

CULTURAL BROKERS AND STUDENT TEACHERS: A PARTNERSHIP WE NEED FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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For the past twelve years, I have supervised student teachers at a university in the suburban wine country of northern California. Several years ago, I held an informational meeting to explore interest in a new field site well over an hour drive from our campus. I asked each of the seven attendees why they had come to the meeting. Kelsey[1] said she could live with her grandparents rent free if she could do her student teaching “over there.” Heather explained she was interested in moving “over there” after completing her teacher education program, so she might as well go sooner and get established. Nathan said he was interested in teaching in an urban setting to understand what goes on there better, but added that his wife would never let him go, for fear he would be shot. I asked if anyone else was concerned about the location of the proposed field placement? Everyone raised their hand.

Inclusive Academy (IA), part of the school district’s Small Schools Initiative, was modern and clean with a striking slanted roof and sky lights that allowed for an open, bright atmosphere throughout the hallways and classrooms. The neighborhood, on the other hand, was a semi-industrial section of town, replete with barred windows, gated doors, and abandoned properties. There was no bank, supermarket, or coffee shop for miles.

Like the majority of teacher candidates in education programs, the pre-service teacher education students were White and middle-class (Feistritzer, 2011). The students at the elementary school of the proposed field site placement was composed of 98% students of color in a city that was 34.5% White, according to the 2010 census. 100% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The city has a reputation for poverty, violence, and gangs. It was clear from my initial meeting with the prospective student teachers that one challenge I would face as a supervisor would be to overcome their anxiety regarding “that city over there,” in which they would be placed.

Four students took the 136-mile roundtrip with me once a week for their early field experience.[2] They agreed that they would move “over there” the following semester for their full-time student teaching. In the meantime, we carpooled to IA in heavy traffic at 6:30am on Wednesday mornings and returned to our campus around 4:00pm, the long commute affording us additional time for conversation. I conducted lunchtime seminars at IA with my student teachers. Mentor teachers and IA’s principal frequently attended these seminars as well, occasionally sharing their expertise with us.

Early on during car talk, the group complained that the students at IA were “defiant” and “disrespectful.” When I asked them to elaborate, one exclaimed, “The students ignore me when I tell them to do something!” Another offered, “They just sit there and won’t do their work,” and another, “I can’t get them to do anything.” I encouraged them to consider the child’s perspective, how students try to get their own needs met in school, and the effects of poverty and unimaginable trauma. We also explored the possibility that instruction is sometimes less than engaging and that we had our own bias toward compliant behavior. However, mentor teachers didn’t seem to face the same challenges we did in guiding students in learning and managing the class. Recognizing that my experience as a supervisor in a variety of contexts was insufficient to weave these comments into teachable moments, I turned to the mentor teachers for help. One of them, a first-grade teacher, Miss Emma Martin, became our “cultural broker” as she began regularly attending our lunchtime seminars. Emma’s mediation transformed the student teachers’ perceptions by bringing us inside the school as she saw it. Emma made explicit to us dynamics we could not know or see.

Cultural Brokers and Student Teachers

I identify the cultural broker in teacher education as a mentor teacher who has decided it is her job, even her duty, to illuminate practices to those who are outsiders, as we were at IA. Though bridging the divide between any student teacher’s experiences

and those of their students can be tricky, and may involve many other teachers, peers, and even coursework, the cultural broker is a true guide through what we often cannot know about individual students or circumstances at a school. Evidence indicates that our nationally and state accredited credential program successfully provides pedagogical support to teacher candidates in the field, but the cultural broker provided something more. Not every mentor teacher is a broker—some are too new to the school; some are too busy. Sometimes however, there is an insider willing to share her insights, and Emma was such a person. She was the “indigenous insider” that James Banks (1998) described in his portrait of multicultural researchers.

Emma, who was African American, grew up not far from IA. With over 15 years teaching experience, she had just been named District Teacher of the Year. I never heard Emma use the words “defiant” or “misbehaving” to describe her students. When I asked Emma about this, she simply said that she knew her students’ behaviors were inextricably connected to their environment, and that she never took anything a child might do in her classroom personally.

In one lunchtime seminar, Emma told us that at IA, SST stood for Study *Support* Team, rather than Student *Study* Team—a small difference in name, but a significant difference in concept. Because the SST is the first step in any review process for students of concern, the word change speaks to the way in which the school philosophy highlights support of every child first and foremost. Emma recounted the story of Ben S., a first grader who stood out among his peers as he was unable to sit still for even the shortest time, could not remember letters and sounds, and seemed to be making little progress. Emma requested an SST conference, attended by herself, the principal, the school psychologist, another teacher and Ben’s mother. At the meeting Ms. S explained her belief that Ben was simply a high-energy child. Prompted by the principal, Ms. S revealed that Ben was born at home and that at birth, he went without breathing for at least four minutes, the time it took EMT personnel to arrive after a 911 call. Such a difficult start explained a great deal about Ben’s current behavior and helped the Student Support Team determine the appropriate next steps. It is rare that SSTs, even ones designed to collect background information, actually investigate circumstances such as Ben’s.

By telling the story of Ben’s SST meeting, Emma revealed a part of the school culture we would not otherwise have known. It would have been understandable if the SST recommended testing and special education services at their first meeting. However, Emma explained that the educators at IA were adamantly opposed to adding to the over representation of minoritized youth, especially boys, in special education, unless they felt certain there was no alternative (see Harry & Klinger, 2014). While Ben was eventually tested and received special education services, Emma asserted that numerous other children had benefitted from the less aggressive approach to special education testing.

Over time, our commuter conversations changed. My student teachers began asking insightful questions about individual students. They were willing to admit why they felt angry or “dissed” when a child did not do as they asked. Our car talks touched on utilization of curriculum rather than disciplinary action to engage students. We started focusing on the particulars of student stories rather than grand generalizations. Was it really all the kids who balked at directions? No, just one or two. Did the problem situations exist during instruction in every subject? No, only under certain circumstances. Might the perception of “defiance” originate from our collective “outsider” position, and our own interpretation of tone or body language? Perhaps.

A broker knows things a supervisor might not, especially if the supervisor is from a university miles away. As the true insider, Emma demonstrated what teaching meant to her by consistently modeling an inclusive approach for everyone in her classroom community. One telling example was the way Emma introduced a new student to the class. With the full group sitting up front, cross-legged on their carpet squares, Emma announced, “We have a new friend in our class and she is from Yemen, she is Yemeni. Let’s find Yemen on our world map...” It is unlikely that many first grade teachers similarly situated would take the time to find Yemen on a map on the second day of school. Nahla, who spoke no English, seemed pleased and proud as she stood beside Emma.

In our teacher education program, supervisors often have backgrounds similar to the student teachers they supervise, which positions all of us as outsiders at some schools. Finding a broker to bridge local knowledge with university coursework is indispensable, especially in urban settings because of the incommensurate experience of student teachers and the students they are teaching. While we strive to recruit more students and faculty of color into the profession, the issue of university supervisors as outsiders in school sites limits the extent to which misperceptions and stereotypical thinking can be successfully confronted. My capacity to nurture student teachers was facilitated by the experience of working with Emma.

So far five student teachers have been hired at IA as a direct result of the six semesters I supervised at IA. These new teachers report that they would not have applied, and it would have been unlikely they would have been hired at IA, if they had not

completed their student teaching there. Each acknowledged their experience was enriched immeasurably by the efforts of our serendipitous cultural broker. Emma was our link to Inclusive Academy and because of her, at least a few of our candidates began to think of “that city over there” as home.

[1] I have used pseudonyms throughout.

[2] The students granted permission to use their comments and reflections from both our car conversations and the on-site seminar in my research.

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