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# URBAN COMMUNITY STUDY BY PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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*This study determined urban community perspectives on quality education and constructed advice for beginning classroom teachers. Participant observers were 26 graduate teacher candidates. First, "expert groups" of students with the same study (e.g., churches, youth gang task force, Urban League, neighborhood arts council, teen pregnancy program, family adoption) presented findings. Next, jigsaw teams composed of experts from different study groups faced two questions from the urban community: "What is good education?" and "What does the community expect teachers to do in classrooms?" Significant themes and examples were extracted and organized. Chief among these were (a) identification of value of community study, (b) differences between community members who are well served by schools and those who are not, (c) expectations of community for urban educators, and (d) student teacher views changed as a result of study. Observers found two distinct populations with considerably different views. Some are well served by schools; others are not.*

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**Current school reform** at national and state levels strongly emphasizes community knowledge by teachers and community influence and choice in schools (Katz, 1991). Teacher education programs have a traditional goal of community study by teacher candidates, but few teacher training programs actually spend much time in this significant activity. Teacher education programs that

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have included community study as a key design feature (Mahan, 1983; Mungo, 1979) concentrated on learning about *the community* as distinct from the goal of this study, which was for teacher candidates to learn about *the views of the urban community toward quality education and classroom practice*. In previous programs student teachers learned about the community itself, but were left with the task of translating community findings into teacher practices. This study went directly to ideas about what teachers should do in their classrooms to respond to community preferences.

The central purpose of this study was to identify principles of urban community expectations for schools and classrooms and to construct advice for beginning teachers. A secondary goal was to phrase these understandings in the context of beginning teacher language, experience, and thinking by having the study done by teacher candidates themselves. This study was conducted as a part of the teacher education program and documented the observations and analysis of a group of persons preparing for urban secondary school teaching.

## BACKGROUND

It is increasingly important for teachers to understand community perspectives and to translate community views into classroom practices. The "community" for public education centers on parents, but also includes other agencies that serve youths, such as social services and law enforcement and neighborhood organizations such as churches and recreation centers.

Teachers who correctly read their local communities can create classrooms that respond to needs, cultures, and resources of students. Thus the central payoff in community study is better education for public school pupils. Second, community agencies are better served when teachers take their needs into account. Finally, teachers who understand the needs of the community are in a better position to structure their practice to meet these needs. Thus teacher knowledge of the community has benefits for students, community, and teachers. The last benefit is particularly important to teachers in an environment where school choice is being discussed.

Professional methods textbooks on field experience often mention community study. For example, Posner (1989) recommended a two-phase study. First, he encourages reading the local newspaper for a couple of weeks. Next comes a "walk around the neighborhood" where the beginning teacher starts conversations and notes reactions. Finally, the candidate analyzes differences between newspaper accounts of the community and personal conversations. Although Posner recognized the value of interviews with parents and community members, he described them as "typically not feasible" (Posner, 1989, p. 40). Gestwicki (1987), in a textbook of home, school, and community relations, recommended interviewing parents and looking for aspects of cultural conditions, such as languages and books, discussed in his text.

Some teacher education programs have made community study a major emphasis of their design. For example, Mungo (1979) reported on a field assignment in which candidates worked with professional staff in multicultural programs such as drug abuse and mental health centers, and youth centers. He reported development of more positive attitudes toward youths of different cultures. Mahan (1983) described placing students in nonschool community settings as an effective additional strategy to building awareness of community and culture into university courses. Neither of these studies reported specific recommendations for classroom practice.

Heath and McLaughlin (1991) studied community organizations, such as recreational centers, that engage and support adolescents. Although this study addressed nonschool organizations, the findings are pertinent because they reflect community values for agencies that serve youths. The authors found six characteristics that make community organizations effective in serving young people, particularly in "high-risk" environments. Included were (a) a view that youths are resources to be developed rather than merely managed, (b) product-oriented activities rather than just time-filling fun, (c) investment of a significant amount of responsibility in the youths themselves, (d) neighborhood investment of time and materials, (e) responsiveness to local social ecology, and (f) flexibility in goals, structure, and identity. The authors reported ideas pertinent to educators, but did not give examples from schools.

Although most research on teacher preparation suggests that the cooperating teacher is the most influential factor in student teacher development (e.g., Haberman, 1983), some studies find the need for a more diverse knowledge base for beginning teachers and that other sources of information are needed for beginning teachers to integrate desirable theory and practice (Nagel & Driscoll, 1991). It is important for teachers to know what the community expects for schools and classrooms. It also is important that teacher educators have effective techniques for determining community perspectives and that they communicate these findings to beginning teachers. The next section will report a technique for community study by beginning teachers and the knowledge that they acquired.

## METHOD

Participant observers for this study were 26 graduate teacher education students at a major urban public university. They were admitted to their program through a competitive process that emphasized a combination of academic success and experiences outside of education. Only one member was an ethnic minority; however, this small proportion reflected the applicant pool. The teacher education program in this study is a "flexible-system" approach (Reich, 1983). The Portland State University program is organized into "cohorts," groups of 25 to 30 students who go through a four-term program together, with a designated faculty group. Teamwork training is a central part of the learning in each cohort. Rather than a massproduction organization of courses, competencies and outcomes, the program is designed on opportunities for investigation of teacher preparation issues. Each cohort has autonomy within the larger university program for a focus and a central organizing issue. Rather than preparing for a fixed concept of quality teaching, the goal is for graduates who are skilled at group problem solving. The group problem for the cohort in this study was the urban educator.

Participant teacher candidates received training in ethnographic research (Everhart, 1983; Lightfoot, 1983; Ogbu, 1988; Wolcott, 1976) that consisted of readings, discussion, exercises, and journal

analysis. Specific topics included self-analysis, educator as researcher, ethnographic data gathering and analysis, and interpretation of qualitative studies. This information gave the predominantly White preservice teachers and researchers the tools to discover the views of individual community members toward quality education and classroom practice. This was particularly important because the early self-analysis suggested that the majority of teacher candidates were prepared to look for *deficits* in the inner-city communities that might lead to lower quality schools. Skill in ethnographic research was important because it gave the candidates tools to discover community *assets* and *values* for learning that are not generally well-known by persons not living in the community.

Located in inner-city neighborhoods particularly challenged by socioeconomic problems, field observations offered students a view from a realistic urban window. Neighborhoods generally were composed of youth populations over 50% African-American, 10% to 30% other ethnic minorities, and 10% to 30% White. Striking concentrations where 50% to 100% of families met U.S. Census Bureau definitions of poverty status occur a few blocks from middle-class and affluent professional communities used to responsive community services and safe neighborhoods. Local schools draw from this diverse mix and cope with correlative problems of 29% high school dropout rates, increasing juvenile crime and use of weapons, increasing teen pregnancies, and child abuse.

Field observations were organized to give individual students a narrow but significant experience, and then to bring diverse assignments together for generalization and learning. Individual assignments included an Urban League tutoring project, a citywide youth gang task force, a community recreation program, neighborhood church activities (services and groups), a neighborhood arts organization, a teen pregnancy program, and family "adoption." Following these individual experiences, candidates met in small groups to process their findings and to generalize from the separate placements.

Participant observers spent a minimum of 30 hours in field experiences. This time was instead of half of the nominal 60 hours of field experience generally reserved for school field experience

in the first quarter of the teacher education program. The second quarter is half time in the field, followed by the third term of full-time student teaching. Thus some time normally spent in schools was diverted for community study.

Students participated in a jigsaw cooperative learning design (Slavin, 1986). In this approach each participant became an expert in one component of the overall study. Then team members gathered to piece together the learning for the entire group. Thus expertise was developed individually but used collectively. The design called for high levels of interdependence and face-to-face work. Group work for this study proceeded in two stages. First, "expert groups" of students with the same study (e.g., Urban League, family adoption, teen pregnancy) met and generalized their individual experiences into preliminary findings. This encounter assisted the development of individual topic expertise. These assignments were not intended to cover every aspect of the community but to give a sufficient representation of diverse ideas and audiences. Several powerful ideas were expected to be more important than an exhaustive list of all possibilities.

For the initial analysis phase, expert student teacher group members formed into jigsaw teams composed of experts from different study areas. This second group faced two questions from the community point of view "What is good education?" and "What does the urban community expect teachers to do in their classrooms?"

#### PRIMARY AND SECONDARY ANALYSIS

Student teams gathered data about specific community observations and gave primary analyses of what community members needed and wanted in public school classrooms (Rennie-Hill, Narode, & Peterson, 1992). Candidates were required to document their statements with direct but anonymous quotations and recountings of eyewitness events. Research in the literature was not expected or used by the student teachers. Observer narratives were further content analyzed (Borg & Gall, 1983) by a Portland State University (PSU) teacher education faculty team composed of experts in urban teacher education. Significant themes and examples were extracted and organized. This secondary analysis in-

cluded frameworks and findings from the research literature concerning urban education.

#### **STUDENT TEACHERS AS DATA GATHERERS AND ANALYZERS**

Having a group of teacher candidates as ethnographic observers was desirable because they matched the audience for findings. That is, these students operated with the perspectives and the motives of those for whom the results of the study were intended. The data-gathering group of this study was able to notice the issues and the solutions most likely to be adopted by beginning teachers. The design of this study also contributed toward teacher preparation of what Reich (1991) called "symbolic analysts" in that teacher candidates were expected to analyze a complex situation and to create meaning from it. This is the kind of high-level educational task Reich recommended that teachers provide for public school students for 21st-century skills. Student teachers gained experience in team work, abstraction, and problem solving. They encountered a view of professional knowledge about the urban community that is not monolithic and finished in its development, but dynamic and growing in nature.

Other teacher education programs have used the community study approach. The key difference in this study was not to study the community itself but to focus on two much narrower and useful questions: How does the urban community conceptualize good teaching, and what advice do they have for classroom teachers? This difference in focus meant that the candidates did not have to grasp as much new content and perspective but to attend to topics of most immediate concern for them. The result is not more information about the community, which must then be translated into community perspective and teacher action, but to go directly for these issues. Thus this study was a unique inquiry and training procedure.

#### **FINDINGS**

The student participant observers in this study reported a variety of findings pertinent to the work of the urban educator. Chief among



these were (a) identification of value of community study, (b) differences between community members who are well served by schools and those who are not well served, (c) operations of effective community and school organizations, (d) expectations of community members for urban educators, and (e) personal changes in student teacher views of inner-city communities.

#### **VALUES FOR COMMUNITY STUDY**

Students identified the following values for community study:

Understanding school-community relations helps educators to appreciate the cultural context of the education environment, to accept the community and students' families as partners in the education of young people, and to communicate effectively with parents and community members based on a relationship of sensitivity, trust and mutual understanding. (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 1)

#### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WELL-SERVED AND POORLY SERVED COMMUNITIES**

Rather than finding general expectations of the community for schools, the observers found two distinct populations with considerably different views of urban education. Some persons are well served by schools, others are not. Community attitudes and expectations differ depending on a number of factors. It is important to be clear about which community is describing its views. The distinguishing characteristics were the following:

1. Parental early experiences with schools, positive or negative;
2. Parental expectations of schools, high or low;
3. Parental education, successful or lacking (language and literacy in particular);
4. Perceptions of schools as intimidating or welcoming, accessible or not;
5. Violence and racial discrimination, absent or experienced;
6. Parent involvement, high or lacking;
7. Effects of tracking, good or poor.

Regarding the last characteristic, "good" effects include low class sizes, high achievers being challenged, effective preparation

for college, and low achievers not being discouraged. "Poor" effects include low-quality education that does not prepare for college or jobs.

Several practices were identified as particularly alienating. Having the initial school contacts come *after* problems occur causes distance between community and school. Also, not including parents in significant school activities importantly contributes to community dissatisfaction.

#### **OPERATIONS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS**

Local churches were described as models of community institutions that can function well in support of school programs. Churches were seen as partners in the emotional and educational development of young people. Three characteristics of effective churches were described. First, the churches expressed a clear belief that life is meaningful and purposeful. Enthusiasm and drive toward these ends were evident. Second, the church cultivated a friendly, family-centered atmosphere that showed respect and recognition of the dignity of individual lives. Finally, the church offered a safe haven, a refuge from unfriendliness, violence, and racial discrimination. Churches showed how mediocrity can be replaced with personal excellence. The church offers a place to shed inhibitions, to be fully accepted, and to gain a sense of direction and purpose. At their best, community groups like churches "help people to become the ones they didn't believe they could be" (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 26).

A community recreational center offered activity and safety, success, and realistic acceptance. Difficulties in youth were handled with tolerance and gentle correction. For example, even though fighting was discouraged at the center, it was recognized as a "part of life for the kids in this community—to tell them not to do it and give them no reason not to is foolish" (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 12). This organized wrestling program for boys and girls had widespread respect and support in the neighborhood.

An Urban League community center offered tutoring and encouragement for parent interaction. The center required at least a minimal level of parent involvement as a condition for student

participation. Clear support for the school program, as well as self-concept building activities, was evident.

Schools can be a focal point of social services. One effective example was provided by a teen pregnancy program. This school-based contact included medical care, day care, clothing, job consulting, and returning to school. A particularly effective school role was to provide the physical facility for these services.

One school conducted an ambitious and promising alliance based on science-math-engineering activities for groups that were previously underrepresented: women, people of color, and poor people. This program provided a variety of experiences in math and science, in and out of classrooms. Family, community and business involvement were key. Cross-cultural understanding was a strong secondary theme.

A variety of small-scale practices found by student teachers in individual locations were encouraging. Several schools have formed school hospitality task forces that directly address the concerns of alienating school environments. Another school ensured early, positive parent contact at the beginning of the school year. Still another school program established communication and cooperation about homework expectations. In this program expectations for homework were negotiated among teachers, parents, administrators, community representatives, and students. Thus enforcement went beyond the individual classroom and teacher to a larger sense of community.

#### **EXPECTATIONS OF COMMUNITY FOR URBAN EDUCATORS**

Parents respond to schools that are comfortable and accessible places. Features such as prominent visitor parking, parent welcoming signs, and parent rooms all communicate friendliness to parents. Parents are put off by schools that have no visible provisions for parents and where staff are too preoccupied to greet them. Schools set up only to deal with problems are difficult to relate to. A central goal of good school-parent relations is to have parents as partners and resources in education. Requests by the school for parent ideas

and participation are well received, even if at times they are on a token basis.

Themes of safety and security are paramount in the views of parents and community centers. Respect for the student needs to be communicated in terms of efforts to furnish secure schools. Although to outsiders, high school students may seem themselves to be a source of significant danger—the students feel that they are at risk of violent and prejudiced acts.

Students are aware of publicity about themselves. Unbalanced reporting in the media that ignores the majority desirable behavior, but focuses on drugs and violence, is demoralizing to students. Students are proud of successful athletic, academic, and community endeavors.

Adults are strong influences in the live of youths. A casual look at students may give the impression that rebellion is dominant. A closer examination, however, shows that youths are extremely receptive to adults who are involved in their lives—parents, teachers, coaches, and ministers. Teachers can be strong influences on youths; however, influence requires care. Those looked up to must not be involved in scandal.

Students and parents were clear about teacher influences. Students appreciate humor and fairness in teachers. They look for teachers who respect students. They expect friendliness that is genuine, honest, and appropriate. They are looking for depth, openness, and not for someone who is on a power trip or who humiliates students. They want teachers to show equal attention to students, regardless of achievement level or social status. They are looking for teachers who are organized and can control a class (without overdominating). Students expect relevant work, not merely worksheets, out-of-date films, and tests that merely examine recall and knowledge. Teachers should not tolerate inappropriate behavior; for example, a student who pounded his desk for half an hour (!) was excused because “black kids have rhythm and need to work it off” (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 32).

Teacher influence was seen to be strongly associated with youth identity formation. Teachers are authority figures who can be very effective. Teachers can help students to see that identity is not only

external—clothing, who you hang out with, current identity—but identity is internal. Identity can be merely made up of association with economic class (e.g., low socioeconomic status) or minority status. Teachers can provide safety, self-expression, and success. Success should not be provided by merely lowering standards, but by support to bring about successful results. Teachers need to teach students as well as subject matter. Teachers can interfere with their own teaching effectiveness and pupil identity formation by being overdomineering, overcontrolling, and by excluding pupil self-expression.

Role models are important to students and the community. Role models may be at a peer level—the same age and status as students. They also may be at the community level—modeling the behaviors of the community, and examples of successful citizens. Community models show involvement and commitment. Cultural leaders, such as Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X, form the highest level of role models. These persons abandon care for themselves in favor of causes and chosen issues. It is a serious breach of faith if community models lose their perspective and take short-term personal gains over community welfare.

Parents expect that schools will include ethnic history and culture. They expect that community role models will be included in the school setting. They look for good programs that teach basics (reading, computation). They look for tests that go beyond recall and knowledge levels. They expect communication that is constant, respectful, and understandable. Some parents would like to have some level of shared decision making on curriculum, placement, and assignments. They appreciate being called on for ideas and preferences.

#### **CHANGES IN PERSONAL VIEWS OF URBAN COMMUNITIES**

Students contrasted earlier personal journal entries outlining assumptions and expectations prior to their fieldwork with actual later experiences. In summary reports they identified significant changes in their own views of possibilities for relating to inner-city communities:

Some . . . misconceptions . . . were that the [urban] community consisted of . . . poor, black and disadvantaged people. . . We believed that abuse, drug use, and sexual exploitation was more common . . . than in other areas of the city. A "typical" family, in our minds, . . . was headed by a single parent who was lazy, unemployed, uneducated, and uninvolved in their child's life. Most importantly . . . we were convinced that the people . . . did not want us to investigate the area in which they lived. We were convinced that these people did not want anything to do with us. (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 75)

Contrary to expectations, students found many examples of urban community values for education and teachers and instances of agencies effectively serving youth. They reported that they were welcomed into homes, churches, schools, and social agencies within the community. They were treated with respect and genuine warmth. Where student teachers performed services such as tutoring, counseling, and coaching, they received appreciation and thanks. Individuals within the community readily confided feelings and concerns and expressed the hope that student reports would find influential listeners. Community members recognized the need for people to talk about their perceptions, hopes, and problems. The lack of communication between community members and school authorities was considered the main cause of harmful, prejudicial beliefs in students, parents, administrators, and teachers.

Participant observers who shadowed middle and high school students and interviewed neighborhood school teachers found data confirming home-school misunderstandings. Harmful, prejudicial beliefs centered on negative patterns of interaction based on race and lack of understanding between teachers, students, and parents. Descriptions of racism were associated with incidents of discipline where minority youths were unfairly singled out and treated as a group, to examples of minority youth disruption that was ignored because the teacher did not know what to do. Some students were ready to use race as an explanation for conflict or tension. Several instances were recounted in which teachers lacked a ready perspective of true parental abilities to help students with academic tasks. The result was patronizing advice that did not take into account parent competence, or confusing jargon or academic content be-

yond the parent's experience. Few teachers were given time or training to follow up on parental interactions. On the other hand, one student teacher reported an incident in which both a parent and a student used physical and legal intimidation against an isolated and undefended teacher.

These negative incidents highlight the need for mutual contact and interaction. Lacking consistent dialogue, inevitable difficulties of student behavior or student learning may well be interpreted as racial in nature. Well-meaning efforts may deteriorate into ethnic conflict.

### **RECOGNITION OF COMMONALITIES IN YOUTH**

Although the community studied was urban, and many of the local customs were novel, the similarities with students in other settings were notable. In addition to the remarkable and stimulating unique qualities of teenagers in the city, the core needs of adolescents were recognizable. Although the external differences were apparent,

the internal needs, wants and dreams of all students remain the same. Students desire and need respect, recognition, support, challenge and acceptance. Success of the students in the classroom and in life will be determined, in great part, by the degree to which educators are able to satisfy these essential wants and desires. (Rennie-Hill et al., 1992, p. 50)

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study identified a significant number of practices for successful teacher practice. For example, teachers can be aware of the degree to which the parents they work with are well served by schools; different strategies will be called for depending on community views of their service. Next, teachers can take clues from well-functioning community organizations. Some ideas include providing a place of belonging, safety, and acceptance and focus on outcome products. Classroom teachers should contribute toward the welcome feeling of the school toward parents. In classrooms,

teachers are encouraged to show characteristics of friendliness, openness, and concern. Teachers are expected to manage effectively but to avoid pure power trips. The role models of the community and local culture should be included in classroom life.

Many examples of effective community-school relations were found. The inadequacy of these solutions is in the *scale* of these programs. They are working for small groups, but significant expansion of their efforts might be expected to lead to more general, overall positive relations between urban communities and their schools.

Teacher candidates in this study identified a number of problems faced by high school students: teen violence, pregnancy, drug use in schools, redundancy and lack of integration of social services, and the role of local media in fostering and promoting negative impressions of inner-city schools and communities. Just as strongly, the students wrote of the positive effects of religion and community churches, athletics and athletic role models, significance of national heroes for ethnic pride, and impact of community volunteers for tutoring, coaching, advising, and securing financial aid for further education.

Some findings were similar to those of Heath and McLaughlin (1991). The community expected schools to be responsive to the local ecology and to take into account the particular resources and problems of the area surrounding them. This is particularly emphasized in terms of friendliness. Also, schools should be flexible in expectations, structures, and activities as they respond to the needs of students. A school should be less of a rigid structure of courses and expectations, and more responsive. That there was not greater similarity between the findings of this study and Heath and McLaughlin may be due to lower expectations held by the community for the schools than for the specific effective institutions reported in the earlier study.

This study identified a distinct difference between a community population that is very satisfied with its schools and a second population that increasingly is becoming dissatisfied. Descriptions of the increasing disparities between income groups in this country are a source of discouragement. Reich (1991) described how the



economic upper fifth of the United States is "seceding" from the interests of the lower four fifths.

In addition to these specific findings leading to recommendations for practice, the teacher candidates reported significant areas of concern for their own further professional and personal development. Preeminent were (a) dispelling their own fear and prejudice of the inner city so that they can become better citizens and educators, (b) observations of racism and institutional discrimination and a commitment to combating racism in their teaching, and (c) a dedication to healing a rift between parents and teachers.

This study has significant implications for teacher education programs. The flexible-system design of the larger program permitted an intense focus on a single problem: the urban educator. This same focus permitted substantial learning on the bigger idea: capacity to function as a problem-solving team member. One reason that community study is not more frequently found in practice is that it is time-consuming. For example, in this study the community study displaced 30 hours of classroom observation or participation time and additional time for analysis and reporting. The tight time demands of teacher education programs too often limit this kind of study.

However, although the community study did compete with other kinds of teacher preparation experiences, it clearly resulted in important learnings for the participants not found in university-based course work. Teacher candidates were able to synthesize new understandings, rather than merely apply learnings passed on to them. Student teachers were able to learn specific information about communities in a holistic context in which their students live. Finally, participants learned a great deal about their community partners in educating youth: social services personnel, religious practitioners, law enforcement persons, local government officials, recreation specialists, community leaders, and parents. These "added value" learnings are likely to be available for other teacher education programs that incorporate field assignments similar to the one described in this study.

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