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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines and compares two groups of urban and suburban minority school district educators in an effort to discover the qualities and conditions that make them effective and potential models for other teachers. One group of four teachers is from an inner-city day care and afterschool center. The program has a history of commitment to building a racially and ethnically diverse community and to interracial social struggle. The second group of four includes participants in a university-based support group for new secondary school teachers. The two groups bring widely different experiences to the teaching profession, represent populations that rarely come in contact with each other in our society, either at work or in their social lives, and, some research suggests, would be expected to have highly divergent world views. Comparison of their voices and visions points to a number of similar perceptions about urban and "minority" group education and suggests that teachers from different racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds can be successful teachers of urban and minority students when specific conditions exist in schools and teachers are nurtured and supported. (Contains 41 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Listening to the Diverse Voices of Urban and Suburban  
Minority School District Educators

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## Abstract

This paper examines and compares two groups of urban and suburban minority school district educators in an effort to discover the qualities and conditions that make them effective and potential models for other teachers. One group of teachers is from an inner-city day care and afterschool center. The program has a history of commitment to building a racially and ethnically diverse community and to interracial social struggle. The second group includes participants in a university-based support group for new secondary school teachers. The two groups bring widely different experiences to the teaching profession, represent populations that rarely come in contact with each other in our society, either at work or in their social lives, and, some research suggests, would be expected to have highly divergent world views. Comparison of their voices and visions points to a number of similar perceptions about urban and "minority" group education and suggests that teachers from different racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds can be successful teachers of urban and minority students when specific conditions exist in schools and teachers are nurtured and supported.

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What does it take to prepare teachers who will invest themselves in working with students in urban and minority schools? What do these teachers bring with them? What supports do they need to sustain them in their work? This paper, which incorporates parts of two research studies, *Fighting for a Better World: Teaching In an Inner-City Day Care Center* (J. Singer, 1998) and *Crossing the Cross Island Parkway* (Murphy and A. Singer, 1996), addresses some of the issues raised in educational literature about the preparation of teachers to work in urban schools and with students who are members of officially designated minority groups.

According to projections, children from minority groups will make up approximately 35% of the public school population of the United States in the year 2000. However, only 13% of public school teachers are members of these groups. Cochran-Smith (1996) discusses the implications of growing demographic divergence in the United States between students, who increasingly belong to racial and cultural minority groups, and new teachers, who continue to be overwhelmingly European American in origin. McDiarmid (1990), Hilliard (1974), Delpit (1988 and 1995), Kohl (1994) and Kozol (1991) comment on problems and misunderstandings that arise as a result of cultural ignorance and insensitivity, especially on the part of new teachers. Britzman (1991) and Tatum (1992) discuss the resistance, frustration and anger of preservice teachers in their university classrooms that emerges as a result of these encounters. Giroux (1997), while commenting on the movie *Dangerous Minds*, where a white woman teacher, a former U.S. Marine, combines poetry with tough love to redirect troubled urban youth, strongly denounces a "colonial educational model in which White paternalism and missionary zeal provide the inspiration for kids from deprived backgrounds to improve their character and sense of responsibility by reading poetry." Giroux terms this approach a "pedagogy of diversion" that presupposes that Whites, because of their "moral superiority," "can come into such

schools and teach without theory, ignore the histories and narratives that students bring to schools, and perform miracles in children's lives by mere acts of kindness."

In response to these and similar concerns, Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa (1990) and Foster (1996) argue teachers must have an African American teaching perspective to successfully empower African American students, while Asante (1991) questions the value of preparing white teachers to work with African students and other students who are accustomed to different learning styles. Delpit (1995) is especially concerned with the cultural conflict in classrooms where middle-class white teachers, ignorant of community norms, meet and assess working-class minority children, based on universalist notions of appropriate behavior and a lack of appreciation for diversity.

The problems confronting teachers and students in urban schools are complicated by the way the school systems are organized. According to a report by the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (September 1996), "[N]ew teachers are typically given the most challenging teaching assignments and left to sink or swim with little or no support. They are often placed in the most disadvantaged schools and assigned the most difficult-to-teach students. . . . Alone in their classrooms, without access to colleagues for problem solving or role modeling, discouragement can easily set in (39)." As a result of conditions like these, New York City estimates that one-sixth of its new teachers leave the school system after one year and about a third leave within three years (Schwartz, 1996). Many quit teaching altogether, while others leave for higher paying positions in surrounding suburban communities.

Under the circumstances, recruiting, preparing, supporting and retaining caring, committed, and effective urban and suburban minority school district educators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds is a major challenge confronting teacher educators and American society. This paper examines and compares two groups of urban and suburban minority school district educators in an

effort to discover the qualities and conditions that make them effective and potential models for other teachers.

### Fighting for a Better World:

#### Teaching in an Inner-City Day Care Center

My research centers on the staff of an inner-city day care and afterschool center which I directed for more than twenty years (Singer, 1998). I call this program Banza, after a Haitian folktale about a little goat who is empowered by the gift of a "banza," or banjo, given to her by a little tiger who becomes her friend. Banza has an enrollment of approximately 150 children between the ages of two and twelve. The program has a history of commitment to building a racially and ethnically diverse community and to interracial social struggle which is expressed in an annual theme calendar. However, at the time of this study, children and staff in the program and the population of the surrounding community were all Caribbean, Latina, and African American.

I used interviews with staff, participation in staff discussions, observations of curriculum events, and my own extended history with the program to develop my understanding of the meaning that Banza had to its staff. Their responses to Banza reflected a dynamic relationship among the school's preexisting curriculum calendar, the strengths brought to the program by its staff members, and a program emphasis on social action. While teachers expressed disagreements with parts of Banza's curriculum, the dominant themes in interviews were their pride in being part of this program, their sense of ownership of curriculum events, and the belief that they had grown personally as a result of their involvement with the school.

The women teachers in Banza range in age from their early twenties to mid-fifties. They come from the southern United States, Puerto Rico, the English-speaking Caribbean, and Haiti. Many live in the working-class and poor community where

Banza is located or in similar communities. Most are not yet certified teachers and their low salaries reflect the low status our society assigns to day care workers. Seventeen out of a staff of twenty-five agreed to be interviewed for this study. A major finding of the study was that Banza's curriculum themes of building community, affirming diversity, and speaking out for social justice had counterparts in the stories these teachers told about their own lives.

Most participants described a sense of community responsibility as something that gave them direction as they were growing up and sustained them as adults. For them, community responsibility originated in family obligations. It was fostered in strong extended families, through active church membership, and by neighborhood or civic organizations. Participants recalled how parents struggled to improve the lives of their children, and how siblings looked out for one another. One participant, who grew up in the segregated South during the 1950s, describes how an older sister was left in charge of the younger siblings while their mother took on housework so the three youngest children could attend high school. The father of another participant was prepared to "work four jobs" if necessary to provide a decent home for his family. A third described how older brothers and sisters took responsibility for the younger ones when family members came North to look for jobs. Her parents stayed with older siblings, and they in turn took care of the younger siblings when they came North.

Extended families became communities themselves, enlarging the sense of support and obligation among family members. One participant remembered that anything important she did, good or bad, would become known to family members "from California, to Mississippi, to Texas, to New York." Others spoke of strict parents and grand-parents who established high expectations of family responsibility.

For several staff members, church membership supported a sense of responsibility to others. One reported that "at church you usually try to help people."

Another noted there were certain things you did not do in her grandparents' house because of their religious beliefs, "and you just knew that and respected it." For some, family and religion were inseparable. One participant commented that religion was with her before she was born. "Passed down, you could say. The experiences with my family were all basically religious. If we have a family reunion, we're going to church for the whole weekend." She emphasized the sense of connection she felt as a result of church membership and being part of an extended family. "With religion, it's almost unsaid that you trust that person. . . In family, it's almost a given that a person's going to have your back, or is going to be in your corner."

Because of these prior experiences with community, staff responded to the way that curriculum events at Banza brought children and groups together to share occasions and reinforce curriculum goals. Curriculum events functioned like rituals (Turner, 1992) or "practices of commitment" (Bellah, 1985) as each group took a turn presenting a song, dance or poem to the entire Banza community. A sense of community was further enhanced as life-cycle events in teachers' lives were acknowledged both among colleagues and with the children in Banza. During this study, six staff members went on maternity leave, one long-term staff member retired, and several staff members moved on to new jobs. In each case, tradition in Banza required the ritual of an all-center sing during which every group of children presented a group-made card or momento to the staff member who was departing. One teacher emphasized the connection teachers felt to Banza, noting, "It's not just a place that you work. It's not just a place that your children come to. It's part of me."

In contrast to curriculum events affirming diversity, previous encounters with diversity by these teachers were largely negative. Each of the teachers I interviewed told a story of discrimination directed against herself or a family member. Several

told stories of intimidation by white people and experiences with inequality in the South. Others described encounters with white high school or college teachers in the North who made derogatory remarks about them and other Black people. Caribbean teachers described being subjected to ridicule and rejection by African Americans because of their accents and the way they dressed, while an African-American teacher had to cope with Caribbean neighbors who thought they were superior to African-Americans.

Experiences with racial or ethnic discrimination had been etched into the sense these teachers had of who they were, and it contributed to their positive identification with Banza. Teachers spoke approvingly about the emphasis on cultural diversity in the curriculum. While they were particularly pleased when their own race or culture was acknowledged, affirmation of themselves also made them more receptive to cultures of other people. Some of the teachers supported Banza's curriculum because they were pleased with the way Banza's emphasis on diversity exposed children to the larger world. "I like the program because it tries to include every race and nationality, and I think that's important." Banza's curriculum showed children "there's more to the world than what's around them . . . And they feel so excited to begin to know about something that's different."

Curriculum emphasis on speaking out also resonated with past experiences of Banza's teachers. For some of Banza's teachers, speaking out was an obligation that attended community responsibility. Some participants in this study describe speaking to neighborhood children about their behavior. Another participated in a church rally to get young people in her community to stop using drugs. A third emphasized that her religion pushed people to stand up and speak about their beliefs.

Participants found that speaking out in response to discrimination helped to reestablish self-respect, and it sometimes brought about change. When one participant was being teased about her Caribbean accent, she remembers that her

father went to school to speak to her teacher, and the teasing stopped. Other teachers in Banza found they had an impact when they expressed their indignation to teachers who made racially derogatory statements in class.

Teachers communicated pride in the way the children learned to speak out in Banza. One teacher remarked, "I think with everything the children experience here, they tend to be different people than the ordinary child. They're very quick to speak up to let you know what's wrong and what's right." Another teacher contrasted her shyness when she first came to work at Banza with the outspokenness of the children she taught. "You see how these kids, they go to public school, they're not afraid to speak up. It teaches them not to just lock themselves and not say what's bothering them."

In the process of supporting the ability of children to speak out, teachers described themselves as learning to speak out as well. One teacher credited her experience working in Banza with her willingness to challenge a college professor. "I think I really would not have spoken up if I hadn't got a lot of those things from being here ." Another teacher saw herself as someone who had learned to speak up as a result of working in Banza. "Now I sit in groups, I'm able to speak out. Because of years passed; I've learned more. There's been a lot of meetings." A third commented that she liked the way Banza "tries to teach people you don't have to accept whatever comes your way." She added, "Personally, I think we affect staff members more than we affect the children. . . I know I've learned a lot since I've been here."

Nonetheless, teachers working in Banza required a lot of support in order to meet the demands involved in implementing Banza's curriculum. Meetings played a significant role in providing support for teachers in Banza. Frequent opportunities to come together in staff workshops and discussions and in staff planning committees provided crucial opportunities for staff to speak out and to address staff conflicts. At

the same time, these meetings were occasions when teachers reaffirmed their commitment to Banza's goals and where they contributed to building a community of support and possibility in Banza.

At Banza, a community of support and possibility was organized around a an annual theme calendar specifically designed to build community, affirm diversity, and promote social justice. The curriculum expressed in this theme calendar helped Banza's Caribbean, Latino/a, and African-American teachers develop a sense of possibility for both themselves and their inner-city students, that helped sustain their teaching. A major strength these urban teachers brought to Banza was their ability to draw on personal experience with community and with rejection of discrimination to develop a supportive caring community at the day care center that included staff members, parents and children. Overwhelmingly, the teachers at Banza exhibited both a sense of mission for creating a better future for children and of empathy with the children in the program and their families. In addition, this community of hope and possibility was supported by the structure of Banza, especially through its commitment to staff development, including staff participation in staff workshops, discussions and planning committees.

### Crossing the Cross Island Parkway

We work with new secondary school teachers who are members of a university-based support group, the New Teachers Network (Murphy and A. Singer, 1996). Our broader study of this group involves thirty-two teachers from a suburban teacher education program who made conscious choices to work in urban minority schools in New York City or predominately minority suburban communities, including twenty-five teachers who are white from diverse ethnic backgrounds, six teachers who are African American or Afro-Caribbean, and one teacher who is Latina (Newsday, 1998). Thirteen of these teachers are male and twenty-one are female. The title of our study

refers to the highway that separates the suburb where our university is located and where most of our students live from New York City. The Cross Island Parkway is both a physical and symbolic barrier between two worlds.

This paper focuses on eight of the teachers, all from European American backgrounds, who discussed their aspirations as educators with us and their decisions to work with urban and suburban minority teenagers. Four teach in New York City and four in suburban minority school districts. Three of the teachers were completing their third year of teaching; two were finishing their second; and three were first year teachers. Five are women and three are men.

Three themes emerge in their narratives. First, the student teachers and teachers who made conscious choices to work in urban and/or suburban minority communities made their decisions because they possess a sense of personal mission that directs their choices and sustains them in difficult school settings. They expect their teaching to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others, so they locate themselves in communities where they perceive greater need. While their missions vary from person to person, and their philosophical sources range from religious to personal to political, a sense of mission is always present.

Christina Agosti grew up in an affluent north shore Long Island community and attended an Ivy League college as an undergraduate. Her parents are Italian immigrants, and the family is Roman Catholic and deeply religious. In her early twenties, after a year in the secondary education program, Christina spent two weeks as an intern in a Brooklyn high school. Based on this experience, she accepted a position as a special education social studies teacher working with students who were labeled emotionally disturbed. Her family, friends, and several of her classmates tried to discourage her with "horror stories of young, naive women facing dangerous situations." However, Christina not only decided to work in "the city," but she moved

into an apartment not far from the school. She participated in this study during her third year of teaching.

According to Christina, "My sense of duty has its origins in my religious beliefs. My uncle worked as a missionary in the shantytowns of Nairobi, Kenya. He opened my eyes to social inequality and injustice and showed me the power of hard work, love, and a positive outlook." As a college student, Christina decided that she needed to act based on her beliefs. "I became a literacy volunteer, tutoring migrant schoolchildren having difficulty with English; a Big Buddy to a truant teen who needed someone to care; a soup kitchen volunteer delivering food and conversation; and a volunteer at the local Red Cross Emergency Shelter for the homeless." In addition, through a college-based religious community, Christina participated in a week-long social outreach project in the Appalachian region of Kentucky. Christina believes that these experiences exposed her to diversity in human circumstances and made her personally aware of "material and spiritual poverty for the first time in my life."

Michael Pezone teaches social studies in a junior high school in Queens, one of the five boroughs of New York City. He is a white male, from a working-class Italian-American family, who grew up in a suburban Long Island community with people from similar backgrounds. He attended an Ivy League college, worked in the corporate world, and, in his mid-thirties, decided to start a second career as a secondary school teacher. A political radical and an intellectual, he was dissatisfied with the academic level and ideological limitations of most of the students and professors in the teacher education program. Because of his political beliefs, he chose to student teach in a predominately minority Long Island school district. However, after a series of unsuccessful job interviews, he opted for a teaching position in "the city" at a school with a largely immigrant population. He participated in this study during his third year of teaching.

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According to Michael, "the ideal teacher is a political prisoner," who resists bondage by continuing "to educate himself, and to educate others. . . He teaches for one reason only: to create a world of equality and freedom." His role model as a teacher is Prometheus as described in classical Greek poetry. For Michael, Prometheus was "the teacher of all arts and the giver of all good to mortal men," who, "as a result of his transgression, was severely and eternally punished by Zeus." When Zeus offered him freedom in exchange for betraying mankind, Prometheus responded, "There is no torment or contrivance in the power of Zeus to wring this utterance from me. . . ; none of these things shall extort from me the knowledge that may ward off his overthrow." Michael describes teaching as an act of resistance to an "oppressive social order."

Other teachers participating in the New Teachers Network had very different starting points. Anthony Isola believes he is participating in an "enormous healing project." Gayle Meinkes argues that "the transformation of society must begin in our schools." The personal missions of all of these teachers, while different, echo similar sentiments expressed by teachers working with urban and minority youth who were interviewed by Michelle Foster (Foster, 1997), Gloria Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 1994), and Kathleen Casey (Casey, 1993).

A second theme that emerges in their narratives is that these teachers are able to draw on personal experiences that make it possible for them to empathize with people who are stereotyped by our society or who experience rejection. Jennifer Bambino "hated teachers in school because they were controlling. I think that if I had a teacher like me back then, it would have saved me from some of the pain I went through." Gayle Meinkes was part of a small group of middle-class white students who attended an inner city Brooklyn, New York high school where she learned to identify and respect the humanity of others. Among other things, she learned that the

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parents of "disadvantaged students" often work "three or four jobs, simply to maintain the family's basic needs."

Lynda Costello identifies herself with her Italian-American mother and stepfather, but remembers the pain of being called "spic" because of her biological father's Puerto Rican heritage. She remains upset that "teachers overheard this but never reprimanded the other students or even pointed out why it was wrong." She wants her students "to never feel the way I did growing up." Gayle's ability to see the humanity of her students, Jennifer's identification with them, and Lynda's desire to create a safe haven are qualities Martin Haberman (1995) identifies as crucial to successful teaching in urban and minority communities

An underlying theme in all the narratives is the belief that they personally benefit from the choice to teach in urban and suburban minority school districts. Jennifer Bambino finds that "the things I learn amaze me." Howard Fuchs feels liberated from a childhood where he was "sheltered from what life is like in urban America." Susan Soitiriades, who hid her Greek ethnic heritage as a youth, now shares her experiences with her students. Gayle Meinkes describes being "rejuvenated" by conversations with her students. Christina Agosti feels that "dreams and hope" that inspire her teaching have also "motivated, challenged, sustained, and rewarded me."

In their narratives, the teachers present very different evaluations of their preservice teacher education classes and experiences. Two teachers are highly critical, while four are positive. The other two teachers do not refer to the teacher education program when they comment on their teaching practice. This is significant because they are all graduates of the same School of Education. Possible interpretations are that they responded to the program differently because of their varying perspectives on education and society or because of what was taking place in their individual lives at the time they were enrolled . . .

The willingness of these eight teachers to struggle with, relate to, and educate urban and suburban minority youths, make them potential models for other beginning teachers from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Based on our work with this group and the rest of the teachers in the New Teachers Network, we believe that effective urban educators share certain basic qualities: a personal sense of mission, the ability to draw on personal experiences to help them empathize with others, and a belief that they personally benefit from their teaching experiences. We also found that white and middle class African American, Caribbean, and Latino/a teachers who challenge stereotypes about students at urban and suburban minority schools are frequently isolated by colleagues and remain separated by race, ethnicity or class from local community support systems. This makes them especially dependent on outside support networks of teachers who share similar goals for professional growth and sustenance.

### Comparison and Conclusion

Participants in the two studies bring widely different experiences to the teaching profession, represent populations that rarely come in contact with each other in our society, either at work or in their social lives, and, some research suggests, would be expected to have highly divergent world views. Yet a comparison of their voices and visions points to a number of similar perceptions about urban and "minority" group education and possibilities for shaping the lives of young people.

Comparison of the two studies suggest that teachers from different racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds can be successful teachers of urban and minority students when specific conditions exist in schools and teachers are nurtured and supported. The most striking differences between the two populations appear to be related to class and gender rather than race and ethnicity. Female teachers, and teachers from working class and low income backgrounds, had greater experience

with supportive community and were much more likely to work to develop such communities in schools. Male teachers, and middle class teachers, had fewer experiences with supportive communities and were more likely to function as individuals unless an outside support network was made available.

In general, the more middle-class and professionally oriented teachers were, the greater their tendency to remain strangers within potentially supportive broader communities. On the other hand, middle class teachers from all ethnic groups and genders had greater individual facility in developing and expressing ideological visions than did teachers from more working class and low income backgrounds, even as collective community made it easier for the teachers from working class and low income backgrounds to act on their beliefs. The combined study suggests that efforts to redirect urban education and the education of minority group students requires the creation of broad supportive communities that include teachers from diverse backgrounds, staff development and teacher education that focus on defining goals and a vision of possibility, and curriculum that scaffolds on student and teacher experiences and strengths.

The studies also suggest that qualities that Giroux and others dismiss as "White paternalism and missionary zeal" have a broader dimension and may be similar to the qualities Martin Haberman, Michelle Foster, Gloria Ladsen-Billings, Kathleen Casey, and Lisa Delpit describe in successful urban educators and educators of children from diverse racial and ethnic groups. Theodora Ridley, the director of Banza, grew up in the community, was involved with aspects of Banza's program as an adolescent, and worked her way through college as a group leader in the afterschool program. She noted that the teachers who were actively identified with Banza's program tended to be from religious families. In an interview, she reflected on the role faith and mission played in shaping the experience of teachers in Banza. "The philosophy here is not really a tangible one; it's one you're working towards. It's like when you're in

church, there is a level of faith you are operating on, faith in a vision for the future. I think many of the teachers here have a certain level of faith, a commitment to things you cannot see. . . I've thought about people here who aren't religious, but have a political focus, and I think their beliefs are like a religion for them. Their involvement in teaching and social change is an act of faith, vision and hope, similar to the work of the church."

In a similar vein, Vincent Harding (1990), a veteran of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, maintains that teachers need a sense of mission so they can serve as "sign posts" for young people, offering them visions of possibility. He believes that a desire for social justice is both a deep yearning among urban youth and a fundamental building block in a democracy. Harding argues that teachers must provide adult models of people from all racial and cultural backgrounds who act on behalf of social justice, even under deeply trying circumstances. He suggests study of the Civil Rights Movement as an avenue of inspiration for both prospective teachers and their students.

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