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# UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY THROUGH SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY INQUIRY

## AN ACTION-RESEARCH STUDY

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*This article describes a portion of a long-term, action-research project investigating the teaching of an elementary social studies methods course for preservice teachers from a social justice framework. Other major foci for the course are integrated with topics related specifically to social studies teaching and learning: cultural diversity, an inquiry orientation to teaching, and teaching for social justice. The authors describe and analyze the community and social inquiry assignments used to develop the concepts of marginalization and privilege within the course. By examining their students' developing understanding of marginality, the authors address particular aspects of assignments that seemed to facilitate and hinder this development, offering new understandings of their own practice as teacher educators for social justice. They frame their ongoing agenda for action research to develop learning experiences designed to promote political understanding among preservice teachers as rooted in the fight for social justice and offer suggestions for other teacher educators working to prepare teachers to teach for positive social change.*

**Keywords:** *teacher education; social studies; social justice; action research*

Our research investigates the ways in which preservice social studies methods students at two universities have come to understand group marginality and diversity through social and community inquiry assignments. These inquiry assignments have been, and continue to be, developed through a long-term action research on our own practice as teacher educators. Our focus is on improving three things: our understanding of our practice, the practice itself, and the situation in which that practice occurs (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This research also

aims to build upon the growing literature about how to better prepare teacher education students to successfully teach students from historically marginalized groups. Although our questions are, of necessity, centered on the experiences and learning of our students, it is not research on the students. The students' work, their class conversations, and focus-group interviews with them serve as data, not to find strengths and deficits in the students but to inform our work as teacher educators. Although we focus on such questions as "In what ways do

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the social and community inquiry assignments influence preservice teachers' understandings of marginality?" "How do students see themselves in relationship to the communities they investigate?" and "How do students understand their role as teachers of diverse students after engaging in social and community inquiry assignments?" our attention to student data sources is intended to inform questions about our practice. For example, when we focus on questions such as "In what ways might these assignments function to reify the marginality of certain groups?" and "What lessons have we learned from these assignments about what to consider when designing teacher education for liberatory ends?" the data inform central aspects of our "findings" about the role of field experiences in teacher education work, but they are also the seeds for changes implemented in practice and form the basis for a new cycle of research.

We begin by grounding our work in the literature on teacher education for diversity, in particular the literature related to community-based learning. After describing the context for and nature of our course assignments, we outline major aspects of the methodology. We then present results related to developing and supporting student understanding, including both conceptual and task-related aspects that emerged. Finally, we conclude by presenting some of the limitations of our approach and frame our ongoing agenda for action research on learning experiences designed to promote a political understanding that is rooted in the struggle for social justice.

## SITUATING OUR WORK IN THE LITERATURE

A large and growing body of scholarship, as well as generations of practice, has clearly indicated that important characteristics of effective teachers of low-income students and of students of color are a respect for, a knowledge of, and a relationship with the home communities of the students (Gonzalez, Moll, et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Based on this scholarship, teacher educators are beginning to investigate the practices that they use to prepare preservice teachers for

diverse and historically marginalized students. Simply placing students in urban schools does not necessarily create opportunities for preservice teachers to develop new perceptions about historically marginalized communities and may, in fact, reify their existing deficit notions (Haberman & Post, 1992). In response, teacher educators are incorporating experiences in which preservice teachers have opportunities to learn from community members and develop relationships with members of historically marginalized communities. Such experiences are developed primarily to help future teachers develop a culturally relevant approach to teaching that values and respects low-income students, students of color, and their home communities.

Many teacher educators build on school-based field placements and work within the existing teacher education structures to create opportunities for students to interact with community members. These activities often lead to community connections that remain centered on the school on some level. For example, Murtadha-Watts (1998) placed his students at a full-service school, marked by collaborative relationships between the community agencies and the school. These preservice students developed more sophisticated understandings of issues of race and poverty by interacting with agencies and community members who were operating and being served within the confines of the school.

Similarly, Burant and Kirby (2002) held their foundations course on the site of an urban school where the students participated in a classroom-based field experience and were required to participate in 10 hrs of schoolwide and/or community-based field experiences. Community-based experiences included riding the school bus, conducting community interviews, publishing a newsletter, developing projects with teachers and the principal, hosting parent-principal coffee talks, providing child care for the Parent-Teacher Organization meetings and parent English as a second language classes, leading a breakfast book club, helping with a turkey trot race, and assembling and delivering food baskets to families. Although

most of these activities are connected closely with the school, rather than being solely rooted in the community, the preservice teachers involved expressed that they learned (a) that all students deserve the best, (b) that parents face great structural obstacles and most want the best for their children, and (c) that the community around a school can be a fruitful resource for teachers (Burant & Kirby, 2002, p. 571).

Hammond (2001) describes how she and her preservice teachers collaborated with teachers and Hmong parents to develop a culturally relevant science project. Her research focus was on the transformation of subject matter to a more feminist, multicultural science rather than on its influence on preservice teachers. However, the work outlines a compelling method for developing multicultural experiences for preservice science methods students. The impact of such community engagement and collaborative inquiry on preservice teachers is more clearly addressed by another science teacher educator, Angela Calabrese Barton (1999). In this study, the rich data from journals, field notes, focus groups, and interviews show clear changes in students' understandings of major areas important to the content area and to working with diverse populations.

Other teacher educators have examined the effects of cultural immersion experiences for preservice teachers. Stachowski and Mahan (1998) found that students who participated in semester-long cultural immersion field placements where they lived overseas or on an American Indian reservation reported that much of their learning came from community members. These students expressed positive feelings for the cultures and communities in which they were placed. Wiest (1998) used a cultural immersion assignment (similar to one of the social inquiry assignments described in this article) in which students immerse themselves for 1 hr in a setting in which they are the minority. Through this short assignment and subsequent discussions, many students expressed personal growth and new realizations.

Other teacher educators are investigating ways to move beyond the school at the center of community-based learning (Murrell, 2001).

Many of these teacher educators use service learning and alternative practica to further challenge their students. Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000) placed student teachers in semester-long, urban, community-based field placements for a service-learning component of their multicultural education class. These placements included after-school centers, community centers, and churches. Students in these placements began to express more positive views about the community, they developed some pragmatic approaches to teaching students in urban areas, and some preservice students, particularly students of color, began to see teaching as a form of political activism. Barton (1999) had her preservice teachers teach science in a homeless shelter to expand their understanding of how to use science education toward deepening their understanding of science as well as social and cultural diversity.

Narode, Rennie-Hill, and Peterson (1994) worked with a group of 26 preservice teachers to learn from community members how they defined a good education. Through 30 hrs of ethnographic observation and interviewing in several community sites (e.g., teen pregnancy programs, churches, gang task force, neighborhood arts council), students learned directly from community members how schools best serve them and their children. This work resulted in student teachers' reporting a sense that their own fears and prejudices were dispelled, that they had a better understanding of institutional racism and a commitment to combating racism in their teaching, and that they had a new dedication to healing the rift between parents and teachers.

The research in this area suggests that the longer, more community-centered approaches to teacher education for diversity offer the most hope for lasting influence on preservice teachers. However, not all students are able to take, nor do all universities offer, semester-long cultural immersion experiences for preservice teachers. Indeed, few teacher education programs offer the flexibility in time and structure to include service learning or extended community-based experiences in their programs. Therefore, teacher educators must continue to examine shorter

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community-based experiences and ways to incorporate community experiences into existing methods courses and into the school-based field placements of preservice teachers. Given this reality, it is even more important that we not limit issues of diversity, marginality, and social justice to the designated multicultural education class or to the foundations courses. Rather, we should look for experiences that support student learning on these issues throughout the teacher education curriculum.

Few studies on specific ways to prepare teachers for historically marginalized groups of students have focused on how teacher educators might use field experiences in the context of content-area methods classes to develop relationships and mutual understandings with the home communities of students. Culturally relevant teaching relies on teachers' linking the community and political contexts of their students to the content they teach (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Barton (1999) and Hammond (2001) begin this examination with their descriptions of their work in science methods classes. By examining how preservice teachers respond to specific assignments designed to assist them in understanding marginality and developing a culturally relevant approach to teaching social studies, we aim to refine our practice as well as to share some lessons on how community-based preservice work may be used to develop a critical multicultural approach to the teaching of social studies. These activities and class assignments are analyzed in conjunction with the related course work so that other elementary social studies teacher educators can imagine ways that they could use such activities. Yet we also believe that our experiences will have relevance to other content areas as well as to secondary teacher educators.

### **CONTEXT FOR AND NATURE OF ASSIGNMENTS**

The authors of this study worked together during the 1999-2000 academic year teaching 120 preservice teachers in four sections of social studies methods classes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Nora

Hyland was a doctoral student teaching two sections of the course, and Susan Noffke was an associate professor also teaching two sections. We met weekly to discuss the class and to plan assignments. Noffke had developed the inquiry assignments and much of the syllabus with her previous teaching assistants, Shuaib Meacham and Edward Buendia (Buendia, Meacham, & Noffke, 2000). However, we revised assignments and course structure based on our discussions of, interest in, and experiences with creating meaningful connections with members of historically marginalized communities. As such, we refined the social inquiry assignments and further developed the community inquiry assignment.

Many of our colleagues have considered ways to train preservice teachers for diverse or urban settings. These efforts can be categorized into three major models: curricular, experiential, and structural (Hyland & Meacham, 2004). Curricular models to address diversity in teacher education emphasize the study of historically marginalized groups throughout teacher education classes. Teacher education classes center on the cultural and intellectual knowledge of nonmainstream groups as well as on teaching strategies that address diverse learning styles. This approach is often coupled with critical reflection by preservice teachers (Cochran-Smith, 1991, 1995; King 1991). The experiential model features practical experiences in nonmainstream community settings as a means of obtaining comfort within those communities as well as knowledge about students from historically marginalized groups and their families (Boyle-Baise & Washburn, 1996; Gillette, 1996). Finally, structural programs are those that have considered relationships between schools of education and public schools. This approach has spawned the Professional Development School (PDS) model in which colleges focused on teacher preparation partner with schools in developing on-site learning experiences for students. In the area of culturally diverse and urban teacher preparation, teacher education programs have sought to take advantage of the PDS structure by having preservice teachers spend more time in



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urban schools throughout their teacher education program (Weiner, 1993).

Each of these approaches is embodied in some way in our courses. Because the social studies easily lend themselves to the curricular model briefly described above, we have each (both separately and collaboratively and with input from numerous others) sought to construct a syllabus that emphasizes a critical study of injustice in history, politics, economics, and geography. All of our in-class lectures, activities, and readings emphasize a critical examination of the various ways that groups have been marginalized (Buendia et al., 2000).

We feel strongly that the curricular model is a necessary component of our courses and that it allows students to take a critical look at the social studies. However, we also feel that there must be experiential and structural components. We feel that students will better understand the social issues that we investigate in class if they have some experiential knowledge of at least one of the groups being studied (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Yet we also know that few schools, or individual teachers within them, have established such relationships with local community members, and therefore they are unable to provide needed models of community engagement for preservice teachers. Nor were we able (in our university positions at the time these data were collected) to regulate the school placements of our students. Some were placed in schools serving affluent or middle-class and predominantly White students and families, and some were placed in working-class and predominantly African American schools. As such, we have created and refined a number of assignments that we refer to as community and social inquiry assignments. These assignments are based on the idea that social studies should be an inquiry into the social world and that, by engaging in such an inquiry, preservice teachers will be better prepared to construct opportunities for their students to engage in social inquiry. In both the UIUC setting and the University of Delaware (UD) setting, students spend 2 days each week in a classroom while they take their methods classes. The concurrent course work and field placement limits their

time for outside commitments. The inquiry assignments were developed to provide an opportunity for students to “do” social studies using an inquiry approach within their limited free time, while also beginning the process of understanding the experiences of a community different from their own.

Students were permitted to conduct the community and social inquiry assignments in small groups, and class discussions are used to focus their efforts. The community inquiry assignment was designed for students to critically examine the neighborhoods surrounding their school placements in terms of access to the school, community perceptions of the school, school perceptions of the community, and local resources available to families and students. Through this “ecological survey” (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990), they tried to understand the school’s relationship with the local community, and they were encouraged to analyze this relationship along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and/or class. Students were to locate the resources in the neighborhood and public services, talk to neighborhood residents, and talk to parents and teachers associated with their school. We also asked them to do a map of the neighborhoods from which their students came. In addition, at UD, students are asked to develop a relationship with a community person and collaborate on a lesson that uses the perspective, life history, knowledge, talents, or interests of the community member. Students, working in small groups, presented their findings in class in a variety of forms and also submit a written reflection on the inquiry.

The social inquiry assignments are based on the idea that students must cross cultural boundaries to learn about historically marginalized groups. Because schools are, regardless of the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or sexuality status of the students that they serve, fundamentally familiar places to our students and typically alienating spaces for marginalized groups, our social inquiry assignments involve preservice teachers’ learning from people by attending events and visiting places that are authentic to the group of study. Preservice teachers select a group on which to focus and

attend events and interview people from that group. They must choose social inquiry assignments from a long list, which include such activities as attending a religious or cultural event in which they would be the minority, conducting an oral history with someone culturally different from themselves, or analyzing media documents for cultural representations or omissions. In these inquiries, students are asked to cross cultural boundaries and learn from people who are different from them. The students go to community events (like gay pride marches, traditionally Black churches, and mosques); they interview people who are unlike themselves in terms of class, race, gender, ability, or sexuality; they watch movies and read books on these groups; and they visit social service organizations that “serve” particular populations (shelters, food banks, etc.). They then write reflections of this process and present the results of their inquiry through video, performance, guest speakers in class, or pictures.

Over the course of the 2 years of this study, the particular assignment choices have varied; however, students are asked to reflect on these experiences in conjunction with their readings of historical texts describing the histories of the particular community of inquiry. In-class discussions are key to synthesizing the variety of experiences in which the students engage.

## **METHOD, PARTICIPANTS, DATA SOURCES, AND DATA ANALYSIS**

After working together to design the inquiry assignments at UIUC during the 1999-2000 academic year, we continued to collect data from our subsequent teaching assignments. During the 2000-2001 academic year, Hyland was an assistant professor at the University of Delaware (UD) and taught social studies methods courses. Noffke continued to teach social studies methods at UIUC. Throughout both years, we continued to use, refine, and collect data on the social and community inquiry assignments. The data used to inform this study come from 198 preservice teacher education students—120 from UIUC and 78 from UD. The overwhelming majority of these students were young (19-21), female, and White. There were 10 men (all

White), 7 African American females, 5 East Asian females, and 5 Latina females. Three White female students and 1 White male student were older than 21. Data sources included students’ written reflections on both social and community inquiry assignments, medial course evaluations from every student, observations of in-class presentations of assignments, written reflections and journals of both authors, and seven audiotaped focus-group conversations (4-6 self-selected students per focus group). The latter discussions were about issues of diversity and how the inquiry assignments influenced their understandings of marginality, diversity, empowerment, and teaching as a political process. These focus groups consisted of students from both UIUC and UD.

Because we were interested in how students understood and acted on these assignments, we focused considerable attention on each student’s verbal and written reactions to the social and community inquiry assignments. Using standard qualitative data analysis techniques for developing themes through coding, we examined these data sources to learn how our students understood broad systems of oppression and how that understanding was in turn associated with their role as teachers. We reviewed our own notes about in-class presentations, and we reread our own reflective journals as teachers of these courses. Throughout the analysis of the data, we asked, What do they report having learned and how did it challenge their assumptions? We analyzed the data with regard to broad themes about race, class, gender, or sexuality.

We also looked for contradictions among students, stereotypical interpretations of inquiry events, and self-reported influences on pedagogy and practice. We looked for patterns of how preservice teachers formed links between historical understandings and inquiry assignments and how they saw themselves in relationship to marginalized communities as well as in relationship to social justice and social activism. We then coded these references using narrative and epiphanic analysis (Denzin, 1989) to identify events that the students experienced as particularly significant. By investigating these broad

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categories and looking for recurrent themes, we identified aspects of the inquiry process that seem most useful in promoting positive understandings of various marginalized communities. These, in turn, are used to address structural components of the program that seem to support such developing understandings.

Because we were the teachers of these students and had an investment in the success of the assignments, it was important for us to distance ourselves from the data in some way and to check our own interpretations. As such, as we analyzed the data, the students' names were hidden, and we were not able to determine which student was from whose class or even which university. We intentionally looked for contradictions to our conclusions to be sure that we were not simply finding what we wanted to find. Finally, because this analysis is part of a larger action-research study, our goal was to find ways to improve our practice as well as to contribute to the overall research agenda. Therefore, finding our limitations in some areas was central to the process of improving our practice.

## DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

Our results are organized in two broad categories. First, we discuss the developing understanding of the preservice students about issues of marginality and their roles as teachers. We then discuss the components of our assignments that seemed to facilitate the developing understanding of preservice teachers. We found that preservice teachers developed respect for, knowledge of, and relationship with members of historically marginalized communities through structured assignments that provided opportunities to meet people from such communities. Key themes that emerged from the data about students' understanding of historically marginalized groups included (a) seeing themselves in relationship to historically marginalized groups, (b) identifying structural inequality with regard to services and voice, (c) developing a sympathetic understanding about people from historically marginalized groups, and (d) identifying the relationship between the

inquiry assignments and their future role as teachers.

*Seeing a relationship with historically marginalized groups.* Through their investigations of marginalized people, preservice students overwhelmingly noted their sense of "place" in relationship to oppression, as well as the various levels of oppression in our society. Most students began the semester by believing that because they did not harbor overt feelings of prejudice, they were exempt from interrogating their own identity in relationship to others. Most students felt that the inquiry assignments were nothing more than opportunities to learn about another culture but, later, expressed a richer understanding of themselves in relationship to oppression.

One White female student who attended a service at an African American church wrote,

I was so nervous before I went. I guess because I was never really a minority before. It made me really think about how all the people there were going to see me. Were they going to see me as the "bad white person"? At first I thought this whole assignment was about learning about some other culture to better understand how students are, but I feel like this made me think more about me. (Inquiry assignment, UD, October 31, 2000)

After going to the Black church, this White student was amazed at how welcoming people were to her. She was most impressed that the people with whom she spoke told her that even though they "don't always trust white people because of our history with them," they were willing to educate her about herself. She ended her reflective essay about the cultural inquiry by writing, "I wish I could say that I had ever thought about what me being white means, but I never did before."

Developing an understanding of oneself in relationship to historically marginalized groups was one of the goals of these assignments. We are aware that students from dominant social and cultural groups have few opportunities to see themselves as part of that group and, as such, have limited access to understanding how their group functions in relationship to others, nor do they have opportunities to see themselves as representative of a particular social or



cultural group. We found that students who chose inquiry assignments in which they truly crossed boundaries were able to identify some of the relational dynamics of group membership. Some of the White students selected assignments in which they met the letter of the assignment and crossed a boundary; however, they failed to accomplish the spirit of the assignment in that they chose an event or location in which they were not obvious outsiders. This phenomenon is discussed in a later section.

We were particularly concerned about creating learning opportunities for our students who were from historically marginalized groups and who would see many of the suggested activities (e.g., attending a service at an historically Black church) as within their own cultural activities, so we included activities in which they, too, had opportunities to cross a new cultural boundary. We explicitly used the word *boundary* because we felt that *border* signifies something more fluid, but a boundary is where cultural groups draw their lines. Regardless of the semester or the university, at least one of the African American and/or Latina students explained to us (the White female professors) and to the rest of the class that she crosses a cultural boundary each day that she enters the predominantly White university. On each of these instances, a classroom discussion was raised about what that means. In each case, White students expressed surprise to hear this from their classmates.

In spite of the irregular boundary crossing, we asked the students of color in our classes to go further, to cross another boundary, and to learn about a group with which they have had little experience. In three instances, students of color decided to inquire into the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community. Two groups spent an evening at a gay nightclub, and one group attended a gay rights rally. The responses from these students were all quite similar. One student wrote,

When I first read this assignment, I thought it was good for these white girls to learn something about us from *our* perspective, but I didn't think I would learn anything. When you [referring to Hyland] suggested that we look at some other marginalized group, I thought about those articles we had read about gay kids and parents in schools and figured that their experience was really different from mine.

I was really scared to go to that rally. I was mostly afraid people would think I was gay, or that some woman would hit on me. Then I thought what that said about me. My whole life I have had to fight to be recognized and here I was thinking I didn't want to be lumped in with that group. I know all about oppression being black, but I saw the other side. Sometimes we oppress other people. I wasn't exactly oppressing them, but I got to understand that they live oppression too, and even black people can be part of that oppression by being homophobic. (Cultural inquiry, UIUC, October 20, 1999)

This response was typical of the students of color. They were surprised to feel themselves on the other side of oppression but recognized that as heterosexuals, they gain privileges and power that homosexuals do not. In this way, the students of color were able to begin to deconstruct the oppressor-oppressed binary and see themselves as having multiple relationships with oppression. We found that it was imperative to create opportunities for all students to investigate the multiple and overlapping contexts of oppression.

*Identifying structural inequality.* We developed the inquiry assignments during the first semester that we worked together in Illinois. We felt that there were two major obstacles to preparing our students to work with historically marginalized groups. First, not all of our students could be placed in schools located in our local communities of color or economically poor neighborhoods. Second, even when they were placed in school communities marked by the stigma of race and/or class, there was often a long history of negative relationships between the schools and their communities. Because these conditions were out of our control due to the small numbers of schools in which to place large numbers of students, we designed the community inquiry assignment to investigate the various communities in which students were placed. Given the bussing patterns of most of the schools, our students had to visit more than one neighborhood—the neighborhood surrounding the school and other neighborhoods from which students were bussed to the school.

Through this assignment, many of our students were able to make remarkable observa-

tions of structural inequality. Those who worked in schools located in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods identified significant barriers for the families and students who were bussed. Students who worked in schools located in poor communities of color found few or no services near the school and very little community access to the school itself. For example, during one in-class presentation by a group of students whose community inquiry was in the neighborhood of a local school, known as one of the best and that served many children of university professors, one student stated,

We found that a bunch of students don't come from the [name of school] neighborhood. Most of the black and poorer students come from the trailer park. When we were going there to visit and do the map, two teachers told us not to go; that it was too dangerous. It made me think that they must not ever visit students' homes or maybe they even make kids feel bad about where they live. Anyway, it wasn't too bad. . . . The other thing is that the parents who live near [name of school] have all the say in what happens and they know the teachers. They get to drop in before and after school. The other parents have a hard time getting there, so their opinion is only heard at meetings. But all of the decisions get made in the schoolyard, not at the meetings. (Ecological survey, UIUC, September 27, 1999)

By visiting the school neighborhood and inquiring into the ways that the school operates as part of the community, our students made many significant insights into structural inequality in schools and communities. They typically expressed surprise at what they discovered. By discussing their findings in class, students were able to make connections and interrogate the ways that schools, communities, and society function to serve some people and limit the opportunities of others. One student expressed his learning this way:

When I talked to the people from the [working-class neighborhood] and they told me about how many busses they have to take to get different places, I realized that it is unbelievably unfair. I mean whose fault is it? I guess whoever made the bussing route, but did that guy do it on purpose? Then all that is in the neighborhood is like bad stuff—you know, the alternative school, the police, there are no stores for people. Then they have to take all these busses. They need a car to live there, but they can afford it the least. I just never thought about all this before. Is it

like this everywhere? (Institutional inquiry, UIUC, November 6, 1999)

This inquiry helped many of our students understand structural inequality. They were both surprised and seemed to feel powerless to do anything to change it. All but 10 students included this sense of powerlessness in their reflective essays about the institutional inquiry and in subsequent interviews and assignments.

I can't believe that I never noticed this before, but what are we supposed to do about it? (Community inquiry, UIUC, November 5, 1999)

It makes me feel kind of hopeless, you know? I wish I knew exactly what to do about all of this structural inequality. (Focus group, UD, March 2, 1999)

This class has been great in terms of giving me an awareness about institutional racism, but I feel like I should do more than just be aware. I know we are supposed to teach about this, but I still feel like it is not enough. (Journal entry, UIUC, December 2, 1999)

*Developing sympathetic understandings or changes of heart.* One of the main reactions to the social and community inquiry assignments that we discovered was that students expressed a feeling that their "eyes had been opened." All but four students expressed a growing sympathy for the experiences of people from historically marginalized populations. They found that they had perhaps been judgmental without enough information about a group. The majority of students stated that this experience had changed their opinions of a group that they had previously prejudged. Students wrote,

I always thought that people had to let go of history; that we can't do anything about past events like slavery. But now I kind of see how history does influence the present time. I guess I was a little prejudice [*sic*] before, but I think these inquiries really helped me to see the bigger picture. (Journal entry, UD, December 5, 2000)

I guess I have had a change of heart about some things. I have been very sheltered (12 years of Catholic school) and only knew one way of looking at things. I am expanding my knowledge and my opinions as well. I used to think that there was only one way to see things and I was sort of prejudiced against certain people. I feel kind of bad about that now, I feel bad for all that happened. I guess it still does. (Journal entry, UIUC, November 30, 2000)

These examples were typical of the kinds of comments made by students following the in-

quiries. They felt that their prejudice had been exposed (to themselves) and subsequently erased. This overwhelming response caused us to reflect about how we are structuring the assignments. Although prejudice reduction is clearly among our goals, we are cognizant of the limits of this as a goal. Such sympathetic expressions can indicate that students believe their work is done; it can signify a belief that sympathy and personal change of heart are the goals rather than working for justice and social change.

Although we later discuss potential problems with this kind of sympathy, it is worth pointing out here that we find the students' self-reports of prejudice reduction and sympathy noteworthy. This is most evident when juxtaposed against the comments of three students who did not express a change of heart. One White male student wrote the following in his inquiry report following a visit to a Black church:

I guess I learned a little from this inquiry—that these people have their own perspective. But let's face it, we won. Our ancestors won and that's the way it is. I don't think we need to teach all these different perspectives about everything. I mean people need to know that whoever wins makes the rules and sets the history. (Cultural Inquiry, UD, October 3, 2000)

This student's comments, and the similar comments of two other students, indicate that sympathy and prejudice reduction may be valuable goals in and of themselves—that looking for expressions of a change of heart among students may be a necessary step in developing the ability to see a situation from another's point of view and to value that point of view. Some students clearly accept domination and oppression as natural and believe that assimilation is a worthwhile goal for people from historically marginalized groups. As such, we see that students who have identified their own prejudice and expressed sympathy for people from historically marginalized groups as a necessary (yet insufficient) step in developing a commitment to justice and social change.

*Relating new understanding to teaching.* Another mixed reaction to the inquiries was how

students related them to their future roles as teachers. Over two thirds of the students found that these inquiries would make them better teachers for two reasons. First, most of them enjoyed the inquiry process and felt that this would be a wonderful technique to use in their own classrooms. Second, they felt that they would be better, more sympathetic, teachers to the students, given the knowledge and perspective they gained from doing the inquiry assignments.

We intended to model the use of inquiry in our classes. We believed that by modeling social inquiry in our social studies methods classes, students would better understand and be able to use the inquiry process in their own classrooms. Our students' comments on course evaluations indicate that at least for some, we accomplished this goal:

At first I thought inquiry was kind of annoying. But even though it did take a long time, I liked it, and I learned a lot. (Course evaluation, UD, December 10, 2000)

I loved doing the inquiry assignments. I learned more from doing these than in any other assignment this year. I will definitely use inquiry in my classroom. (Course evaluation, UD, December 10, 2000)

I think the inquiry process is very beneficial and should be used in the elementary classroom in all subjects. (Course evaluation, UIUC, December 9, 2000)

By engaging in inquiry with students, we had hoped to model how this can be used as a classroom teaching method. Among our goals was that students would see inquiry as a tool to tackle issues of social justice in their own classrooms. Over time, the students' comments on course evaluations have indicated that the majority found the inquiry process useful and a good model for what they would like to do in their future classrooms.

Students also indicated that the inquiry process would make them better teachers because of what it taught them about historically marginalized groups, social justice, and oppression. Students had previously not thought that these were relevant issues to their lives as classroom teachers. Some students commented as follows:



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We are a new age of teachers. We will be teaching students of all different backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions. What we learn about in these inquiries will help make our students' views more acceptable to us. (Journal entry, UD, November 30, 2000)

These inquiries show me a lot about what is left out. It will help me be a better teacher to students who feel left out for some reason. (Focus group, UIUC, March 4, 2000)

I never thought about teaching as having anything to do with social justice or anything "political." All these inquiries make me think that as a teacher I should think about that. I am still not sure how to do it, but I really like the inquiry process of teaching and learning. (Journal entry, UD, November 30, 2000)

These comments indicate that our students found the inquiry process to be positive and would likely make them better teachers of students from historically marginalized groups. However, it is unclear whether they see it as a tool to address injustice, or beyond a dozen or so comments from former students now teaching, how much of an impact we are having on their later practice. We realize that although students report that they would like to teach in these ways, it is important to follow up with them after graduation to determine how and whether they use such practices.

### **COURSE COMPONENTS THAT SUPPORT KEY UNDERSTANDINGS**

Because our goal is to better understand and to improve our teaching, it is important that we look at aspects of the course as well as specific aspects of the inquiry assignments that seemed to influence the students' changing political and social understandings and their desire to teach for social justice. These influential components included (a) meeting people from historically marginalized groups in contexts that are designed and led by people from that group, (b) examining the experience of "others" in the context of historical and political information, and (c) deconstructing inquiry experiences with small groups and within the larger class discussion.

*Meeting people from historically marginalized groups in their own context.* Students made choices in all of the social inquiry assignments.

Students were asked to attend a social event or cultural group activity that would allow them to cross a cultural boundary. At various times, students have been asked to focus all of their social inquiries on one particular cultural or social group, and at other times, students have selected events that represent various groups. They are then asked to critically reflect on what they learned. Over the course of the past few years of developing social inquiry assignments, it has become clear that these assignments are most useful and meaningful when students choose to go out of their comfort zones and into a place that is owned by the other. Giving students choices seemed essential to this process, as was establishing clearly the criteria for inquiry-event election. We have struggled to strike balance between choice and authentic events. Our mostly White students at UIUC and UD often feel most comfortable selecting events offered by cultural groups on campus. We encourage them to move out of their comfort zones and select community events sponsored by local people with whom they would rarely interact.

But in spite of our best efforts to challenge students to select events that are across a cultural boundary, we acknowledge the fact that many of our students' delineation of cultural boundaries is different than ours. We struggle with the idea of giving students choice in their assignments, realizing that choice often acts to reinforce their White privilege. Many students do choose events that place them in a situation where they are the minority, that allow them to interrogate their various privileges, and that allow them to experience being an outsider. Students who choose to attend services at Black churches, mosques, Buddhist temples, or Korean churches, or who attend political rallies or go to gay nightclubs, challenge their privileged perspective. They experience, if for a moment, what it is like to be the minority in an institution that is run by a group to which they do not belong.

Some students select events that require a minimal cultural border crossing. These students meet the general requirements of the assignment but select relatively safe events in which they are unlikely to feel much discom-



fort. For example, White students have chosen events that are sponsored by the campus such as a campus Latina/o film series or Seder suppers at the campus Hillel. Frequently, White Christian students will attend Jewish services, and Jewish students will attend Christian services. Two reformed Jewish students selected to attend an orthodox synagogue. Frequently, White students will find a White "ethnic" friend who is having a family event and attend that. For example, White Christian students have selected events like an Armenian church social, a Greek Orthodox service, and an Irish American festival. These students have very different experiences. They tend to notice superficial cultural differences in artifacts and rituals but fail to examine the relative marginalization and privilege of the group or to experience the discomfort of being an obvious outsider.

Over time, we have concluded that by offering a choice in these assignments, we reify the experience of White (or heterosexual, or Christian, or male) privilege. People who are members of historically marginalized groups do not have the privilege of choosing how much of a boundary they need to cross. People of historically marginalized groups have to cross boundaries every day to bring their children to school, to go shopping, and to go to work. Unless our White, heterosexual students learn to understand diversity in new ways, the children from these groups in their classrooms will continue to have to live within the dominant culture every day of their schooling. By encouraging students to cross boundaries and experience for a moment what it feels like to be marginalized, we have found that we offer greater opportunities for students to examine their roles in relationship to historically oppressed groups of people. But, clearly, encouragement is not enough for all students.

*Examining inquiry assignments in political and historical perspective.* Selecting events that are authentic to a historically marginalized community is key to making inquiries useful. However, we have found that even when students choose authentic events that are organized by and indigenous to particular groups, they are best able to make sense of these events when

they have some historical perspective about that group. Our students read Takaki's *A Different Mirror* and parts of Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* as part of their course requirement. These readings give students a framework in which to place their social and community inquiry assignments. Here, too, giving students a choice as to their area of inquiry complicates the extent to which the course can provide an historical framework. For example, Takaki does not devote attention to the history of sexual oppression in this country, and neither book attends to certain types of religious oppression like that Muslims or Hindus, for example, have experienced. When students select to inquire about the experiences of groups not detailed by Takaki or Zinn, we have found that it is necessary to find other historical and cultural reading material for our students.

When students have an alternative framework with which to interpret observations at inquiry events and their conversations with people unlike themselves, they are able to process new experiences in new ways. Because students' inquiry experiences with the group are so short, they need a framework in which to place their observations. If this framework is not provided, their new information is interpreted within their existing White (or dominant) framework. We have found that critical readings offering authentic perspectives of the group being studied are therefore essential to the inquiry experience. Students are encouraged to relate their inquiry experiences to the material that they have read in class and thereby challenge the dominant interpretations. This ability is essential as they learn about such issues as curriculum planning, classroom management, and parent involvement in their other course and field experiences.

*Deconstructing experiences through discussions and critical reflection.* Finally, the third essential component of the inquiry process is that of critical group reflection. Discussions are an important vehicle for students to learn to challenge and support conflicting interpretations of school interactions. All students noted that the class discussions of inquiries were as important as the inquiries themselves. One student wrote,

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I wish this class lasted a little bit longer because when we talk about the inquiries I learn so much. I like hearing what other people did, but also I like that when we talk about these things, everything that we read makes sense. (Journal entry, UD, December 10, 2000)

Comments like this were common among students. Students felt that having opportunities to process their inquiry experiences helped them to think more critically about them. We had several students ask to rewrite their inquiry reflections following the class discussion. Many students found that doing inquiry in small groups was difficult to coordinate but useful in that it got them to talk about their topics with other students. The whole-class discussions of their inquiries brought the conversation to a new level because it gave the opportunity for students to compare their insights with those of others.

For example, following the community inquiry assignment at UD, Hyland found that the students were able to analyze structural inequality across racial lines more completely during their whole-class discussion. One group had inquired into the affluent, White community surrounding a brand new school. They found that the families felt great ownership over the school, that they had a voice in the planning and structure of the school, and that there was a distinct sense of community. Another group had inquired into the community around a new school in a working-class neighborhood. They found that the parents and community members had been shut out of meetings; they had few opportunities to find out what was going on and almost no voice in the school planning. The school was planned "for them," and they had felt ostracized from it since then. Because these groups had the opportunity to talk about the different experiences of these two communities, they were able to draw conclusions that they may not have otherwise drawn. For example, the group who had studied the affluent community felt that this was an indication that the district cared about parental input and that parents had a voice. The other group felt that the same district was bureaucratic and did not care about families. It was not until they had heard each other's inquiry

reports that they realized that the district might act one way for affluent, White parents and another for working-class parents of color. Having the opportunity to share and discuss, although time consuming, gave students the opportunity to make connections between what they learned and the experiences of other groups. It allowed students to begin to understand the multiple contexts and ways that oppression operates.

### **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

Our findings about the lessons we have learned by constructing inquiry experiences for our social studies methods students are varied. As is typical with action-research projects, although we have new understandings of some issues, we have also uncovered tensions and raised new questions. We believe that particular aspects of the inquiry process challenge our students to be better teachers of children from historically marginalized groups. We have taken the position that educators need to understand and interrogate oppression in order to work against it in their classrooms. We have also taken the position that teachers must become allied with marginalized communities in the fight for social justice. Before teachers can work against oppression and ally with oppressed communities, they must understand the experience of oppression. By creating inquiry assignments that require students to go "out there" and learn about marginalized communities from members of those communities, we believe we have taken the first step. By combining these experiences with critical readings and opportunities for discussion and reflection, we believe that we have solidified that step. However, we also know that we are still learning.

We continue to uncover conundrums in this process of preparing students to engage in teaching for social justice. In spite of our careful efforts to plan and construct opportunities for students to critically inquire into social injustice and oppression, we are faced with limitations. Because so many of our students are White, or otherwise steeped in privilege (as are we), we need to uncover ways in which our "good inten-

tions" may actually be reifying White privilege. Without careful background work and critical dialogue, for example, student observations can only result in interpretations that fit into their previously learned frameworks, which we see as structured by our racialized society. Our belief in the liberal ideology of "choice" as a fundamental element in progressive schooling may also be another way in which privilege is reinscribed.

As we continue our efforts to encourage students to cross historically shaped boundaries and to experience events that are organized by, owned by, and rooted in the cultural experience of historically marginalized people, we need to be aware of potential contradictions. We know that these boundary crossings help our students to think critically about their own privilege and to consider that privilege as part of the oppression of others. However, we struggle with the idea that these boundary crossings reify White (male, heterosexual, Christian) privilege by signaling that privileged people have the right of voyeurism, the ability to observe and interpret without engagement. In our current efforts, we are seeking to structure ways to more fully incorporate sustained and interactive contact across boundaries.

Our action-research project, which aims to interrogate our own practice and discover the best ways of preparing our students to teach for social justice and become practitioners committed to the fight against oppression, is ongoing. This work, like all action research, addresses some questions but raises others. As we critically reflect on our practice as teacher educators committed to social justice, we are left with many questions still to answer: Can we continue to allow choice for students and still achieve boundary crossing? By creating voyeuristic opportunities for our students to participate in authentic community events, do we help privileged students understand oppression but, at the same time, rob marginalized communities of their safe places? Do we sully the authenticity of these events by making them objects of inquiry? By creating these small opportunities for our students to develop a sympathetic understanding of oppression, do we somehow minimize the experience of oppression? Do we

signal that sympathy is the only goal? How can we continue to challenge our students to see that their fate is inextricably linked to the fates of those that they study? The quest for understanding, ours and theirs, is not undertaken simply to understand and move on but rather to understand and engage in the struggle for justice.

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