

Empowering Underprivileged Students: Lessons from Chicago

Kaleigh Boysen

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Gayle Luck

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Abstract

After completing my student teaching in a second and third grade classroom in an inner-city elementary school in Chicago, Illinois, I developed many questions about the implications of teaching poor, urban minority students. Through qualitative research, I discovered the importance of engaging in honest, open dialogue and establishing connections with parents in the community in order to gain students' trust and advocate for their success. Through a review of relevant literature and my own experiences, this paper explores the challenges of urban school systems as well as strategies for empowering underprivileged students in primary grades to succeed in school despite the lack of resources they face.

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I completed my student teaching at Peabody Elementary School in Chicago, IL in a neighborhood called West Town, located just west of downtown Chicago. Most of my students came from the nearby neighborhood of Humboldt Park, a largely Hispanic and African-American community. The racial makeup of Peabody consisted of 24% African-American students, 70% Hispanic students, 0.01% white students, and no Asian or American Indian students; 95% of the students at Peabody qualified for free or reduced lunch (nces.ed.gov). My classroom's statistics differed from these numbers because many of the Hispanic students were placed in bilingual classrooms, so in English-only classrooms like mine, the racial makeup was about 50% Hispanic and 50% African-American. I had no white students in my class and all of my students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Every single student in my classroom, and almost all of the students in the school were identified as poor, minority students.

The students and teachers of Peabody faced less-than-ideal conditions. The students used old computers similar to the ones I learned to work on when I attended elementary school. My class of 28 students was crammed into a tiny room where I could hardly walk between the desks. I felt lucky to have only 28 students; the kindergarten teacher had 34 children in her class. Because the school had been placed on probation by No Child Left Behind, teachers had to use scripted curriculum programs and felt a great deal of pressure to strictly adhere to the curriculum in order to prepare their students for upcoming standardized tests. The school limited the number of copies each teacher was allowed to make to 7 sets per week. Many teachers paid to make their own copies elsewhere. The students were never allowed outside for recess, never had music class,

and never used the school library. The school did have a very small library, but it had no computers and no librarian, so it was locked most of the time. I found it difficult to function in this school environment due to the lack of resources available to students and teachers that I had taken for granted in Iowa.

Contrast the environment of this school with one of the schools I worked in during my practicum in Iowa, Van Allen Elementary. Van Allen was a new building with plenty of space and materials. Teachers were not policed in regard to the amount of copies made. The students went to music class and computer lab at least once a week. They spent time in the school library and checked out books weekly. They played outside each day for recess. Van Allen was home to a much different student body than Peabody in that most of the students were white, middle-class children.

Observing these differences led me to question my role as a teacher of poor minority students in an urban school. I did not find the conditions they were expected to endure for the sake of school acceptable. The quality and quantity of resources available to my students in Chicago was a prime example of institutional racism, in other words, a system that by design discriminates against minorities. I discovered that schools hold entirely different sets of expectations for minorities in low socioeconomic schools. If underprivileged students are truly to have an equal opportunity to succeed in the world as my students in Iowa, then the system in which they attend school must change. One question that plagued me throughout student teaching was how to open dialogue with my students about race and how to arm them to fight back against a system that short-changes them. I believe that teachers of urban minority students must teach them early in life, even in the primary grades, to prevail over a system that insists on subordinating

them. My students in Chicago will face a set of obstacles much more daunting than most of my students in Iowa. What strategies can teachers use in the primary grades to empower urban minority students to overcome the institutional or overt social barriers they will face?

Literature Review

During my research, I read on the topic of social justice in classrooms. I discovered a prevailing theme in the literature is the importance of reaching out to parents and communities. Many sources referenced the under-representation of minority parents' voices in the schools their children attend. Jonathan Kozol (2007) in his book *Letters to a Young Teacher* voices his concern about parents feeling intimidated by school teachers or administrators who they do not view as having a vested interest in their community. He discusses the importance of reaching out to parents who may feel "that they were viewed with subtle disrespect, or feared that they would be so viewed, by middle-class administrators" (p. 23). Kozol (2007) reinforces that teachers must make a concerted effort to make minority parents feel comfortable in the school setting, or perhaps visit them outside of a school setting where parents may feel less anxious. Involving parents in the schools can help make the parents agents of change in the school system.

It can be difficult to involve parents in low-socioeconomic urban minority communities, but it is of utmost importance if school systems are to be improved. As Lois Weinart (2006) accurately states in her book *Urban Teaching*, "Urban schools are run by bureaucracies and by design cut off from the communities they are supposed to serve" (p. 16). Therefore, teachers must work to overcome this problem by encouraging minority parents to become engaged in their children's school lives. This is by no means

a new idea. Paulo Freire (1970) agrees that if a system of oppression, such as the school system I have described, is to transform through education, the change must come from within the community. Freire (1970) says in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (p. 39). In other words, minority parents in low socioeconomic communities must be the driving force behind school change in order for them to shape schools to meet the needs of the community. Change cannot simply be brought to these schools by an outsider who may not understand the particular needs and desires of a community.

Camille Wilson Cooper and Christina A. Christie (2005) examine a viable method of reaching out to urban minority parents in their article “Evaluating Parent Empowerment: A Look at the Potential of Social Justice Evaluation in Education” from the *Teachers College Record*. They evaluate a program called the District Parent Training Program initiated in an urban Southern California school district using what they term a “social justice evaluation”, which takes into account the viewpoints of minority parents directly involved in the program as well as the reactions of teachers and administrators (p. 2253). Cooper and Christie (2005) state that the goals of the UCLA-sponsored program are to empower urban minority parents by informing them about school curriculum, standards, and assessment, as well as to foster communication between teachers and parents and encourage parents to volunteer in schools (p. 2253-2254). Some points that contributed to the program’s success were that it provided both meals and childcare to the parents as incentive to come to the program and parent feedback was

collected to evaluate parents' responses to the program. Also, parents developed and presented action plans that identified problems in the school and strategies to solve them, and parent graduates of the course served as directors or coordinators of future courses. According to this evaluation, the DPTP also inspired some parents to go back to school themselves and to volunteer in their child's school (p. 2264). The article quotes one principal as saying, "I've seen growth in [the parents]... I also see something else- it's not really measurable- but I see pride. I see pride and the attitude and the way the parents have confidence. They are no longer walking around in fear of not fitting [in]. They know they fit, they know they're part of the school" (p. 2264).

I focused my research on the study of children in primary grades, who I anticipated may have difficulty perceiving complex concepts such as poverty and racism. Judith A. Chafel and Carin Neitzel (2005) published a study in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* entitled "Young children's ideas about the nature, causes, justification, and alleviation of poverty" which provides some insight into young children's attitudes toward poverty. The study presented some intriguing findings on the way children of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds perceive poverty. Chafel and Neitzel (2005) found that, "not surprisingly, children with 'less' appear to be more attuned to the typically observable aspects of poverty than those with 'more'" and that, "nearly all of the children who demonstrated an awareness of the many-faceted or complicated nature of poverty resided in an urban setting" (p. 445). This finding means that poor children in urban areas carry a deeper understanding of poverty and therefore, an urban classroom such as the one I student taught in creates a fertile ground to cultivate rich discussions with students about poverty and how to act to solve it.

Such discussions serve as the central tenet to successful urban teaching in minority communities. Authors who became successful urban teachers have commented on the importance of gaining information and ideas from students through discussion. Weinart (2006), a thriving urban teacher, reports that, “the most successful urban teachers regard their students as people from whom they have much to learn as well as much to teach. They and their students regard the classroom as a community or family in which everyone’s talents and abilities are respected” (p. 70). When students feel respected, they generally give that respect back.

Kozol (2007) also writes about this bond of respect that must be created between the individuals in a classroom. He argues, “That bond of trust and tenderness comes first. Without that, everything is merely dutiful- and, generally, deadening” (p.19). Kozol (2007) also stresses talking honestly with students about the conditions of the school. He gives one reason that he believes his students trusted him: “I told them flatly that they had been treated in a way that I thought unforgivable” (p. 11) Honest discussion and group collaboration have made these urban teachers successful in their classrooms, despite the cultural differences between them and their students.

Research Findings

During my time in Chicago Public Schools, I experienced a number of frustrations related to urban teaching and, through reflection, attempted to solve, minimize or teach effectively in spite of them. It should be noted, however, that I interpret my qualitative research as a white middle-class female, the category which represents the majority of teachers in the United States, and my interpretation of the

literature and data may reflect my hegemonic status. After reflecting on my experience in urban schools and researching relevant literature, I propose some potential solutions to the problem of minority disempowerment in urban public school systems.

Engaging in discussion about race with children in primary grades can help them think critically about the world around them and place their life experiences (and those of the teacher's) in the context of the greater world. I had a unique classroom setting in that there were two distinct cultural groups present in the class: African-American and Hispanic. There was no question that my students noticed this fact, and they often asked questions or made comments to me, or to each other, about race that demonstrated it was a topic on their minds that they wanted, and perhaps needed, to discuss. Young children also have a tendency to be particularly honest in their questioning, a trait which can be harnessed to direct thoughtful, engaging discussion about complex and sensitive issues.

A prime example of students' willingness to discuss race appeared in a unit I taught on Hispanic Heritage month. I was faced with the challenge of how to teach Hispanic heritage to a class split evenly between Hispanic students, who were more knowledgeable than I due to life experience, and African-American students. I began the unit with a chart on which students wrote what they already knew about Hispanic heritage and what they wanted to know. The level of thought evident in my students' responses both delighted and surprised me. I had one African-American boy ask, "Why don't they want to be like us?" This type of question opens the door for rich discussions about cultural differences and respect for other cultures. Many of my African-American students said that they would be interested in learning Spanish. My students displayed equal interest in learning about Iowa from me. They asked me questions such as, "Do

people talk different in Iowa?” The primary grades present an ideal ground for discussing race and culture because students express a natural curiosity about their peers and a willingness to articulate honestly opinions and questions that many adults and older children feel uncomfortable discussing.

How can a teacher ensure that these discussions serve to empower minority students rather than further categorize or reinforce stereotypes? This is a difficult question which I still have not answered for myself, though I had a number of interactions with students that helped me begin to think analytically about my response. In the scripted reading curriculum I had to use, I read one story with the class about Jackie Robinson which addressed the issue of segregation. The curriculum contained several questions to ask the students during discussion. Because I felt a great deal of pressure from my cooperating teacher to stick to the scripted curriculum, I used these questions to guide the discussion. Upon reflecting on the lesson, I regretted that decision because I realized that the questions were framed in such a way as to lead the discussion about segregation to specific responses from the children. The discussion questions posed segregation as a problem of the past that people like Jackie Robinson helped to solve. I appreciated the students reading about an African-American historical figure and discussing the issue of segregation, but I wish I had talked about it as a modern-day issue as well and addressed how it affects their daily lives. I felt ridiculous standing in front of a class of 28 students, all minority and all of a low socioeconomic background, as a white teacher talking about how segregation ended in the 1960s and now black children can attend the same schools as white children when there were only five white students in their entire school.

Being honest with students about the circumstances of the world and being willing to engage in authentic, open dialogue, even when those circumstances are less than ideal, is important because it does not disillusion students. This creates the type of bond of trust between teachers and students discussed by Kozol (2007). It can also empower students to resist a system that disenfranchises them and work to change it. Such discussions prepare students for the world they will have to face, one which may not be kind to them.

I made it a point during student teaching to communicate with parents. This was made easier for me because many parents already had a positive relationship with the school. I gained invaluable knowledge from parents about my students' needs, their home lives and parents' expectations for the school. One Hispanic student struggled quite a bit with reading and did not speak much in class. I was unsure if she had difficulties with the English language, was shy with a new teacher or if there was some other explanation. I wrote a note home to her mother, who came to the school to talk to me. Her mother was able to tell me that they spoke English at home, so I could eliminate that variable. Her mother talked to the student about the importance of participating in class and asking questions if she gets confused, and I observed a noticeable increase in classroom participation from the student after this discussion.

I heard many negative comments from those outside the community who made assumptions about families at my school. One private school teacher I observed at the end of my student teaching got an e-mail from a parent about a student's grade and remarked, "I bet you didn't have parents like this at the school you were in!" Nothing could be further from the truth. The parents I worked with were incredibly dedicated to

their children's education. Many lacked the resources or education to help their children to the extent that many suburban parents do, but the problem did not lie in lack of interest. One mother that I spoke with frequently told me she was quitting one of her jobs in order to stay home with her son after school to keep him out of trouble and make sure he completed his homework. Another mother came to the school one afternoon to ask me to explain her son's math homework to her so that she could, in turn, help him. I made many mistakes during student teaching, but I owe many of the successes I did have to working with parents. As Kozol (2007), Weinart (2006), and Freire (1970) point out, making strong connections with the community alleviates potential tension and creates a powerful advocacy team for students. To create this connection, I wrote a letter to parents at the beginning of the year, wrote notes home, called parents, ran report card pick-up and met with parents before and after school. This established that I cared about their children and wanted their input as to how I could best help their children.

While in Chicago, I attended a conference entitled Teachers for Social Justice, which presented a variety of social-justice-oriented lesson plans and networked teachers interested in working for positive social change. Many of the ideas presented involved lessons which offered students an opportunity to discuss issues such as racism and classism in a classroom setting and make sense of it. Many were geared toward junior high and high school students; however, I believe these discussions are equally as important in the primary grades. As shown in the Chafel and Neitzel (2005) study, primary students can demonstrate a great deal of understanding of complex issues such as poverty, particularly those students who experience it directly. My second and third grade students enjoyed the chance to discuss race as they began to form their own opinions

about the world and a teacher should guide these discussions in order to help students realize their position in the world and their own personal potential.

Conclusion

In order to empower minority students as a teacher, the teacher must make a conscious decision to do so and act on that decision. The teacher must make crucial connections with parents and the community in order to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of the community and how families want to be supported. Secondly, teachers must engage students in open dialogue and not be afraid to discuss race and racism honestly with students. This creates a bond of trust between students and teachers, and between teachers and the community. Both are important if the school system and society at large are ever to change for the better. The strategies presented here can help empower minority students, but larger changes are necessary if underprivileged students are to ever have an equal shot at success to their privileged peers. Seeing minority culture reflected in literature and television, as well as seeing minority leaders as role models will also lead to more empowerment of minority students; however, these changes reach beyond the realm of the public school system.

My research led me to another question regarding teaching minority students. If social change must catalyze from within oppressed communities, and not be brought from an outsider, and if minority children are to grow up with minority leaders as role models, what, then is the role of a white teacher? Is a white teacher to be viewed as an “outsider” who is less capable of inspiring minority students? Can change truly come to an urban public school system if minority students continue to be taught primarily by white teachers? After much reflection on my experiences in Chicago, I have yet to

answer these questions myself. I can only hope to have left my students with a greater knowledge of the world and the knowledge that I cared about them deeply. Whether I was more or less effective at this than their African-American teacher, I may never know. Perhaps the two should not, or can not, be compared.

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