White Student Teachers' Capacity to Consult Schoolchildren of Color

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Abstract
Student teachers are rarely encouraged by experienced educators to consult schoolchildren to understand teaching and learning. Sometimes student teachers are not encouraged because of a believed incapacity to interact discernibly with schoolchildren—a belief stemming from minimal life experiences with people unlike themselves. Notions of deficiency attributed to urban youngsters may offer another explanation. Using a phenomenological perspective, this study demonstrates the capacity of eight White graduate student teachers, who, when urged to consult urban schoolchildren of color, to understand teaching and learning, were able to engage youngsters in meaningful conversation.

The Problem

Student teachers are rarely encouraged by teacher educators, university supervisors, or classroom/cooperating teachers to consult schoolchildren to understand teaching and learning. While this lack of encouragement from experienced educators may stem from a belief that only they have "the answers," notions about student teacher incapacity posit other reasons. Typically, undergraduate student teachers are in their early twenties, with graduate prospective teachers in their mid-twenties, and those entering the profession as career changers in their thirties (Chambers, 2002; Murname, Singer, Willet, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991). Some experienced educators reason that the minimal life and professional experiences among student teachers are obstacles that preclude them from being able to discernibly talk with and listen to youngsters about schooling (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lincoln, 1995). Issues of authority may be other reasons. For example, regarding school-age children as professional resources challenges the historical hierarchy of grown-ups as omniscient and young people as unknowing (Cook-Sather, 2002, Glickman, 1998; Habashi, 2005). Add the situation of a pupil's race—which if dark hued is usually associated with deficiency—and arrive at yet another supposition as to why student teachers are not commonly urged by experienced educators to consult schoolchildren about teaching and learning.

The disregard for people of color is not a new phenomenon (Davis, 2002). Intricately woven into the fabric of American schooling are notions of deficiency. Schoolchildren of color, who in large numbers live and learn in urban settings, are routinely labeled by K-12 educators as academically, motivationally, and intellectually inferior (García & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Such views posit that schoolchildren of color and their family have little interest in grasping academic concepts and comprehending subject matter. Other educators contend that urban youngsters choose to avoid learning (Ayers & Ford, 1996). Although disturbing to consider, some educators embrace the idea of Eugenics and physiological

differences in youngsters of color (Valencia, 1997). Teachers who hold notions of ineptitude about city schoolchildren are of particular concern given the demographic disparity in urban, public K-12 classrooms.

There is an overrepresentation of White preservice and in-service teachers in urban education. Within that same context, schoolchildren of color are the majority (Gay & Howard, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002). This racial disparity has instilled a sense of urgency among teacher educators and policy makers about how best to prepare and support teachers for city classrooms. Amid prevailing beliefs that White student teachers come from homogeneous backgrounds, which contrasts the diversity among city pupils, requiring student teachers to establish personal relationships with urban youngsters has been a common approach to teacher preparation (Grant & Tate, 1995; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). The goal is for student teachers access to pupil's vast sociocultural backgrounds and experiences for subsequent planning and scaffolding of appropriate classroom instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Although a plausible, the emphasis on understanding the interpersonal dimensions of urban youth is a shortcoming of this process. Little if any attention is specifically devoted to grasping youngsters academic experiences. Direct queries into children's learning histories or current schooling situations are minimal with specific requests for pupils' ideas and insights about education are rarely sought (Hernandez Sheets, 2003). To emphasize whether student teachers have capacity to talk with and listen to schoolchildren to understand teaching and learning is the purpose of this study.

The Methodology
Methods related to phenomenology were used to examine student teachers' capacity to consult schoolchildren of color for the primary purpose of grasping teaching and learning. Phenomenology seeks to locate and illuminate the essence of phenomena from an emic perspective instead of describing events from an etic vantage point (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1994; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Van Manen, 1990). As a qualitative approach, it "generates rather than tests theory" (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000, p. 634) and is fitting when examining classroom events (Van Manen, 2002b). Since K-12 schools are commonly considered places that foster literacy and numeracy, along with the current national emphasis on cognitive outcomes, it seemed appropriate to use a phenomenological stance to examine student teachers' new understandings about teaching and learning from schoolchildren.

Participants
Boris, Carmella, Jacqueline, Kameron, Lisa, Mary, Matilda, and Terri[1] were the eight participants in the study. Although a small number, it is an appropriate participant pool size (Polkinghorne, 1989). All were full time, master's degree candidates attending one of three private universities located in a major, New England city. Six participants were members of the same urban teachers' preparation cohort program. None received remuneration for their 12-16 week practicum but all earned three graduate credits except for Kameron who received six. Participants offered self-descriptions of racially White or ethnically European. Each told of growing up in low or moderate-income homes, and of attending suburban or rural K-12 public

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[1] Participants selected pseudonyms to shield identity.

schools. Professional connections with the school district and one of the universities facilitated participant recruitment.

Setting Location

The school district in the New England city served as the student teaching venue. At the time of the study, its website listed the pupil racial demographic as: 15% White, 48% Non-Hispanic Black, 28% Hispanic, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander. The high school student teachers were divided between two comprehensive schools with citywide enrollments. Jacqueline and Lisa were placed in separate 9th grade remedial literacy classrooms while Matilda and Terri were placed in 11th grade history, and American Literature. The city's prominent magnet middle school hosted Boris and Kameron. Both worked with 6th, 7th, and 8th grade youngsters in advanced, general education, and IEP curriculum tracks. Carmella and Mary were placed in separate 4th and 5th grade classrooms in the same elementary school. Although located in a neighborhood surging in gentrification, the majority of the elementary pupils were of African and Latino descent.

Data Collection Procedures and Sources

To gather data semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and observations of teaching events were conducted. Additional data sources included reaction papers written in response to the teaching event, and reflection journals. Since a phenomenological research perspective requires researcher subjectivity—a shifting of researcher "authority" to the background and situating the voice and perspective of participants in the foreground (Van Manen, 1990). The following bracketing process was completed: (a) no sharing with participants any prior personal experiences of learning from city schoolchildren; (b) maintaining a research log to record study concerns and participant issues; (c) avoiding the use of a priori codes, criteria, or categories during data analysis; and (d) analyzing the data to demonstrate particularized not generalized phenomena (Van Manen, 1990). This bracketing process also helped to minimize validity and authenticity concerns.

Encouraging Consultation

Encouraging student teachers to consult schoolchildren was integral to the study. During the initial interview, participants received verbal and written information about children as professional resources via "wonderful ideas "(Duckworth, 1987; 2001), "pupil consultation" (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004) schoolchildren as "critical friends" (Bambino, 2002; Featherstone et al., 1997), and honoring student voice (Cook-Sather, 2002; Glickman, 1998; Lincoln, 1995). During subsequent interviews, participants were asked whether they had actualized any of the theories. A Post Teaching Interview Guide for Children for children was designed and distributed to aid participants in gathering information from the pupils. The guide included seven questions such as, "Tell me what you liked/disliked about today's lesson" and "what should I remember when I teach again?" Journal and reaction paper prompts urged participants to write about their new understandings resulting from the schoolchildren.

Data Analysis

Scrutiny of the corpus of data followed Van Manen's (1990) thematic analysis. Below are the findings of the analytic process.

Findings

Student Teachers' Capacity to Consult Schoolchildren about Teaching and Learning

　　Albeit to varying degrees, the eight White student teachers in this study demonstrated capacity to consult urban schoolchildren of color to understand teaching and learning. This was apparent through idiomatic expressions, prefacing statements, direct inquiries, and collective and individual consultative interviews.

　　Student teachers demonstrated their capacity to consult schoolchildren through idiomatic expressions. Although the rationale for using idioms was unspecified, gaining awareness about classroom events was the apparent goal. For example, Carmella's desire to "get at the root of what's going on," revealed her objective to figure out classroom happenings. Lisa's intent to "keep her finger on the pulse of the class" meant she did not want to lose sight of pupil activity.

　　Another demonstration of capacity prevailed when student teachers used prefacing statements. Prefacing statements were verbal precursors that student teachers used to situate themselves before asking questions. Prefacing statements were reminders about being a student teacher and new to teaching. Lisa stated, "I tell them I am brand new at this and I want to know what they think I can do to make it better." Terri compared herself to the children stating she needed information because she was learning as they were. Mary indicated, "I am a new teacher and that I have not done this before and if you have any suggestions for me…." Student teachers used prefacing statement to substantiate questions.

　　Student teachers consulted youngsters by posing questions of them. Mary raised queries of, "How did that work? Was that interesting to you? And do you think that you learned something" while Terri asked, "Do you think this works, not works, should we trash it?" and "What do you guys think about…?" This line of questioning represented participants' straightforward attempts to gather information about instruction from schoolchildren.

　　Student teachers' also demonstrated capacity to consult school-age children via collective and individual consultations. Through interviews, student teachers sought information from the youngsters en masse. For elementary teachers, collective consultations occurred when escorting schoolchildren to and from the playground or cafeteria. For middle schoolteachers, the consultations happened when accompanying pupils between classes and the cafeteria. An illustration of this is Boris's routine practice of stopping pupils in the corridor before entering the classroom to explain the task awaiting them. After he spoke, the youngsters were permitted to ask clarifying questions and offer responsive comments.

　　For high school teachers, collective interviews happened within the classroom as a mini lesson. Terri's "Heart to Heart" talk with eleventh graders exemplifies collective interviewing.

> Yesterday we had a big Heart to Heart [talk]. I had to really think about how I wanted to teach writing and the actual unit because a couple of my students who worked really hard, seemed to shut down after I gave them their paper back. I thought of [the Heart to Heart] myself…. I knew that I wanted to talk with them. I was really frustrated, so my supervisor helped me come up with a plan for how to use a Heart to Heart to approach. I asked the [children] if they had ever had a Heart to

Heart…. about what it means, and then about the paper. I only gave them a week to do the assignment and they told me that was not enough time.

The Heart-to-Heart talk provided Terri with insight about her teaching. First, Terri recognized that despite devoting class time to the essays, she discovered one week was an insufficient amount of time to complete the assignment successfully. Second, she realized that allowing children to provide evaluative information was helpful in handling her frustration. Further, this example illustrates how the university supervisor supported Terri in her desire to consult the schoolchildren. In addition to seeking information from children in whole groups, student teachers consulted schoolchildren about instructional matters individually and in small groups.

Student teachers consulted pupils one-on-one or privately in small groups of fewer than four. Among middle and high school teachers, the individual interviews were to avoid "embarrassing children in front of their friends" according to Kameron. Individual consultations occurred when teachers wanted to understand why children were off task. Individual consultations commonly happened after school and were unplanned and planned. Boris used the one-on-one time he spent with a 7th grade boy after school to query him spontaneously about school while Jacqueline and Matilda always planned their individual interviews. Jacqueline wrote in her journal about how she used after school time to query ninth graders about her classroom instruction and management.

In another effort to analyze my effectiveness in the classroom, and to highlight areas that need change, I try talking to the students when they are hanging around the classroom at the end of the day. I ask them about their experiences in the class; to tell me things that they enjoy…dislike…want to change and…recommend remain the same."

Although Matilda preferred individual interviews, small group chats often resulted.

Once after school, I saw a boy and asked him, "Do you have a minute? Can you come and talk to me for five minutes?' He said, 'yes' and then, another girl asked if she could talk to me too. I didn't feel right saying no. Then another time the same thing happened and another kid, who was hanging around ended up joining in on the interview.

Conversely, Carmella planned her talks with fourth graders. In conjunction with her master's thesis, she consulted Sonia, the only Latina, and Armando, one of three males, in the 4th grade class, to assess her use of multicultural materials.

During my interview with Sonia…I was surprised to hear… she clearly considered her culture Salvadoran, not Latino. When asked if she thought of her culture as Salvadoran, or Latino/Spanish-speaking, she quite firmly told me, "Salvador."

My interview with Armando offered a slightly different slant on how he defined his culture. When asked if he considered his culture as Central American, from Honduran, (where his family comes from), or Latino/Spanish-speaking, he told me Central American. As I plan a reading unit for Sonia's class that focuses on a Latino

author, it is now apparent to me that writers should be from El Salvador and another Central American country if I want the [children] to see their culture represented.

Although working with elementary schoolchildren, Carmella's appreciation of their perspectives was apparent in the design of her inquiry project. Interviewing the children was an integral aspect of her action plan. The time Carmella spent consulting schoolchildren strengthen her value of their insight.

These examples of consulting schoolchildren are of note. First, student teachers demonstrated capacity to consult youngsters. Participants developed verbal strategies to approach youngsters and request information. Student teachers decided whether to make a statement or raise questions.

Second, although the statements and questions emanated from the student teachers, they arose in response to the study's focus on consulting schoolchildren to comprehend teaching and learning. Participants were encouraged to consider schoolchildren of color as professional resources, which they did albeit to varying degrees.

Third, seeking input and advice from urban schoolchildren of color presents them in a positive light, which counters notions of deficiency. As abovementioned, when teachers assume that urban schoolchildren of color have "limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (Valencia, 1997, p. 2) deficit thinking prevails. However, the student teachers in this study had high regard for pupils' feedback and ideas. In fact, a quote from Jacqueline's journal is given as a fitting summary, "the [children] had a lot to offer to me. Their feedback was very important…."

Conclusion
Whether as idiomatic expressions, direct queries, prefacing statements, or consultative interviews, White student teachers engaged in meaningful talks with urban schoolchildren of color. This is significant because it challenges the argument that student teachers' lack the capacity to discernibly talk with and listen to schoolchildren about teaching and learning.

As previously mentioned, the goal of this study was to generate data and present information in useful ways for others to draw on during current practice or future research. Ideally, these findings will advance the practice and scholarly inquiry of urging student teachers to consult youngsters to make sense of teaching and learning, especially as a way to prepare White student teachers to work with pupils of color. The findings are a means to an end rather than an end.

Educational researchers should realize that student teachers have capacity to interact with and to learn from school-age youngsters in discerning ways. However, research that explores the theoretical aspects of talking with and listening to schoolchildren is one way to advance the concept. Particularized rather than generalized data provide opportunities for teacher educators and researchers to consider, analyze, "rework, and adjust practice" (Carini, 2001, p. 125). The patterns and commonalities among these data offer useful information and perspectives for educational inquiry into consulting schoolchildren. The concept exists and findings from this study are available for academic consideration.

Moreover, given the current racial disparity between White student teachers and urban schoolchildren of color, exploring ways to urge student teachers to consult youngsters about teaching and learning is an innovate yet useful modification of the student teaching apprentice model. The current classroom based-field experience has its origins in a time when cultural and social sameness between teachers and pupils was prevalent in public schools. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the apprentice model placed same race preservice and in-service schoolchildren together in the same classroom (McIntyre, Byrd, and Foxx, 1996). Issues of ethnic and cultural diversity were not paramount, leaving student teachers to make sense of teaching and learning from a monocultural dimension. However, with the 1970s surge of racial integration in public schools discovering the contributions of historically ignored groups and developing ways to incorporate their experiences into the curriculum became the new emphasis in the apprentice model. Providing student teachers with the rationale, methodology, and encouragement to consult youngsters to create meaningful learning experiences offers additional and authentic opportunities for professional growth.

This study does present one caveat. The participants were graduate student teachers with prior experiences atypical of White preservice teachers. Unlike the prevailing view that White student teachers represent homogenous, encapsulated lives, the backgrounds of the student teachers in this study are vast and varied. Perhaps then, the ability to comprehend information from schoolchildren stems unique practical life experiences and chronological development. Maybe the range of personal and professional endeavors fosters the capacity of White student teachers' positive responsiveness to being encouraged to consult schoolchildren of color.

Finally, a prerequisite to researching or teaching about the notion of consulting urban schoolchildren to grasp meaningful instruction necessitates purging deficit thinking. All too often city youngsters are deemed part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Labeling their lives as marginalized and their experiences as minimal leaves little room for schoolchildren of color to have a direct impact on teaching and learning. Developing ways to talk with and learn from schoolchildren is a way to gather information about their educational successes and failures, and in turn, use such details to enhance learning and reform schooling. Consulting pupils of color helps to transcend dispositions of deficit thinking towards urban schoolchildren of color.

American democracy espouses equal regard for each of its members. Relative to schools and classrooms, its members include schoolchildren who should have full participation and parallel representation in all facets of the learning experience (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Shor, 2000). If American schools are considered places where democracy thrives, it is important that the perspective of all of its members have the opportunity to contribute to its existence and improvement. To advance this idea, teacher educators, university supervisors, and classroom/cooperating teachers must find ways to urge and facilitate student teachers to purposefully talk with and listen to schoolchildren about teaching and learning. Such professional activity will assuredly help prospective teachers become effective practitioners.

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