

## Urban Teachers Engaged in Critical Reflection and Action

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It is common for teachers to have low expectations of students who demonstrate low achievement. These students are often tracked into remedial and low-level classes in elementary and secondary schools. This tracking results in stratification by race and class (Meier, England, & Stewart, 1989). Students tend to remain in low tracks throughout their schooling, thereby learning less than their peers (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). When students learn less, their low achievement reinforces teachers' low expectations as well as teachers' low efficacy in their ability to make a difference (Carey, 1989; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995).

The urban Midwestern school district in which our study took place implements common patterns of differentiation: Elementary schools sort students into leveled reading and mathematics groupings; some middle schools track students into honors and "regular" courses; and the high schools track students into academic (low), honors, and advanced placement (AP) courses. And, concurrent with extant research (Allington, 1991; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Tobin, Seiler, & Walls, 1999), the students in the lower achievement groups generally experience low-level, uninteresting, unmotivating curriculum while the students in the higher groups are more likely to experience inquiry-based and engaging pedagogy (Oakes & Lipton, 1994). Therefore, differing expectations of students are embedded and reinforced systemically in this district.

This school district of over 45,000 students has more students of color, students receiving free or reduced lunch, and students who are English language learners than any of the other five contiguous districts in this city. At the time of the study, the district was engaged in the third year of a five-year funded project aimed at increasing students' mathematics and science achievement through systemic change. To meet this goal, some teachers chose to enroll in a graduate certificate program in urban education through a local university. The program requires courses in mathematics and/or science content and pedagogy. However, the research about low-achieving students, especially low-achieving students of color and students from high-poverty homes, demonstrates that effective teaching requires more than knowledge about content and methods.

### Weaving Complex Factors in Urban Education

The participants in this study were fifty-six elementary and secondary science and/or mathematics teachers who began the program with a course, "Contemporary Issues in Urban Education." The two authors of this paper each teach sections of this course. It is designed to contextualize teachers' increased knowledge of content and pedagogy and engage teachers in critical reflection. To accomplish this goal, participants read and discussed scholarly literature about urban schools, teachers and students. One component of the course focuses on the educational disparities that occur as a direct result of assumptions school systems make about what counts as knowledge, how that knowledge is assessed, and how students are subsequently taught (Apple, 1993). An overlapping component of the course addresses students' culture since students' ways of knowing and background experiences that impact their knowledge construction are culturally situated. For example, it is common for many African American, Native American, and Hispanic American students to take an oppositional stance to education

(Ogbu, 1992). These students often resist the expectations of school so that they may maintain a sense of cultural independence.

Effective teachers understand these issues and successfully teach historically underachieving students through culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), caring, high-expectations (Irvine, 1999) pedagogy, drawing from the students' and their community's funds of knowledge (Moll, 1993). These teachers understand the economic, societal and educational causes of low achievement but also feel responsible for their students' learning, persisting in meeting their students' needs that result in effectively teaching their urban students (Haberman, 1995a). Students substantiate these characteristics of successful urban teachers (Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Students for Cultural and Linguistic Democracy, 1996). Some readings, therefore, wove together culture, content standards, and pedagogy. To further concretize the relationships between students, teaching, and learning, the teachers in this study also read examples of research that document increased achievement of previously low-performing urban students. These readings have the potential to increase teachers' efficacy to positively impact *their* low-achieving students' knowledge and school success (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

Educational contexts, as well as state policies and funding, impact the work of educators (Haberman, 1995b; Placier & Hamilton, 1994). As we examined the urbanization process and its impact on schools (Anyon, 1997) through scholarly research, participants in the course also read articles from the local popular press and heard speakers discuss the history of the city and school district (such as red-lining practices that prevented African Americans and Latinos from buying real estate in certain areas, and spending caps imposed on this district but not others).

Participants also examined data about local health care, lead in their students' neighborhoods (this city was recently declared a Super Fund site due to lead in the soil) and welfare regulations that affect many of their students. Our purpose was to provide teachers with information that allowed them to develop a more complete picture of their low-achieving students than the simplistic perspective that sees these children as having deficits (Hilliard, 1997).

## Data and Analysis

Collected over four semesters, the online data used for this study included on-line discussion boards that served as a vehicle for 1) identifying local issues in young adult novels, 2) describing reactions to local and national articles about urban issues, and 3) responding to research journal articles about culture and pedagogy and about effective mathematics and science teaching in urban schools as a framework for discussions.

Follow-up interviews were used to determine the perceived impact of the course on participants' beliefs and pedagogy. Following the format of Denzin's (1978) nonscheduled standardized interview, the same questions and probes were used for all participants, but the order of the prompts was varied to be responsive to each participant. The interviews were conducted after the participants had completed the course, but included participants who had recently finished the class as well as those who had taken the class the previous year. This variation was sought to provide both a short-term as well as a long-term perspective.

Weinstein (1996) identifies three essential components of effective change: 1) confronting and changing the entrenched beliefs about students' differential needs that result in differential expectations and teaching, 2) attention and commitment to teaching practices that are effective with low-achieving students rather than the continued practice of repetition and slower-paced instruction, and 3) a process for change that effectively engages educators and the community.

This research evaluates one attempt to accomplish these goals. The purposes of this research were 1) to describe urban teachers' understandings of the political, economic, cultural, and educational forces that explain the low achievement of many of their students; and 2) to describe their subsequent actions with students, colleagues, and/or school community to affect equitable educational opportunities for their students. Freire (1993) defined these processes, namely critical reflection and action, as praxis.

The researchers used systematic qualitative methodology and inductive analysis for this study. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach was employed as a framework for the data analysis of this research including the processes of microscopic coding, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, coding for process and the creation of a conditional/consequential matrix. Specifically, the framework guiding this research was the constructivist interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Data analysis began with the very first set of emerging categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and continued as the initial categories were refined into consolidated themes. The stages (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) of category coding, refinement of categories, exploration of the relationships across categories, and the understandings of the integrated data helped identify the meanings from within the data sources. This type of inductive data analysis was most appropriate as this research sought to identify themes in the teachers' understandings as they were impacted by the experiences of the coursework.

#### Findings: Teachers as Change Agents

Although this data set yielded multiple results, for the purpose of this paper we focused on the theme of the participants' perceptions of their role as an agent of change in their educational setting as they described their understandings of the forces related to the low achievement of their students. In addition, this perception of self-efficacy also played a role in the participants' descriptions of their actions. The perceptions fell into three major categories of *encouraged*, *empowered*, and *conflicted*.

Those who made statements in the *encouraged* category often recognized possibilities for initiating change and felt as if they had enough knowledge to implement new ideas in their classrooms or schools. These participants expressed a desire to learn ways to address the underlying issues they had discovered. In general, those in the encouraged category felt as though they could make a difference in the lives of the children they teach.

The category of *empowered* participants found the course information an affirmation of what they were currently trying to do in their classrooms. These participants believe that they are enacting effective pedagogy in two ways: they feel empowered to teach the content effectively and they also feel empowered to provide a nurturing environment that is conducive to the multiple physical, emotional, and academic needs of their students. In sum, these participants perceived they were addressing the issues underlying the low achievement of their urban students.

Perhaps the most crucial category of self-efficacy as an agent of change was in the findings of the *conflicted* participants. These statements generally fell into three subcategories of those who would like to enact change but could not communicate how it would happen, those who agreed that change was necessary but focused on obstacles rather than opportunities, and those who had felt empowered enough to try some strategies but were now discussing the difficulties of putting their ideas into action. Overall, the participants who were conflicted in

their approach to effective and equitable educational practices often described systemic and/or personal obstacles that kept them from engaging in these practices.

## Discussion

These teachers demonstrated various levels of understanding of the inequitable power relationships that contribute to the low achievement of many urban students. Likewise, they demonstrated various levels of self-efficacy as change agents in the lives of their students. Efforts designed to enhance the educational opportunities for previously low-achieving urban children cannot be implemented or sustained without committed educators who are given more than just theoretical knowledge of how to teach to every child. They must also understand the local perspective and develop pedagogical tools with which they may create real, critical, and equitable educational change. Vital to this issue is the ability for teachers to want to create change and feel as if they are able to make a difference. As teachers within schools and a district believe that they are able to successfully educate their students, their collective efficacy will create a social norm that encourages these beliefs (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000) and socially just pedagogy.

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