

Reducing Preservice Teachers' Negative Expectations of Urban Students through Field Experience

By Robert Wolffe

Introduction

Because of geography there exists a strong potential for graduates of teacher education programs to enter the profession with misinformed perceptions of the realities of teaching in urban schools. This can leave prospective teachers with negative expectations of their future students which might affect the quality of education these students receive. Many institutions preparing teachers are located in quaint, rural areas far removed from the urban environment. When I was a teacher educator at such a place, I quickly discovered that our program was not adequately preparing our students' understandings of the nature of the urban school. When I asked my students to describe their expectations of urban schools I received responses such as:

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When asked, "What should I expect when I visit an urban school?", many things come to mind immediately. Unfortunately, none of them are positive. The first thing that comes to mind is fear. I have

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heard so much on the news and have read a lot about gang wars, drugs, and general violence that it scares me to think about teaching in or visiting an inner city school. I have heard of many instances where teachers were mugged or killed by students right in the middle of class. This is not the type of place where I would want to teach.

I was concerned that such negative expectations were based on little to no real experience in an urban setting. Therefore, I proposed a program change which addressed this question: What effect will a short-term field experience in an urban school have on preservice teachers' perceptions of this setting?

Two tried, and I believe true, assumptions were footers upon which the new course component was built: "It isn't just what you know that counts, but also how you came to know it," and "The best teacher is experience." The new course component was the addition of a two day field-experience in an urban school by junior elementary education majors. This experience caused a positive change in the attitudes held by these preservice teachers toward urban schools, their faculty, and students.

The Problem

Two potential effects exist when preservice teachers have unsubstantiated negative attitudes toward teaching in urban schools. First, quality candidates may not consider employment opportunities in this setting. Second, if these preservice teachers are employed to work in an urban school, the negative attitudes they hold may affect adversely the instructional opportunity they offer their students. Certain characteristics of the institution of higher education where I taught and of its students enhanced the possibility that these negative potentials could become realities. This small, liberal arts college is located in rural Indiana. The only city within 20 miles of the college has a population of less than fifteen thousand and the nearest metropolitan area is about an hour's drive from campus. The vast majority of the student body attended either rural or suburban high schools. While the student population is fairly diverse socioeconomically, it lacks substantial racial diversity. As a result of this combination of geography and demographics, most elementary education majors were graduating without any field experience upon which they could base their understandings regarding urban schools. The following comment is representative of the perceptions of urban schools which were held by most of the elementary education majors:

I have had no experience with any other schools other than the schools in the surrounding area. Therefore, I really have no concrete experience in which to base my comparison. Based on the images the television portrays about urban schools, I would assume that there are greater discipline problems, racial conflicts, lack of parental support, and a higher rate of abused children.

An effect of student perceptions such as this are graduates who are reluctant to

consider seeking employment in an urban setting. This reluctance seems to be due, in part, to the negative perceptions students hold regarding urban schools and their students. The main teacher of what these students “know” about urban schools has been the media. They are making career decisions based on this “knowledge.”

Another negative effect of their perceptions is also plausible. Even with their stated reluctance to consider seeking such positions, the realities of the job market make employment in an urban school a real possibility. Much has been written since Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968) reported the Pygmalion effect which described the potential for students to be treated differently when teachers are given concocted “facts” about their students’ intellectual ability. Numerous subsequent studies have shown how several different factors can affect the expectations teachers have for their students (Dill & Associates, 1990). David Tom, Harris Cooper, and Mary McGraw (1984) concluded that higher grades and occupational status were expected from middle-class students and that Asian males were expected to have higher achievement than Caucasian males. Mary Jensen and Lawrence Rosenfeld (1974) found that teachers rated Anglos higher than Blacks and Chicanos and middle-class students had higher ratings than students from lower-class families. Karen Marwit, Samuel Marwit, and Elaine Walker (1978) also ascertained that knowledge of race or class can affect a teacher’s expectations for those students. Further support is also found in a meta-analysis conducted by Jerome Dusek and Gail Joseph (1983) who concluded that teachers’ expectations for their students can be adversely affected by factors such as information about a student’s ability, race, or social class.

The reliability and validity of these findings is not unanimously supported (Reichardt, 1985). Concerns are especially prevalent when the issue of creating expectations using contrived information is raised (Dusek & O’Connell, 1973). However, most research appears to agree with Dusek and Edward O’Connell that the expectations teachers hold for student performance, regardless of how it was created or derived, relates “to the way teachers teach different groups of students and may influence student’s self-concept and classroom performance” (p. 376). Therefore, the sum effect of these elementary education students having negative perceptions of urban schools and then, by default, finding work in an urban school may be lowered student achievement. The predictive value of the reduced expectations held by these students is by no means certain. However, it was enough of a concern that I felt that the addition of a two day field experience as a means of better informing their expectations should be investigated.

The Project

Overview

Programs such as those described by Elizabeth Kozleski, Denna Sands, and Nancy French (1993) for preparing special education teachers for urban schools

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support the conclusion that long-term experience in these classrooms positively affects preservice teachers' attitudes regarding culturally diverse settings. For many rural teacher preparation programs such lengthy placements are not possible. This study investigated whether a short-term, direct experience with elementary students who are culturally different would affect the attitudes and expectations of Hanover's elementary education students.

Description

First, I held informal deliberations with colleagues regarding the problem explicated in the first part of this paper. Then, the possibility of a short-term, direct experience in Cincinnati was discussed and it was agreed that I should pursue the project. I sought and received funding from the college's Faculty Development Committee. With the plan funded, the site in Cincinnati was contacted and final approval for the school to participate was secured. Shortly thereafter I met with school's program director to finalize plans for my students' experience while visiting the urban school. The agreement was that the 18 students making the trip would be paired for placements in rooms covering the full range of grades in this K-8 school. Students were paired so that perceptions of what was observed and experienced could be directly compared. Since the preservice teachers' prior knowledge of urban students could inform their observations, it was important to have students compare and contrast their reflections with someone who had been in the identical setting. The range of grades was important so a comprehensive set of experiences could be shared within the group. These sharing sessions took place during the evening between the two days of the experience and again upon returning to campus. It was also agreed that the college students would be given opportunities both to observe and to interact with the elementary school's students, faculty, and administration.

The site utilized is a magnet school in Cincinnati's large urban public school system. The student body consists of nearly 50 percent African Americans and 50 percent Caucasians. Many of the Caucasian students are from Appalachian backgrounds. The students are not extraordinary as compared to students in most urban public schools. However, the school is extraordinary in that all of the teachers have volunteered to be assigned to this particular school and have received extensive training in Mortimer Adler's Paideia approach to education as described in the book *The Paideia Proposal*. It is a Socratic program of curriculum and instruction. Therefore, while the students are not especially different from students in many urban public schools, the faculty and the educational program they present is rather unique. Underlying all that goes on at this school is a belief that all students can make substantial academic progress.

This site was selected for two reasons. First, it allowed the participants to interact with students who are fairly characteristic of many large urban schools. Second, it allowed the participants to view an educational program which is

effectively educating these “ordinary” urban children. The hope was that this would give the participants an opportunity to realize that a program which had at least the same level of expectations for students as they were used to observing in the schools around Hanover could work and was working.

The next step was to establish a means of assessing the attitudes of Hanover’s students toward a school where the student body is quite different culturally from that to which they are accustomed. The use of both an attitude survey and essays regarding perceptions of urban schools were chosen as the means of assessing any changes in attitude the field experience might cause. These two assessment tools also helped focus the students’ observations when they visited the urban school.

I did encounter one obstacle. After reviewing a number of instruments used in the area of investigating cultural attitudes, I decided that a new survey would have to be developed. Ten open-ended questions were designed to assess different areas where preservice teachers might have lower expectations when working with students in an urban setting versus students in other settings. Chart I provides examples of the questions answered by those completing the survey. After the survey was developed several experts assessed the instrument’s face, content and sampling validity with satisfactory results.

Chart 1: Attitude Survey Content Sample

Scenario: Next fall you will be a first year teacher. You have been employed by an urban school system. The student body of the building to which you have been assigned is divided evenly between Blacks and Appalachian Whites. Based on this information please answer the following questions.

A. Do you think your methods of discipline will need to be modified from what you would have used if you had been employed by a different school system? Please explain your answer.

B. What adjustments, if any, will you have to make in your use of textbooks or other print materials from what you would have done in a different school? Please include rationale for your answer.

C. In what ways, if any, do you feel the level of parental support and involvement will differ from that found in schools in other settings? Please give rationale for your answer.

D. Will you be less concerned or more concerned with motivating students in this school than you would be motivating students in a different school? Please explain your answer.

E. In what ways, if any, will you need to modify the way you grade papers from what you would have done in a different school? Please give rationale for your answer.

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Data Collection

The 18 juniors who visited the urban school were asked to complete this ten-question survey on two different occasions. The first time was a week prior to the urban experience, and the second time was four days after returning. Eighteen sophomores planning to major in elementary education followed the same schedule for completing the survey. Only the juniors went to Cincinnati and only they wrote the essays described next.

Prior to the trip, the juniors were asked to complete a paper describing what they expected to find when they visited the urban school. This was done after completing the attitude survey so that the questions in the survey might act as a guide to possible topics for discussion in the paper. The students' writing was to be personal, but it could include informal references to what they had read.

The weekend after the trip, students who went to Cincinnati were asked to reflect upon and react to their first essay. Now that they had had the two-day urban field experience, they analyzed in writing the accuracy of the expectations they had described in their first paper.

Analysis and Results

The data collected allowed for a quantitative analysis of the attitude survey and a qualitative analysis of the papers written regarding expectations. Two teacher educators scored the surveys. The proportion of agreement between the two scorers' assessments of the students' responses was over 90 percent. The results were encouraging.

A one-tailed T-test for dependent samples on the survey scores showed a significant difference in the change of attitudes held by the those who went to Cincinnati ($t=1.87$, $n=16$, $p=.04$). As a result of the experience, most students who had the field experience had a reduced level of lower expectations for urban schools. While the level of their prejudice had been diminished, their expectations were still lower for urban students than for students in other settings. The students who remained on campus had no significant change in attitudes ($t=1.36$, $n=16$, $p=.10$). The papers written by those who experienced the urban school provide the most compelling evidence that expectations of urban school students had been modified and were now considerably less negative than they had been prior to the visit. The following comments are illustrative of their changed perceptions:

I thought I would see more of what is portrayed on television but most of what I saw is similar to problems here and where I attended school.

In my previous picture of an urban school I pictured the students as being very rough and poorly behaved. I did not think the children were very rough or poorly behaved once I observed them.

The whole experience was incredible. Incredible in that the children were getting

a positive education—more positive than I expected. The negative aspect was their home environment—it was far worse than expected or even than I can imagine.

I figured that with an inner city school things would be kind of impersonal, and maybe even a bit hostile. Instead I found that the students were very curious and kind.

Another thing that surprised me was the fact that these students accepted responsibility.

These students were really studying things of interest and they were discussing it more intelligently than I ever would have expected.

My perceptions of an urban school are not as negative as they were before I observed an urban school.

The teachers I encountered impressed me. They all seemed to want to be there, and were enjoying their job.

For a few participants the trip was so transforming that they made comments stating that they were reconsidering the possibility of teaching in an urban setting. One student wrote, “Before I went to (Cincinnati) I never thought about teaching in this type of school. Now I think maybe this is something I might want to consider.”

A final finding which is quite clear when analyzing the papers is that the students placed a great deal of value on having had the opportunity to learn from actual experience. These quotations express well the feelings of all of the students who participated in the urban experience:

This was an excellent opportunity to form hypotheses and actually test them through actual experience and observation. I was exposed to more in two days time than I could ever gain through articles in magazines or books which describe urban schools.

In general, the observation was a wonderful experience and put away some of the myths I had about urban schools. Everyone should be able to get this same experience somehow.

Overall it was a great experience and I’m glad I went. It made theories, ideas, and expectations seem more real.

There is no opportunity to experience anything like this in the area of Hanover, and teaching in an inner city may be a reality for many students at Hanover in the near future.

As a result of the positive findings of this research, funding for continuing this experience was sought and has been received. In addition, an endowed program has been implemented which now makes it possible for students to complete their student teaching experience in an urban setting and to share that experience with other preservice teachers.

Conclusion

For many rural colleges and universities providing preservice teachers culturally diverse experiences is problematic. The faculty can teach the students about cultural awareness issues and texts are available which will expose the students to instructional ideas (Grant & Slefeter, 1989, Tye, 1990). Yet providing all prospective teachers extended real-world experiences in diverse settings is difficult to impossible. This study demonstrates that a well planned, short-term field experience which engages students in careful reflection can positively influence their attitudes of and expectations for students enrolled in integrated urban schools.

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