

2000

Seeing the Students behind the Stereotypes: The Perspective of Three Preservice Teachers

Alison Cook-Sather

Bryn Mawr College, acooksat@brynmawr.edu

Ondrea Reisinger

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/edu_pubs

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Cook-Sather, Alison, and Ondrea Reisinger. "Seeing the Students behind the Stereotypes: The Perspectives of Three Preservice Teachers." *The Teacher Educator* 37, no. 2 (2001): 91-99.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/edu_pubs/26

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

**Seeing the Students Behind the Stereotypes:
The Perspectives of Three Pre-Service Teachers**

Alison Cook-Sather & Ondrea Reisinger

The Teacher Educator, Volume 37, Number 3, 2001.

Abstract

Stereotypes are a particularly insidious factor in the formation of pre- and in-service teachers' images of students. Teachers who rely on stereotypes rather than try to see the students behind them run the risk of letting cultural and individual biases work to their own disadvantage and to the disadvantage of the next generation of high school students. This article describes a project called Teaching and Learning Together that brings pre-service teachers into direct dialogue with high school students with the goal of helping pre-service teachers learn to attend to high school students and analyze the pedagogical implications of that attention prior to undertaking teaching responsibilities.

Student one: disaffected, distracted, disgusted — “He's the perfect slacker.” Student two: attention deficit, poor test scores, behavioral problems — “All learning disabled students are the same.” Student three: colorful stickers on her correspondence, large handwriting, into sports — “She must be a dumb jock.”

The broad strokes that compose these rough portraits of high school students were rendered from the initially narrow perspectives of three undergraduate, pre-service teachers. Falling back on deep-seated assumptions about students formed during their own high school years, these pre-service teachers dismiss the students they are describing using stereotypes readily available and regularly reinforced in daily social interaction. Stereotypes lend themselves to this employment because they “engender a static and hence repressed notion of identity” — “a stability that can be assumed” (Britzman, 1991, p. 5).

Resorting to stereotypes allows pre-service teachers to categorize and discriminate against students. It leads them to ignore possible student strengths, misinterpret signals students give about their needs, and neglect to perceive possible sources of students' weaknesses. If pre-service teachers rely on stereotypes rather than try to see the students behind them, they run the risk of letting cultural and individual biases work to their disadvantage and to the disadvantage of the next generations of high school students.

Pre-service teachers' stereotypes of high school students can become solidified during their formal preparation and carried forward into their classrooms. When their perceptions are inaccurate and inflexible, teachers can make poor pedagogical choices (Brophy & Good, 1974, p. 25) that hinder student achievement and lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (Weinstein, 1998; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995). One of the responsibilities of a teacher educator is to prepare pre-service teachers so they are responsive to their students' educational needs and interests (Bruner, 1977; Dewey, 1964; Freire, 1990; Shor, 1987). In addition, a teacher educator has a responsibility to teach pre-service teachers how to reflect on their instructional practice (Dewey, 1933; Richert, 1990; Rudney & Guillaume, 1990; Schon, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Both of these skills help develop teachers who are more responsive to students and enabling of their success.

Teaching and Learning Together

Designed to create for pre-service teachers a forum within which to listen to students and reflect on what they hear, Teaching and Learning Together is intended to help pre-service teachers learn to attend to high school students and analyze the pedagogical implications of that attention prior to undertaking teaching responsibilities. Teaching and Learning Together is an integral part of a Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar, which is required for state certification at the secondary level at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. The central component of this project is a weekly exchange of letters between pre-service teachers enrolled in the course and selected students who attend a local public high school. This letter exchange is private: it constitutes a forum through which the pairs explore their perspectives on issues relevant to teaching and learning in the absence of any direct monitoring or intervention.

This written dialogue is complemented and informed by weekly conversations between the pre-service teachers and their college instructor and weekly conversations between the high school students and their assistant principal. These separate conversations give each group an opportunity to discuss not only the topics explored each week through the seminar — the role of the teacher, classroom environment, diversity, assessment, etc. — but also the experience of corresponding with someone in a different educational context and in a different role. The conversations at both the college and the high school are recorded and made available to the pre-service teachers.

The pre-service teachers and the high school students meet face to face only twice: once at the beginning of the semester to establish a relationship upon which to base their correspondence, and once at the end of the semester to conclude the correspondence and reflect together on the experience. They are encouraged to visit one another's schools, however, and many take advantage of this opportunity to see a different educational context.

The final component of Teaching and Learning Together is a critical analysis paper each pre-service teacher writes at the end of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar. Drawing on the letters exchanged, the conversations in the college class, and the transcripts of the conversations at the high school, each pre-service teacher selects an aspect of what she learned from the correspondence and offers a critical reflection on the experience and how it prepared her for teaching.

This project was designed to create opportunities for direct interaction between pre-service teachers and the population they are preparing to teach, structured forums for analysis of that interaction, and opportunities for critical reflection on both. The goal was to give the pre-service teachers an opportunity to interact directly with those whose perspectives on teaching and learning are least often sought but who are most directly affected by the pedagogical choices teachers make (see Cook-Sather, 2001; Cook-Sather, in press; Cook-Sather, 2000; Cook-Sather & Shultz, in press, for related discussions).

Three Stories of Seeing the Students Behind the Stereotypes

The three pre-service teachers featured here participated in Teaching and Learning Together in the fall of 1997. Each initially associated their assigned high school student with a different stereotype. Through corresponding with that student and reflecting on the correspondence, the pre-service teachers revised their perceptions of the high school students. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations within the stories are drawn from the final analysis paper each pre-service teacher wrote at the end of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar. Pseudonyms are used for all pre-service teachers and all high school students quoted.

Disaffected, Distracted, Disgusted — “The Perfect Slacker”

When James first met his partner, Don, he based his initial impressions on Don's appearance and demeanor. James is a Caucasian male who, at the time of his participation in Teaching and Learning Together, was pursuing his undergraduate degree and certification in

mathematics. Don is a Caucasian male who, at the time of his participation in the project, was a junior designated learning disabled following a car accident that left him with brain injuries.

When James met Don at the initial gathering, he did not have this information about Don's condition. Judging Don by his appearance, James thought he was "the perfect slacker" — "a really bright student...who made the choice to rebel against the system, and damn whatever future he was destroying." Throughout their initial conversation, James perceived that Don "was less than enthusiastic about getting involved" and "muttering under his breath was his only seemingly bitter and disgusted means of communication." James' impression of Don as "a slacker" was reinforced by the fact that Don missed his first letter to James and that James' college roommate quickly assigned Don the epithet "slacker boy." To James' eye, Don fit the stereotype: "even his dress reminded me of those students I thought were slackers at my own [high] school."

This initial judgment might have kept James from looking beyond Don's appearance. Instead, James worked to get to know Don. By their fourth exchange, James had not only learned of Don's accident and its effects, including short-term memory loss and fine motor skill impairment, but had acquired a copy of an 11-page research paper Don had written about his accident and his subsequent experiences in school. With this new information, James began to view some of Don's behaviors in a different light. As James explained, "Don's initial low grades may not have been a sign of apathy, but rather a circumstance of his ADHD, and his preference for verbal expression over written." Similarly, after corresponding with Don about the lack of support he had received after his injury, James surmised that perhaps Don was muttering "to reinforce his short-term memory, or because of insecurity. Maybe he was disgruntled or upset, but it certainly seems justified considering how little help he's had." Through their dialogue, a more complex image of Don emerged, which helped James identify ways in which he as a future teacher could better understand and more effectively connect with students like Don.

James' attempts to better understand Don led him to a profound realization. In his own words:

It is frighteningly easy [for a teacher] to misframe student struggle as apathy.

Apathy is a [teacher's] quick fix, and it removes our responsibility as teachers to do something...Such a denial of assistance is an inexcusable course of action, and one I am much more conscious of after learning about Don's struggle.

James' analysis reflects that what he learned about the challenges Don faced shifted his sense of responsibility as a teacher. He realized that he needed to look past appearances to find

the potential in Don — a recognition that has two, potentially contradictory, dimensions. On the one hand, James was inspired by what he learned through coming to better understand Don:

Don had broken through many of the negative stereotypes I placed upon him at our first meeting, and had shown himself to be capable of a great deal. He had given me a lot of faith that students could rise to meet the challenges that face them, even with very little support and motivation from the school system. It gave me high hopes for what students who had such support would be able to accomplish.

On the other hand, James recognized that knowing all his future students as deeply as he got to know Don would make his role as teacher more challenging:

This realization has, in many ways, made teaching harder for me. I see now that if I want to help all of my students achieve, I need to know them, to work with their skills and their abilities, and I need to somehow do this all in the framework provided by a particular educational system.

Don's assessment of James as a future teacher is testimony to the efficacy of James' attitude and approach. In the final meeting of the high school students and the pre-service teachers, Don said that his dialogue with James "made me respect teachers more. I never really thought that they wondered about some of the things that James asked me. And just to think that they actually wondered about that or cared about that made me respect them a little more" (December 16, 1997).

Attention Deficit, Poor Test Scores, Behavioral Problems — "Learning Disabled"

Like James, Melanie's experience in Teaching and Learning Together gave her the opportunity to examine her response to a deeply held stereotype. Melanie, a Caucasian female and a college history major who planned to teach in a private school, had attended a boarding school and a private high school. Her partner, Sally, is a Caucasian female from a middle-class family who was identified as learning disabled and mainstreamed with learning support.

Initially, Melanie did not know that Sally was labeled a learning disabled student. She was impressed with Sally's insights and with her ability to express herself. Then, Melanie was surprised by a statement and a question Sally shared in the middle of the semester. Melanie explains:

About half way through the dialogue, Sally wrote to me, “Sometimes teachers treat me differently because I am in special education. Would you treat a student differently if they came up to you and you knew they were in special education?” I was shocked. This bright, well-spoken girl I had been enjoying dialogue with for a few weeks was a special education student. I didn't know what that meant, for me or the project. I wondered if I should have been asking her different questions. Should I be treating her differently? I was amazed. I did not even guess that she had any learning difficulties at all.

At Melanie's high school, she explained in her dialogue analysis, one third of the students were

kids who had been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, who had poor SAT and other test scores, and more importantly had significant problems reading and writing. These students, if they went to college at all, almost always went to community colleges, and often had behavioral problems in school.

Based on her high school experiences, Melanie had developed a stereotype of students labeled with learning disabilities. And, as she explained, “Even though we spoke often in Curriculum and Pedagogy about integrating learning disabled students into classrooms, I admit I hoped I would never have to try to teach this type of student.”

Given the stereotype she had assimilated from her own high school experience, Melanie had no basis or cause for comparison between the learning disabled students she had observed in high school and Sally. And yet as soon as she learned that Sally was labeled as a learning disabled student, the stereotype Melanie held resurfaced and caused her to call into question the present experience she was having with Sally. The stereotype was so deeply ingrained that it overshadowed the evidence she had before her that Sally was functioning perfectly well in their dialogue.

Fortunately, Melanie kept her focus on what Sally had to say: “I asked her why she was considered special ed. She replied, because I can't take tests and I have a hard time understanding things and the teachers sometimes have to explain things over and over for me to understand.” Asking an honest question rather than falling back on the stereotype allowed Melanie to recognize and identify with Sally's experience; in her dialogue analysis Melanie

wrote: “Actually, I thought, that’s really not all that different from me, or most other students I know.”

Melanie learned a very important lesson through her dialogue with Sally, her reflection on it, and her willingness to critically analyze and revise her response to Sally’s learning disabled status:

I thought about [Sally’s] question and realized I would have treated her differently had I known. I would have acted on my assumptions about learning disabled students and never would have gotten very far in the dialogue. She made me realize that my conceptions about students with learning disabilities were incorrect. By sharing herself with me and helping me to destroy an unfounded assumption, [Sally] helped me to realize that teaching learning disabled students is not something to be viewed with apprehension. I actually now hope to have the opportunity to teach students like Sally who have enormous potential but just need some extra help and a good teacher.

When Sally spent a day at Melanie’s college, she offered numerous insightful critiques of the pedagogical approaches of some of Melanie’s professors, which Melanie reported to her education professor and to some of the professors Sally has observed, illustrating that teaching and learning can go in two directions.

Colorful Stickers on Her Letters, Large Handwriting, into Sports — “Dumb Jock”

Mary, a Caucasian woman, the daughter of academics, and a writer who had graduated from college several years prior to enrolling in the Education Program, was seeking certification in English. Married and helping to bring up her step-children, she was more removed from her own high school experiences and the typical undergraduate experience than the other pre-service teachers who participate in Teaching and Learning Together. Erin, her high school student partner, is a Caucasian female from a middle-class home. At the time of her participation in the project she was heavily involved in sports, and she was a sophomore who earned As and Bs in the Regular track of her high school classes.

The initial judgments Mary made about Erin were based on the “multi-colored lettering on [Erin’s] envelope and a sparkly sticker inside” and Erin’s “neat but large” handwriting. These superficial characteristics prompted Mary to “judge [Erin] and make assumptions without even realizing I had made them. I seemed to have forgotten that she was fifteen years old.” Like the

stickers and the large handwriting, Erin's short sentences contributed to Mary's negative judgment. She explained that "although I would not have admitted it or even realized it at the time, I am a terrible snob when it comes to writing and verbal expression. The simple sentences irritated me. I took them as indications of either stupidity, insincerity or both." Mary assumed that the juvenile appearance of Erin's writing was a direct reflection of Erin's ability and sophistication. Based on this correlation, Mary "felt that if this was the level we were going to communicate on, then I was certainly not to get anything out of the project."

The weeks that ensued brought more anxiety and frustration on Mary's part, and continued but failed attempts to connect with Mary on Erin's part. For instance, in another letter, Erin asked Mary what her favorite color was, and Mary wrote that she thought to herself, "God, what a stupid question." And in another letter, Erin revealed that her hobbies were field hockey, basketball, and lacrosse. Mary was "instantly turned off by the fact that she's a 'jock'" and she assumed that if Erin was an athlete "she would be shallow and dumb." Mary's harsh judgment of Erin is, perhaps, extreme, but it throws into relief the kinds of assumptions pre-service teachers can make and the danger of not confronting those stereotypes.

It was a difficult and painful process for Mary to realize that her initial and ongoing judgments of Erin were misguided. A turning point in Mary's participation and understanding of her exchange with Erin came when Mary decided not to write back to Erin "partly because I couldn't think of anything to say, and partly out of fear that I would be coming from a place of anger and blaming." During a discussion in the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar, she presented this choice to the class. Jessica, one of her peers, said to Mary, "I keep thinking about this in the context of, if this were one of your students, and my first reaction is that you can't give up and not write back." Another peer, Joanna, suggested approaching the interaction from a different angle: "Is there maybe a non-confrontational approach you could try? Like, 'Here's my phone number'?" Michael posed a question to clarify his and Mary's understanding of the tone of the relationship: "she's not antagonistic toward you, right?" Building on this point, James confirmed the possibility of successful communication: "I think you can send her a message that's very clear without necessarily being angry" (all excerpts from class discussion, October 7, 1997).

Through this discussion, Mary was "nudged/pushed/kicked out of [her] defensive, angry, blaming corner," and she left class early to pen a lengthy letter to Erin to which she received in return "a letter exploding with information and personal involvement."

In her dialogue analysis, Mary wrote:

In becoming aware of how assumptions I made set the stage for the unfolding relationship between Erin and me, I realized that I was judging her according to

my interests and strengths; I was defining intelligence solely in reference to myself. I made the mistake of interpreting her different (from mine) writing style and her level of comfort with written self-expression as lack of intelligence...

What Mary describes is an initial inability to see beyond the stereotypes she imposed on Erin — both the stereotype of “the jock” and the stereotyped correlation between handwriting and intellectual sophistication. After reflecting on her semester-long correspondence, however, Mary realized that she had not only misjudged Erin but had failed to participate constructively or productively in their relationship. She explains:

Now I see that I had abdicated my responsibility in our conversations and in the relationship as a whole. I had felt uncomfortable... and my response was to retreat into my own skeptical perspective. Essentially, my failure to assume responsibility for the early steps of our relationship left her foundering.

As Mary realized, judging students on superficial grounds makes it easy to blame them for lack of communication and connection, and therefore makes it possible for a teacher to abdicate her responsibility to really get to know students. Because she was required to continue to engage with Erin and to reflect on the exchange, Mary was able to come to a better understanding of the student with whom she was corresponding and of herself through “a process of self-examination that I not only want to continue, but will have to continue to be the kind of teacher I want to be.”

Conclusion

These stories are not intended to be representative. Rather, they are particular stories that three pre-service teachers told about discerning assumptions about and seeing beyond stereotypes of students. But the stories are illuminating. The revelations these three pre-service teachers offer suggest that teacher educators must challenge pre-service teachers to recognize and confront their stereotypes of high school students.

Because of the critical analyses James, Melanie, and Mary offered of their problematic assumptions and expectations, the examination of assumptions and expectations has become a central, underlying theme of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Seminar. Furthermore, in addition to maintaining the exchange of letters and the weekly discussions that have constituted Teaching and Learning Together since its creation, pre-service teachers are now required to read copies of transcripts of discussions among high school students from previous years of Teaching and

Learning Together. One question for future research is to what extent these instructional strategies succeed in challenging all participating pre-service teachers' understandings of their biases and stereotypes.

It is no more possible to eliminate stereotypes from the minds of pre-service teachers than from the larger social palette, and there is no doubt that not all pre-service teachers who participate in Teaching and Learning Together unearth and revise the stereotypes they hold of high school students. It is possible, however, to strive toward this goal as one of many efforts toward greater equity and better pedagogical practice. Teacher educators must create innovative strategies for helping pre-service teachers see the students behind the stereotypes.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Christopher Clark, Jody Cohen, Paul Grobstein, and Jean McWilliams for their critiques of this article, to Katie McGinn for her critical insights and her research, and to Eula Jackson for her research.

References

Britzman, D. (1991). Practice makes practice: A critical study in learning to teach. New York: State University of New York Press.

Brophy, J. E., & Good, T.L. (1974). Teacher-student relationships: Causes and consequences. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Bruner, J. (1977). The Process of Education. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, J. (1964). John Dewey on education: Selected writings. Archambault, R.D. (Ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1933). How we think: A restatement of reflective thinking to the educative process. Boston: Heath.

Cook-Sather, A. (2001). Translating themselves: Becoming a teacher through text and talk. In Christopher M. Clark (Ed.) Talking shop: Authentic conversation and teacher learning. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cook-Sather, A. (in press). Between student and teacher: Learning to teach as translation. Teaching Education.

Cook-Sather, A. (2000). Re(in)forming the conversations: Including high school teachers and students in pre-service teacher education.

Cook-Sather, A., & Shultz, J. (in press). Starting where the learner is: Listening to students. In our own words: Student perspectives on school. Shultz, J., & Cook-Sather, A. (Eds.). Latham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Freire, P. (1990). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Richert, A. (1990). Teaching teachers to reflect: A consideration of programme structure. Journal of Curriculum Studies 22 (6), 509-527.

Rudney, G., & Guillaume, A. (1990). Reflective teaching for student teachers. The Teacher Educator 25 (3), 13-20.

Schon, D. (1983). The reflective practitioner. New York: Basic Books.

Shor, I. (Ed.) (1987). Freire for the classroom: A sourcebook for liberatory teaching. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Weinstein, R. S. (1998). Promoting positive expectations in schooling. In N.M. Lambert & B.L. McCombs (Eds.), How students learn: Reforming schools through learner-centered education. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Weinstein, R. S., Madison, S. M., & Kuklinski, M.R. (1995). Raising expectations in schooling: Obstacles and opportunities for change. American Educational Research Journal 32 (1), 121-159.

Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (1987). Teaching student teachers to reflect. Harvard Educational Review 57 (1), 23-48.