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Making some modest strides: The story of downtown elementary school (DES)[1]

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Abstract
This paper discusses research, (its process and results), on an inner city school. It highlights the methods of data collection used in the research and discusses the findings. Methods of data collection include observation, interview and documentary information. Results indicate that the school in question is making modest strides, in terms of serving its students and the community in which it is located, through its school improvement programs. Besides making other strides, Downtown Elementary School (DES) strives to be a pedagogical community and a place where praxis (simplified definition: the interrelationship/interaction between practice and theory) is being practiced at its best. DES is unique because it concurrently runs two contemporary school reform programs, namely, magnet[3] and professional development school (PDS)[4]. The paper describes how these innovative ventures operate at DES and the implications of the juxtaposition of the two programs.

Keywords: *School reform, magnet schools, professional development schools, ethnography, multiculturalism.*

Introduction

This paper is about research that was conducted on a predominantly Black student populated school that has both magnet and professional development school (PDS) programs. The data used in this paper was

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[3]Magnet schools are schools with educational offerings so promising that, it was hoped, parents would overcome their fears and concerns about interracial contact and place their children in desegregated settings.
[4] It is a school for the development of novice professionals, for continuing development of experienced professionals, and for the research and development of the teaching profession. Although the concept of school-based teacher education is not new, the PDS movement is different from the traditional school-based approach because of its focus on individual public schools as well as the depth of collaboration between university and school-based educators (Lecos, 1997).

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gathered through an ethnographic research in which the author immersed herself in the research site. Entering Downtown Elementary School (DES) as a distant observer, the author gradually became a participant observer in the capacity of a substitute teacher, gathering information on the school for approximately three years. The process and byproduct of this research are presented here in this paper, in not just a simplistic narrative form but also in the form of a complex enough analysis that turns the everyday taken for granted issues into analytically abstract issues and vice versa for theoretical and practical purposes in order to attain an optimum level of analysis based on praxis, emphasizing the interrelatedness and interdependence of theory and practice and how they feed off each other.

Besides the introduction, the paper consists of four other sections: description of the methodology, presentation of the results, a discussion of the findings and a conclusion section. The second section, immediately following the introduction, is an elaboration of the methods of data collection, and how the data were analyzed. The methods of data employed, include: participant observation, interviewing, documentary information. The author provides an elaborate description of how each one was carried out since one of the foci of the paper is the "research process".

The third section of the paper is a presentation of the outcome of the research. Culling from interviews conducted at DES, the author paints a picture of the story of the school. Major themes that emerged from the data analysis include the revelation of DES as pedagogical or learning/teaching community, DES as a site where praxis, through the collaboration between different experts (theorists and practitioners) is practiced at its best. The fourth section discusses the findings at length from a critical multicultural perspective. The results of the research illustrate how DES is making some modest strides in school reform due in part to its innovative programs – magnet and PDS, albeit, the critical analysis. The fifth and final section is a summation and reinforcement of all the sections. Suggestions for further research are also made in this final section.

Methodology

This section is a crucial component of the paper and is an elaboration on the research process –the ethnographic study. Methods of data collection used in the field research on DES include participant observation, interviewing and documentary information. These are described in detail in the next few sub-sections. Note worthy is their face-to-face nature, especially in the case of the first two methods. After all, earlier social science researchers have long recognized the relevance of fieldwork:

> Good training in theory and acquaintance with its latest results is not identical with being burdened with 'preconceived ideas'. If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the

> more he is in the habit of moulding (sic.) his theories according to the facts and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory [what better way is there to explain the use of *praxis* in research than this], the better he is equipped for the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies. (Malinowski, 1922, pp. 8-9).

Similarly, more contemporary researchers, alluding to the above quote, are in agreement about the importance of empirical research in theorizing and vice versa, (Alasuutari, 1996; Amundson, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Helfat, 2007; Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). Spradley & McCurdy, (1972), for example, spelled it out in a clear and concise manner:

> It is possible to acquire partial understanding of this perspective [phenomenon under study] by reading and studying anthropological literature. We believe that a more meaningful learning experience results from first-hand cultural investigation. Fieldwork leads to higher level of concept comprehension . . . (p. 3).

Hence, prior to writing this paper, the author embarked on a three-year ethnographic research employing the methods of data collection described below.

Participant observation

As advised by (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Johnson & Christensen, 2008), the author used participant observation for the purpose of being there to catch the "moments," developing an understanding of the research participants and acquiring the status of "trusted person" to facilitate the collection of data. Thus, I started off as a “participant observer”, to borrow Spradley’s words (1980, p. 53). As one that eventually became a substitute teacher in the school, the teacher began as a participant-observer at first who later became observer participant and then finally a participant-observer and attending major events such as school carnivals and speeches on Martin Luther King Jr. day, and others. Through participant observation (through being part of the social setting of the school) the author tried to learn firsthand how the actions of the research participants correspond to their words; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected; develop a quality of trust with my research participants that motivates them to tell the author what they might not otherwise tell an outsider or a stranger.

As noted by several scholars, (Johnson & Christensen, (2008); Anzul & Ely, 1991; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Spindler, 1997; Spradley, 1980), participatory observation served as the essential means of gathering qualitative data. Besides being useful as a tool for establishing rapport, it is also useful as a method of gathering data. Participatory observation covers a continuum of different kinds and degrees of participation.

The type of participatory observation that was used during the first few weeks of the research was mostly observation without note taking, in

order to give the research participants the chance to become used to the author's presence. The author then gradually began to take field notes and make arrangements to observe certain individuals and functions of the school. The author's approach eventually became as interactive as possible depending on the type of rapport that was established in each instance/situation or moment of the research process.

Besides day-to-day observations and interactions with individual teachers and staff throughout the two year study, the author had the opportunity to observe five major events: the carnival, the launching of the school book coupon, the Martin Luther King Birthday celebrations, and the Black month cultural celebrations. Each event, although not a one-day celebration, ended with a gathering of the entire school for an hour or two of exuberant performances such as dances, speeches, recitals and pep-rallies. The author also had the chance to interact with the whole school population on a day to day basis in the capacity of a substitute teacher, get the feel of what is going on, observe and learn the language of the new environment as the author became fully immersed and her presence no longer bothered anyone.

Interviewing

The second major data collection method employed was interviewing. Informal conversational interviews were carried out throughout the research. That is to say that the author asked questions on the many occasions when something was happening that she wondered about, and had conversations with the people she came in contact with, without formally arranging a time to ask questions. In terms of formal interviews, the author conducted open-ended and semi-structured interviews whereby appointments were set up with selected research participants. Ten audio taped interviews were conducted with two University representatives, the school principal, an administrative staff, two parents, two interns and two mentor teachers who were willing to have an in-depth conversation with me.

The University officials that were interviewed have a longtime relationship with DES as well as expertise in teacher education, magnet schools and professional development schools. One of them has worked as a representative of the University in its collaboration with DES in the training of teachers by assigning them as interns to various mentor teachers. The other University official interviewed was an expert in teacher education and has served for a long time on various committees that represent the University in the PDS consortium of universities and is behind the beginning of the University of Tennessee's collaboration efforts with the neighboring public schools.

The principal and the administrative staff that were interviewed have both been with DES for a very long time and have seen it move from being magnet school as it was originally intended, to being a professional development school as well. In fact, the school administrator has been with

the school since it was founded, first as a classroom teacher, and then a curriculum supervisor.

The two parents that were interviewed have first hand knowledge about their children's school because they both work there and so are well informed about issues of concern and the advantages of having their children enrolled in DES. The fact that they are parents and teaching assistants rather than classroom teachers makes their perspective a useful addition to the picture because they are able to view issues from different angles and appreciate issues that may not be of much concern to the teachers and other members of staff of the school.

Two mentor teachers were also interviewed. One was a former intern at the school who got recruited after completing her teacher education program. This teacher therefore had a considerable knowledge and experience base that consists of knowing what it means to be an intern and what it means to be a mentor and therefore offered a lot of insight on the issues at stake. The other mentor teacher has several years of experience as a teacher and a mentor and is a recipient of several teaching awards and so speaks with authority on the issues that were discussed. At the time of the interview, she had just won an award for excellence in teaching skills. She had a lot to offer as to what the school was doing with the interns and teaching in DES in general.

The two interns from the University that collaborates with DES that were interviewed, were at different stages of their program and worked at different grade-levels so the author was able to tap into their different perspectives based on the length and type of interaction with the school and length of time spent in their teacher training program thus far. All in all, therefore, the population of respondents was diverse with different perspectives that provided an insight to the broader picture.

Documentary information

Documentary information was gathered from various publications and manuscripts such as affiliated university students' term papers, local newspapers, DES's handouts, application forms, announcements about events and agenda of events, description of programs and activities of school, etc. The author was also able to obtain and study documents that guided the development of both programs at the school. Some of the other documents include historical newsletters of churches, notes that have been written by various members of the civil rights movement at the time of the desegregation of the city. The handbook of the County's Substitute Teacher, The Title One Parent's Handbook, and the School's Staff Handbook were reviewed.

Data analysis

Data analysis was part of the research process right from the very beginning to the end. The data included field notes, ten audio taped

interviews, photocopies of newspapers, and other printed materials mentioned above under documentary information. Data analysis entailed the summarization of data, transcription of interviews, coding and interpretation. It also entailed the integration and presentation and all of the above; i.e. the integration of the summarization of data, transcription of interviews, coding and interpretation in a way as to make sense of it all and give an organized picture of the process and outcome of the research.

As advised by various experienced researchers such as (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Wolcott 2001; Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984), the author started data categorization and the writing of research report early in the study and continued after the field research was over. Field notes were organized by day and time and where observation took place, the audiotapes were labeled according to the interviewee's given name.

As the author continued to gather, organize and summarize the data, clusters or analytic units began emerging (in the form of ideas and phrases repeating themselves), which were then used as tools for organizing the description of the data. Throughout this qualitative research, the author paid close attention to the fact that all the stages of research are interdependent. Thus, data were in fact invariably analyzed throughout the research process. There were several mini-analyses all throughout the research as the author sought to summarize and make presentations, interpretations and integrations with every bit of data that were gathered each day.

The ten audio taped interviews were transcribed into typewritten texts by the author and then read over and over to familiarize the author with their contents. Field notes and some information from documents were also transcribed, scrutinized, sifted and as time went on themes began to emerge (in the form of ideas, topics and subject matter) and the data was categorized according to these themes which are further *crystallized*, i.e. reflected, refracted and the findings discussed in the next section. In essence, the author did not only focus on portraying a detailed description of events and processes at the school (at the micro level) but also on "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar", (Spindler & Spindler, 1983, pp. 23-24) drawing on the real life situation and the ideal, and teasing the data to see if there is common ground for the past, present and future advances at DES and the idealized versions of the school's magnet and professional development programs (at the macro level). Thus, the analysis process included grouping data from different sources together to provide concrete thick descriptions that consist of different aspects of DES culture and provide a rounded picture that makes theoretical implications possible while heeding to the warning from Hammersley and Atkinson (1983),

> Theorized accounts give much poorer representation of the phenomena with which they deal. On the other hand, assuming the theoretical ideas are well founded, they begin to give us much more knowledge about how particular

> aspect of social process is organized and perhaps even why events occur in the patterned way they do. (p.177).

There is the need for triangulation in order not to rely on only one piece of data rather than different kinds of data. Hammersley and Atkinson (2002) indicated that the danger of undetected error built into data-production can be minimized through the use of different kinds of data rather than a single piece of data. They assert that if different kinds of data lead to the same conclusion, then one can be a little more confident about that conclusion, bearing in mind that the different kinds of data have different kinds of error built into them.

Hence, the author did not only gather different kinds and sources of data, but also tried to remain systematic, rigorous and robust in conducting this research exercise. Through reflective thinking, nothing was taken for granted as the author worked on "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (Spindler & Spindler, 1982, pp. 23-24). In order to facilitate the process of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, the author did not only review the available literature on magnet and professional development schools, but also immersed herself in DES, a school that has both programs, as well as triangulate various other techniques of data collection. Data from one method complemented, authenticated or contradicted data from another method and/or provided ways and means of carrying out other methods of data collection. In other words, through casual observation, the author was able to design questions to investigate during participant observation. All the stages of the research are intertwined and interrelated. They are framed and formed from one another and data from one are crossed examined through the use of another method. For instance, interview questions were framed from notes taken during observation and the entire collection of data from interviews, observation and documents were triangulated not so much to "commend the use of different methods as to give weight to the idea of reflexive triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2002, p. 232).

In addition, data from different respondents gathered at different moments and in different situations were triangulated and never taken at face value. For instance, through participant observation (through being part of the social setting of the school) the author tried to learn firsthand how the actions of the research participants correspond to their words; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected; develop a quality of trust with the research participants that motivates them to tell the author what they might not otherwise tell an outsider or a stranger.

The outcome is not just a simple narrative but also a complex enough analysis that turns the elementary, taken for granted issues into analytically abstract issues and vice versa for theoretical and practical purposes attaining an optimum level of analysis based on *praxis*, emphasizing the interrelatedness and interdependence of theory and practice; how they feed off each other. Emerged major themes include: *DES*

as Pedagogical Community; Praxis at Its Best: Collaboration between Different Experts. Subsequent sections, present more detailed descriptions these findings. The author proceeds to discuss the big picture in greater depth through critical multiculturalism.

Results

DES as pedagogical community/learning community

A theme that emerged was the school as a learning team or a community of learners. This is made possible and facilitated by the school's magnet program. There were computers everywhere, at least two in the non-magnet classrooms and up to five or more in the magnet classrooms. There were also two computer laboratories and i-Note-Books for some of the higher-grade magnet students to be used both at school and at home for note taking and for doing homework. There were computer classes for parents, the community tried to stay connected as a school, a family of friends, who shared each other's expertise in trying to raise the students as not only knowledgeable but also decent up-right respectable future leaders.

It was not always easy, but in as much as possible, every staff member and some of children's guardians tried to stay involved in the school's activities in general and especially in the activities of individual children. The principal and assistant principal were the ones who, for the most part, dealt with some of the most difficult daily situations such as misbehavior and disrespect of students. The administrative staff, especially those who have been there for a long time, have a way of calming down whatever situation there might be that inhibits learning and encourages disrespectful behavior of each other and of grown-ups. Each person in the school, in their assigned role and capacity played a very important role in trying to bring about the success of the students.

Different children with different problems and needs were assigned staff with special expertise to deal with these needs and it was not always easy but they tried their best. Eye and dental care was provided to all students periodically. Extra speech and reading lessons for specific students were provided. Projects/programs were designed for the gifted and talented. Additionally, extra-curricular activities such as music and dance were made available to students whose parents were interested in having their children take up such lessons and extra-curricular activities. The involvement of most parents, the subject of the next subsection, was also highly noticeable.

Involvement of parents, grandparents and guardians. Every now and then, parents, grandparents or guardians would make unannounced visits to check on their children and sometimes they may happen to come on a day that their children are having a bad day or a day when they can be helpful to the teacher.

Some parents are a part of the faculty and staff of the school as teachers or teaching assistants or administrative staff so it is in their interest to put

in their best effort when it comes to the affairs of the school. Other parents or grandparents and guardians volunteer services either on a regular basis or just every now and then. It is not unusual to find parents on the school premises involved in the school's day-to-day activities. As a substitute teacher, the author has met parents that were mistaken for classroom teachers and was very impressed to learn that they just came to help out because their children attend DES. The PTA is quite active and they have PTA days when they bring food to the school for everyone just to express their gratitude.

*After school program*s. In keeping up with ensuring the welfare of the children, there are various ways of making sure that they stay off the streets and that parents who work don't have to worry about picking up their children until in the evening or after work. This is made possible by the after school program. According to Denise (fictitious name), a parent,

> There is [*sic*] so many programs here in the building . . . each child can pick one of those and stay involved in that program. And that will keep them here if mom has to work late or whatever. And there is a daycare program, Prime Time, YMCA, which my child attends. So if you if you are running little late or whatever, you don't have to worry . . . And you don't have to worry about transportation . . . you don't have to worry about any of that stuff . . .

Also in relation to that is the full service program where various experts like counselors, dentists and optometrists are brought in to take care of the entire well being of the students. Some of the students who were legally blind had prescription glasses made for them. They also received regular special tutoring. Others had a lot of serious dental problems that had to be taken care of. Children who had lost relatives were given special attention in class and received periodic counseling.

Computer literacy and media training. In accordance with DES being a technology based magnet school, it is saturated with computers, televisions, and a fully established media production studio. There are two computer labs, the title one computer lab and the magnet computer lab. All classrooms have at least two computers and a television. The magnet classrooms may have more than the non-magnet but no classroom goes totally without computer and television.

All the students receive computer lessons and it begins as early as kindergarten and first grade. There are some technology experts who work with the students and the teachers to up-date their knowledge on various computer programs. Media experts work with students to develop newscasts produced solely by the students. Each school day began at 7.30 a.m. with the TVs turned on as the entire school was prompted to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. This is followed by the latest news at DES and announcements by one of the TV news anchor of the day. Every now and then these students go around the school taking pictures and videotapes and when there is an

important event going on, with the assistance of the adult studio workers, the student TV crew tries to capture it all on tape.

Praxis at its best: Collaboration between different experts. Another theme that emerged was the implementation of praxis "at its best"? The question mark is there for a reason. Although the author was not always seeking to find where theory was intersecting with practice, one could not avoid the nexus of that interplay. For example, some of the most difficult questions facing classrooms were those of teachers who do not seem to be able to bridge the generational gap between them and their students in terms of the magnitude of the social problems students face. The different interns and teaching assistants that worked with the different teachers and classrooms were able to coordinate efforts even when their approaches were different.

The interns are able to learn from these teachers what they need to do to become better teachers and yet maintain their unique approach or style of teaching. Teaching or serving (in the cafeteria, as janitor, as counselor, as skills personnel, administrative staff, etc.), in a school such as DES, is a very difficult challenge and a labor of love and care. Some had to quit, frustrated, a lot are still persevering so that they may be able to take care of our future leaders and responsible citizens. Some of them are so up to the task that the job seems like an effortless activity. The author believes sometimes the tasks seem effortless to the observer because the one performing them has long years of experience, love or enthusiasm for and dedication to the profession, flexibility and frequent professional development training on different ways of achieving the same goal.

As expressed by one of the participants, the collaborative aspect of the two programs (magnet and PDS) is helpful in achieving the school's goals, giving every child a fair chance of obtaining good quality education and providing teachers of the school a chance to interact with pre-service teachers and their professors in order to stay informed about the latest theories and research findings in education. Another participant, a member of staff and curriculum specialist said she was very impressed by the fact that the collaborative effort between the school and the University made it possible to get to know about events such as conferences and even made it possible to attend them. This never happened prior to the collaborative effort and she has been learning a lot not only from the conferences but also from the University students and their professors. A University administrative staff said it is a win-win situation because the school makes it possible for their students to intern in a real life situation and conduct collaborative research with teachers who are not new in the field.

Through observation and the notes that were kept on how this unique school functions, the author has come to the conclusion that it is a school that expends considerable effort to ensure that everyone's contribution and voice is heard. Many of the school's faculty and staff indicated that they know that what they are doing and have to do is not an easy task but they

are content in the fact that at least they are doing something positive about taking care of the children and community's needs jointly. The different interns worked in collaboration with their mentors in different unique ways as befits their different personalities and approach to the issues, be it lesson, content, discipline or classroom management.

The different workers had different roles and they all had to work together in a collaborative manner to get their work accomplished. As a substitute teacher of the school, the author got to understand that the most difficult tasks of the teachers was classroom management and control over the children and also realized that there are different approaches and it is easier for those who have been in the system longest and best know the class, individual students and their parents. Parents and grandparents frequent the school to check on their children's performance and welfare. The children are sometimes a source of information on how to go about managing the class and dealing with the different children especially when you are new in the school as was my case - as a researcher and a substitute teacher. The teaching assistants are especially very helpful to the children and teachers and although they perform different roles from the rest of the school, they are an essential part of the wellbeing of the entire school.

The janitors, cafeteria workers, parents and teachers are a source of learning about good manners, proper language and acquisition of the necessary skills for becoming good and responsible citizens in their community. The administrative staff, especially, the principal and assistant principal, had greater control over the children in terms of improper behavior in the classroom, hallways and cafeteria.

Also, when they first encounter someone new in the school environment (such as a substitute teacher, a researcher or community resource person) the reaction of the children was different and there was always the need for those who have been in the school longest to assist the new arrivals. Initial reaction of the children was that of excitement and questioning in order that they may get to know the person better and also find out if the person was in a good position to teach them. The author, upon reflection on her work as researcher and substitute teacher at the school, realized that there is the need for humility especially when people with different talents get together so that they can dialogue on their common concerns. Especially, as a researcher, there is the need for one not to be over-confident but humble enough to show some ignorance, admit faults and respectfully learn from one's participants. These are also essential qualities in the teachers, the administrative staff, the other workers, parents and the entire community as well as the University affiliates in the PDS collaborative effort if there is to be a successful and productive collaboration between them.

PDS: collaboration between the university and the school. Similar to what was reported by Rice (2002), the PDS program at DES is a process that

embodied several dimensions as exemplified in the next few paragraphs. The University and the school worked hand in hand to bring about improved teaching methods, by researching together and sharing knowledge. Student teachers intern and work along side experienced classroom teachers and they each get to learn what each one brings to the table: practical knowledge gained from experience and theoretical knowledge gained from reading books. So not only is teacher preparation of the University students going on, but also professional development for the teachers at DES as well. As one of the participants from the DES staff put it so well,

> So the biggest part, I think, is the fact that - the collaborativeness, the ability to receive and gain always . . . We talk about being life-long learners . . . We are able to get the research-based information from the university through the professional development school [PDS]. We can bring that back and see how it applies in our school. These are some things teachers normally wouldn't have time to go out and just for whatever reason read, just read. All teachers read, of course, but generally directed toward their classroom . . .

Noteworthy is the fact that just as was observed in the literature review, there is a dichotomy between research, which is supposed to be the role of the University, and practice that of the school. However, another participant, University personnel, describes the rationale behind the PDS differently:

> So the idea is supposed to be a special school where teacher training - teacher preparation is the key focus and that the University and the school system agree on the teacher preparation process and agree as to how interns are going to be placed in the school and what kinds of things they'll do as part of their training program . . . Secondly, was a focus on continued professional development for the teachers who are in the PDS in the school. And the idea was that everyone in the school is considered a learner, including not only the students, not only the interns, but also the teachers of the school and the University personnel who happen to work there. So that everybody is supposed to work together to improve teaching and learning in the PDS.

And yet, what another participant shared with me about this collaboration indicates that the old tradition of believing in the University as the main source of authentic and genuine research and knowledge still prevails:

> It is the University of (mention of the State in which it is located) . . . we are talking about the presence of students and professors from the University in our school - it is such a, eh - working alongside with everyone, we feel lucky to have them here.

Mentor-teachers and interns exchange of knowledge. The mentor-teachers and their interns may have different approaches to teaching and different sources and stocks of knowledge, but they respect what each one brings to the table and interact in a way as to make it possible for them to exchange knowledge and create an environment conducive to learning. Here, research and practice actually blend together to produce praxis - a blend of practical and experience-based knowledge of mentor-teachers and theory, avant-

garde based knowledge of the interns. There is a good level of collaborative effort to not just share and exchange knowledge, but also to create new approaches and theories by researching together. For example, one of the University personnel describes this goal so clearly:

> . . . [The] goal is to do some research on new practices - new teaching practices and new organizational structures or different organizational structures. And the school and the university make a commitment to essentially conduct inquiry projects into different practices.

An intern also talks about mentor-teacher relationship and the praxis aspect of the relationship:

> . . . the PDS just helps . . . it helps the things we do to be research based - an emphasis on action research and involving your mentors in your action research project and not just do it yourself.

It is also important to note, as mentioned earlier, that in most instances at DES, interns and mentors consider each other as colleagues. This is what one of the interns said:

> I think having . . . the PDS and working with your teacher and feeling like you are a colleague and them [*sic*] treating you like a colleague definitely helps. This definitely has a positive effect on the confident level of the interns by the time they graduate.

Discussion of findings from a critical multicultural point of view: the big picture

> Critical multiculturalism may be described as a perspective from which "representations of race, class, and gender are understood as the result of larger social struggles over signs and meanings and in this way emphasizes not simply the textual play or metaphorical displacement as a form of resistance . . . but stresses the central task of transforming the social, cultural, and institutional relations in which meanings are generated "(McLaren, 1995, p. 53).

DES, as a school that juxtaposes both magnet and PDS programs, faces a lot of complex issues because school reform efforts have been both informed and complicated by historical and contemporary issues related to social difference (race, gender, class, sexual preference and disability). In this particular school, the dominant contemporary issue and social difference issue was not only that of segregation or desegregation of schools, but also the intricate relationship between race, gender, class, sexual preference and disability issues in this nation and in the world for that matter. Rather, it is a much more complex and comprehensive issue of integration, inclusion, equity and excellence in education. It was not as simplistic as an issue of sexism and/or racism, cultural domination, ethnocentrism, Eurocentric imperialism, ethnocentric diversity, homophobia, etc., but a combination of all the above delicate and sensitive issues.

Everyone at DES shows an awareness of issues of race, class, gender and ethnicity as they interact with one another. When a child calls another a racial or sexist name, instead of putting up a fight, that child reports to

the teacher or the nearest adult. The author observed teachers warn children against this practice of name-calling but has not seen them try to take proactive steps to prevent it and to explain to children why such acts are improper. From a critical multiculturalists' point of view, this is an omission that could have been easily taken care of with the introduction of some multicultural activities such as having children describe other people that don't look like them both in the classroom and elsewhere. In discussing such issues, they may also be asked to reflect on why some people are called certain names and how it might feel to belong to one or the other race. Another exercise could entail having them research on the historical origins of some of these names, and how those origins impact on individuals today.

In an effort to start education on diversity early, some kindergarten teachers have dolls of different races in their class. The author observed children play with them while their teachers pay no attention to what and how the children were playing with the dolls. The author observed that the main objective of their presence might have been reduced to a mere cosmetic gesture of racial representation. In their play, some children for example, arranged the dolls according to types based on their skin color. A critical multicultural education teacher would have taken that opportunity to introduce racial integration and mention how a lot of times people of different colors have to be together at a lot of places at the same time and co-exist without the need to be kept in isolation. The school and the classroom population would make good examples in terms of their being interracial. Even at that tender age, they have been able to observe the segregation problem that is still persists in a larger part of the American society and in their immediate families, residences, and churches and in the city that DES is located for that matter.

There is a considerable amount of diversity in DES classrooms and this makes the everyday classroom interactions of students and instructors not only richer in variety, but also more complex. The increased diversity because of its magnet program, means that the histories, cultures and everyday experiences students, teachers and administrators bring to the DES classroom are quite distinct and separate, even distanced by time and space. The classroom in this case is similar to what Bacon and Kischner (2002) meant when they observed, "classrooms are greatly enriched when they are not defined by the four walls that enclose them, but as a nexus of community resources that teachers can draw on to build understanding of greater world" (p. 51). Teachers, in particular, are faced with the task of helping one another, and their students, to engage positively, negotiate fairly, and intellectually come to understand "difference" in their classrooms. The importance of this daily task cannot be over-emphasized. The manner in which the next generation learns to engage, negotiate, struggle over and understand "differences" are crucial to the future of their lives as adults and responsible citizens of their society and the nation at large.

The role of social difference in the idea of, and rationale for, and function of both magnet and PDS programs cannot be stressed enough. Issues of race, socio-economic background, issues of power and gender, the meaning of knowledge, ownership of knowledge, the relationship between knowledge, race, class, gender, power, and the ownership of knowledge have been questioned by the author. For example, one of the reasons why these magnet and PDS programs have been instituted is because of the recognition that too many of America's children are not learning and that what they are learning is not enough. The magnet schools are especially meant to provide or make room for those who are most likely not to be learning or not learning enough. A critical multiculturalist approach, with its emphasis on diversity and equity, can facilitate this ideal.

A number of multiculturalists, (Banks, 2006; Banks, 2001; Brown & Kysilka, 2009; McLaren, 1995; Nieto, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004) have noted that there is need for the realization of students and teachers alike that justice does not exist simply because of laws but that they have to continually struggle against injustice and persist for the implementation of the laws for the promotion of justice. How does this translate in the findings of the study of DES and its magnet and PDS programs?

In the case of the PDSs, for example, it is assumed that power is equally distributed and everyone is said to be a winner. However, there is virtually no in-depth discussion on how one acquires the title of the "best teacher", "teacher of teachers", novice, mentor, student, etc. In the course of the research, the author got to find out at lunch break in one of the faculty lounges that one of the teachers who had been there longest and had always had interns prior to the time she was there, was either never available for a chat or never fitted into my interview schedules. Judging from the way no one could control her class when she was away, she probably was given a bunch of problem children or her techniques were simply so unique that the class could not stand any other teacher. For example, the student teacher of this class quit suddenly, and all substitute teachers assigned to that class complained about the behavior of the students. The author felt this was a powerful voice of importance that was silent for some reason. It was later found out that she had a very sick child at home that is most likely not going to stay alive. The issue of voice and voiceless therefore has many dimensions and dynamics to it. How long does one remain in each position, how do they intersect, how fluid are their duties, responsibilities in relation to power and authority? Whose voices are the loudest and where is the voice of the voiceless?

The kind of hegemonic relationships between mentor teachers and pre-service teachers; between teachers and University staff and professors were very apparent in the interview responses as well as in my observation of what went on at DES. During the interviews, most of the participants indicated how they respect their colleagues' expertise and yet emphasized that they did not discount their own expertise. Interns on the other hand,

expressed the need to be diplomatic when it came to sharing what they learn at the University in their teacher-training program because they still felt more like novice and learners rather than colleagues to their mentors. Both University affiliates and practicing teachers of the school, however, still revered University based knowledge and research instead of emphasizing how to make it both school and University based all at once. A critical multiculturalist approach will mean a break down of false barriers between theory and practice making possible for the University professors and teachers to research together and allow theory to inform and feed off practice and vice versa in the production of *praxis*. This finding relates to the popular view that the University is the main authentic site for *serious research and knowledge*.

As far as critical multiculturalism is concerned, there is no room for this kind of myth to exist among educationists. The PDS program is an ideal site for the multiculturalists to reach their full potentials by constantly engaging in research, brainstorming on their strategies and challenging the meaning of knowledge in general. The PDS site ought to be a place where transformative academic knowledge as described by Banks (2006) thrives and coexists with established other types of knowledge. According to Banks (2006), this type of knowledge challenges mainstreams knowledge and leads to a revised establishment of canons, paradigms, theories, explanations and research methods. In my opinion, it is through critical multiculturalism, that the mainstream hegemonic nature of what is considered knowledge at this PDS site may be challenged. A few of the participants had mixed opinions about which party was actually in charge of research or serious knowledge. Some thought both DES and the University were commonly and equally engaged in the PDS, while others thought the research-based knowledge came solely from the University and the practical knowledge came solely from the school.

On the issue of the dynamics of having a voice and being involved, one of the participants was asked about how the information on the documents compares with the magnet program as it operates now. This is the response:

> The documents of the magnet program and the other programs that are offered by the school are—I don't think they say enough about the programs. I think that it's a little bit more in-depth. I think a lot of people have the misconception that this is for—the magnet class is for smart kids only. And the magnet program is for children, who, you know, may be in CDC [a special Education program] or have a handicap. It's not just for super-smart kids, and that bugs me. The average student can benefit just as well. The America's Promise—different things like that—that are going on in the building—That contributes so much to the school. And I think that's not said enough.

Although the response is negative there a discussion of how beneficial the program is and how its misconception does not do enough justices to it. There is a bridge of communication, but it is not a power issue, or is it? There is need for further investigation to arrive at a conclusive observation.

The institution of innovative programs of DES makes it possible for parents and guardians to have their children taken care of while they are away at work, the school has an after school service program which operates to take care of the children after school and also to provide them with other services. As one of the participants put it, "The after school or the full-service school programs have been wonderful—the kids having the opportunity to go to the dentist".

At DES, the author observed arrangements being made for children who had eyesight problems as well. Special arrangements had to be made for some of the children with special family problems. Mothers, grandmothers and aunties got involved with the classroom teacher, teaching assistants and the staff to try to remedy the problems as much as possible. As to how DES compares with other schools, one participant said:

> —Comparing this school to other schools—? Well for one thing, with the PDS team this school has access to the latest things—the latest ideas. Being involved with the University of Tennessee, I do not—I feel like that can be very beneficial and is very beneficial to this school, because they have contacts—outside contacts—that this school may not have, or they may be able to help the school in getting those contacts. So I think in that manner, you know, it helps this school.

Another expression of the school's uniqueness is as follows:

> They don't have as much as this school has. This school's very fortunate to have everything it has. I mean they really are. But you know what? They have a lot of caring teachers and they have a lot of good students. And to me—yeah, there's a lot of crime happening on the streets, but it's kind of like once you walk in those doors it's a different world. It really is. I'm not saying anything bad could never happen, but—I never had any problems, you know.

When asked about the significance of the school's juxtaposition of both magnet and PDS programs, this participant also provides valuable information on how the University is perceived and how this perception contributes to the hegemonic relationships described in earlier paragraphs. For instance, she said:

> Well, of course you know, what a magnet school is. It's a way to bring in—to diversify the population in the school by bringing people from different neighborhoods into the school. And PDS is, of course, a professional development team that works to help both mentors and U's interns who are becoming new teachers. How do I view the meaning and significance? Well—The combination of the two? Well for one thing, it gives the interns an idea of what a magnet school is all about. And—You know, it allows us to see how that type of school works and, you know, both the good and bad points of it. [PAUSE] Other than that I don't really—You know, I've thought about this question before because I kind of knew this was the one you were going to ask, and I don't see—I don't see that close of a relationship. I mean, yes you have a magnet school. Yes, you have a professional development team. [PAUSE] But—In a way they don't really rely on each other, I don't think. . . . You're talking about a PDS team run by the University of [name of state] versus a magnate school program, which is something that this school institutes. But like I said, it does give us a chance to see how that

type of school operates.

Another participant adds:

> I think it is a real advantage for this school to be, first of all, a magnet school as well as a professional development school in that both of them involve a lot of collaborative efforts. It involves with students. It involves teachers interacting with students, parents, the community, people in higher education. I think the magnate school concept came here probably before we—well before we became a PDS or a professional development school. And before the professional development school, the school was actually a site that took in student teachers from the University of Tennessee. But it was not quite as organized, of course, as a professional development school. So I think having both things—there are many advantages of being in a magnet school—Funding, additional personnel, a lot of opportunities that you wouldn't have as a regular school within the school system. And the PDS involves the ability to have an organized cohort of student interns who work collaboratively with our teachers. Our teachers become mentors to those interns. And we have people as part of regular program as well as part of the magnet portion of the program who work with the interns. So, again, the biggest part, I think, is the fact that—the collaborativeness, the ability to receive and gain always being—we talk about being life-long learners. I can think of no better way than to be part of a magnate program and a professional development school as part of becoming a life-long learner, because there's always something new—changing. We're able to get the research-based information from the university through the professional development school. We can bring that back and see how it applies in our school. These are some things teachers normally wouldn't have time to go out and—just for whatever reason, just read. All teachers read, of course, but generally directed toward their classroom. So I see the two as being much interconnected.

One or two of those interviewed said they saw a disadvantage in having both programs at the same school:

> Well—to be honest with you, I think the magnate program—I can see why they have it because it does bring people from other neighborhoods and it does diversify the population. However—and I do think it gives the kids some really good experiences. And, you know, this is a technology magnet school, something they really need for the future. However, I do see almost like class distinctions between magnet classrooms and classrooms that are not magnet, and I personally don't see that as something positive. Now, of course, whether the kids recognize this I don't—you know, it's hard to say. But I think they do because you get the idea, after being in the climate for a while, that magnate classrooms have this—they have this idea that they're almost superior to other students within the school. Do you see what I'm saying? And therefore in a way it does create a distinction there. But they do—You know, magnate classrooms do have a lot of technology, but what I've also noticed is that these other classrooms have the technology, too. So that is great, because I think every child in this school needs to have the same opportunities that are in that magnet classroom . . . And that's what we strive to go against, I feel like, in an educational setting. We don't want to create class boundaries. And I hate to say this, but if you go into a magnet classroom, a lot of times you are going to see children from other neighborhoods. So in a way it's almost like the people within this community may not—Even though the magnet brings a lot of positive things for their children, in a way their children may not get that into that

> magnet classroom. Do you see what I'm saying? So—But you have to take, you know, the good with the bad. . . . But all in all, I think the kids—that this magnate school does strive to provide these children with a lot of technology experiences that they wouldn't otherwise have in a regular—just a regular type school. So in that way it is very good for them . . . The only—which is not the case with me—but the only disadvantage I could see to students who are part of the PDS is that they do not have a technology background. They may not feel very comfortable in a magnate classroom, but it also exposes them to new things to learn. So in that way it could be a positive.

And yet, some participants expressed the gains and strides such programs helped them to make in their professional development and teacher-training program, as shown below. One intern said:

> How does it feel to be a student and also to be treated as a teacher, too? It's very hard, because you are—and you have to understand that they see you as a teacher at sometimes. You see yourself as a teacher sometimes. Then you see yourself as a student. And they also see you as a student because you're leaving the room to go to class or whatever. So it is a hard transition, I think, for both intern and teacher. And so you don't always get that respect that you should get as a teacher. But you can't expect to, I don't think. That's just the way it's going to be, because you are still a student and even the children pick up on that, you know. You're not going to get the same respect from them as—as the main teacher is going to get. So—there is a difference. There is definitely something there that makes it different.

The above quote also indicates how the roles played by interns and their mentors can be fluid and illustrates the power dynamics between them and how such a relationship could be quite delicate. A further illustration may be found in another intern's opinion on her relationship with her mentor teacher:

> Oh yes. I've been—I've been very lucky. She is very interested in what I'm doing. And I've noticed that sometimes I can say, "Oh, well I read this" or "I've thought about this idea", and the next thing I know she's using it. So—and that's what it's about, I think, anywhere you work. It's about sharing together—sharing your ideas and working together. If you don't have that you don't have anything. And I have seen her really work with me and—She shares her ideas with me and I share hers—or I share mine with hers is what I'm trying to say. And I think that although it might be hard sometimes for teachers who've been teaching a long time to sit down and say, "Oh, what good ideas do you have?" Because you know, of course, they have an attitude that—and they should—that they've been doing this a long time. They don't need some student to tell them how to run things. But they do, in certain ways, really value what you bring into the classroom, even though they won't come out and acknowledge—you know, directly acknowledge it. And if I were in their shoes I would probably be the same way. So [LAUGHS] I don't hold it against them.

Another said:

> Well the PDS—you know - we work together as a team. It is about teamwork. It's about getting input from interns, teachers, coming up with the best ideas to fix problems or change situations. The more input you have from people the better off you are. I mean, there is no doubt that two heads are better than one. And [PAUSE]—Other than that—Let's see, the PDS—

> They really—As far as their relationship with the interns—You know, they are giving their interns—They're teaching them how to go about taking care of research, because as we know as a teacher you know—You know, the more research you do, the more data you have to back you up. And they're teaching us how to interpret all that, and that's—I think that's really good that they're doing that. As far as the—We're in the urban multi-culture program, . . . This probably provides a boost for the magnet program and I can really say that they've prepared us for that because they've really given us a good sense of what it is really like to be in an urban city school. There is a difference between being in this school and being at one in west [name of city deleted]. And they've really given the opportunity for us to see that, not only in this school but also in other schools.

Thus, although there have been a lot of success stories about magnet schools and PDSs, there are cases of failure that have to do with the very innovative nature of these programs. Taking a critical look at these challenges would lead to more successful PDSs and magnet programs. The benefits far out-weigh the challenges involved in these innovative approaches to teacher education and school improvement. This is why schools like DES with its juxtaposition of both programs deserves special attention especially that it seems to have overcome most of these challenges through the positive and hard working staff and teachers and all the other parties involved.

The school system has also spent some substantial amount of resources on the school and most of the people the author spoke to felt that although it was demanding to have both programs under one roof, they feel blessed that they have been offered such an opportunity and cannot come up with any disadvantages of either of the programs or the combination of them in their school. Although there is considerable literature on each of these two programs, there is hardly any on the co-existence of both at the same site and how they impact one another. This study has illustrated that these programs, as advantageous as they are, are also truly demanding and challenging and DES is always a busy place with a lot of different aspects of learning activities going on simultaneously.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was educational reform efforts and attempts in one urban school – Downtown Elementary School (DES). The author discussed difficulties that were encountered in the process of the school housing two innovative reform programs, namely, magnet and professional development school (PDS) programs.

The paper addressed how best difference and social justice issues may be handled in concrete instances of particular contemporary reform programs in a real life situation. In an elaborate section on methodology, the author presents and discusses the methods of the data collection and the research process. The methods of data collection discussed include participant observation, interviewing, and documentary information. The reader is also informed about how the data was analyzed and interpreted. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis are: DES as

pedagogical community; praxis at its best: collaboration between different experts. These themes were discussed in detail with highlights of what goes on at DES and what ought to go on.

Thus, the author, in this paper, showed that DES is on the right track, in spite of a few glitches and is making modest strides as a unique school that juxtaposes two different reform programs – PDS and magnet school programs. These findings on DES were further discussed from the point of view of critical multiculturalism. Numerous quotations from interviews of affiliates of DES enrich the story of one urban school and its school improvement attempts. The story of an inner-city school, in real life situation, is presented. Further research is required on schools that house similar innovative school improvement programs, the dynamics of school reform programs and their impact on the school environment and the functioning of the school in general. The story of DES is one school's experience and generalizations will only be possible when more similar research analyses are made available. Future research endeavors of the author will focus on making this possible.

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Biographic Statement

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