

Stories about the *Inner-City*

Beginning Teachers Struggle with Image and Reality

BY SONIA JAMES-WILSON

In the early 1990s I visited Toronto with a group of my colleagues from the City University of New York (CUNY). We were invited to tour a few "inner-city" schools and to talk to school, Board and Ministry of Education administrators in an effort to share best practices in the schooling of poor and minority children. I remember telling a friend who was a former Grade 1 teacher in Toronto about my upcoming trip. I can still recall how her eyes widened and the rate of her speech accelerated as she pointed out all of the things I should look for. She described depressed neighbourhoods, poorly resourced classrooms, disrespectful students, uninvolved parents and a high degree of immigrant and ethnically diverse children who created many "challenges" related to literacy and language learning. With this and a few first hand accounts of life "in the trenches," I thought I had a good sense of what to expect.

As we entered our first school in Parkdale, I remember struggling to reconcile the stories that I had heard with the reality before me. The school was teeming with excitement. Children of all races and ethnicities filled classrooms that were bright and well stocked. I can still remember my amazement when I noticed both sand and water tables in the kindergarten classrooms. Glancing through the windows of the library, which was filled with books and computers, I could see a series of apartment buildings which paled in comparison to the "housing projects" that surrounded the school in New York City where I spent most of my teaching career. Later the vice principal spoke to us of the wide variety of programs that the School Board was able to offer to both children



and their families, and the ways in which the school was working with the local community to assist newcomers to Canada.

I remember walking away from the school feeling both delighted and confused. The images that I had brought with me to this visit did not match those that presented themselves. My friend's story and my actual experience seemed to speak of two different places, and indeed represented two distinct interpretations of the same reality.

Several years later I moved to Toronto and began to work in the elementary teacher education program at OISE/UT. This past year I had the privilege of working with the teacher candidates who selected the Central Option as their cohort for this one-year training program. The two foci for this Option were urban education and arts education, and by extension those who selected it were usually interested in one or both of these areas. Over the course of the program, teacher candidates used many strategies to understand their role as emergent teaching professionals. In this article I will explore the ways in which "stories" about the inner-city were used to create powerful images for our teacher candidates and helped make sense of the learning environments in which they were placed.

Profile of Beginning Teachers

For the most part the candidates in the Central Option reflected the profile of the "typical" teacher candidate, based on research conducted in both Canada and the United States. These studies suggest that most teacher candidates are white, Anglo-Saxon, lower- or middle-class females who have grown up in a suburban or rural area. They tend to

The children at these schools are like children everywhere else. They are sometimes good, sometimes devious and always curious... Essentially they need to know that the school and community care for them.

speaking only English, and hope to teach average, middle-class students in a community very similar to the one in which they grew up (Avery & Walker, 1993; Beynon & Toohey, 1995; Gomez, 1994; Zimpher, 1989). In a cohort of 58, with only 10 male candidates, 90 percent of our prospective teachers self-identified as "white," from Irish, Canadian or British backgrounds.

Studies also suggest that most preservice teachers do not express a preference for teaching in inner-city school settings (Gilbert, 1995; Zimpher, 1989), but as might have been predicted, our candidates did. In the findings of an attitude survey that was completed during the first week of the program, only four percent indicated that they would not choose to teach in an inner-city school. The rest described the potential as "challenging," "rewarding" and "exciting," and believed that in such schools they would "learn about" and "be exposed to other cultures." They also saw their potential work as an opportunity to "help the disadvantaged" and "make a difference."

Unlike the "typical" teacher candidates, almost half of our students had grown up in an urban environment, with 13 percent springing from the inner-city. This latter group comprised a significant proportion of the "minorities" in the cohort which represented 24 ethnocultural groups including Ukrainian, Greek, Portuguese, South East Asian, South African, Malaysian, Israeli, Filipino, Russian and West Indian.

Even before our candidates were placed in classrooms they had well formed ideas about the children they would encounter. Almost half believed that their attitudes and behaviour were different from those of the children they were to teach even though most admitted that they had never had any personal interaction with "inner-city" children. They imagined that these children would be different in three general areas: ability, outlook and parental support. They were generally characterised as having "short attention spans," "impatient," "demanding," "more aggressive and physically violent" and in need of more attention and individual help than their suburban or rural counterparts. Their outlook on life was thought to be "more pessimistic." "They have tougher attitudes to compensate for their problems," one candidate wrote. Others suggested that education would not be a priority because they would feel as if there was "little point in trying to work within the system." Parents were thought to have more influence over these children than their teachers might have, even though it was also suggested that parents would not be around and wouldn't be able to support or encourage children because of "financial struggles."

About 12 percent of the teacher candidates believed that their attitudes and behaviour were the same as those of the children in

urban or inner-city schools. They attributed this to similarity in upbringing, stating that they "both knew the rules of the game when it came to urban schooling" and they "understood the rhythm of their lives." Others reported that they felt this way because of their experiences with children (5 percent) stating that "although we may have different backgrounds, we are not that different (as I've experienced through my teaching jobs)."

The Use of Story

For several years now teacher narratives, including oral and written stories, have been used to infer what teachers know or what they believe. Studies conducted in this tradition often involve the preparation of narrative accounts from field notes or interviews which are then used in the interpretative process (Carter, 1990). Such methodologies have been used to investigate how beginning teachers understand the development of their teaching skills during teacher training (Alexander, Muir & Chant, 1992) and stories about incidents involving cultural diversity issues have been used to help teacher educators understand some of the potential limits to candidates' understanding of the historical and social conditions of schooling from the perspective of people of diverse backgrounds (Goodwin, 1993).

Beginning teachers also use stories for their own understanding, and the images they manufacture create expectations of the classrooms in which they are placed. "All stories, whether large or small, general or personal relate to theory. Everybody has a set of theories comprising fact and value, history and myth, observation and folklore, superstition and convention" (Alexander, Muir & Chant, 1992:62). Many of the stories that were passed on to (and down to) our teacher candidates were based on theories that portrayed their future placements in a negative, sometimes derogatory light. One candidate wrote:

"Prior to going to the Parkdale community I was fed a lot of stories, generalisations and stereotypes about the community. When I would mention to people that I would be practice teaching in the Parkdale region, most people would give me a frightened look and wish me luck. I recall one individual telling me that area was just like Regent Park, a ghetto with nothing but dangerous people, places and this all over. It is amazing how much of what people say to you can influence the way you see an area." AR

The Storytellers

Stories about the inner-city reached our candidates through various avenues; the most frequently mentioned, however, were people who they knew and trusted like, "family and friends." A few candidates

reflected the conflict felt as they tried to reconcile various stories with their own beliefs and expectations:

"I was told by my friends and family that this was a very tough and rough school due to its location. Many people told me that I would be dealing with 'troubled kids' with family problems.... As a result I thought that I might have to deal with some 'really bad kids.' At the same time I knew that there were going to be some 'normal, good kids' who just wanted a good education like all the other children but that these children were just less fortunate." LA

"I had previous stereotypes and misconceptions of 'inner-city' children that a lot of other people had lead me to believe. I expected the children to have different behavioural problems and to have very little respect for their teachers. I never believed that 'inner-city' children were 'bad kids' as some people have said, but I had heard various stories about children telling their teachers to 'f___ off', among other things, and I expected to see some surprising teaching situations." SL

Other images were developed over time through the stories offered by the media, including newspapers and television, or from community members themselves:

"Basically, my prior stereotypes about inner-city areas were constructed from the media. It is common for the media (news and newspapers) to focus on news events that have negative content." RM

"I think that the reason why I thought parents wouldn't be involved in school activities was because I thought many of them would be working. I had heard many stories about parents in 'inner-city' communities working two and three jobs. I thought that many of them would be too tired or too busy to attend such activities. I think I was also influenced by the images of inner-city parents in movies and on television and from reading the newspaper, but when people I know who live in Regent Park tell me similar things it is hard not to be influenced and believe all the images." CS

Critical Incidents

The literature on urban teacher preparation suggests that prospective teachers need to understand the socio-cultural context of teaching and the socio-economic make-up of local school communities, especially if their background is different from that of the children most likely to populate these schools (Boutte & McCormick, 1992; Gay, 1993; Nieto, 1992). In an effort to help teacher candidates in the Central Option develop this understanding, we asked them to provide service to the local committees where their host schools were located. I also requested that they reflect on and write about "critical incidents" that helped them to reaffirm, question or change their views regarding urban and inner-city schools.

The idea to add a community-based element to the course was not an original one. In the past few years, teacher educators have credited these experiences with helping prospective teachers gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the lives of children and families outside of school walls (Cruz, 1997). They have also been shown to help reduce stereotyping, dispel misconceptions (Darling

& Ward, 1995), and encourage the development of positive attitudes towards youth of other cultures.

The idea to ask our students to identify critical points in their learning has also been used by others. In our case, we asked our students to isolate those points in their learning that mattered the most, signified the most, and changed them the most. The stories they told as a result of these incidences were explicit, rich, honest and unfinished. Unlike those passed on by family, friends and media, their stories didn't have simple descriptions or easy explanations. They were complex and probing and for some represented real growth and development.

Some of these stories tell of encounters that dramatically changed the ways that they viewed the people in their host schools' communities:

"I had the preconception that many of the homeless people on the streets were there of their own volition. I felt that many of them were just lazy and living off the guilt of the socially conscious. I still don't know if there are not cases like this but I feel differently. The shelter opened my eyes and my heart. I now know some of their stories. I know that, at least in Parkdale, there are a lot of homeless people out there who are mentally challenged. They have such long and painful stories that I wonder now who wouldn't be homeless if they were in the same shoes. I know now that many, if not all homeless people have their own stories and most especially, they are human. None of us are infallible and but for the grace of God, as the saying goes. It was especially the families and their children that my heart went out to. I know now that whenever I see a homeless person, I will wonder what their story is." HT

Their stories also tell of changes in attitudes towards the children in these schools and communities:

"On the Monday morning following Halloween, the children were greeted in their school yard with a variety of racial slurs and profanity that had been spray painted on the walls of the school, the portable and the sidewalk. Most of the students seemed incensed that someone would come and deface their school. There was a real sadness that could be felt about the events. Apparently every couple of months, some form of visible, serious vandalism occurs in and around the school. The children seemed to feel a great deal of pride in their school and its community. Several students asked me while I was on yard duty that morning, 'Why someone would do this?' They could not understand why someone would want to come and scar what they apparently found to be a very sanitary, safe place to be. I guess what surprised me in this incident was how the students viewed the school. Growing up in a busy city can be quite intimidating sometimes and to feel that a secure place you go to each day is vulnerable and threatened is scary for many of these children." MD

Not all of their stories however were positive or transformative:

"Almost all of things I thought would happen happened. All the things I thought the children would say were said. There was an average of three to four fights each week in my class. A number of the students in the class talked back. They would often tell me to leave them alone, tell me to 'quit bugging' them and tell me that

they wished I wasn't their teacher. Sometimes they would call me names and swear behind my back." CS

Stories like these were not often written about as critical incidences, but the telling and re-telling of them also has a significant place in the learning process. It was often through the sharing of disappointment, and for some even grief, that these prospective teachers were able to come to terms with these realities, put them in perspective and move beyond them in order to be effective and compassionate teachers for children.

The majority of the beginning teachers in our Option seemed to be able to come to terms with their "stories" of the inner-city by the end of the first practice teaching session. In December, their stories were of self-discovery, and demonstrated not only changes in attitudes and beliefs, but knowledge development. The statements below, and others like them, speak to the development and growth of our candidates over the past year. The stories and images that they shared and referred to by the end of the program were vastly different from those that they started with.

"After working in the area for a few weeks I began to become desensitised to all the negative stuff around me. I began to see that even though most of these children came from a lower income bracket that did not mean they were impoverished. Each child looked healthy and appeared to be getting enough nourishment at home, so the only guideline I had been using for seeing these children as 'inner-city' kids was that their parents did not make enough to buy them the extras that we so often do not need." RA

"I suppose I watched too many stereotypical movies about inner-city schools in the States. After my practicum I realised that my notions of inner-city schools were very distorted if not completely wrong." TS

"My notion of minimal parent involvement was completely torn to pieces as I got to experience first hand the total opposite. Even though parents may have demanding lives that does not necessarily mean that they do not care or have the time to become involved in their child's education as I previously thought." DC

"The children at these schools are like children everywhere else. They are sometimes good, sometimes devious and always curious. They need opportunities that allow them to be involved, to feel important and to reinforce their capabilities. They need positive role models. They need chances to find the positive in their lives despite having many other forces working against them. Essentially they need to know that the school and the community care for them. My experience in this urban school demonstrated that this is their objective." DA **O**

Sonja James-Wilson teaches social foundations, music and visual arts in the Elementary Preservice Program at OISE/UT and is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education. She is also the past-president of the Canadian Council for Inner-City Education, research associate with the International Centre for Educational Change and mother to Symon (pictured above) and Matthew.



References

- Aaronsohn, E. Carter, C. J. & Howell, M. (1995). Preparing monocultural teachers for a multicultural world: Attitudes towards inner-city schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 28 (1), 5-9.
- Alexander, D., Muir, D. Chant (1992). Interrogating stories: How teachers think they learned to teach. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 8 (1), 59-68
- Avery, P. G. & Walker, C. (1993). Prospective teachers' perceptions of ethnic and gender differences in academic achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44 (1) 27-37.
- Beynon, J. & Toohey, K. (1995). Aspirations: Careers in teaching as seen by Canadian university students of Chinese and Punjabi-Sikh ancestry. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 41 (4). 435-461.
- Boutte, G. S., & McCormick, C. B. (1992). Avoiding pseudomulticulturalism: Authentic multicultural activities. *Childhood Education*, 68 (13), 140-144.
- Carter, K. (1990). Teachers' knowledge and learning to teach. In, W. R. Houston (Ed.) *Handbook of research on teacher education*. (pp. 291-310). New York: Macmillan
- Cruz, B. C. (1997). Walking the talk: The importance of community involvement in preservice urban teacher education. *Urban Education*, 32 (3). 394-410.
- Darling, L., & Ward, A. (1995). Understanding the school community: A field-based experience in teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 7 (1), 85-93.
- Gay, G. (1993). Building cultural bridges: A bold proposal for teacher education. *Education and Urban Society*, 25 (3), 285-299.
- Gilbert, S. (1995). Perspectives of rural prospective teachers toward teaching in urban schools. *Urban Education*, 30 (3). 290-305.
- Gomez, M. L. (1994). Teacher education reform and prospective teachers' perspectives on teaching "other people's" children. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10 (3), 319-334.
- Goodwin, A. L. (1993). Multicultural teacher education: Listening to preservice teachers' stories. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, San Diego, CA.
- Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity*. New York: Longman.
- Zimpher, N. L. (1989) RATE Project: A profile of teacher education students. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40 (6), 27-30.