, ratio of staff to patrons, nature of the population (age, race, ethnicity) of patrons.

The second type of assignment, altering their personal lives, might mean that the students will engage in activities ranging from using public transportation for

an entire week, during which they conduct all aspects of their lives via the use of busses, or to working in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen for a week. The third type of project, a volunteer activity, usually involves organizing a food or clothing drive for a targeted family, or establishing a practice or policy in their own school that will have an impact upon the low-income students and their families. This might include the creation of a "clothes closet" or other facility.

In all of the activities the student must demonstrate the application of a critical analytical framework grounded in the readings we have done, and discuss their insights. Finally, there must be evidence that something new, perhaps a cognitive awakening, has occurred for the student. This is often reflected in personal statements such as those in this document. Because many of the students take the course early in their undergraduate career, there may or may not be transformative pedagogical insights. However, at the graduate level practicing educators often refer to altering their pedagogy by changing curriculum or by engaging in any of the several projects that I described here.

After I grade the papers, I ask students for permission to quote them, and I request and keep papers that detail unique accounts of their findings. It should be noted that while this work analyzes action research about social class, issues of race and gender are woven into the fabric of the class and that data has been reported in other work (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). This article focuses upon a few of the assignments that pertain specifically to the formal action-research papers that I received about social class.

It is important to note that the insights that students gain are as varied as are the students. There is no predictable "aha" moment, and for some the realization that social class disparities exist is more momentous than for others. It is clear from the papers, class conversations and personal correspondence that I receive from students that they are able to transcend normative assumptions (meritocracy, bootstraps myth and victim blaming rationalizations) that they often possess at the beginning of the assignment. That transformation is embedded in the process throughout the enactment of the assignment as is illustrated by the following examples of student work.

Amamda Yarcho chose to volunteer in a soup kitchen. Not unlike many others who participate in action research, she experienced a cultural awakening for which she was unprepared. Many students conclude that the experience is one that is unforgettable. For example, in 1998 Amanda wrote:

> I began this experience with an open mind and the naiveté of my white, middle class, suburban upbringing. Poor and homeless people were blank faces that we heard about in school and donated clothes or money to, not anyone I had ever met. I soon discovered much more about the impoverished population [in our city] than ever could have been learned from a textbook.

Throughout her assignment Amanda encountered homeless women with small

babies, people who were mentally ill and people who were literally starving. She noted that the soup kitchen at which she volunteered had regular patrons, many of whom forced her to look at her self and her own life differently. She was surprised to learn of the extent of the hunger from which people were suffering:

> It took only a short while for me to realize how often the people there visit the soup kitchen: every day. Those within the old decaying walls of that basement found friends, neighbors, and confidants who knew their problems and took the time to listen. This small community provides food, shelter, and friends for those deprived of these necessities. Not only did the people visit the kitchen frequently, they went through the food line countless times. I saw several people return up to five times for more food, each time professing their hunger. One man whispered after his fourth trip through the line, "I am so hungry. This is the only meal I'll get today."

As she left the soup kitchen for the last time she wrote: "My mind raced with all the lessons and the experiences I remembered and the people I'd never forget."

Kincheloe has written: "In a sense, critical action researchers relearn the ways they have come to view the world around them-indeed, they awaken from the modernist dream with its unexamined landscape of knowledge and unimaginative consciousness construction" (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 77).

Other students have compared institutions in high-and low- income areas of the city. Bernadette Noone set out to compare two local libraries. One of the libraries was located in an urban tract where 43.2% of the families lived below the poverty level and where the mean household income was $21,271. She immediately became aware of the links among poverty, race and education noting that the racial makeup in the low-income area was 77% African American, 19.9% white, and 3.1 % other. In addition she found that only about 65% of the residents were high school graduates. She compared it with a tract which was comprised of 97.3% Whites, 0.6% African Americans and 2.1% other, where 91.9% were high school graduates and 44.3% held a bachelor or advanced degree and in which the mean household income was $101,767. In addition she observed the following:

> [At the low income library] I immediately noticed the hours posted on the door because they seemed so short: Monday, noon-8:30 p.m.; Tuesday-Saturday 9:00-5:30 p.m. and closed Sunday. The librarian I talked to estimated there to be around 15,000 books...I found there to be eight rows of non-fiction books, seven rows of fiction books including one which had books with large print, one row of video material, a small audio visual section, and about ninety magazines and five newspapers. The magazines and newspapers, including previous editions, were just stacked on the shelves in a disorderly manner... There were two personal computers and one electronic typewriter and eight computers that could be used to search the card catalog or the Internet. Two computers in the children's section had supplemental material for a variety of school subjects. There were only about four quiet study booths in a separate room in addition to a few study tables.

When she contrasted the library in the low-income area with the one in the high-income area she was amazed. The high-income branch had longer hours: Monday-Thursday 9:00 a.m. -9:00 p.m. and Friday and Saturday 9:00 a.m. -6:00 p.m. It too was closed on Sunday. She also found a computer room with two PCs and a MacIntosh, six computers in the children's section to search the card catalog and Internet and one additional computer with supplemental educational material. The library contained 13 additional computers, 4 of which were new. There were numerous study tables and 14 quiet study areas. She counted 130 magazines and 12 newspapers arranged neatly and alphabetically. In addition the rows of books were at least twice as long as those found at the other branch, and the shelves were significantly higher. She wrote:

> The librarian at the information desk informed me that there were about 100,000 books at this branch. I noticed nine rows of non-fiction, five rows of fiction, twelve rows of children's books divided into young adult, juvenile fiction, picture books, fairly tales and reference books. There was also a row for large print books, one row for video material and one for audio-visual material. There were tax forms, consumer information, and travel and career pamphlets. There were even books from Oprah's book club.

Perhaps most surprising for all of the students who engage in this particular activity is the fact that the money allocated to each branch of the library is contingent upon its circulation: the more frequently the library is open and the more books it possesses, the more money it is able to generate through circulation. For Bernadette the conclusion was obvious:

> The aspirations, behaviors, and beliefs that you hold are likely to be affected by the events and surroundings in your everyday life. Those with wealth and power enjoy the benefits of quality schools and communities with resources.

And she concurred with Gollnick and Chinn (1994) who have noted "Powerless groups continually obtain fewer of the good things in life" (p. 45).

She later confided that she was astonished at the disparity and would never have conceded that such differences existed had she not seen them for herself. She further acknowledged that doing the assignment had caused her to rethink her own positionality of social class and the benefits it accorded her. Before the activity she assumed that an institution like a public library would most certainly have provided uniform services throughout the city. For this student a moment of intellectual transcendence occurred when she recognized that, unlike her previous assumptions, social class is a significant factor in the existing disparities. Formerly she had attributed most differences to race and had been unaware of the importance of social class. During her visits she noted that mostly European Americans were utilizing the high-income library and that the population at the low-income library was exclusively African American. Because one of the requirements of the activity is to gather the demographic data, she was able to understand the convergence of income

and race. Thus she was able to link issues of social class with racism. She valued the activity because it was experiential and because she learned more than she ever could have by just reading the statistics.

Jason Ball who compared two other high-and low-income libraries concurred and recognized the psychological impact of these quality-of- life issues.

> The implications of having to use these libraries are obvious: those who use the high income branch have distinct educational benefits over those who use the low income branch in terms of available reading materials, resources and a quality learning environment. Basically the children at the low income branch are being treated as second best. This can have a damaging psychological impact on children by making them believe that they are not equal to the children that have better facilities.

Another student, Adam Marks, noted similar conditions in his comparison of two libraries.

> If you live in a low income area, then you become accustomed to not having access to resources that most of us take for granted. These things may include a nice car (or a car at all for that matter), a nice place to live, etc. I would not have listed access to information as one of those things [prior to doing this activity.] After my research, I am forced to list this item as well. Access to information is supposed to be an inalienable right of all citizens in a democracy. By under funding libraries in low income areas society is denying this right to financially poorer members. This perpetuates the substandard education that low income people receive, and continuing this cycle assures that they, children of low income parents will stay in that social class.

Quoting Golden (1996) he noted:

> "In order to be outraged against the injustice we face, we must first feel a basic sense that we deserve better. Having more resources conditions you to assume that things will come your way. Not having them—well you get the hang of it." (p. 155)

Action research provides a vehicle for understanding that neither the high-income or the low-income condition is normative or endemic. Both are the product of inequitable social relationships. Further, action research has enabled many students to note the fallacy of meritocracy. One student concluded that if we teach children that those who work hard are rewarded with success and material wealth and resources, then must it not be the case that children who live in poverty will conclude that they are unworthy because their efforts have somehow failed to produce equitable conditions?

Among the more popular assignments were those in which students compared grocery stores located in high-and low-income areas. Jennifer Sniegowski wrote:

> As I set out to do my investigation, I hoped to find rather similar qualities of food products, even though I supposed that the surrounding neighborhoods and store

quality might not be equal. I was sadly mistaken. ...Upon entering the parking lot and looking at the building [in the low-income neighborhood] I could not help but notice that the there were large signs promoting the sale of liquor and lottery tickets. As I entered the store I immediately noticed the smell, stale, old, and dirty... there were not real price markings and if prices were marked, it was either written on the package or on a small yellow piece of paper written in pen. The store had no real selection of anything. I counted only four different brands of bread, ...the only choices were white and wheat. ...The meat that I observed would be the last thing that I would ever purchase from that store. The meat was very fatty with almost 1/2inch thick layer of fat around the edges of steaks...The ground beef was pale pink and grayish, and all of it expired that day. The cube steaks and English cut roast were both very fatty and had dark brown areas with tints of green.

At the high-income store she found eleven different brands of bread and many different types. The meats all appeared to be fresh and bright pink to red in color, and none had expiration dates less than a week from the day she shopped. Most of the fat had been cut off of the meat products, and there were a larger variety of meats plus chicken with the skin removed, which she interpreted to be healthier than what she had observed in the previous store. Jennifer linked her observations to work by Travers (1996), who noted that low-income households consume more fat and tend to have diets lower in fiber than people from middle-and high-income households. She surmised that:

Children in the underclass neighborhood start out being disadvantaged by having decreased nutritional levels due to the poor intake of nutrients from their mothers and the continued intake of nutrients [from the food] they buy. These findings also seem to imply that due to the inaccessibility of quality goods, poorer people would need to go further to access healthy food and live healthy lifestyles.

And she concluded:

I cannot forget the look of the meat and how dirty and unkempt the low income store was. To walk down those aisles with the choices poor people have shames me to think that I have done nothing to help local people of this area.

Engaging in these activities lays bare social class inequities and the assumptions students bring with them to teacher education. Reflective self-analysis in the form of action research causes students to consider how they might alter the institutionalized inequities that they find, thus fulfilling a goal of an MCSR approach. Some write to the stores that they visit; others have written to government officials. Others learn to question their pedagogy. Students who are teachers have contacted local libraries to discuss the social-class disparities, and created food pantries and clothing drives at their schools. Others have initiated opportunities within their social studies, English and sociology courses to include readings and films that call attention to issues of poverty and social class inequities; and some have created opportunities to replicate the social class action-research projects in

their own schools. Several students have begun to re-think their own social-class positionalities. For example after volunteering at a local soup kitchen one graduate student from a high-income family organized a family trip in California that included having her children work with her in an urban homeless shelter. The family has incorporated the activity into their trips throughout the country.

Yet another student was influenced by our reading of Jonathon Kozol's book, *Savage Inequalities*. After establishing a clothes closet as part of her action research project at the school in which she is a teacher, she e-mailed Rosie O'Donnell on the day on which Kozol appeared on her television show. The graduate student and teacher, Carey Gates, later received a call from a philanthropist friend of Rosie's who arranged for a truckload of books and supplies to be delivered to the low-income school at which she teaches. While it is difficult to measure the impact of course work upon these actions, what is clear is that throughout the past decade numerous students have been inspired to go beyond what is traditionally regarded as classroom learning and many admit to having done so as a result of the initial action-research projects.

Summary

Certainly it is the case that one course cannot provide students with comprehensive knowledge about the links among culture, power, and ideology as they relate to social class. However, it is clear from the body of action research and anecdotal data that I have accumulated that during the action-research assignments students begin to make links among those crucial elements. When incorporated into a social reconstructionist framework, action-research projects help some develop connections between their lived biographies and those of people, such as the poor, who have historically been marginalized. In addition because of the participatory nature of the assignment, action research helps students and teachers produce a new and more relevant knowledge base from which to theorize about solutions to social problems. Gaventa (1993) has noted:

> Participatory research attempts to break down the distinction between the re-searchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production, by the participation of the people for themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. In the process research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and the development of conscious-ness, and of mobilization for action. (p. 34)

The opportunity to engage in action research allows some students to transcend normative assumptions and begin to question what epistemological and pedagogical implications might be embedded in their own belief systems, as evidenced by an example from earlier research. Matt Sheiber analyzed a walk to school through a high-and low- income neighborhood (See Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). As a classroom teacher Matt concluded:

> The potential exists through education to contribute to the development in children of alternative answers to the questions of why economic differences exist. Rather than ignore the social context or treat it as normative in either [a high or a low income] school—and thereby let the child eventually stumble on the question and the inevitable damaging answers about what causes economic differences—educators could actively engage students in analyzing different socio-economic environments. By forcing, in a systematic way, the inevitable questions about why the privileged are privileged and why the poor are poor, educators can offer alternative possibilities to self-deprecating or discriminatory answers. Teachers of the privileged can enable students to recognize their privilege as such and challenge them to consciousness for social justice. Teachers of the oppressed can enable students to recognize their oppression and begin to develop strategies and coalitions for challenging the unjust structures. (class assignment)

Implications of the Study

Some authors have asserted that critical reflection and problem solving, which are inherent parts of the action research described herein, enables capable individuals to make sense of challenging situations, identify areas of practice for scrutiny, pursue appropriate actions and solutions through the reconstruction of knowledge (Yost et al., 2000, p. 40). Debunking the rhetoric of meritocracy and analyzing the mythology that surrounds social class is essential if we are to create a teaching force that understands the fabric of the lives of today's public school children. In combination action research, MCSR and positionality help students frame social class in their own unique ways and have the potential to alter the intellectual landscape of those who will be teachers. By becoming aware of the impact that social class has on the everyday lives of the students whom they will teach, teachers can create pedagogy and discourse that can be both revolutionary and evolutionary. Action research that problematizes social class, helps to alter the implicit dominant ideological belief structure about what children are capable of achieving, and frees educators to create opportunities that they perceived were unattainable for low income children. For example, prospective educators might integrate their understanding of social-class to create standardized tests that are sensitive to class inequities; they could investigate the No Child Left Behind initiative and mount substantive alternatives to it; they might interrogate the use of school vouchers as well as numerous other educational initiatives that ignore the implications of social-class disparities. In addition critical action research has implications for how teacher-education students negotiate field work placements, student teaching assignments and methods courses.

Finally, studies such as this one have implications for the broader society. Feagin and Feagin (2001) point out that many social problems in American society are deeply rooted in our social-class system and that social class relations "regularly shape the everyday lives of every American" (p. 64).

An inequitable social-class structure has implications for the nation's chronic unemployment among some groups, as well as the low literacy and high dropout rates in American public schools. They have asserted,

> A reasonably equal distribution of wealth and income, and thus of dignity, could reduce crime by removing the causes of much property and personal crime. There would be less economic pressure for people to steal, and the economic motives for such crimes as assault and murder would be reduced substantially. In addition much of the economic and political pressure for oppressed minorities and the poor to revolt would be removed from the society. These changes could reduce much civil disobedience now labeled "crime." Corporate crime would be eliminated from the society since there would be no secretive corporate class that cold change artificially high prices or dump dangerous products on unsuspecting consumers. (Feagin & Feagin 1990, pp. 466-67)

Unless teacher educators problematize and question underlying social-class assumptions, prospective teachers will continue to transmit the social class biases of the culture. Articulating the relationship between the school and the student's community and home environment is paramount to creating successful academic outcomes for all students in American schools. The Holmes Group (1995) noted that

> Serving a diverse group of students more effectively requires knowing more about the out-of-school lives of these children. For the TSE (Tomorrow's School of Education) the mission is clear: those who work in the schools cannot do the best job possible for students whose lives outside the classroom are a mystery to them (Holmes Group, 1995, 46). And they add "Finally, the TSE should also help the student fashion field experiences in neighborhoods and even in homes where they can get to know more intimately people who are unfamiliar to them. Ultimately, to know a child or anyone else, is to become familiar with the texture of the soil from which that person sprung." (p.46)

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