The Winnipeg Center Project: Teacher Education for Inner-City People

Jack Deines/Winnipeg Center Project

Education in the inner city is complicated by a series of unique problems. These problems have been recognized but little has been done by teacher educators to prepare teachers to cope with them. The Winnipeg Center Project represents an attempt to prepare individuals, drawn from the inner city, to become teachers who are specially prepared to cope with these problems.

The Winnipeg Center Project is a teacher-education program that was formulated to give low-income, inner-city residents the opportunity to become teachers. The project was designed by Brandon University and the Planning and Research Branch of the Manitoba government's Department of Colleges and Universities Affairs in cooperation with the Winnipeg School Division #1.

The project was conceived with several objectives in mind. The residents of the core area, or inner city, of Winnipeg include new immigrants, Canadian Indian and Métis families, welfare recipients, and many of the working poor. The children of these residents bring experiences and values with them to school that may be outside the experience of the teachers and administrators who are to provide their education. The behavior of these children, both in an academic and a social sense, may be misunderstood by educators within the system. Only rarely do these teachers have an inner-city background and their education has tended to reinforce their generally middle-class backgrounds and values. Certain of these values may come into conflict with those held by inner-city children. This is not to argue that the teachers' values are wrong, but rather that a value conflict may interfere with the educative process. It was felt that much of this interference could be ameliorated if there were more awareness and understanding of these children's values. By involving inner-city residents as teacher-trainees, and eventually as fully certified teachers, this understanding could be achieved.

Also, the fact that inner-city residents are poorly represented in the teaching force is cause for concern from the standpoint of social justice. The relationship between education and level of income has been known for some time. University assistance programs have been made available but have proven inadequate as people in the lower socioeconomic groupings often become frustrated with school and leave prior to gaining university entrance standards. Once they have left school, social and economic pressures often make it impossible for them to return. Another objective of the project was to direct itself toward this problem. Students therefore are selected on the basis of desire and apparent potential and allowed admittance on the basis of Mature Student Entry. The Manitoba government pays a monthly allowance to all students, as well as all costs directly related to their education such as tuition and books. These steps have enabled interested inner-city residents to come forward and participate in the program.

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It has also been argued that there has not been enough community involvement in our schools, a situation that is especially evident in inner-city schools, in spite of many attempts to begin a process of communication between the schools and the community. Many educators have recognized that there are people within the community who have had valuable experience that could be of considerable assistance in the schools and who often relate very well to children. These community resources, in cooperation with the teachers, could very well bring to the school a sense of realism that is sometimes lacking at present. However, schools often present the appearance of being closed to the community. Many parents are uncomfortable in the schools and are apparently reluctant to come forward to assist or to discuss their concerns with teachers and administrators. In a time of spiraling tax costs, criticism of the schools likewise has spiraled. Much of this criticism is based on the frustration of not knowing what is happening in the schools. To reconcile the parental unwillingness to become involved with the schools and the frustrations of a lack of knowledge about them is no easy task. However, involving people from the community in teacher education may provide one method. If these inner-city teacher-trainees become involved and begin to understand what is happening in education, they may become a bridge between the community and the schools.

In light of the points just mentioned, a series of general objectives was established by the planners of the Winnipeg Center Project. The prime objective was to develop a teacher-education program that could take into account the special needs of all interested parties—students, teachers, and parents—within the inner city of Winnipeg. Trainees within the project would concentrate on gaining the necessary skills to deal with these needs. Trainees would also be chosen from the inner city itself.

Trainees were to be involved in a student-centered teacher-education program. Although they would be required to complete the same course of studies as any student registered in a Bachelor of Teaching course at Brandon University, certain supports were built in. Students at the university normally take two years to complete the 60 credit hours required before they may qualify for a teaching certificate; Winnipeg Center Project students are allowed three years to accomplish their 60 credit hours. This extra time allows them the opportunity to engage in remedial work to overcome any academic handicaps that they might have as a result of their past experiences.

Although project students were to pursue the same course of studies as the other students, specific course content was carefully examined. Discussions were held with the professors concerned and an attempt was made to make the content of the courses relevant to the inner city. Wherever possible examples were drawn from published works relating to the inner city. Problems to be dealt with also reflected a concern for inner-city experience, in order to allow the students to pursue academic studies relevant to their background experience as well as directly preparing them for the specific concerns they will have as teachers in the inner city.

An emphasis on humanistic education was stressed and, in keeping with this approach, students were encouraged to make suggestions about course content and how it could be made relevant to their experience. Their knowledge of a variety of community organizations working in the inner city and of how they operated provided useful examples in the summer session course. Most of the students were parents and knowledge gained from their experience with their own children often proved a useful starting point in class discussions. This type of communication was of considerable value to both the students and the professors concerned.

It was also felt that valuable experience for the trainees could be gained by having them student teach in each year of their program. It would allow them to relate their theoretical studies to classroom practice as well as help them to recognize any of their own weaknesses that they could then attempt to overcome through remedial courses.

Indeed, there were noticeable results from the student-teaching experience of the students. They quickly became interested in relating discussions of learning theories to the actual classroom activity. They were prepared to question what they were doing in their day-to-day classroom activity and showed an eagerness to learn how to increase their effectiveness. At this point their interest in their remedial classes also quickened. They were able to pinpoint their own weaknesses and had a genuine incentive to overcome them.

It was also hoped that the trainees might provide some assistance to the classroom teacher, besides the normal help that a student teacher might give. Certain of the trainees spoke languages other than English and it was felt they might help establish direct communication between non-English-speaking people and the school.