

REDISCOVERING GOOD TEACHING: EXPLORING SELFHOOD AND SOLIDARITY IN URBAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper describes the experiences of preservice teachers developing deeper understanding of themselves and diverse students through participation in the Philadelphia Urban Seminar. The Seminar focuses on the reconstruction of more complete understanding of urban students and urban communities by combining field experience in Philadelphia with profession development, service projects and contact with community members and organizations. Field notes, transcriptions of interviews and meetings, as well as reflective writing are analyzed using the framework of Solidarity (Rorty, 1998). Findings suggest that specific models of field experience and reflection are necessary to adequately prepare beginning teachers to work in urban classrooms.

Keywords: Preservice teachers, urban communities, Selfhood and Solidarity

This paper began in early 2002 when new federal educational policy suggested, and eventually demanded, a particular definition of a good teacher. This policy, which began as *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and is now known as *Race to the Top* (Department of Education, 2009), employs a conception of good teaching that involves standardizing both the content good teachers were expected to know and the methods good teachers were expected to use to communicate this content. As a result of this policy, school districts and individual schools have adopted regulatory practices that enforce particular pedagogical models across all grade levels and narrow curriculum to focus on preparation for high stakes tests (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hill, 2007; Cawelti, 2006). Within the policies, there's no clear definition of what counts as a "qualified teacher," an "effective teacher," or a "good teacher" for any school, let alone an urban school, beyond passage of standardized content tests. This paper will not propose a definition of a good teacher either, but instead will try to extend the conception of good teaching to include a number of qualities that seem absent from any conception of qualified, effective, or good teaching available in the literature.

In a charitable sense, *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* have shed important light on the lack of educational opportunities in urban schools. However, the mandated teaching practices and narrowed curriculum have had a disproportional effect

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on the educational experiences in urban schools, and have resulted in some of the questionable teaching practices and administrative policies described so vividly in Jonathan Kozol's *Shame of the Nation* (2005) and illustrated in documentaries such as *Hard Times at Douglass High: A No Child Left Behind Report Card* (2008) Further, mandated pedagogies and narrowed content do not seem to be a pathway toward better teaching in urban classrooms, as any improvements in learning or teaching practices gained in the years since 2002 are suspicious (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2009; Meier & Wood, 2004).

This lack of progress begs the question, "What is an effective pathway to good teaching, and good teaching in urban schools in particular?" Existing research (see Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005; Cochrane-Smith and Zeichner, 2005 for many examples) has generated many frameworks and lists of the qualities of good teachers and the practices good teachers employ. However, although these lists of qualities and practices may describe good teaching in a general sense, they do not explain why teachers who possess them do not necessarily become effective teachers.

This paper will propose two potential solutions to this problem. First, one reason that descriptions of effective teaching in general fall short is that they fail to incorporate *teacher selfhood* (Palmer, 1998) in the conceptions. This failure results in teacher certification programs, school administrators, and teachers themselves overemphasizing the wrong things, such as content and teaching methods, in the preparation for and supervision of classroom practice. Secondly, a possible reason that teachers with all the requisite skills fail to teach effectively in urban schools is their inability to achieve a sense of *solidarity* (Rorty, 1989) with their students. Instead of enabling teachers to know their students in deep and meaningful ways, teachers are taught surface tricks and techniques to know students which maintain the separation between teacher and student, disabling real communication and connection. Using the Philadelphia Urban Seminar as the context, this paper will illustrate how 17 beginning teachers came to understand how they could become good teachers through the exploration and rediscovery of selfhood and solidarity.

Conceptual Framework: Selfhood and Solidarity

In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer proposes a rich, yet seemingly simple, way to connect the qualities of good teaching to the practice of good teachers. He asserts that knowledge and skills alone do not make teachers effective. What does is the way knowledge and skills are put to use in relation to each teacher's personal identity *as a teacher*. As he writes, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." (p. 10). This identity and integrity, what Palmer calls *teacher selfhood*, goes beyond classroom management skills, knowledge of child development, and sensitivity to diverse students. Teacher selfhood is a deeper commitment to deconstruct and reconstruct initial images of how teachers work in classrooms to can escape the orthodoxy of standardized methods of instruction, scripted curriculum, and rigid adherence to external mandates that can inhibit their development, particularly in urban schools. As Palmer writes, "as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes." (p. 24).

The philosophical framework of solidarity (Rorty, 1989) puts this personhood to work. Rorty writes that solidarity “is not about clearing away prejudice or burrowing into repressed anger or fear, but rather as a goal to be achieved through imagination—the ability to see unfamiliar people as fellow travelers—it is not only discovered through reflection, but is created by increasing our sensitivity to their circumstances...” (1989, xvi). The concept of solidarity provides a framework for understanding students where the distinctions between “us” (the teachers) and “them” (the students) become less clearly defined. This move toward solidarity is particularly important in urban schools and with urban students, as the myriad of bias, stereotype, and real obstacles to successful educational experiences often conflict with the well-intentioned efforts of teachers striving to become effective in urban settings (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007).

The Philadelphia Urban Seminar

The Philadelphia Urban Seminar (the Seminar) is a two-week residential course focused on urban teaching in Philadelphia. The Seminar combines 10 full days of field experience in Philadelphia public schools, professional development meetings, daily seminar meetings focused on processing the experiences in urban schools, and service projects in the neighborhoods surrounding the placement schools.

Subjects

This project focuses on 17 teacher certification students, all of whom, self-selected to participate in the Seminar in 2008. They were all traditional undergraduate students in the teacher certification program at a university in Pennsylvania. All subjects were white, and all came from suburban or rural communities. Although they all had one field experience in urban schools, none of them had any consistent contact with the kinds of schools or students they would encounter in Philadelphia before the Seminar began.

Data

Data for this paper are taken from a larger longitudinal project describing the development of this group of teacher candidates through their certification programs and into their first years of teaching. This paper focuses on transcriptions of three Seminar meetings, although the analytical framework includes transcriptions of all ten Seminar meetings as well as interviews, reflective coursework, and field notes from classroom observations. Data were continually analyzed using the constant comparative method pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Findings and Discussion

Seminar meetings centered on equipping students to unpack their daily experiences in urban classrooms through reflective discussion. The meetings juxtaposed field experiences with structured reflection as explicitly as possible, and often involved community members, experienced urban teachers, and urban students in the conversations. During the first Seminar meeting, directly after their first day in classrooms, a lengthy discussion occurred surrounding the physical space of the schools.

Most teacher candidates, although they had read books about inner-city schools and done a previous field experience in urban settings, were generally shocked by their first encounter with Philadelphia schools. Three teacher candidates began the discussion with these comments:

Tara: I was really shocked that there were 29 students and only one teacher occupying a space that might fit 15 kids comfortably. That really threw all my thoughts about teacher to student ratio and optimized learning environments out the window in about 15 seconds. There are just too many kids with really extreme level differences. If the room was a little bigger there may have been the possibility of working in small groups, but there just wasn't room—to really make the learning effective and organized.

Heather: Yeah, there are 32 kids in my room, and you can't even walk around the room without bumping into desks, and some kids don't even have desks. They sit on the windowsills with low tables piled with the teacher's stuff. It's really hard to imagine how anyone could learn in there.

Kristen: I think the thing that affected me the most was the whole respect for space thing. When I went down to the cafeteria my teacher pointed out this black shriveled-up thing in the rafters, it looked sort of like a tennis ball, and it turned out that it was an orange somebody threw up there three years ago, and I was thinking, "You have got to be kidding me." If we are setting this example that the school doesn't need to be respected, then that send the message that education doesn't need to be respected either. There were classrooms that looked like they came straight out of *The Wire*, that show on HBO? I thought that was TV, but apparently not. Like how can people function in trash and mess? Like dirty? (Personal communication, May 12, 2008).

These teacher candidates represented the dispositions of all subjects in beginning the experience thinking of the space of the classroom in the same way they thought of themselves - through a lens of normativity. They compared what a "normal" school or classroom should look like, based on whatever ideas they had about what a classroom should be, and ascribed "less than" qualities to these classrooms that didn't look "normal" or work normally.

This represented a real difficulty in encouraging beginning teachers to develop a complete sense of teacher selfhood. Liston & Zeichner (1996) write that since many beginning teachers come from homogenous communities, in essence they are "prisoners of their own experience," as they have had little contact with people and children of different background from their own. So, though these prospective teachers began the Seminar with a positive outlook, their lack of experience with diverse students prevented them from seeing the school and the children clearly, with compassion and understanding (p. 68).

A central focus of the Seminar is interrupting the "missionary mindset" (Mahoney, 2008), the idea that good teachers need to *save* the students and that the students *needed saving* from their circumstances. By seeing the positive dimensions of urban neighborhoods, though structured reflection and conversations, service projects,

and contact with community leaders, all 17 of the student teachers began to see the hope and promise their students lived within, as well as the poverty and despair. As their eyes opened to the positive dimensions of urban communities, they realized that urban students needed great teachers that recognized the valuable resources that surrounded the schools, not people to rescue them from these resources. The shift from saving students to teaching students represented a major milestone on their path to finding their selfhood in the Seminar, and a first step on their path toward a fuller sense of solidarity with their students. This shift is also deemed essential for effective urban teachers (Stairs, Donnell & Dunn, 2012; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007) and one that is entirely neglected in many teacher certification programs, in professional induction programs for new teachers, and in professional development for practicing teachers.

At the start of a Seminar meeting at the end of the first week, this interaction took place:

Ellen: I can't stop thinking about what I saw on the way to school this morning: A mother in a nightdress and slippers sending her kids to school from the porch. The kids were really cute in their uniforms and backpacks and they seemed to have so much energy, but what struck me is that I would have seen a completely different scene two days ago. I would have seen a beat-up house in a beat up neighborhood and an overweight woman in pajamas who can't walk her own kids to school through a really scary neighborhood because she can barely get out of bed. Today, I saw a family trying to start their day.

Karey: You know, I don't think I ever realized how uncomfortable I felt being so surrounded by students, only students of color. You know, because I am. Today, at about noon, boy, it hit me, and I don't even know what happened, but things clicked, and maybe what happened is that I stopped looking at color and started looking at what we have in common. Then, I started talking to them the way they talked to me, like I started saying, "y'all are nasty." and stuff like that. I know. Its ridiculous, and I don't even know that I have been saying that, you know, but this morning the kids were sniffing their armpits. They are in sixth grade. And I was like, "What are you doing?" and they were like, "Well, we are just sniffing our armpits." And I said "y'all are nasty!" and I walked away. And I was like, "I just said 'y'all are nasty!' What am I doing?" (Personal communication, May 16, 2008)

As they started to question the normalization of communities, schools, and students and reject the missionary mindset, these teacher candidates began to articulate how they were growing to understanding urban students in the short duration of the Seminar. After nine days in school, this interaction took place during a Seminar meeting in response to a question about how teachers can truly know their students:

Susan: I totally agree, I think our relationships with the kids are the first thing we want to think about, but I was thinking about how hard I found that to be here. How much I had to work on finding ways to relate.

Amanda: OK, so Susan, I mean our question really is how can we relate to these kids, that we are dealing with here, but really anywhere, and I am not sure that there is an answer, because we don't know, and we can't know, what these kids are going through, because we are not them. What we can do is show them that, yes, we do not understand what they are going through, but that doesn't take away from our ability to sit and listen to them. And it's hard to talk about, but just giving them the option to come to you as someone they can confide in, that goes a long way. And maybe we can't relate to the bigger things they have going on, but some of the smaller things, that's maybe a place we can reach them, find commonalities.

Michelle: Yeah. I'm obviously not black. I'm not in sixth in Grade. I'm not in foster care. I don't live in inner city Philadelphia. But I think where we find common ground is that every day for the past two weeks I have been looking into the eyes of someone who I don't know how he is going to react, and I think he is looking at me the same way. That is where the common ground is, in saying that I don't know if I can trust this person, I don't know who this person is, but I am going to risk it, and I think that is enough of a commonality to build off us, to begin trusting each other.

Valerie: This morning two boys were arguing over who had darker skin. I decided to ask them to compare my arm to theirs, and I could see them working through the idea of who cared about lighter or darker. I think I really made them think about the color issue because they never talked about it the rest of the day. I just think that since we talked so freely about race with each other, I felt liberated to talk about it with my kids, and because I was so open, it worked. I felt like I had a major victory for myself and those boys. (Personal communication, May 22, 2008).

The movement these students show toward understanding their students is stronger than empathy or sensitivity, as there is still a demarcation between self and other in those dispositions. Taking solidarity seriously as a way to understand students goes deeper. Rorty writes that our sense of solidarity is strongest when we think of those with whom solidarity is expressed as one of us, where *us* is defined as something smaller and more local than "the human race." In this way, the teacher candidates' desire to work with city kids was deepened to go beyond some vague obligation to work with less fortunate kids, or altruistic notions of helping kids who did not have the same advantages they had. Those ideas persist in placing the person at the center and the other at the margin. Through the reflection of the Seminar, notions of altruism and the conception that "we" are there to save "them" began to disappear as their sense of teacher selfhood expanded. Henry (1966) called the intellectual work required to imagine teaching in such a way "the assertion of self" and identified such work as a key component in developing alternative practices in an environment that emphasizes standardization over creativity and innovation. This is not to suggest that teachers should focus exclusively on self-knowledge if they want to become good teachers in urban schools, but the assertion of self may be the essential component that binds all the other characteristics of good

teaching together. Without this binding, there is no structure to hold all the qualities of good teachers together and integrate them into more than a checklist or a list of attributes. They only can only become qualities teachers practice through the assertion of self.

Conclusion

Despite the possibility of illuminating the nexus of teacher and students through a concept like solidarity, Margolis (2007) rightly cautions teachers to reject the idealism that they can somehow dismiss existing relations of power and privilege and find some commonalities with their students as equals. For these students to “understand” life in poverty, growing up in urban neighborhoods, or childhood for a person of color is ridiculous.

However, Rorty (1989) writes that one way to come to terms with what he calls the “slogan” that might define the work of good teachers, that people should try to help other people succeed, is to expand as far as possible our sense of “us”—to actively seek common ground with others. While this is not something that only teachers should do, it is a movement that is essential for good teaching. This is because if the call for good and effective teaching—in many ways the slogan “No Child Left Behind” is one of them, can be understood and acted upon, then thinking about our students through solidarity provides a new vocabulary for reweaving notions of good teaching to accommodate the new discoveries of commonality, equality and worth.

That might be the most critical part of this project, and what most definitions of good teaching neglect. A teacher, school administrator, or policy maker can not simply decide to leave no child behind any more than a teacher can say “I am a good teacher” and thus become one. Teaching in a way that every student can learn is an idea that has to be created through the interaction and understanding of the teacher and the students. It cannot be forced upon teachers and students in the hope that they will eventually come to accept it. Until policy makers, administrators and teachers realize that leaving no child behind or winning the race to the top involves recognizing that the students can succeed before we implement policies that will require them to succeed, there is little hope for large scale improvement of urban schools.

Further, until teacher candidates are allowed to explore their selfhood and engage in field experiences that involve an explicit focus on building solidarity through recognizing the positive resources surrounding diverse schools, it seems likely that the missionary mentality will persist in the way they frame teaching in urban schools, and there is even less hope that they will be prepared to be great teachers in urban schools through their certification programs.

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