Chapter Five
Care and Resentment: Choosing to Student Teach in an Urban High School

Personal Background

I became interested in student teachers’ experiences in urban settings, while I was still a high school teacher at Heritage (pseudonym), a low income urban high school. I was working with others to create a university partnership under the auspices of Goodlad’s\(^1\) plan for mutual renewal of schools and universities. Despite several years of a growing partnership between the university and Heritage, we had very few (some semesters none at all) student teachers. In an effort to attract secondary education majors to prefer our school as a student teaching assignment, I participated in a panel presentation for the university’s methods classes. After the class, a young woman came up to me and said, “I’ve always sorta been interested in teaching in an urban high school, but before your presentation I couldn’t see myself doing it.” Her comment sparked my desire to better understand the stories, influences and perceptions that student teachers draw-upon to understand their choice of an urban site. In traditional education programs, and perhaps even more so in programs based on university and school partnerships, student teachers are the most tangible link between teacher education and “real” schools, and as such, their stories offer a crucial point of examination between “what is happening” and “what is possible to imagine” in urban education.

Overview

In this study, four, middle class, white pre-service teachers were observed and interviewed during their student teaching in order to better understand their perceptions about their choice to student teach in an urban setting. Despite fears expressed by family and friends, all four pre-service teachers had chosen to student teach at Heritage, a low income, urban high school, located in the Midwest. Their choice of student teaching placement was influenced by their desire for challenge and their construction of teaching as
public service. The student teachers cited field experiences in urban schools as important, but overall thought of the university as a “neutral force” in their decision where to student teach. Motivated by a desire to “care” for urban students, much of the time the student teachers still appeared unable to read their experiences without a discourse of resentment, in which a negative moral valuation was the center of their relationship with the students and families of the school.

As a student teaching supervisor, I arranged my assignment to encompass student teachers in urban secondary settings. Four, white, middle class, practicing student teachers were chosen as informants, because they were the only pre-service teachers who specifically chose to teach in a non-alternative, urban, secondary school, Heritage. (I have provided pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Heritage is a high school located in a midwestern city). The student population of Heritage is approximately 85% African American and 15% European American, a large portion of whom have an Appalachian background. Most of the Heritage students are bused from a variety of diverse neighborhoods. Many of the students are eligible for the free lunch program. As of the mid 1990’s approximately 150 graduate each year.

All of the student teachers in the study were Anglo American. Three of the student teachers, Joan, Tina and Paul, were undergraduates and Nancy was pursuing her M.A.T. Joan, Tina and Paul were in their early twenties and hailed from the Midwest. Joan, grew up in a small, almost rural town, not far from the university. She taught English. Tina grew up in a small community similar to Joan’s and taught science. Paul grew up in a small rural town and taught math. Nancy was in her early 30’s. She was originally from a small town in the South. Her background was lower middle class. Friends and family were quite dismayed that Nancy left a successful career as an engineer to become a secondary science teacher.

I gathered information through semi structured interviews, student teaching observations and bi-weekly seminar discussions held in my home throughout one
semester. Informants signed an informed consent form and great efforts were made to establish this research as a voluntary activity which was not officially related to their student teaching. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I used a grand tour question “How do you feel about your student teaching experience?” Open questions gave them room to discuss their student teaching experience and the history behind it. New interview questions and paths of discovery emerged with each successive interview.

During each interview, I took notes and afterwards immediately transcribed them into narrative form. Each narrative was then analyzed. Three major categories were in my mind during the interviews: informants’ background, reasons informants chose to become a teacher, and the informants’ feeling about the student teaching experience in general. I used a constant comparative method of analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) sifting and comparing each narrative in relation to the others, confirming and rejecting categories and subcategories of information until major themes emerged.

**Resentment, Care and the Representation of Urban Schools**

“Are you crazy! Why don’t you go somewhere where somebody cares?” exclaimed Tina’s roommate upon hearing Tina’s decision to student teach at Heritage, a low income, urban high school nearly an hour’s drive from the university campus. Messages (though many are more subtle) of incredulity and concern often surround pre-service teachers who choose to do their student teaching in an urban environment. Tina’s roommate had never been to Heritage, but she grew up in the same metropolitan area and thus, primarily through reputation, knew the school. She knew Heritage was grouped among several high schools considered as “inner city” and “bad.” In these times, representation plays a strong role in the development of identity. Representations in popular culture texts such as Dangerous Minds (1995), The Substitute (1996) and 187 (1997) and “non-fiction” news reports about urban school “problems” reinforce a symbolic boundary between “safe, middle class suburban lives” and “unsafe, drug and crime infested urban lives.” The concept “inner city schooling” is mapped out clearly in the symbolic realm of the public
imagination. Teenage youths (particularly those who are African American and Hispanic) are linked to the aesthetic of city as a place of crime and moral disorder. (Giroux, 1996, 56). In Chapter Two Dangerous Minds was analyzed for its particular construction of meaning around this aesthetic. Within the same genre are even newer films such as The Substitute (1996) and 187 (1999) which capitalize and extend this aesthetic in a particularly gruesome manner. This larger representational grid of fear, danger and negativity is easily attached to any school that is categorized as “inner city.” Hence, Tina’s roommate, and others can express concrete objections about a place they’ve never been to.

However, this is not merely a question of attraction and repulsion. As McCarthy et. al. (1997) remind us, what is at stake is power. They posit that, largely through mediated images, the white, middle class constructs a “discourse of resentment” aimed at urban Others in order to project itself as the subject of history (p.3). McCarthy et. al. utilize Nietzsche to define resentment as “the process of fabricating one’s own identity through the strategy of negating the other and the tactical and strategic deployment of moral evaluation” (p.3). Negating the other, means defining one’s self in opposition to certain identity arrangements, and dispersing moral judgment against these “other” identities. For example, middle class values of competitiveness and surface politeness are placed as morally at the center, whereas cultural arrangements which do not view themselves as competing as individuals or “playing nice” when they dislike someone, are lessened in value. Placing moral evaluation on “others” is a strategic move. Resentment is an emotion concerned with power. Recently, I witnessed this aggressive display of power in a college level course I was teaching. It may sound like a familiar story. All the students were white, mainly middle to upper middle class. We were discussing the public dialogue around affirmative action and I was trying to push students to look at the various ways the topic is being argued in different cultural texts. I confronted a wall, in the form of their own group “reading” of the topic. “Affirmative action” to them had one major meaning: inferior African American students were getting slots (internships, university admissions)
that they, with their hard work and merit were competing for. In its deepest recesses, this rhetoric operates on a moral axis; hard work and merit versus laziness and a free-ride. These students had collectively adopted a reading of affirmative action, which ignored the benefits overwhelmingly received by white, middle class women and instead read it as a personal threat—a reading which keeps status quo power arrangements firmly at the center. Teaching at this juncture, was not simply about engaging students in a plurality of texts, but an active struggle to decenter their racially entrenched reading.

However, the discourse of resentment has an odd currency and fixed notions of identity should not be firmly cemented through its lens. Tina’s roommate is African American, Samuel L. Jackson, the current version of the vigilante teacher is African American. I mention these details here, to remind us that other forces are marshaled by “agents” (not just white and middle class) as well as race to construct a mainstream flow of negativity and fascination toward low-income urban schools. The prevalence of “inner city schools” in the public imaginary, since *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) illustrates its importance as a cultural marker. Anyone who has ever contemplated the desire to teach has an image of what it might be like to step through the classroom door of an inner city classroom. Stand-ins for experience: Glenn Ford, LouAnne Johnson, Tom Berenger, and Samuel L. Jackson, have stepped through the door and taken the audience to the other side. Time and time again, these teacher stand-ins confront the disorder, wild play, loud music and danger which stereotypically must await them on the other side. In these representations, the “others” of innercity schooling are represented through a vast array of tangential points: race, ethnicity, youth, poverty, fashion, language, gender, music and sexuality just to name a few. The “white middle class” is not the only subject position capable of otherizing based on resentment, though arguably this subject position has the most to protect from such a strategy.

The corollary strategy of resentment is care. Rather than construct a sense of self in moral opposition to an “other,” the discourse of care, at its highest level, propels an
individual to connect; to see overlaps of the self in the “other,” and the “other” in self. Caring is based in the domain of human affect and emotion, and is a moral response. (Noddings, 1984, 3). However, a discourse of care is not divorced from the realm of power, particularly when the “one who cares” occupies a class or racial subject position that actively marginalizes the “one cared for.” Without in-depth explorations into various understandings of power and differences a stance of care can easily erode into resentment. Such an attitude of care offers the same reading of negativity and difference as “resentment,” however, the perceived moral lacks in others demand attention, and a desire to help rather than the anger of resentment. It is within the dual forces of resentment and care that I would like to situate this study of pre-service teachers who chose to student teach in an urban high school. All four student teachers expressed care for “urban others,” but this discourse of “care” did not stand out in stark contrast to a discourse of resentment; instead, care and resentment often appeared to be interwoven together.

**Perceptions of Care: Urban Schools as a Challenging Public Service**

Discussing their reasons for choosing Heritage, the student teachers voiced the perception that university as a neutral force in their decision making. “I didn’t get the impression that the university cared one way or another if I went into an urban high school. I was neither encouraged, nor discouraged.” Students felt relatively autonomous in their decision to teach at Heritage, however, they did credit the university for exposing them to urban schools. Urban field experiences during the beginning of their education program as well as during the methods portion were mentioned as helping them to decide to teach in an urban high school.

Exposure to an urban environment increased student’s desire to student teach there for a variety of reasons. First, it reduced the stereotyped images of inner city schools.

The differences were there, but they were positive. It wasn’t like the misconceptions everyone has such as violence and gangs. I didn’t see any violence. It was strange seeing security guards…but I was never afraid for my life.
And secondly, students enjoyed the challenge of teaching in a low income urban environment. “It’s adventurous. There’s always something happening.” In contrast, the students reported finding their suburban or rural field experiences as less exciting. “During my second field experience, with privileged kids, I was bored. I was not as challenged.” There was a perception that urban classrooms were more lively and more fun. Although the Heritage student teachers felt generally supported by family and friends, all of them reported hearing expressions of fear and negativity about their decision to teach in an urban high school. They heard comments such as:

Don’t do this.  
I don’t want to have to worry about you.  
Why are you doing it?  
Why deal with kids who have parole officers?

These expressions of fear for the student’s safety as well as their potential lack of success working with urban students appeared to heighten the student teachers’ drive. Rather than wishing to avoid schools like Heritage High School they felt an attraction toward them. An urban school was a challenging place to go, and if one wanted to care, it was the place to do so.

Also, the student teachers in this study appeared to share similar feelings about the nature of teaching. One of the informants specifically left a successful corporate career to become a teacher, however, all the student teachers expressed their choice to teach as in some way, oppositional to business:

Lots of my friends are in the “Big Six” firms, they sell insurance, and work in the business world. They’re not happy. Some of them may think they’re happy, but they’re not. I have no desire to enter the rat race of life. I’d rather spend my life actually accomplishing something.

When discussing the job of teaching, students tended to avoid mainstream “job” discourse such as salaries, qualifications, and societal status, unless it was to reject these categories. Student teachers discussed teaching in terms of human relationships and the impact that they wished to have. “I was raised to be a humanist, to give my talents to other people. To
serve. Teaching is more a philosophy of life than a job.” Preparing students for a specific type of subject matter or set of skills, was never brought up.

In searching for words to describe their decision to student teach in an urban setting, student teachers, often reluctantly, portrayed themselves as “idealists.”

I’m an optimist. I have a feeling I’m doing more to help people who are looked over, shunned, and given rougher lives. I have a feeling I am helping people out, people who need me more...I’m doing it to make a difference even though I know that sounds cheesy.

Teaching in an urban school was equated with a “moral higher ground,” and performing a “civic duty.” The informants wanted to do good, and urban schools became the focus of where this could best be accomplished.

Many popular texts were cited as aiding in the construction of teaching as the need to “reach those with less privilege.” Jonathan Kozol’s books such as Savage Inequalities (1991) and films such as The Dead Poet’s Society (1989) among many others were often mentioned as being influential toward constructing a vision of humanist teaching.

I remember seeing the film Teachers (1985) when I was 12 or 13 and I was emotionally struck. The urban school was the tough place to go and I wanted the challenge.

Besides their field experiences, novels and media were the only access these particular student teachers had to experience an urban school environment. Through reading these texts they perceived the urban environment as “dangerous and filled with violence and gangs,” the same images available to mainstream society; however, these student teachers somehow used the construction of difference between themselves and the images in popular culture to enhance their desire “to leave the comfort zone.” Care for the other, not resentment, appeared to be their primary motivation.

The desire to care for others “less fortunate” was evident in the language of the student teachers throughout the semester. Paul talked with passion of his desire to coach, “to reach students and be a positive influence in their lives.” Each of these student teachers emphasized the importance of personal relationships as central to urban teaching, and often segued into personal stories about individual students, even when questions to elicit these
responses were not asked. For example, as we sat sipping sodas in the middle of a fast food restaurant, Nancy suddenly implored:

How could you not want to be with these kids? They need so much. There was this girl, Lakeisha. I met her two years ago during my methods block in Mr. Z.’s room. I only had her in class for two weeks. She came back my last week of student teaching and gave me her address.

Increased human connection was definitely experienced and appreciated by all four student teachers. Despite often feeling unsuccessful in their mission to “reach kids”, the student teachers in this study appeared to thrive on the personal relationships they negotiated with the students in general.

**Language of Resentment: Under the Surface**

Based on this pilot study, it is clear to me that partnerships between universities and urban schools should be more fully developed. Being given opportunities to experience and interact within culturally diverse educational settings was considered helpful by all four of the student teachers. It was one influence among many, when considering where to student teach; however without it, many of the students might not have gained the confidence to apprentice in an urban environment. Considering the lack of diversity in a predominantly white, upper middle class university setting, the practice of field experiences seem a particularly worthwhile commitment for teacher preparation.

However, exposure to culturally diverse schools is not enough. First of all, there is a question of whether or not direct experiences actually change education students’ perceptions of low income, minority children or if students merely selectively perceive what they have been structured to see, and through this process reinforce their beliefs (Haberman and Post, 1992). Also, it has been suggested that teachers acquire most of their beliefs about teaching before beginning their professional study and that these personal beliefs are not changed much through experience in teacher education (Floden, 1995 paraphrased from Gilbert, S. 1997). Field experiences, in and of themselves, are not transformative.
Through interaction with the student teachers I saw aspects of positive possibilities as well as limitations arising from field experience in urban settings. Most of the students reported that the urban school field experiences showed them that the school was “not as bad” as they thought it would be, and yet mainstream conceptions of “inner city schooling” still coated their perceptions of place. A reading of danger and difference, although not considered as deterrents to teaching were still strong concepts the student teachers utilized for organizing their teaching experience. Even though these four student teachers reported feeling a great deal of care and concern for their students they often struggled for words to describe the differences they felt between their own conception of schooling and what they experienced as teachers in a low income, ethnically different setting. They attempted to describe student behaviors and make sense of their experiences in ways that showed respect for their students but were often limited to mainstream discourse choices, steeped in resentment.

For example, the student teachers, in their struggles to “reach kids” often labeled them as “lazy,” “not caring about anything,” or “unable to rise above their lack of family.” These phrases echoed other findings on studies with preservice teachers about perceptions of negativity toward urban youth (Olmedo, 1997; Shulz, 1996; Gilbert, 1997). Negative, individualistic attributions such as “lack of motivation,” coat teachers understandings of urban youth, even before teachers have direct experience in culturally diverse school settings. A discourse of resentment, in which the “other” is outside of morally appropriate behavior entrenches perception. Urban education as a category, is always already constructed outside of “normalcy” (Popkewitz, 1998).

In their daily relationships with students, the student teachers in this study often moved beyond stereotyped notions of perceived socioeconomic and cultural difference, however, in many instances they did not have a language or theoretical framework to describe a new way of seeing the world. This appeared to be a struggle for all four of the
student teachers, although with varying degrees of intensity and awareness. Nancy’s comments stood out as most against the grain:

A lot of people tend to talk about what’s wrong with the culture as compared to our culture rather than trying to understand. Morris Lund, it’s his second time through chemistry because he was locked up the first time. He’s really, really smart. He’s one of the best students, he helps others, participates a lot. His parole [probation] officer comes to visit him once a week. He keeps a really organized notebook, but he leaves it on the fume hood so he doesn’t have to be seen walking around with it. Most people in my life would look at a kid with a parole [probation] officer as bad, Well, we have to look at things differently.

Nancy credited a class on education and culture, a class incidentally only offered at the masters level, as being one of the most helpful learning experiences from her teacher education program. On the other end of the spectrum, and far more recurring, student teachers frustrated by perceptions of low student achievement resorted to explanation such as “apathy,” and “lack of family” to rationalize these perceptions. "These kids are just lazy." Moral lacks within the students and the students’ personal lives were discussed as causes of sympathy as well as causes for not learning.

These responses are in agreement with McIntyre’s (1997) findings about ways in which white, female teachers construct images of themselves. She found that female pre-service teachers construct perceptions of themselves as caring, benevolent, “good white knights” ready to rescue urban students, which glossed over their own immersion in stereotypes and racism.

Rather than expressing anger and rage at children coming to school with no coats and “not having” what “they have” the participants discourse lacked a sense of urgency about the need to restructure educational institutions. The participants conceptualize the problems as being internal to their students. The solution then is to “save” them. (p. 668)

Regardless of positive intentions and high ideals, without adequate language, or strategies to negotiate and understand the cultural differences they are confronted with, urban student teachers will be trapped into using mainstream discourses, which often code their experiences and the students they care deeply about, as almost irretrievably negative and pathological.
In essence, despite their care and desire to make a difference to help urban students (McIntyre calls this “caretaking paternalism”) without more complex and reflective understandings of systemic inequitable power relationships, these inequalities are invisibly reproduced. These “good white knight” student teachers, much like the student teachers in this research, appear to define themselves, by a discourse of care for the “other.” Although this discourse may at first seem positive in comparison with that of “resentment,” it should not be seen as innocent or divorced from power. In my discussions with student teachers, I, similar to McIntyre, did not detect much of a sense of “urgency” in student teachers’ responses to inequity. They cared about the students they taught, but did not or could not articulate any political intentions for transforming or intervening in the systems which maintain and structure poverty and marginalization.

Conclusion

Based on these limited observations, and considering the overwhelmingly large matrix of negative representations of urban students available to pre-service teachers, it is particularly important for teacher education to raise questions about culture as a way of perceiving the world. In varying degrees, the student teachers had understandings of themselves as culturally different from the students they taught, but they had difficulty connecting this understanding to action. They desired a teaching identity which they described in terms of care for the other, but often it was a language of resentment which they fell back on to describe experience. In order to increase the potential for more democratic, inclusive forms of storytelling and thus identity, cultural studies, which takes media, power, production and consumption seriously should be infused into the curriculum.