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A School-Based Project: Increasing Ontario Pre-Service Teacher Candidates' Experiences With Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

This paper details a service-learning project involving thirty-two Ontario, White pre-service teachers in Buffalo, New York. We provided reflective activities to help future teachers develop an awareness and understanding of how unjust educational practices inhibit the educational performance of marginalized students. Although fourteen students did increase their awareness of urban school conditions and communities, we also learned that neither our teaching nor the service-project pushed eighteen participants to 'see' how educational practices work to perpetuate the racial and social class structure. Armed with this knowledge, we recognized that more time and energy must be expended to create research activities as well as authentic learning experiences to guide prospective teachers to recognize institutional practices that create social inequalities.

Research Orientation

Over the past three years, we have mentored and taught hundreds of Ontario pre-service teacher candidates in Buffalo, New York. The vast majority of our students (ninety-percent) are White, middle class women, who access our faculty of education due to quotas mandated in Ontario, which limit the number of candidates who can obtain teacher certification within the province. The expectations in our program focus upon encouraging an Anti-Racist and a multicultural approach to teaching and learning in elementary schools. Although the coursework is generally helpful in developing some awareness about cultural diversity as well as about institutional practices that generate inequity in school performance and student achievement, we were concerned that the experiences were merely at a theoretical level. After various conversations with faculty, teacher candidates, and in-service teachers, we believed our White middle class pre-service teachers would benefit from being involved in a school-based program situated in a low-income, racially and culturally diverse community. We felt this project would bridge theory and practice. Being situated in urban schools would reinforce many ideas generated in our graduate teaching seminars, as students would see first-hand how unjust practices in urban schools present challenges in meeting the social, educational, and emotional needs of at-risk, marginalized students.

The following questions served as the framework for this action-research project:

Question 1: What are some of the barriers that impoverished children face as they experience formal schooling?

Question 2: How do community service projects help White pre-service teacher candidates increase their awareness and understanding of racism and diversity in elementary schools?

Question 3: What educational initiatives in Buffalo, New York can help Ontario pre-service teacher candidates gain a better understanding of how unjust educational practices inhibit urban students' academic performance?

We were well aware of the merits of practitioners engaging in action research projects. Rather than relying exclusively on researchers and government officials to guide us in what and how we teach, reflective practitioners learn the importance of raising their own questions and concerns about their teaching experiences. The self-reflective process has empowered many educators to find additional ways to improve students' learning (Vacca & Vacca, 2000). The reflective process often helps critical practitioners understand how their biases inhibit their growth as intellectuals and as teachers (Grant, 2002). Specifically, this form of research was meant to help us, two teacher educators, recognize our growing knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to the complexities of helping White pre-service teacher candidates to understand systemic barriers that create inequity in schools and in the wider society. In addition, we wanted to explore new avenues that could help facilitate critical conversations with future teachers in relation to helping at-risk students achieve academically.

Project Description

The setting for the project was a large (650 students), urban public school in Buffalo, New York. Buffalo is typical of most Northeastern cities, as it has been ensnared for decades in the debilitating effects of a post-industrial economy. Consequently, eighty-percent of the student population are considered impoverished by standards established by New York State. The population served is approximately seventy-five percent Latino(a), fifteen percent African American, and the remaining population reflected impoverished White students. The school's instructional plan is tied to improving students' performances on standardized tests in mathematics and literacy. Among the teachers' and administrators' concerns about the impoverished status of the community are issues around violence and drugs, low-parental support for the school's mission, and the transient nature of the student population.

Thirty-two teacher candidates who enrolled in an elementary instructional strategies course spanning the Fall 2003 semester were paired with elementary students at the JK-8 urban school. For seventy-five minutes periods, one-day per week, over the course of two weeks, the teacher candidates engaged in one-to-one or small group interactions focusing upon helping students learn literacy and math concepts and skills. First, the education students were required to implement rapport-building strategies with the urban students. Second, they diagnosed, taught, or guided students to learn concepts or skills in these disciplines. Finally, back at the college campus, the pre-service teachers reflected and shared successes, challenges and barriers in relation to teaching and learning, rapport building, and helping at-risk students.

Course assignments were designed to engender further reflections about helping to improve teaching and learning in high needs Ontario and New York State school districts. For instance,

the course writing assignments dealt with helping culturally diverse, at-risk students to acquire math and language skills in preparing for New York State's high-stakes examinations. The students also engaged in shared dialogues about institutional barriers that inhibit education performance at impoverished schools.

Background Theory

Literature relating to Anti-Racist multicultural education speaks clearly to the fact that the vast majority of White teachers are not aware of the cause of inequities in schools and society (McIntosh, 1992; Feagin & Vera, 1995; McIntyre, 1997). Most of these teachers draw upon their own experiences of living in North America. These individuals are led to believe the rules of society are fair and just. With this line of thinking, they, as teachers, feel that people of color succeed in schools and in society based solely on their own merit or efforts (Sleeter, 2002). Clearly, this is not case. Transformative researchers across the globe point to many institutional practices that hinder the social, academic, and emotional development of people of color. For example, government officials have created public policies and regulations, assessment instruments, and have held back needed educational resources that systemically block the 'Other' from achieving as well as the dominant culture (Kozol, 1991; Dei, 1996; Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 2003).

On the micro-level, transformative researchers also show how systemic racism operates to disenfranchise visible minorities. Many elementary school teachers have internalized pernicious racialized stereotypes from the media and public discourse, which configure the 'Other' as aberrant, 'up to no good,' or not intelligent (Fleras & Kunz, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers across North America often have low-expectations for students, make racially offensive remarks, and frequently blame students for social problems, such as poverty, violence, and joblessness. This is particularly evident with Black or Latino(a) students (Kozol, 1991; Dei, 1996; Anyon, 1997; Dimitridis, 2003).

Some state and provincial officials and socially conscious educators have attempted to combat institutional racism by developing curricular initiatives that bring awareness to educational and social practices that perpetuate inequalities in schools. Thus far, their initiatives have not closed the gaps of academic achievement, individual performance and community development in North America (Lee, 2002). This makes it imperative for teacher educators to build alliances for the purpose of attempting to create a shared vision of promoting equity in schools and society. Collaborating on equity initiatives, inside and outside of collegiate settings, provides building blocks for creating a more inclusive and just society, based upon a more "equitable structure of power relations" (Derman-Sparks, 2002).

In this vein, service learning projects developed by teacher education programs are designed to facilitate an increased understanding and awareness of systemic barriers that thwart the achievement of students coming from marginalized backgrounds. Qualities associated with successful service learning projects are: a reciprocal sharing of skills, increased problem solving by classroom teachers, pre-service teachers, and community members and a shared commitment to meet the various needs of inner-city students. More importantly, perhaps, these programs help to nudge White pre-service teachers to reflect upon the nature of their racial identity. Through

this type of transformative work, some pre-service teachers have come to realize that Whiteness confers certain privileges and power within the society generally and within schools specifically. This knowledge sensitizes future teachers to issues endemic to inner-city communities and the role educators must take to dismantle systemic barriers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Moore, 1999; Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999).

Data Collection

Data were collected using three processes. First, pre-service teachers completed individually a summary assessment of their experiences at the urban school. Second, the instructors elicited pre-service teachers' comments about the service-learning program. Third, follow-up questions were distributed to the participants during their third week of practice while teaching in Ontario schools.

Findings

Collaboratively, we reviewed the data collected. We found that several themes cropped up in the students' summary assessment. For clarity, we synthesized the comments gleaned from the thirty-two students who took part in this project. Some appreciated the opportunity to participate in ethnically diverse classrooms. They appreciated the inner-city school experience that, they 'could not have gotten in a hometown (suburban) school.' Their experience transcended their initial negative stereotypes of urban schooling. Some students expected to find difficult student behavior, unkind teachers, unclean conditions, and discrimination. Instead, they found positive and engaging teachers, hallways decorated with quality students' work, such as writing samples, math word problems and solutions, and various artistic representations from grades 1-8. In juxtaposition, some future educators believed that the negative demeanor exhibited by several urban teachers towards their students caused them to disengage from the learning process. However, through encouragement, praise, and instructional support, pre-service teachers were able to break down emotional barriers and develop a positive rapport with several disaffected students.

The following is our summary of the issues raised in the various class discussions. White pre-service teachers quickly absorbed inner-city teachers' anxieties about their students' performance on state standardized tests. The inner-city teachers commented on low-levels of parental support for student learning. Many students stated, "parental support and involvement did not seem to be the case at this urban school." Unlike their personal experience in Ontario schools, they noticed that focusing on student behavior was deemed to be more important than teaching content and skills. Pre-service teachers observed a high-level of personal support amongst the teachers. Regrettably, equal support was not given to students in some classrooms.

After the experience had concluded in the urban school, the students' narratives revealed interesting trends. Some students became more appreciative of the lives and possibilities of inner-city students. According to three female students residing in Ontario:

That was my first eye-opening experience in regards to ESL and its challenges. I really valued my time, because the school has many at-risk students, yet it is a positive environment full of

caring people and fostered a strong sense of community. It gives hope for all schools to remain positive and do their best they can (despite adverse conditions). I found that for some kids I came into contact with, school is a safe-haven for them {sd}.

I personally, did not have any negative or "scary" experiences, it was just different. That is all. I have been at many schools. I actually really like it and thrived on the challenge of educating at-risk students who can really benefit from the extra attention {sn}.

This school gave me a broader perspective on a group of students and classroom situations that I likely would not otherwise have been exposed to {ln}.

Another trend focused on teacher expectations. Many White pre-service teachers found high-expectations yielded a positive outcome. As one male pre-service teacher states:

When I did reinforce and praise students' efforts as well as give them the expectation that I had high expectations from them-the result was more in return {rm}.

During their student teaching episodes, fourteen of the thirty-two future teachers in this study became more aware of how the impact of financial hardships in the community and the schools twinned together to challenge the teachers, students, and parents in urban communities. Interestingly, their comments also reveal how pre-service teachers became more cognizant of how unearned advantages in affluent schools in Ontario often translates into increased student achievement and performance. Two future teachers' comments are reflective of the major ideas from this set of narratives:

From the abundant resources to the extremely involved parents at RHPS (White middle-class school in Ontario) an entirely different school experience is presented than what I experience at the urban school. Not having a computer at home to do a project is not an issue at RHPS, while it was a very real one at the urban school. There weren't weekly pizza, sub and ice cream lunches at the urban school. I haven't noticed any hungry students at RHPS {jm}.

With an abundance of resources (at an affluent school) the staff are able to implement a lot of enhancements into the curriculum such as field trips, computer-generated assignments, and community volunteers and mentors. Students are really well behaved and take pride in what they're doing, and do not constantly be told (by teachers and staff) what they should be doing and asked why they are not doing it {ty}.

For eighteen pre-service teachers, the urban school partnership did little to change how they viewed inequities within inner-city communities and schools. They continued to view urban schooling through the prism of Whiteness. Their racial status blocked them from 'seeing' how several unjust practices, within schools and the wider society, braid together to hinder the academic performance of urban youth. One male future teacher claims he:

was saddened by one thing that (he) found while teaching at the school. In a school class of 35 students or so-(he) found only about 3 students to be bright and totally focused towards learning-the rest had to be kept on task and focused {cj}.

By linking poor educational performance or 'brightness' solely to individual effort or intelligence, future teachers are kept 'color-blind.' They continue to view schooling as a fair and just enterprise for all students. Unfortunately, this means they lack the critical consciousness necessary to create an ethical educational vision-one that is geared to meet the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of marginalized students (Dei, 1996; Anyon, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1997). Moreover, their 'color-blindness' will keep them from confronting racist practices in their educational communities and in the wider society.

Reflections on the Urban School Community Services Program

Although we believe the project had some success stories, we are also more aware of how structural impediments in teacher education programs hinder pre-service teachers from learning and restructuring power relationships in urban communities. For example, our teacher education program puts students on a 'fast-track' to acquire teaching certification. The vast majority of our pre-service teachers take eighteen graduate credits over the course of two days. For instance, the future teachers in this study enrolled in the college's most attractive program, which requires them to take six, three-hour graduate courses. The classes begin early on Monday mornings and end late on Tuesday evenings. This makes it difficult for us to structure field-based exercises in schools and urban communities that help future teachers reflect upon Whiteness and the role it plays in schools and in society. These limitations also make it difficult for students to reflect deeply upon how educational and economic forces impact urban schools and communities in North America.

On the positive side, we found predominately White pre-service Ontario teachers increased their awareness of urban school conditions and communities. Future teachers developed a growing awareness of the significant challenges confronting urban teachers and school administrators. School personnel often 'fail' in their quest to meet the social, emotional, and educational needs of poor urban students because they lack resources to support teaching and learning, lack parental support, and lack the support from state lawmakers. This does not mention the role that poverty and racism plays in inhibiting the educational performance of urban youth. Urban schools are also forced to prepare students to pass state-mandated, high-stake examinations, instead of implementing curriculum initiatives, such as intercultural learning projects and media awareness activities, designed to create collaborative educational contexts that foster critical thinking and academic excellence among *all* students (Cummins & Sayers, 1996; Bruner & Talley, 1999).

While we hoped the project would lead all of our students to recognize how certain urban school educational practices operate to reproduce the racial and social class structure, we found that eighteen of the thirty-two pre-service teachers were unable to move beyond their own frames of reference with respect to schooling and society. For example, they could not 'see' how standardized testing, lack of resources, and negative teachers' attitudes were linked to the embedded dominant culture keeping control over resources and power in society.

As teacher educators, we have learned from this project that our pedagogy must include additional urban partnerships with community members and agencies, parents, and empowering urban teachers. To this end, we intend to voice our concerns about our 'fast-track' approach to teacher certification. We feel future teachers need more time and additional authentic learning experiences to reflect upon issues surrounding equity, social justice, and urban schooling. Meanwhile, we will look for additional opportunities to establish more respectful relationships with urban schools and their communities. We realize future teachers learn the most about 'the urban' through projects that involve all parties who have a stake in educating marginalized youth. However, to enable these projects to have a more positive impact on the urban community and future teachers, we must expend more time and energy to ensure that we establish a true bond with the urban community, where we are perceived as part of the community, rather than perceived as 'experts' from a privileged, closed-community.

Finally, we need to engage in more critical conversations as well as establish additional reflective research activities with our colleagues and future teachers. In our classroom, there will be more opportunities for student reflection as well as additional student projects confronting the larger inequities that impeded the creation of a just society. Outside of the classroom, we intend to improve our teaching through reflective research activities. Collectively, these practices will allow us to retool our pedagogy to ensure that more pre-service teachers enter the profession with the critical consciousness needed to recognize and dismantle unjust practices that reproduce various forms of social inequalities (McLaren & Torres, 1999; Lee, 2002).

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